

Payne recognized for coaching Fire season with close calls

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Les Payne coaching on the field with Greg Grant
-Contributed photo

year something stands out," says Payne.

For instance, he recalls one team in the 1990s that, he says, might have been the best team they ever had. They didn't even qualify for state that year.

"There just happened to be one or two teams out there better than we were," he says. "But we were pretty darn good."

Payne says his priority is that athletes enjoy the game.

"To me, number one, it's gotta be fun. If it's not fun, you shouldn't do it," he says.

At the same time, he says he regards sports as a continuation of the classroom.

"You're learning. If you're going to be any good at what you do, you've got to learn. You've got to learn to work with other people," Payne says. "Obviously, it takes discipline. Sometimes those words are thrown around. I think those are things that sports can teach you that aren't always in the

forefront in the classroom."

Payne retired from teaching in 2004, but his career in coaching was nowhere near its end. He stayed on as assistant football coach, and substitute taught from time to time.

"I guess after I retired from teaching, somehow it fell on my shoulders to make sure all the fields got line before games," says Payne.

He can't seem to think of a better reason they would have named the Heppner football field after him, which they did in 2008.

"I'm still not sure why," he says. "You'll have to ask someone else."

Payne also recognizes the importance of the people in his life.

"There's life-long relationships that have formed through the years with a lot of people," he says.

Payne and his first wife divorced. His daughter is a teacher in Washington, but his son, Kevin, moved to Heppner when he was in junior high and chose to

stay. Payne had the privilege of coaching, and later coaching alongside, his son.

"That was kind of a special deal," he recalls.

He also credits his wife, Kathy, with putting up with him. They met in 1991 in Umatilla, where she was a teacher. They celebrated their 30th anniversary this year.

"Any coach, probably the person that is most important to them is their spouse," says Payne. "They put up with late dinners, grumpy husbands when things aren't going good, all that stuff. A good spouse is a key ingredient for any coach."

After his son graduated, Payne and Kathy moved to Umatilla, where they still live. He continues to drive to Heppner to coach football. He's been at it so long, he says that, for the last several years, he's been coaching the children of his former players.

Payne says any rumors of his retirement from coaching aren't true.

"It's gotta happen one of these days. I'm not going to say I know when yet," he says. "I'm about half afraid to quit. I don't know what would happen, I've been doing it so long."

"I still love the game. I love working with the kids. That's what keep me going," he adds.

"I feel fortunate I get to do something I love to do, I get to do it with people I like to work with and be around, and I get to do it in a place I love being in. You can't get much better than that."

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The scorched earth left behind after the July 1 fire. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

Steve Rhea took command of the situation, and Heppner crews worked to secure the homes threatened by the fire.

"There were four houses that they protected real good," said Morgan. "They did a good job on it."

Meanwhile, lone firefighters took control of the north side of the highway, fighting the fire as it burned over the hill toward the airport. Morgan said they had a bulldozer and disc in addition to firetrucks. Also helpful was the fact that Jeff Cutsforth's field was in summer fallow, which slowed the fire's progress.

Mark and Alaina Lemmon live on the outskirts of Lexington, and theirs was one of the homes threatened by the fast-moving fire that Saturday. Mark Lemmon gives the following first-person account:

On the morning of July 1, 2023 I checked my weather app and it said it was a "red flag day" for fire danger. All I noted was that it was not going to be a pleasant weather day to work outside. Little did I know how much of a "red flag day" it would become.

Early afternoon we noted a big plume of smoke several hundred yards to the west, the wind direction. My wife asked if we should be concerned. I told her, "Any fire on a day like today upwind is a concern". About that time, we could hear the sirens and saw the fire trucks attempting to contain the fire, but it was obviously a losing battle. The smoke was mostly behind a copse of trees between us and the flames. I said, "If it gets to those trees, we should start getting really concerned." In seconds, the flames engulfed those trees and be-

gan running uphill across the road with the upslope drafts.

We put the kids and the pets in the car and sent them towards Heppner, away from the danger. We turned on the sprinklers all around the yard and started to wet down the house with garden hoses. The outlook seemed to be deteriorating by the minute as a wall of smoke and flames was headed our way at a running pace.

About then, a big fire truck pulled into my driveway, and out stepped Eric Chick, a friend I have known for many years. An amazing sense of relief washed over me as I realized the cavalry had arrived. He quickly explained they were going to burn a fire line to defend my property, and they went to work. Then more and more fire trucks and tankers arrived filled with many familiar faces from Heppner, Lexington and Ione, followed by neighbors, friends and family coming for support.

I was fifty-plus yards behind the line, and I still felt the intensity of the heat and choked from the smoke. At one point, the visibility was pretty much nil. As bad as it felt where I was, I could only imagine how intense it got for the firefighters up against the flames. I couldn't see what they were doing, but I was confident they were winning the battle as the heat subsided and the smoke became less thick. When it was all over, a few fence posts, sprinklers and hoses were all the damage. What an incredible, professional job of firefighting.

A few years ago, our home insurance company sent us a letter stating that they were essentially dou-

bling our rates, something to do with being in a rural fire district in the desert. We canceled them and switched companies. How our decision has been truly justified. The fire districts of Heppner, Lexington and Ione demonstrated that day that our rural fire districts take a back seat to no one.

