

A look at area hoops

Happy New Year, everybody. Now that it is the new year, it means one thing, among others: league basketball.

Let's jump right into it. After a slow start, the Hermiston girls have come on like gangbusters. The Lady Bulldogs have won 10 straight games and look to be regaining their top-three finisher form from last season. Earlier this season, I wrote that they might be in a rebuilding year, that it might take them time to get back to that level of basketball. Well, I was wrong. They can play. As of Monday, they were 10-2. The Eugene tournament swing opened my eyes, and the thrashing of a decent Kennewick team solidified the egg on my face. I'll take it. I'm a big boy.

With the way Hermiston is playing, the girls should roll through league no problem. The remaining nonleague games, Sunnyside (10-0) and La Salle Prep (9-0), should go a long way in telling head coach Steve Hoffert and the players where the team is at. Two wins over those teams would do wonders. Even a split would be good.

The boys, though, are a different story — not a bad story, just different.

We keep talking about the new system, the football players needing more time to prepare for basketball, etc. I feel bad when I ask head coach Jake McElligott about the latter. It seems like such a non-factor now. They've been playing basketball for a month now. They should be in shape. But it is still a question. Football and basketball shape are different. Football is a sporadic, herky-jerky type game that is played in spurts, albeit intensely physical spurts. Basketball is elongated. The play doesn't stop between action. It continues almost unceasingly until it merely pauses for a number of seconds before picking up again.

So, these guys are just getting into shape. We know that ... sort of. But we've been able to see improvement out of



SAM BARBEE
FROM THE SIDELINES
Sports reporter

the Bulldogs. Hermiston took a 6-1 Kennewick team to the wire on Saturday but still only scored 39 points. It was the second-straight game the Bulldogs were held to less than 40 points and the fourth time all year. Regarding league teams, keep in mind that Pendleton is playing good basketball. Hood River Valley is performing decently, and The Dalles always gets up to play Hermiston. I'm not saying the Bulldogs will go 0-9 in the Columbia River Conference, just that they won't breeze through. But maybe they will. That remains to be seen.

Moving north, Umatilla basketball is fun to watch.

The girls are 11-3 with their only losses coming to undefeated 2A powers Kennedy and Union and to solid 4A team La Grande. Excluding the 95 points they put up over Harper/Huntington, the Lady Viks are averaging 51 points per game. With that 95, however, it jumps to 54. They are one of two girls teams in any classification in the entire state to score 700 points, so far, and one of 13 teams overall. To put in perspective, Hermiston has played 12 games and has scored just more than 600 points. Umatilla has played 14 games and has scored 750.

Umatilla should roll through its league slate. As of Monday, Vale is 7-1 but has only played a collection of mediocre Idaho schools and suffered a four-point loss to La Grande. Riverside is small and will struggle with Umatilla's size and speed, and Nyssa has already been blown out by Umatilla. I'm expecting the Lady Viks to take the EOL crown.

The Umatilla boys are steadily improving. Interestingly enough, they have actually scored more points than the seventh-ranked Lady Viks, but they've also allowed 700. They are

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Hermiston boys put away La Grande

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Jake McElligott got his first home win as the head coach of the Hermiston boys basketball team Tuesday night as the Bulldogs rallied from an 11-4 first-quarter deficit to down the 10th-ranked 4A La Grande Tigers 51-44 behind Dillon Zimmerly's 18 points and Keegan Crafton's 12.

"It feels nice," McElligott said after the win. "I'm proud of how the boys fought, going down early in the first quarter and coming out in the third quarter flat, but there are still things we need to work on."

The win gives the Bulldogs (3-8) a little bit of bragging rights over the neighbor to the south, as well.

"Especially playing against these guys," Zimmerly said. "We've been playing them since we were 9 years old, and it's nice to beat them for the last time."

After making all three 3-point attempts in the first quarter and going 4 of 6 in the second, La Grande cooled considerably in the second half, hitting 2 of 4. Hermiston's perimeter defense tightened up, forcing Tiger shooters to put it on the deck instead of taking wide open 3s.

"It's kind of been our problem other games, too,

teams making 3s," Zimmerly said about the Bulldogs' 3-point defense. "So, we're working on closing out better."

The first quarter was all La Grande.

The Tigers (8-3) hit their first two shots — both 3s — with one coming from Derek Yohannan and the other from Jake Powell. Hermiston didn't score until the 4:09 mark to make the



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Chase Knutz (21) of Hermiston shoots over La Grande's Blaine Kreutz (22) as teammate Dillon Zimmerly boxes out Brandon Dall during the first half of Hermiston's 51-44 win Tuesday night in the Dawghouse.

count 6-2, but Brandon Dall hit a 3, and Hermiston committed its third turnover of the quarter and was behind 9-2. Dall's basket with 1:48 left gave La Grande an 11-2 advantage, and a Zimmerly jumper brought Hermiston back to 11-4 with a minute left.

