

Men's soccer returns to Mount St. Mary's after five-year absence

Bryan Cunningham is a proven recruiter of soccer talent and has sent several of his former college players to the professional ranks, among the reasons he was hired to resurrect the men's program at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg.

For the first time since 2012, the Mountaineers took the field in an NCAA game Aug. 24, when they played host to Bucknell at Waldron Family Stadium and lost, 2-0.

Mount St. Mary's plays at in-state Catholic rival Loyola University Maryland Aug. 27, at 7 p.m., and fully intends to compete for a title in the Northeast Conference, where a preseason poll had them eighth among nine teams.

"We had to start from the ground up because there was no infrastructure here," Cunningham said. "It was just building a good solid base. The recruiting cycle for men is pretty fast, so we hit the ground running, bringing in a solid group of freshmen, some transfers that could play right away and making sure we were not sacrificing four years from now for the sake of one year."

Athletic Director Lynne Robinson said that the university embarked on an expansion plan for intercollegiate athletics in 2016, one that has taken it from 16 sports to 22. That includes the reinstatement of three sports that were dropped after the 2012-13 school year, men's soccer program, and men's and women's golf.

Committed to Title IX compliance, the Mount has also added bowling, rugby and golf, and plans to add two or three more women's programs.

Robinson said that Cunningham's track record with high-caliber programs made him a strong hire.

"Bryan brings many years of successful Division I head coaching experience to the Mount," Robinson said. "He is a proven recruiter, and is committed to student-athlete success, both in the classroom and on the field."

A native of Allentown, Pa., Cunningham was a three-year captain at Pfeiffer University in North Carolina. He was an assistant at the University of South Carolina, then the head coach at Central Florida, which he twice led to the second round of the NCAA tournament and was ranked as high as No. 6 in the nation in 2011.

"The Mount is a really great place, the education here is fantastic," Cunningham said. "I love the fact that we don't have a football program here. We are the flagship sport here in the fall.

"I convinced guys that they were going to come here and be under the microscope, which is a good thing because they all come from really good backgrounds and high-level play. I told them we're going to do really well here attendance-wise. I have a track record of developing pro players so we convinced kids this is a great place to continue their development."

At Central Florida, Cunningham developed three first-round selections in the MLS SuperDraft. He knows the Mid-Atlantic region as fertile recruiting territory.

From the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association A Conference, regarded as one of the best high school soccer leagues in the nation, the Mount's roster includes Seth Walker (Calvert Hall), Andrew Robbins (Mount St. Joseph) and Tommy Sidleck (Archbishop Curley).

"We made a very deliberate choice in that we wanted kids who were used to winning," Cunningham said. "We're starting a whole culture. If you look at all of the kids we brought in, every single one of them comes from a pedigree of winning."

All three A Conference products mentioned the Mount as an extension of the ethos ingrained at their respective high schools.

Walker said he learned about the importance of "brotherhood" at Calvert Hall, a philosophy also embraced by the Mountaineers. Robbins said the biggest lessons he learned at Mount St. Joseph were "putting others before myself and striving to be the best person possible." Sidleck, who said he was "inspired" to compete for a new program, said that a big takeaway from Curley was to "always ... persevere through

any adversity.”

In addition to Patriot League programs, the Mountaineers face non-conference tests against West Virginia University, George Mason and Army West Point, where Timothy Trainor, the Mount president, previously served as dean and chief academic officer.

“That’s what recruits want,” Cunningham said, of the schedule. “We want to play the best teams. That’s why I was excited about this job, there are great recruits in this area and great teams to play against. You can build a great (strength of) schedule within three hours of this place.”