When I look out of my window and see the fire-scarred landscape and still smell the smoke in my house, I get a lump in my throat thinking of those brave firefighters who literally dropped everything they were doing on a Saturday afternoon to answer the call to save homes and the town of Lexington. In these days of social media and so many people standing by taking videos instead of decisive action in the face of catastrophe, I am proud to live in a rural community with people still showing the spirit on which our country was founded.

This week, the Devil's Butte wildfire in Gilliam County closed Hwy. 206 between Wasco and Condon Monday as crews worked to contain that fire, which was thought to be caused by lightning. Morrow County fire departments were among those that responded in mutual aid.

No structures were threatened in the Devil's Butte fire, but two fire trucks from Gilliam County were lost when they were overrun by wind-driven fire. No firefighters were injured.

Hwy 206 was reopened in the early hours of Tuesday morning. The latest report showed the fire had burned more than 4,000 acres of rangeland, wheat-fields and CRP.

Country club holds youth golf clinic



Willow Creek Country Club hosted a two-day youth golf clinic last week, instructed by Donald Matthews and Joe Armato. Twenty-four local kids of varying ages attended the free event, which was sponsored by Morrow County Unified Recreation District (MURD). WCCC is also planning a youth golf tournament July 22 from 8 a.m. to noon. Also thanks to MURD funding, youth under 18 can golf free all summer at the country club. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

Sheriff's Report

December 17, 2022—Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Boardman Fire, Irrigon Fire, Irrigon Ambulance, and units from Umatilla and Hermiston responded to a structure fire in Irrigon. It was unknown if anyone was inside.

-A male on Upper Rhea Creek advised there was a gentleman who would like to hunt on his property, but he had questions about the tag the gentleman was showing him. Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife made contact with the caller.

-A caller in Irrigon advised they would like to file a harassment complaint against someone. The caller disconnected while on hold and did not call back.

-A male in Heppner advised he was missing \$600 from his house and there had only been one person there. That person left about two hours before. MCSO made contact.

-MCSO was advised of a possible drunk driver on I-82 near the I-84 interchange. The caller was connected directly to Oregon State Police. The vehicle entered Morrow County and was located in Boardman, but the driver was determined not to be

impaired.

-MCSO dispatch received an open line 911 call from the Irrigon area. There was dead air at first, and then a female came on and advised a child had been playing with the phone. A deputy responded and confirmed no emergency.

-An MCSO deputy was contacted by a subject receiving messages; the subject was concerned that they might be coming from someone with a restraining order against him.

-Heppner Fire Dept. responded to a call about a fire on the hill below Heppner High School, by Morgan St. The property owner advised they would like to pile to continue to

December 18, 2022—A Morrow County Sheriff's deputy reported being out with a vehicle at the ball fields by Irrigon Marina. The subject was advised the location is closed at night.

-An MCSO officer initiated activity at Umatilla Fish Hatchery in Irrigon. A garage door was open.

-MCSO was advised of a silver Mazda stolen from the Irrigon Marina the night before.

-A caller in Irrigon advised he found a small,

dead red-tailed hawk on his property. He advised he knew people were not supposed to shoot them, so he checked but did not find any holes to indicate it had been shot. He would like to know if the Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife or anyone else needed to be notified.

A deputy contacted the caller and advised he could contact ODFW for further information.

-A caller in Irrigon asked a deputy to contact him regarding problems with his mom. She was not there. A deputy contacted the caller and his father regarding their issues.

-A caller in Irrigon advised that a friend told her that her trailer door was open and someone was inside. The caller had the trailer parked on someone's property, and one of the people living in the house was the one inside the trailer. MCSO and Boardman PD responded. Nothing in the trailer appeared damaged or missing.

-A Boardman PD officer advised of an extremely intoxicated subject leaving a bar in Boardman.

-A caller reported suspicious activity at the PGE plant in Boardman. A small,

white SUV was driving by slowly, casing out the plant. It had driven by twice before the current time. BPD responded, checked the area and made contact.

-Main Street Laundry in Boardman advised that someone attempted to break down the door for the storage/office room where they stored the money. It did not appear anything was taken. BPD took it under investigation.

-The manager at Main Street Laundry called later that day and advised someone had left a phone at the facility. BPD responded and retrieved the phone and returned it to its owner.

December 20, 2022—Boardman Ambulance and Boardman Fire responded to a one-year-old having a seizure in Boardman, still seizing. Patient refused transport and the incident was referred to another agency.

-Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Boardman Fire, Boardman Ambulance and Boardman PD responded to a two-vehicle crash in Boardman. The accident was non-blocking with no injuries. The vehicle was impounded and David

Madrigal was issued citations for driving uninsured and for unlawful possession of marijuana under the age of 21.

-Boardman Fire and Boardman Ambulance responded to a two-year-old female who was having trouble breathing, with lips and fingers turning blue. Patient refused transport. The incident was referred to another agency.

-A caller advised that a vehicle went off the road on Hwy. 207, Lexington. The vehicle went off at the corner headed south but the caller was unable to stop. MCSO, Oregon State Police, Heppner Ambulance,

Ione Fire and Heppner Fire responded. Patients refused transport, and OSP handled the incident.

-A caller at Pioneer Memorial Clinic in Heppner reported that a truck knocked down a power pole. There were no injuries, and it was not a live power pole. The truck was in the middle of the road.

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