The Bulldogs mounted a charge in the second quarter by scoring the first five points on an Austin Naillon 3 and a putback by Landon Gammell. Hermiston and La Grande traded baskets, and Hermiston trailed 15-11 when Zimmerly hit a layup and was fouled. His 3-point play brought Hermiston within a point at 15-14, and, after a Powell basket, the score was tied on a Zimmerly 3 with three minutes left in the first half.

"I wouldn't call it smother," McElligott said of the second-quarter offense. "When we came back, Z (Zimmerly) hit a big 3 in a scattered court. We did run some sets well and got Keegan some good looks on lobs, but we got a long way to go."

Hermiston trailed 22-21 at the half, partly due to better perimeter defense, but partly from La Grande's inability to make a free throw or even get to the line. The Tigers went 0 of 2 on the night.

La Grande tried to take control in the third quarter

and made three consecutive baskets when Dall and Powell hit 2-point shots and Yohannan hit a 3, but Gammell, Naillon and Chance Flores all had baskets to pull Hermiston within two at 31-29. Yohannan hit another 3 — he had four on the night, but Cole Smith got a layup to go with a foul to cut La Grande's lead to three. Smith missed the free throw, but the momentum carried over for the Bulldogs.

The fourth quarter started with an 11-0 Hermiston run that all but put the game away for the Bulldogs. Crafton scored on a nice set play that ended with a lob from Zimmerly, Naillon hit a 3 and Crafton had two more baskets to give Hermiston a seven-point lead it wouldn't relent. The 3-balls that were falling for La Grande earlier kept rattling out, and Hermiston made three of five free throws in the final minute to seal the win.

"It's a feel good (win)," McElligott said. "You can celebrate for 12 hours and pat yourself on the back, but I'm going to go home tonight and get ready for tomorrow's practice and move on. We need to get better, OK? We played well in the fourth quarter. We need to build on that. Teams are either growing, or they're dying. We gotta grow from this."



SAM BARBEE PHOTOS

Aleesha Watson (left) is a sophomore on the Umatilla girls basketball team and is the first option on offense.

Dancing her way to the court

Umatilla's Aleesha Watson trades slippers for sneakers

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Before middle school, Umatilla's Aleesha Watson didn't even consider playing basketball.

She was busy doing something else that requires balance and footwork and athleticism. It, too, requires a uniform and special shoes and people to come watch. The crowd applauds good performances and cheers success.

That, though, is where the similarities end with basketball.

In her other activity, there is no winner or loser. There is no opponent. Skill comes from muscle memory after spending hours, days, weeks in a

studio.

Watson was a ballerina.

"I was busy with dancing all the time," the Umatilla sophomore said. "The balance helps a lot. That transfers over really nicely. It helps a lot. I'm glad I did ballet. It really helps with basketball."

Then seventh grade came around for Watson. Almost all of her older siblings played basketball, and Watson said their experiences had been positive. People told her she should try out, and she did.

Three years later, Watson is a two-year starter for the Lady Viks and a top option on offense.

"She's different than any other girl I have right now," Umatilla head coach Scott Bow said. "She's the one always with a ball in her hand. As an eighth-grader coming up, in her younger years, she always had a ball in her hand. She was always outside in the morning,



Umatilla sophomore guard Aleesha Watson (left) didn't start playing basketball until seventh grade because she danced ballet instead.

shooting outside in the cold. She just had that 'I want it' attitude. She's always had that, and it's paying off right now."

Other than basketball, Watson runs track and

cross country, but basketball is her love.

"(It's) very, very good for Umatilla for having her, but basketball's al-

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Wednesday, January 7

No events scheduled

Thursday, January 8

Swimming
Hermiston @ Hood River, 2:45 p.m.
Wrestling
Hermiston @ Yelm (WA), 7 p.m.

Friday, January 9

Wrestling
Hermiston @ Gut Check Challenge in Olympia (WA), 9 a.m.
Boys Basketball
Stanfield vs. Weston-McEwen, 7:30 p.m.
Echo vs. Joseph, 6:30 p.m.
Girls Basketball
Stanfield vs. Weston-McEwen, 6 p.m.
Echo vs. Joseph, 5 p.m.

Saturday, January 10

Wrestling
Hermiston @ Gut Check Challenge in Olympia (WA), 9 a.m.
Echo/Stanford @ Riversiders Tournament, 9 a.m.
Swimming
Hermiston @ The Dalles in Hood River, 10 a.m.
Boys Basketball
Hermiston @ Summit, 3:30 p.m.
Umatilla vs. Vale, 6:30 p.m.
Echo @ Nixyaawii, 5:30 p.m.
Girls Basketball
Umatilla vs. Vale, 5 p.m.
Echo @ Nixyaawii, 4 p.m.