



Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain

Wallowa girls basketball assistant coach Carrie Hermens, far left, addresses a crowd of more than 80 people at the Wallowa County Courthouse on Monday, Dec. 28.

Rally supports Wallowa County prep athletes missing sports

By Ellen Morris Bishop
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Parents, players, coaches and fans of all ages rallied on Monday, Dec. 28, at the Wallowa County Courthouse in support of a high school basketball and wrestling season this year. The hastily scheduled event drew more than 80 people, and featured talks by coaches, Wallowa County commissioners and athletes.

Both sports are considered “contact sports” and are currently banned by the Oregon Health Authority due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Oregon School Activities Association, because of the ban, cannot OK those sports for the upcoming season.

The rally organizers and others hope a change can allow the sports to be played. “Thirty-five other states have been playing high school sports,” said David Howe, Wallowa High School principal and girls basketball coach. “They haven’t experienced problems. If OSAA could give us a reason for not allowing us to play, I could go along. But they have just banned the basketball season without an explanation.”

Rally organizers and Wallowa Superintendent of Schools Tammy Jones emphasized that schools wanted to adhere to rules for safety and health.

“We want to be sure that whatever seasons we open, we keep kids and families safe,” Jones said.

“Applying a one-measure-fits-all rule to all schools across the state does not make sense to students or the community (here),” rally organizer Dennis Sheehy of Wallowa said. “In Wallowa County, the total number of COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic is 76. The number of deaths ... is three. It is obvious that the situation in rural counties like Wallowa County is very different from counties like Multnomah or Marion that have very high-density populations.”

In September, the athletic directors at all three Wallowa County high schools submitted a letter and proposal for a basketball season to the OSAA. They proposed a basketball season in November and December with restrictions that included a maximum of 45 spectators at each game, with masks required, or a total of 100 people in the gym, with no spectators allowed and only teams, coaches, officials and others essential to the game, includ-



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Football, basketball and track athlete Jericho Peters, far right, explains why athletics are important to him at the Wallowa County Courthouse on Monday, Dec. 28.

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ing a person who would film the game. The proposal also included sanitizing the ball and many other measures.

The proposed “COVID-19 league” would be similar to the group of Eastern Oregon schools that played in the abbreviated “touch” football season, including Cove, Elgin, Imbler and North Powder as well as Wallowa, Enterprise and Joseph.

The OSAA never responded to the proposal, according to Howe. Wallowa A.D. Mitch Frye considered the proposal as being rejected.

Currently, OSAA has sanctioned a statewide “fall” sports season consisting of football and cross-country beginning in February.

“It’s obvious that playing football in February is not a viable option in Wallowa County,” Sheehy said. “Basketball should be played in the winter months to have the most social, mental and health benefits to students and the community.”

Student athletes spoke fervently in support of returning sports to the schools.

“I’ve been going to wrestling tournaments across the country, with thousands of kids from across all 50 states and from all those tournaments, not one participant



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Wallowa girls basketball assistant coach Carrie Hermens pleads for state officials to allow high school sports.

has gotten COVID-19,” Enterprise High School wrestling and football standout Trace Evans said. “Sports have always been a huge part of my life. It’s been a coping mechanism. Having sports taken away from me has made all parts of my life extremely difficult. My motivation to get schoolwork done is way down, and I need to finish that online English course. It can be done. And I hope something is done about it.”

Carrie Hermens, Wallowa assistant girls basketball coach, spoke about the damaging consequences of the removal of sports and other extracurricular activities are having on students.

“The sudden loss of young people’s most cherished and anticipated high school experiences is having devastating consequences on their mental and physical well-being. School is more than just going to class and turning in your homework,” she said. “It is getting to be part of something bigger than yourself, and growing into a more mature and well-rounded person. That includes everything from public speaking in FFA to playing in a sports

game with your whole town cheering for you.”

Hermens, like other speakers, pointed out that the few incidents of COVID-19 among youths made the ban on high school sports somewhat irrational. She noted that Oregon students have been playing basketball on “travel teams” across Idaho every weekend for months without any cases of COVID-19 or other adverse effects.

“It has become clear from the experiences of other states that with enhanced safety measures in place, we can safely allow these activities to resume,” she said. “Our kids should not have to suffer the consequences of unimaginative blanket decisions regarding sports and other activities that are handed down from the state. There is no time to waste. Please, please, please let them play.”

“In this county and similar counties in Eastern Oregon, schools and school sports are the backbone of the community,” Sheehy said. “Without school sports and other extracurricular activities, Wallowa County will lose even more of the fabric that connects and sustains people in our communities.”

OREGON BRIEFING

Florida man charged with rioting after election in downtown Portland

PORTLAND (AP) — A 23-year-old Florida man faces riot and other charges in connection with post-election mayhem in downtown Portland that left windows smashed at a church and many businesses.

Jarrod DeFerrari of Sunrise, Florida was stopped with other people in a parking garage at about 7:10 p.m. Nov. 4, according to court records.

A sheriff’s deputy found a hammer, a gas mask, an empty can of spray paint and an illegal mortar firework in DeFerrari’s backpack, according to a probable cause affidavit filed in Multnomah County Circuit Court.

