

End-of-season predictions

Wait, it's February already? Where has time gone?

Basketball playoffs are right around the corner, and things are starting to get really, really interesting.

While ordinarily, I'd start with Hermiston, the Bulldogs still have a week or so left in Columbia River Conference play. Umatilla, Stanfield and Echo, on the other hand, are all almost done with their schedules, so I won't get ahead of myself and starting looking at the playoffs for Hermiston. We'll get there in due time, and faster than we realize.

So, to Umatilla.

UMATILLA

The girls started off their season super hot. In their first nine games, the Lady Viks were 9-3 and rolling. Their three losses were to La Grande, a good 4A team, Kennedy, a top-ranked 3A team at the time, and Union, a 1A power.

To say things are going badly now isn't quite accurate. Sure, leading scorer Aleesha Watson has been struggling from the floor. Sure, the Vikings lost back-to-back contests with league rival and defending state champion Vale. Sure, they only scored 36 points in their last game against Nyssa, but that doesn't mean the bus is broken and needs to be abandoned. It just means the road they're on has gotten a bit rougher and the ride will be a little bumpy. There isn't any reason to get overly upset. The Lady Viks are still 5-2 in Eastern Oregon League play and ranked ninth by the OSAA. They have scored the fifth-most points in 3A girls basketball (1,106), which is good for the seventh-best per game average (47.1). They are still just two games back of Vale, with two left to play including one against Vale. Now if Vale and Umatilla were to finish tied atop the EOL, Vale would still take the top-seed heading into the district tournament, as the southern Vikings would have the tiebreaker 2-1 over the northern Vikings.

I would still expect Umatilla to make a state run. Maybe they've peaked too soon; maybe they haven't. These next two games Umatilla has — a home game against



SAM BARBEE
FROM THE SIDELINES
Sports reporter

Riverside Thursday and a road test at Vale — will say a lot about the Lady Viks' mindset heading into the postseason. Keep an eye on them.

The Umatilla boys have been a bit of a different story, but not in a bad way. They've had problems stringing wins together, but they've also had a couple heart-breaking and momentum-stopping losses. After winning its first two league games, Umatilla couldn't overcome a couple late-game mistakes and lost to Stanfield 59-55. Earlier in the season, the Vikings lost to Nyssa and Creswell by a combined five points. Recently, the boys had a three-game win streak snapped by Nyssa. It's been tough for the Vikings to get any momentum going, but they're still in a really good position moving into the stretch run.

They're 11-11, but 5-2 in EOL play. The two losses have come to Nyssa, who beat Umatilla 2-1 in the season series this year. So, Umatilla will probably finish with the No. 2 seed, barring something unforeseen and weird happening.

Umatilla's dangerous because it hasn't played its best basketball yet. This is a team that can get hot and do some things when it has no other options. It's a back-against-the-wall team that nobody thinks will do anything. That makes the Vikings dangerous. Look for them to win some games maybe they weren't expected to.

STANFIELD

I feel really bad for the Stanfield boys. It has everything to do with how they lost to Heppner.

Stanfield was up two with seconds left when a Tiger fouled a Mustang as he was heaving one from half-court as time expired. Heppner made all three free throws and came away with an improbable win. Such a heart-breaking loss for Stanfield. Obviously the stakes aren't as high, but it felt like a Bill Buckner moment; snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Those are losses that can really be difficult

SEE PREDICTIONS/A7

Lady Bulldogs ground Eagles

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Despite a poor shooting performance in the first quarter of its game Tuesday night, the No. 2 Hermiston Bulldogs (17-3, 5-0) steamrolled past the Hood River Valley Eagles 79-24 in the Dawghouse, setting up a showdown with Pendleton on Friday.

The Bulldogs had a rocky start, however. It wasn't the defense. The Bulldogs forced 12 turnovers. Offensively, the Bulldogs had good looks at the basket, but their shots just weren't going in.

They resolved those issues later, however, and Jansen Edmiston led all scorers with 19 points, including 14 in the third quarter. Tavin Headings had 18, including key run-sparking baskets in the second quarter, and Abi Drotzmann had 12.

Coach Steve Hoffert said this was a classic trap game. Hermiston was coming off a big 55-30 win at The Dalles last Friday and has the showdown with Pendleton coming up this Friday.

"We have to do a better job of focusing on those (trap) games and put people away like we did early so there's no question," he said.

"(We just have to) play our own game," Headings added. "No matter who we're playing, the No. 1 team in the state or whoever we're playing. (We have to) just play our own game and earn our respect and play like we're one of the top teams in the state."

Late in the fourth quarter, with the game all but decided, injured Hermiston senior Jazmin Gutierrez got on the floor for the first time at home this season. She even got in the scorebook with two points off free throws.

"It's nice for her," Hoffert said of Gutierrez. "She's a senior. She believes. She loves this team, and for her to be on the floor and score like she did — it's pretty satisfying. The girls enjoyed it."

For a while, though, it looked like Hermiston would never get to that point.

Down 6-0 in the first quarter, Hoffert emptied his bench in an attempt to spark a run. Hermiston still strug-



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston's Abi Drotzmann (12) rises for a layup over a host of Hood River Valley Eagles during a Columbia River Conference girls basketball game Tuesday night in Hermiston.

gled to put in baskets and get anything going offensively as Hood River kept handing over the ball.

With Hermiston down 7-4, the run started. The Bulldogs finished the first half on a 26-6 run that Headings kicked off with about three minutes left. The senior hit a free throw, a mid-range jumper and then a 3-ball to give Hermiston a 21-9 lead.

