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WIAA a perfect fit



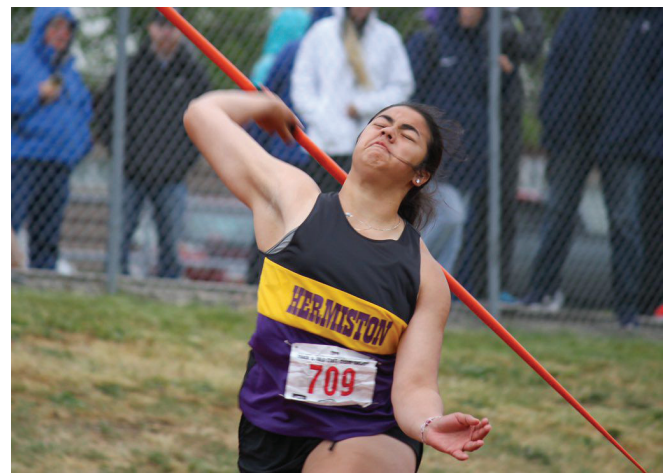
Hermiston's Wyatt Noland outruns Eisenhower's Thomas Oplinger in the Bulldogs' 61-42 win against the Cadets in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Hermiston's Jayden Ray shoots the ball in front of La Grande's Alexyss Chamberlain in the Bulldogs' 47-35 win over the Tigers on Dec. 4 in Hermiston.

HH file photo



Hermiston's Jazlyn Romero throws the javelin during the 3A State Track and Field Championships in Tacoma. Romero won the state title with a throw of 144 feet, 11 inches.

Photo courtesy of Michael Nejjara

for Hermiston teams

By ANNIE FOWLER
STAFF WRITER

Two years ago it was a dream.

One month ago, Hermiston High School finished its first year in the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association and the Mid-Columbia Conference, with much success.

"Honestly, I think it went better than most people expected," Hermiston athletic director Larry Usher said. "I figured we would run into all kinds of problems and headaches, and that didn't happen. The other ADs had us prepared."

Hermiston first approached the WIAA in January 2017 about a possible move to join the organization.

The school was facing the possibility of being placed in the 6A Mt. Hood Conference for the start of the 2018-19 school year had it remained part of the OSAA. That would have meant an estimated 404-mile round trip to any sporting contest.

For a three-sport athlete, that would have equated to 40 missed days of school because of travel — about five classes per game day.

The OSAA wrote a letter of support for Hermiston to explore the opportunity.

"There were seven criteria that

had to be met for this to even be considered," Usher said. "One was having the support from your current organization. This absolutely would not have happened without that."

Hermiston became the first out-of-state school to join the WIAA as a full member on June 5, 2017. Usher still remembers getting the call.

"We traveled to a (WIAA) board meeting for a presentation," Usher recalled. "They had a very long discussion after we left. They voted on it, and we got a call later that evening that they voted to allow us in."

Mike Colbrese, executive director of the WIAA, said the partnership has gone well.

"We have a very good relationship with them," Colbrese said. "It has worked out really well. They always called the office if there was a question or they needed a clarification. Larry won't guess, he will call."

Southridge AD Tim Wood said his initial reaction of the request was that Hermiston should join the MCC.

"It's what's best for the students," Wood said. "Teachers and students were missing classes, and the transportation costs were high. We had their backs."

A penny saved

The move to the WIAA and

MCC saved the Hermiston School District tens of thousands of dollars just in one year.

Usher said the final numbers have not yet been tallied, but the extra money was put to good use.

"We don't have our final bill for transportation, but it's fair to say it will be much less than in the past," Usher said. "We were able to redirect funds to add girls slow pitch softball, bowling and wrestling. It's an opportunity to get more kids involved."

With the addition of Hermiston, the MCC swelled to nine schools, eliminating the need for the Bulldogs to have to fill 10 to 15 nonleague basketball, baseball or softball games.

"A lot of times, we had overnight tournaments or single games in the Portland or Eugene area," Usher said. "Now, we just have a couple of nonleague dates to fill."

Part of the extra money also has gone to pay coaches who were volunteering their time, or getting a small stipend from the booster club.

"We have the opportunity to add funds to those programs," Usher said. "Some of the coaches were getting paid by the booster club, and now that frees up that money for other projects."

With most of the MCC teams less than an hour away, their fans travel well, which meant increased revenue at the box office.

"I haven't looked at all the data, but we definitely had more fans in the seats," Usher said. "A lot of people said we traveled well."

A whole new world

Hermiston knew a jump to the MCC would come at a cost. The Bulldogs were moving into a highly competitive conference. They took their lumps, but they also gave as good as they got.

"We have a couple of coaches who liked things the way they were," Usher said. "But they saw the benefits for all the programs. For some sports, it was a great fit, for others, it was a wash."

Led by running back Wyatt Noland and quarterback Andrew James, the Bulldogs had a successful season on the football field.

Noland ran for a league-best 1,570 yards and 22 touchdowns, and led the league in scoring.

The Bulldogs finished 6-4 with impressive road wins over Richland and Hanford, but with losses to Kamiakin and Kennewick, Hermiston lost out on a 3A playoff spot.

The boys basketball team advanced to regionals before bowing out.

One of the highlights of the move for the Bulldogs was not splitting their fan base. In the MCC, the boys and girls basketball teams play on the same night

at the same venue.

On the mat, the Bulldogs sent seven to state, with Jon Lee (220 pounds, fifth) and Trevor Wagner (160, fourth) bringing home state medals.

In the spring, the Bulldogs had success on the softball field, advancing to the 3A state tournament.

In track, javelin thrower Jazlyn Romero won a 3A state title.

While watching Romero throw at state, Usher overheard the following: "excuse me, did they move the city of Hermiston to Washington?"

Colbrese had a great comeback when told of the exchange.

"Darn Lewis and Clark, they didn't survey that very well back in the day," he quipped.

During the season, Hermiston hosted the District 8 wrestling tournament, and the MCC 3A district track meet.

"They have great facilities," Wood said. "It's a good partnership. We love having them here. It's good for their teams and their community."

Usher said there are no regrets on their part.

"The only part, which we expected, is we need to do a better job competing," he said. "These teams are good. We knew a year and a half ago that we had to get better, but overall, we did a good job representing ourselves."