DeFerrari was indicted this week on charges of felony riot and three counts of criminal mischief, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. He caused more than \$5,000 of damage at Riverside Tobacco, more than \$1,000 of damage at St. André Bessette Catholic Church and more than \$1,000 of damage at Alco Properties, according to the indictment. It wasn’t immediately known if DeFerrari has a lawyer to comment on his case.

Multnomah County Deputy Nicholas Bohrer encountered DeFerrari in the garage, according to the affidavit. One of the members of the group identified himself as an FBI agent and said he had been following them “because they had been rioting,” the affidavit said.

The agent reported that DeFerrari was with about 100 people, including eight who “were actively breaking windows,” the affidavit said.

At least five other businesses were vandalized that night. Police declared a riot and Gov. Kate Brown activated the Oregon National Guard to help respond.

COVID-19 cases surging at federal prison at Sheridan in Willamette Valley

SHERIDAN (AP) — The number of people testing positive for the coronavirus has surged over the past month at a federal prison west of Salem, officials said.

Officials confirmed Tuesday that on Dec. 4, the medium-security prison in Sheridan had two cases, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. By Wednesday, the prison, which is home to about 1,450 male inmates, had 41 active cases among prisoners and another 10 cases diagnosed in staff, according to the Bureau of Prisons.

Colleen Samuel, whose son Robert Benham is serving a seven-year sentence there for bank robbery, said conditions have been deteriorating and that he is concerned for his health and safety.

Benham, 55, told his mom some inmates have been put in a COVID-19 unit housed in a prison gymnasium where they have to lay on their bunks all day.

Farrah Silver, a spokesperson for the Bureau of Prisons, said the facility has had to find “alternate housing and spacing for social distancing, as well as quarantine and isolation purposes,” but that inmates have not been restricted to their bunks.

Silver also said the uptick in cases could be due to increased testing.

In state prisons throughout Oregon, over 2,000 inmates have tested positive for the virus, with about 500 with active infections as of Wednesday and 21 deaths.

Oregon Appeals Court affirms that State Hospital leaders violated court orders

PORTLAND (AP) — The Oregon Court of Appeals has affirmed that Oregon State Hospital leaders “willfully” violated court orders when they did not promptly admit a criminal defendant with severe mental illness for treatment so he could help in his legal defense.

A three-judge panel on Wednesday unanimously upheld a 2019 lower court ruling declaring the state psychiatric hospital in contempt of court, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. The contempt ruling came for forcing Carlos Zamora-Skarr to stay in the county jail for over six weeks as his mental state deteriorated.

Under a 2002 federal court order, Oregon must admit defendants within seven days who are deemed unable to aid and assist in their own defense.

Zamora-Skarr was jailed in November 2018 on burglary charges. His attorney petitioned the court to have him treated, writing that he was “undergoing as severe a mental health crisis as a person could ever undergo.”

Despite repeated court orders and inquiries starting in March 2019, state hospital officials said they couldn’t admit him because the hospital did not have room.

But judges noted the hospital had more than a dozen empty beds in its aid-and-assist units.

In the Appeals Court ruling, Judge Erika Hadlock wrote about the legal meanings of “willfully” and “inability to comply,” as state hospital officials argued they lacked the money and staffing needed to admit more patients.

Investigators say fire at synagogue in Portland had suspicious origin

PORTLAND (AP) — Portland police and fire officials are investigating a fire they believe was suspicious at a synagogue in Northwest Portland.

The Portland Police Bureau said in a news release the fire happened at about 9:10 p.m. Wednesday at an educational building on the grounds of Congregation Beth Israel.

After the flames were extinguished, fire investigators determined the fire appeared to be intentionally set. Police say they have no information at this point that the blaze is related to anti-Semitic activity and are seeking help from the public in their investigation.

Elgin man facing murder charges in double homicide

■ Gary Otis Mason, 54, accused of killing Candy K. Williams and a juvenile

By Kaleb Lay
The (La Grande) Observer

ELGIN — The Union County Sheriff’s Office is investigating a double homicide outside Elgin.

The sheriff’s office in a press release Wednesday, Dec. 30, announced the arrest of Gary Otis Mason, 54, of Elgin, for the deaths of

Candy K. Williams, 56, and a juvenile. Williams was Mason’s significant other, according to the sheriff’s office, which did not identify the juvenile.

The sheriff’s office detained Mason on Tuesday, Dec. 29, at approximately 3 a.m. following an initial investigation at his residence, 68381

Chumos Road, outside Elgin, where Williams also resided. The sheriff’s office booked Mason into the Union County Correctional Facility, La Grande, at about 6 p.m. Tuesday.

He now faces two charges of first-degree murder.

According to the sheriff’s office, Mason called the Union County Dis-

patch Center via 911 from his home on Chumos Road at approximately 12:06 a.m. Tuesday.

A deputy with the sheriff’s office and an Oregon State Police trooper responded and found two bodies upon arrival. Mason was at the scene and received aid from the Elgin Ambulance and La Grande Fire Department.

The Union County Major Crime Team, which includes members of

the Union County Sheriff’s Office, La Grande Police Department, Oregon State Police and Union County Attorney’s office, then investigated throughout the day.

The sheriff’s office also said it would not provide further comments on the case, which now is in the hands of the district attorney’s office for prosecution.

Mason remains in the county jail on no bail.