

## 2015: How I saw it

For the past few months I've been ranking each of the local teams based on their merits and whatnot, so with the new year approaching we at the Hermiston Herald thought it would be fun to rank the top sports stories that appeared in our paper.

Those will run Wednesday, Dec. 30. But before they do, I wanted to know what you thought were our best sports stories. I'll give you my list and you let us know what you think of them. We want this to be interactive and fun, plus not everyone sees things the same way. This list includes both your traditional sports stories — things about teams, players, etc. — but also other things that are only loosely connected to sports. Sometimes, through these games we all love, other, more important points are made. And I want to highlight those just as much as the athletes and teams. It only seems fair.

So, here we go.



**Sam Barbee**  
FROM THE SIDELINES

1. Hermiston girls basketball finishes second
2. Hermiston wrestling wins... again
3. 'More than a game' — local softball tournament fights skin cancer
4. Stanfield football makes historic run
5. Andre Allison loses sports, finds self
6. Echo girls basketball hosts playoff game for first time in decades
7. Stanfield girls basketball rises from mat, makes playoffs
8. Hermiston boys soccer wins playoff game, gets three all-state players
9. Hermiston coaching carousel

That's my list. I don't want to go into too much detail here, because I'd be spoiling next week's feature. But I'll give a few reasons as to why I selected these in this order.

It would be too easy to put Hermiston wrestling at the top, plus it would feel like I'm disparaging the girls basketball team for having the best finish in program history. Sometimes it's more important because it hasn't been done before.

I just had so much fun writing those two non-sportsy features ('More than a game' and Allison's story) and I was grateful to no end that they opened up to me and shared difficult details of their lives. It's a bit selfish, I admit, but they received a lot of positive feedback and they deserve it. As I wrote above, sometimes sports provides a gateway into a larger issues that can be discussed, and both of those did that. In 'More than a game,' Brandi Howard used softball to battle melanoma, which took her husband. Allison, a Hermiston high schooler, found his identity as a coach after losing his identity after suffering a serious back injury.

The next three are simply programs who hadn't done something in a long time and that needs recognized. Plus, the idea that Hermiston's boys soccer team had three all-state players needs celebrated, too.

And, finally, what a year it was for Hermiston's coaching staff. Five Bulldogs coaches stepped down this year, and all for different reasons and three within weeks of each other.

So that's my list. Please let us know what you think of it or if something else should be in there. We would like to run some of your lists, as well, so it doesn't feel like I'm telling you how the year went. Let's make it a discussion.

— Sam Barbee is a sports reporter for the Hermiston Herald and East Oregonian based out of Hermiston. He can be reached by email at sbarbee@hermistonherald.com or on Twitter @SamBarbee1. Follow Herald Sports @HHeraldSports.

# Mustangs crowd all-state roster

Patrick Collins, C.J. Kindle named Players of the Year

By ERIC SINGER  
Staff Writer

The 2015 football season was a special one for the Heppner Mustangs.

They cruised through the nine-game regular season with relative ease, and then rolled through the playoffs in similar fashion on their way to winning the Class 2A state title — the ultimate team honor.

On Thursday, the players involved were honored on an individual scale, as Heppner placed 12 players on the first team all-state roster.

On top of that, Heppner coach Greg Grant was chosen as Coach of the Year, senior running back C.J. Kindle was selected as Offensive Player of the Year and senior defensive lineman Patrick Collins earned Defensive Player of the Year —



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Heppner's C.J. Kindle carries Stanfield's Tyler Monkus into the end zone for a touchdown in the Mustang's 60-6 win against the Tigers in Stanfield.

the second-straight year he has taken home the award.

Collins said that the award could not have been possible without the help from his support system of coaches, teammates, and family.

"It's a great feeling to know that all of the hard work pays off," he said. "These individual honors are great, and I really appreciate that I was selected for it, but the best honor I've gotten was the (state title) trophy and

the satisfaction we received that freezing cold Saturday night."

Collins was the leader on a defense that did not budge much this season. He was third on the team with 71 total tackles — behind fellow first-teamers Kevin Murray (87) and Tommy Bredfield (85) — and led the team with 16.5 tackles-for-loss and turned in three sacks as well.

And with the awards and trophies all handed out, the book officially closes on the prep football career of Collins and his classmates, which is something that Collins said went by too fast.

