

Grant Union considers ending sports co-ops

Transfer students returning to play sports weighs on staff

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant School District officials are mulling ending cooperative agreements that allow students from surrounding schools to participate in sports programs that their schools lack the resources to offer.

According to an Aug. 18 letter to the school board signed by Grant Union High School's wrestling, basketball, track and field and cross country coaches, the purpose of the co-op was to bring in students from neighboring schools when Grant Union did not have enough student athletes to field a varsity and junior varsity team.

Now, the coaches write, the number of participants at Grant Union has "stabilized," and they believe they should focus exclusively on "creating opportunities for Grant Union students and not those of neighboring schools."

Zach Williams, Grant Union's softball coach, who did not sign the letter, said most sports at Grant Union do not have a co-op and that softball has been approved to have a co-op for the 2022 season.

Billy Colson, Prairie City's principal and athletic director, said two students played on Grant Union's baseball team last year, and two played on its softball team.

This year, he said one freshman from Prairie City wants to play baseball for Grant Union and six students wish to play softball.

Colson said, if Grant Union rejects Prairie City's request for a co-op, they would try and put together a softball team, but there is no way they could form a baseball team.

Grant school board member Chris

Labhart, a former teacher, told the board that the co-ops came when Prairie City did not have enough athletes to field teams. Now, he said, the district has enough students to build their teams out.

Board member Jake Taylor said Grant Union is losing students to Prairie City, and he hoped that a decision to end the co-op did not hurt the district in the long run.

"We have the facility," he said. "We have the programs, but they're still leaving because they feel that strongly about it."

Ryan Gerry, Grant Union principal, said students leaving because they were unhappy with an aspect of the school and then opting to return to play a Grant Union sport weighed heavily on many staff, teachers and coaches.

Gerry said if the students did not have the opportunity to co-op then they would have stayed at Grant Union.

"I don't think we should strong-arm people," Taylor said. "We should give them a reason to want to be here. We should not hold a sport over their head."

Taylor said it is a "false statement" that the co-op was put in place because Grant Union did not have enough students to field varsity and junior varsity teams.

"We've always had enough," he said. "We've lost so many kids. Now we're desperate."

An unidentified Grant School District staffer said, when she was in high school, she was an "average athlete" and would have been "deeply disheartened" had she lost her spot on a varsity team to a student from another school. Aside from that, she said, the district is "morally and ethically" responsible for supporting students from Grant's district.

Moreover, she said the board spent two hours talking about showcasing

NUMBER OF GRANT SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS WHO HAVE TRANSFERRED

Year	Elementary	High school
2015-16	6	9
2016-17	7	8
2017-18	9	7
2018-19	5	15
2019-20	24	11
2020-21	13	18
2021-22	19	14

the district's programs to entice students to want to attend school within the district. Athletics, she said, are one of those programs.

"I watched several kids this year walk away from our school knowing that they were going to be able to walk back onto the field that they wanted to play on because there are no consequences to them leaving," she said.

Background on cooperative agreements

Gerry said the cooperative agreement process came to be because Grant Union had schools from Prairie City, Dayville and Long Creek asking if they would allow students to participate in their sports programs.

Gerry said there was not any formal process in place. Grant school board chair Haley Walker noted the board's concern was that allowing, in some cases, just one school to co-op with Grant Union could bump Grant Union up in the classification of its division.

According to board meeting materials, schools that co-op with Grant School District pay \$2,500 per sport. Grant School District Superintendent Bret Uptmor said that does not cover all the costs, depending on the num-

ber of coaches and experience level. According to Uptmor, the district could be paying up to \$5,000 for coaching salaries, and then adding in transportation costs, the price tag can reach up to \$13,000.

With students defecting to other school districts — mainly Prairie City — the district is losing enrollment-based state funding at roughly \$8,000 per student.

Uptmor said he wanted to emphasize that the cooperative agreements and the transfer of students out of the district do not correlate.

"One is about a student," he said. "And one is about a team."

He said the board put the cooperative agreements and student and teacher retention on the work session agenda as two separate items. He said they do not consider them the same.

"We want to talk about how we can improve our enrollment," he said.

How many students have left Grant School District and why are they leaving?

Grant School District lost over 60 of its students last year. Labhart said he taught at Prairie City for three months. He said, while they have a "good school," he believes Grant Union holds students to a higher standard.

Additionally, he said he believes mask requirements play a role in the uptick in students leaving as well. He said, if the high school students wouldn't have been able to play co-op sports, they would have stayed.

"I'm just being honest," he said.

Grant Union High School basketball coach and engagement coordinator RC Huerta said another reason students are leaving is for political reasons, though he doesn't believe teachers are bringing politics into the classroom.

Taylor said he knew "for a fact" that teachers at Grant Union had "pushed their beliefs" on students. Nonetheless, he said, he did not believe those were the reasons why students were leaving.

Board member Colleen Robertson said she had seen teachers bring politics into the classroom when it came to her own family and that there was nothing the school could do about it. However, she said, the district needed to be honest about it going on.

Uptmor said some of the other reasons are smaller class sizes, convenience, the desire to have a family within the same district and families moving out of the area.

Additionally, Uptmor said the district has lost 45 staff and teachers over the last three years. Those reasons, according to board meeting materials, ranged from a lack of support among parents and students and a lack of feeling valued in the community.

For his part, Gerry pointed out the school saw a good number of staff retire as well, which, he said, accounted for nearly half of the staff the district lost last year.

Gerry said the "easiest route" for some students who are being told something they do not like is to say, "I'm leaving," and that, he said, is "unfortunate."

