



Angie Malone, of La Grande, makes a call Saturday, Aug. 27, 2022, at the Hanna Cashell Memorial Tournament at La Grande High School. Malone is one of 14 volleyball officials that belong to the Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association, which serves schools in Union, Wallowa and Baker counties.

Shortage of volleyball officials major issue

BY DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Jennifer Stephens, a volleyball official for the past 30 years, remembers a time when the Union, Wallowa and Baker county region was flush with high school volleyball officials.

The La Grande resident said it was sometimes hard for less-experienced officials to get the match assignments they wanted because the region had almost a surplus of referees. The days when the Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association, which provides officials for high school matches in Union, Wallowa and Baker counties, had plenty of referees are a distant memory.

The association is down to 16 officials this season, up to two from a year ago, but still well short of the optimum of 20 to 24 officials needed, said Karen Howton of Island City.

This means local volleyball officials will be stretched thin again this year, keeping the pressure on officials

“Last season, I was officiating five or six days a week. By the end of the season, I was dead tired. It is grueling, it is easy to get burnt out,” Howton said.

Stephens agrees the shortage puts great pressure on officials.

“We are on the run from the start of the season until the last playoff game,” she said. “I don’t get to see much of my family during that time.”

The shortage of officials means that high school athletic directors will again be busy rescheduling games when many teams are set to compete at home on the same day.

“You have to be flexible so everybody can play,” said La Grande High School Athletic Director Darren Goodman, adding that, for example, on Tuesdays when La Grande, Baker and Powder Valley high schools are all set to play at home, he will try to move La Grande’s game to a Monday or a Wednesday.

Imbler High School Athletic Director Mike Mills also said a lot of schedule juggling is done to make sure that the referee shortage does not prevent any matches from being played.

“There is a lot of give and take,” he said.

Heidi Justus, commissioner of the Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association, credits athletic directors with being very accommodating.

“The athletic directors are really great to work with,” she said.

Justus said the shortage of officials is partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that prior to the pandemic, the Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association had between 16 to 18 officials. Some who stopped officiating during the pandemic have not returned, Justus said.

Stephens believes one of the best ways to address the shortage is to encourage younger members of the association to recruit their friends, such as those they play intramural volleyball with.

When encouraging people to step forward, Stephens be-

More Information

The Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association provides training for everyone who wants to become an official. It is now signing up people for training prior to the 2023 season. People who are interested in serving as officials for the Northeast Oregon Volleyball Association should send an email to Heidi Justus at neovba@gmail.com.

lieves it is important to concentrate on the contributions people will make as officials — without them, she said, girls will not experience the joy of playing high school volleyball.

“We need to focus on the excitement of helping girls do something fun, which helps keep them in school,” Stephens said.

Howton, who has officiated volleyball for 21 years, also said she is driven to keep going because of what it means to the girls playing, student-athletes she gets to see grow up right before her eyes, while officiating not only high school but also middle school matches.

“I love every one of them,” she said.

The camaraderie officials share is also cherished by Howton.

“You have fun traveling together. You get to know each other well. Some of my dearest friends are volleyball officials,” she said.

Volleyball officials are paid about \$67 for matches involving schools in the Class 4A to 6A enrollment classifications and about \$64 for games of schools in the smaller 3A and below classifications. The money is not eye popping but Stephens said it is a sum people like college students would welcome.

“What student could not use a few extra dollars in their pocket,” she said.

BAKER VOLLEYBALL

Bulldogs nip Vale, fall to Fruitland

Baker City Herald

It took almost 2 hours, but Baker finally vanquished Vale in an epic nonleague volleyball match on Tuesday, Aug. 30, in the Baker gym.

Senior Jozie Ramos’ kill was the final point as the Bulldogs rallied from a 2-1 set deficit to beat the Vikings 17-15 in the decisive fifth set.

“The Vale game was very intense, and I was proud of the girls for overcoming their challenges to bring home the win,” Baker coach Ali Abrego said.

Fittingly, the final set, which is played to 15 points rather than 25 as with other sets, was a back and forth affair.

Vale led 4-2 early, but Baker then went on a run to go up 11-7 and force a Vale timeout.

The Vikings promptly scored 4 straight points, and the score was tied at 12, 13 and 14 (to win, a team needs to have a 2-point lead).

Baker took advantage of two straight Vale service errors to set up the concluding kill from Ramos, the reigning Greater Oregon League player of the year.

The Bulldogs forced the fifth set with a strong performance in the fourth.

Baker led 4-0, and extended the lead to 12-6 as Sofia Hanson served several straight points.

Vale staged a minor comeback late, but Baker closed out the set 25-19.

The Vikings broke open the first set with a 7-point run to take an 18-6 lead. They went on to win the first set 25-13.

The Vikings appeared poised to take 2-0 set lead, going ahead 19-17 before Baker rallied.

A Ramos kill cut the lead to 19-18, and Baker scored the next 4 points, with Kaydena Thomas serving, to lead 23-19. Baker went on to win 25-20 and even the match.

Baker led 11-9 in the third set, and forged a tie at 16, before Vale pulled away to win 25-20.

Fruitland match

After a break while Vale played Fruitland, Idaho, Baker returned to the court around 6:30 p.m. to take on the Grizzlies.

Baker led 23-19 in the first set but Fruitland rallied for a 25-23 win.

Baker returned the favor in the second set, scoring the final 4 points to



Baker's Jozie Ramos spikes the ball during a match against Vale on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in the Baker gym. Ramos had the match-winning kill against the Vikings.

win 26-24. But the Grizzlies, who had multiple powerful hitters, won the last two sets, 25-17 and 26-24, to claim the match.

“Fruitland was a very good team,” Abrego said. “Our girls rose to their level of play and delivered a great performance despite being tired.”

The loss to Fruitland was

Baker’s first on the young season, dropping the Bulldogs to 4-1.

“I think losing keeps us humble,” Abrego said. “It gives an opportunity to grow. It was a situation where our mistakes cost us the game, not something they did which we couldn’t adapt to. We will be successful, as the kids are motivated and are eager to con-

tinue to work.”

In the JV matches, Baker fell to Vale, 25-20, 25-23, 21-25 and 25-21.

Against Fruitland, Baker split the first four sets and led 14-11 in the decisive fifth set, but the Grizzlies won the final 5 points.

In JV2 play, Baker beat Vale, 25-21, 19-25, 15-5, and beat Fruitland, 17-25, 25-24, 15-5.

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