"When I was a freshman I was looking up thinking about the four years in front of me (and) then the years slipped away until it was just one left," he said. "And then it went from one year, to one month, to one game, to one last play as a Mustang. And I wouldn't have wanted to end it any other way."

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# From the bottom to the top

Freshman Andrew James goes from the bottom group to a starting guard after one game

By SAM BARBEE  
Staff Writer

When Dave Ego took over the Hermiston boys basketball program on an interim basis this season, some community members approached him and said that Andrew James was his best basketball player.

The thing about it, though, was James was yet to play a high school basketball game. An incoming freshman, he had already impressed with his aggressiveness, skills and basketball I.Q.

"His aggressiveness and ability to penetrate was pretty evident with the freshman group," Ego said. "So we brought him up to the varsity group and that was the same thing. He was ready. It was pretty evident."

James played summer league with the varsity group, but started try-outs with the freshman group before quickly rising into the varsity and made the premiere Bulldogs team out of the initial three practices. Since then, he's earned a spot in the starting lineup and even had a 20-point game to boot.

James burst onto the scene in Hermiston's first game of the year, an 85-57 loss to Kamiakin Dec. 4, when he made his first two shots — both 3-pointers — and led all scorers after the first quar-

ter with ten points. He went to the free throw line 14 times that game, made 11 and finished with 21 points off the bench.

"I was just playing, and it just kept going up. And whatever happened, happened," James said of his first game.

His basketball acumen was put on display in front of a large crowd on the road in his first varsity game.

"I was a little nervous," James said. "First varsity game, big crowd — I was a little nervous. But once I got the hang of it, it was basketball from there."

"I was thinking, 'I didn't know he could shoot the 3,'" Ego said, smiling, recalling his thoughts during James' first appearance. "He's not a great — you know he was 4-16 that night — he's not a great shooter. He's a great scorer. A lot of his points are gonna come from the free throw line."

Even when he doesn't have great scoring games, like when he had just eight points in Hermiston's 74-57 win over Southridge Dec. 11, he was 6-8 from the charity stripe. On Chance Flores' 12 trips bested the aggressive freshman.

After that first game, Ego told the team in the locker room he "can't not start" after the 21-point performance, and he's been staple in the starting five since.

"We kinda saw it coming," senior point guard Austin Naillon said, recounting the story of Ego's postgame



STAFF PHOTO BY SAM BARBEE

Hermiston freshman Andrew James rises for a layup against Kamiakin's Hayden Nelson (left) and Cooper Ellison during the Braves' 85-59 win Friday night in Kennewick. James led all Bulldogs scorers with 21 points in his first varsity game.

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STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Hermiston's Tre Neal sacks Coeur d'Alene sophomore quarterback Colson Yankoff during Hermiston's loss at Kennison Stadium.

# Neal makes first team

Hermiston DT named to second all-state roster

By SAM BARBEE  
Staff Writer

For the second straight year, Tre Neal is considered one of the best defensive football players in the 5A ranks in the state of Oregon.

The 6-foot-3, 250-pound defensive tackle was named to the 5A All-State first team this week, an honor he earned last year as well after transferring from 1A Ione.

"It feels good to be recognized, honestly," said Neal, the two-time Columbia River Conference Defensive Player of the Year. "It's a good accomplishment and I'm thankful for the coaching staff for getting me there."

The senior was a defensive force for the Bulldogs.

Of the team's 11 sacks, Neal had seven in nine regular season games. He also led the team in solo tackles (36), total tackles (61), tackles per game (6.8) tackles for loss (13.5),

forced fumbles (three) and quarterback hurries (14). He also deflected one pass at the line and recovered a fumble.

In league play, Neal averaged about one sack, 7.6 tackles and just more than two quarterback hurries per game. His season worked into a crescendo, with the final two contests of the schedule arguably his best.

Against Hood River Valley, an exciting 36-28 home win, Neal recorded eight solo tackles, three sacks, two hurries and his pass deflection.

The next week in the War on 84 at the Round-up Grounds, Neal caused havoc all night for rival Pendleton. He sacked Buckaroo quarterback Kai Quinn once, hurrying him a season-high five times while recording 3.5 tackles for loss, 10 total tackles and four solos.

Neal also had good games against Hermiston's Idaho opponents, recording 14 total tackles (10 solo) while coming up with two sacks, four tackles for loss, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery on a strip sack of

See **NEAL**, A12

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