Gerry said, with COVID-19, he would throw out the last two years as they are anomalies. He said people were moving out of the district for various reasons and that they are trying to do their best to highlight what the district is doing and the programs they offer. And, he said, they could do a better job.

"I think sometimes we tend to look at these numbers and you're like, 'Wow, that's doesn't look very positive,'" he said. "But then you start to look at the things that are offered in this district, and that is a lot."

Junior Rodeo: A Grant County tradition

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Young cowboys and cowgirls from as far away as Texas competed at the Grant County Junior Rodeo Saturday at the Fairgrounds.

Grant County Fairgrounds Manager said 130 contestants came out this year for the event, up from 75 in 2019. Last year's Junior Rodeo was put on hiatus due to COVID-19, according to Winegar.

She said she was happy to see the annual event back this year.

"This is a Grant County tradition," Winegar said.

To kick off the rodeo, the organizers honored the 13 service members who were killed last month in Afghanistan before the U.S.'s planned withdrawal from the country.

"It was a nice little ceremony," Winegar said. "Rodeos are very patriotic."

Winegar said rodeo emcee and Cornerstone Christian Church pastor Levi Manitsas said a short prayer.

She said it was also important to hold the ceremony with the rodeo being held on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

Organizers Shilo Burton and Britany Desadier said roughly 20 volunteers chipped in to make the event happen and they thanked the fair board as well.

Winegar said the county has hosted the event since 2005.

Seniors

All-around champion

Talyn Sandifer

Poles

First: Zeleta Masterson, 19.260

Second: Zoey Beam, 20.289

Third: Talyn Sandifer, 20.672

Goats

First: Rylee Russell, 15.844

Second: Bryce Roggenkamp, 16.47

Third: Talyn Sandifer, 16.547



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

A young cattle roper chases down a calf Saturday at the Grant County Fairgrounds during the county's Junior Rodeo.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Macy Carter, left, presents a young rodeo competitor with a belt buckle Saturday at the Grant County Junior Rodeo awards show in the heritage barn of the fairgrounds.

Juniors

All-around champion

Lainee Winebarger

Poles

First: Lainee Winebarger, 23.311

Second: Emerson Russell, 23.351

Third: Jolee Oakes, 24.164

Steer riding

First: Brody Fife, 70

Second: Jaxon Griffith, 65

Third: Landyn Fincher, no score recorded

Goats

First: Molly Davis, 12.329

Second: Landyn Fincher, 15.604

Third: Payson Green, 16.053

Youth

All-around champion

Callie Smith-Giovanini

Calf riding

First: Callie Smith-Giovanini, 66

Second: Kale Tremblay, 65

Third: Cole Molly, 60

Poles

First: Josie Kimball, 23.597

Second: Millie McCoin, 24.34

Third: Kingslee Green, 24.727

Goats

First: Brinlee Smith-Giovanini, 14.132

Second: Jadon Snow, 14.157

Third: Rigginn McGinn, 15.192

Dummy Roping

First: Rigginn McGinn

Second: Tate Turner

Third: Jadon Snow

Pee wee

All-around champion

Hazel McGinn

Woolies

First: Bowen Bronson, 3.25

Second: Gage Tremblay, 3.06

Third: Wyatt Hansen, 2.69

Barrels

First: Monnee Jo McCain, 24.317

Second: Maven Russell, 31.567

Third: Hazel McGinn, 32.036

Poles

First: Maven Russell, 38.916

Second: Quincee Jayne Harper, 40.568

Third: Hazel McGinn, 42.315

Goats

First: Hazel McGinn, 9.445

Second: Maven Russell, 9.518

Third: Monnee Jo McCain, 11.395

Dummy roping

First: Sterling Oakes, 9

Second: Bowen Bronson, 6

Third: Hazel McGinn, 5



Contributed photo

From left, Bailey McCracken, Sarah Clark and Rowdy Israel pose for a picture at the Cottage Grove rodeo last month.

McCracken nabs top spot in barrel racing

Blue Mountain Eagle

A Grant Union High School student won barrel racing at the state's high school rodeo Aug. 28

Bailey McCracken, a sophomore, won the barrel racing competition, an event where a horse and rider attempt to run a pattern around barrels in the fastest time.

In barrel racing she took first with a time of 17.025

She took fourth and fifth place in pole bending. Her older brother, Sam McCracken, took second in the cutting competition and third in reined cow.

Dayville High School student Rowdy Israel participated in goats, breakaway, barrel racing and pole bending, while Sarah Clark, a Grant Union student, participated in pole bending and barrel races as well.

SPORTS SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, SEPT. 16

Grant Union volleyball @ Heppner, 5 p.m.

FRIDAY, SEPT. 17

Dayville/Monument football vs. Joseph, 1 p.m.

Prairie City football vs. South Wasco County, 7 p.m.

Prairie City volleyball vs. Harper, 5:30 p.m.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 18

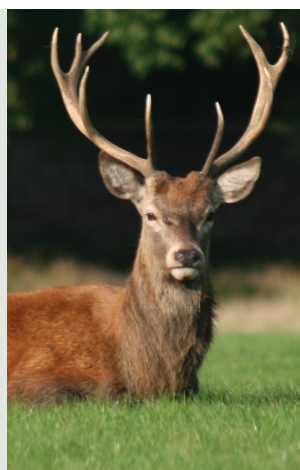
Grant Union football @ Lost River, 1 p.m.

Prairie City volleyball @ Elgin, 1 p.m.

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