"We realized we weren't playing to our potential," Headings said.

The Bulldogs' lead would only grow, and by the third

quarter it grew even faster.

To start the penultimate period, Drotzmann, Maddy Juul and Edmiston all scored to give Hermiston a 37-13 lead. Late in the quarter, the deep-range bombs started to fall when Edmiston hit three and Headings got one to go.

The fourth was all about getting the bench in the game, including the three minutes of playing time for Gutierrez.

Hoffert said his Bulldogs are still answering state-wide questions about their dominance this season. He said the first half

raised questions, and the second half answered them.

"I'm sure people are still gonna have questions for whatever reason tonight which aren't really warranted after our second-half performance," he said. "It's the critics. We call them the lions because they come after you when you're weak. We just have to understand that that's gonna happen, and we just go from game to game and we deal with it."

Hermiston hosts rival Pendleton at 7 p.m. Friday.

Bulldog girls gearing up for second tough battle against Pendleton at home

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Last week, the Pendleton girls basketball team gave Hermiston all it could handle at Warberg Court. Hermiston went on a late run to take control of a very even game and waltzed away with a 57-54 win.

On Friday, they'll try to do it all over again when Pendleton heads to the Dawghouse to take on the Bulldogs in the second installment of the War on 84.

On paper, these teams are similar.

Hermiston is ranked second, Pendleton sixth by the Oregon School Activities Association. Hermiston is 16-3, 4-0 in the Columbia River Conference, and Pendleton is 13-6, 3-1 in league. Prior to Tuesday, Hermiston has scored

1,036 points, Pendleton 1,030. Both teams have a mix of size and speed and experience and youth.

The only real difference is the level of success either program has had.

The Hermiston program has dominated in the CRC since its inception five years ago. Since then, the Bulldogs have lost just one league game on their way to five league championships. Hermiston's third-place finish in last year's state tournament was just a repeat from 2013.

Pendleton, however, hasn't enjoyed the same success Hermiston has. Its last state tournament appearance was in 2013, when the Lady Bucks lost in the play-in round. Before then, they're last state appearance was in 2008, when, again, the Lady Bucks were ousted in the

play-in round.

Past games this season will factor more into Friday's rivalry matchup than past seasons will, especially the back-and-forth game last week.

After that game, Lady Bucks coach Michelle Gomez said the Buckaroos did what they wanted to do: ran the offense and defense according to plan, but they just turned the ball over too many times. She said, however, her team knows it can play against an opponent of Hermiston's caliber.

On the other hand, Hermiston's bench players had key roles in the tight game, including Raleigh Andreason, who sparked the go-ahead run. After the game, assistant coach Juan Rodriguez said it was good to see players from the bench filling in the gaps

offensively, especially because close games will become more common in the postseason.

At the same time, Hermiston has been vulnerable at times at home. All three of the Bulldogs' losses have come at home: to Kamiakin, Beaverton and Sunnyside. Hermiston is 3-3 at home and 13-0 away from the Dawghouse. Pendleton, however, is 5-4 away from Warberg Court.

If Pendleton wins, the Buckaroos will tie Hermiston for first place in the CRC with just three games to go. A Hermiston loss Friday could muddle the standings and force a winner-take-all matchup on Feb. 24 to decide the league title.

Hermiston might have an advantage then, as the game will be played in Pendleton.

Drotzmann to sign with Linfield

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

The Hermiston School District announced Tuesday, Hermiston High School senior Abi Drotzmann will sign a National Letter of Intent to play softball at Linfield University in McMinnville, Oregon today.

She joins a program that has won 11-straight North-

west Conference titles and has won NCAA Division III titles twice in the last decade (2007, 2011).

"I'm excited to continue my softball career at Linfield, where they have a strong tradition of softball and academic success," Drotzmann said in a press release issued by the school district.

Drotzmann, a left fielder on Hermiston's softball

team, hit .459 last season as a junior and slugged an amazing .838 on the way to a first-team all Columbia River Conference nod. According to the press release, as a sophomore, Drotzmann was named second-team all state and helped the Bulldogs to the state championship game, where they were bested by Sandy 1-0.

Over the summer, Drotzmann played for the NW

Bullets 16 Gold team and continued her success on the diamond. Drotzmann again had high batting totals, hitting .397, an OBP of .507, slugged .784 and drilled eight home runs. This summer, Drotzmann will compete for NW Blaze 18 Gold.

See Saturday's edition of the Hermiston Herald for the full story of Drotzmann after her signing ceremony.

GO SEE IT

Wednesday, February 11

No events scheduled

Thursday, February 12

Girls Basketball

Umatilla vs. Riverside, 6 p.m.

Boys Basketball

Umatilla vs. Riverside, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, February 13

Girls Basketball

Hermiston vs. Pendleton, 7 p.m.

Stanfield vs. Culver, 4:30 p.m.

Echo vs. Wallowa, 6 p.m.

Boys Basketball

Hermiston vs. Pendleton, 5:15 p.m.

Stanfield vs. Culver, 5 p.m.

Echo vs. Wallowa, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, February 14

Swimming

Hermiston @ district meet @ Hood River, 11 a.m.

Girls Basketball

Umatilla @ Vale, 5 p.m.

Stanfield @ Irrigon, 4 p.m.

Boys Basketball

Umatilla @ Vale, 6:30 p.m.

Stanfield @ Irrigon, 5:30 p.m.