

Ohio's best? Mount Union's Kehres stands among college football's coaching giants

Press release by: Leonard Reich, Mount Union SID

ALLIANCE, Ohio (STATS) - The winningest coach in college football history didn't wear a houndstooth hat, rest a pair of Coke bottle glasses on his nose or turn a former school for white women into the preeminent Division I program of the 1990s.

He is born and bred in Ohio, but never moved on to Norman, Gainesville, Baton Rouge or Columbus.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Larry Kehres has spent almost his entire life within a 20-mile radius of eastern Ohio, a marathon's jog from the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton. He hasn't strayed far from the tiny liberal arts school which he helped put on the map by turning into a Division III powerhouse.

And that's just fine with him.

"I'm not one bit flashy," Kehres says. "People who meet me often say, 'I thought you'd be a bit more exciting.' I'm here to prepare for the task at hand. I think the coaches and guys who play for me understand that."

Kehres is the head coach at the University of Mount Union, a Methodist school which, for its first 164 years, was simply known as Mount Union College. In August 2010 it received a status upgrade from its trustees to reflect a growing enrollment, currently at 2,200, which is nearly double where it was in the early '90s.

Back then, few had heard of the Alliance institution. But that was before Kehres turned the program into the most dominant college football has seen since - at any level.

The list of accomplishments is staggering: 303 wins, including 10 national championships; two winning streaks that total 109 games - at 55 and 54, they're the longest unbeaten stretches in NCAA football history - and, perhaps most impressively, a winning percentage of .926 that dwarfs the numbers of legends like Bear Bryant, Joe Paterno and Bobby Bowden - the latter of whom ushered in an era of football dominance just 30 years after his school was known as the Florida State College for Women.

In a quarter of a century as head coach, Kehres has lost eight conference games. And just like every other D-III program, he does it without the benefit of athletic scholarships.

The Purple Raiders have a semifinal streak that even Roger Federer could appreciate. Mount Union has been one of the final four teams alive in Division III every season since 1995, and in 13 of the past 15 seasons it has at least participated in the national championship game.

Kehres grew up in the tiny community of Diamond just up the road from Alliance, but his future profession hardly made him unique in the state he calls home. Ohio has spawned a who's-who list of the biggest names in coaching, from Woody Hayes, Bo Schembechler and Ara Parseghian to Bob

Stoops, Les Miles and the currently-on-hiatus Urban Meyer and Jim Tressel.

But Kehres' accomplishments are on par with them all. When the "other" big-name program in Ohio fired Tressel in July, Kehres' name was thrown around as a potential replacement given his similar in-state, small-school pedigree of success. When Notre Dame was looking for a new coach, NCAA all-time wins leader John Gagliardi suggested the Fighting Irish hire him. Kent State tried to take him in 1998, and Kehres declined. Ditto for Princeton. Aside from a three-year period shortly after he graduated from Mount Union in 1970 - he was the quarterback, of course - Kehres hasn't gone anywhere.

"As my career unfolded, I saw the salaries. No doubt the financial rewards are much greater," said Kehres, whose sophomore roommate was Super Bowl-winning Packers defensive coordinator Dom Capers. "The risks are much higher too, though, and maybe I wasn't a great risk taker.

"I was never doing what I did so I could put great stats together to get a better job. That wasn't what it was about."

Kehres, who turns 62 on Sept. 7 - three days before his team's opener against Wisconsin-Oshkosh - is 21 wins away from surpassing Bryant for fifth place on the NCAA's all-time victory list, a milestone he should reach late in 2012. At that point, the only names above him will be Bowden, Paterno, Eddie Robinson and Gagliardi.

None of those coaches, though, called it quits before age 78, and Gagliardi and Paterno - 84 apiece - are still going.

But don't expect Kehres to still be roaming the sidelines when he's an octogenarian.

"I certainly won't coach until I'm Joe's age," Kehres said.

As his legacy has built, so has the talent he attracts. Pierre Garcon, now a household name among NFL fans, was the first Mount Union player drafted when Indianapolis took him in the sixth round in 2008. Garcon credits the big-game experience that came with Kehres' consistent success for preparing him for Sundays.

"Those games made it a lot easier to get used to that atmosphere," said Garcon, who has a pair of 100-yard receiving efforts in four career playoff games and caught a touchdown pass in Super Bowl XLIV - a game Kehres attended. "Any time you're playing for something significant, it makes it a lot easier at the next level."

So does having a college coach who you admire and respect.

"He'll be at the next Super Bowl I play in," Garcon added.

That Super Bowl was the most recent of the five that have taken place in what's now Miami's Sun Life Stadium, though it bore the name Joe Robbie when the NFL first played its biggest game there: Super Bowl XXIII, the last of three that Bill Walsh won as head coach of the San Francisco 49ers.

Kehres, who took over at Mount Union in 1986 after spending 11 years as offensive coordinator, was certainly paying attention to Walsh during the architect of the West Coast offense's reign. He was so enamored by Walsh's coaching style that he taped 49ers games on his VCR and pored over the details, looking for ways to refine his own offense.

When he could, Kehres also made sure to attend any coaching clinic Walsh was part of.

"He would look for flashes of excellence," Kehres said. "He felt like, as a good coach, if a player could do something well a few times, he could get you to do it more consistently. Anything he said, I listened to or read."

Kehres put those lessons to use with many players, including Cecil Shorts, who came to Mount Union in 2006 after getting shunned by Division I schools despite an illustrious high school career as a quarterback. Kehres promised Shorts he'd keep him under center, but moved him to receiver late in the 2007 season in an effort to get him on the field and away from a backup role behind the talented Greg Micheli.

Shorts wasn't happy with the move at the time, but thought it would be temporary. Instead, the Colts drafted Garcon the following spring and Shorts embraced the role. Three years later, his 63 career touchdown receptions are the second-most in D-III history.

In April, Jacksonville made Shorts one of the earliest D-III players ever drafted - two rounds higher than Garcon, in the fourth. He's shined thus far in the preseason, and has a chance to be one of the Jaguars' top two receivers.

"I love the man," Shorts said of Kehres. "(Mount Union) stuck with me, made me want to work hard and become the player I am."

When it's finally time to go, Kehres will have a vested interest in his successor. His defensive coordinator - and potential heir apparent - is son Vince, a defensive end at Mount Union in the mid-1990s.

Vince heads into his seventh season as the leader of the Purple Raiders' defense, but, like his father, he's wanted elsewhere. He interviewed for a few head coaching jobs in the offseason and turned down another high-profile D-III position, preferring to stay - for now - where he's most comfortable.

"I'm in a great situation, I'm at a place that I love and I get the opportunity to coach with my dad," he said. "A lot of guys would love to have that opportunity. ... This is the best place for me."

While the younger Kehres was off being wooed over the summer, Larry took a trip to Austria, where he was the United States' offensive coordinator in the International Federation of American Football's World Championships. The U.S. averaged 44 points in cruising to the gold medal. Former Purple Raider running back Nate Kmic, fittingly, was the tournament's MVP.

Now, it's back to Alliance, where Mount Union is the consensus favorite to win the Ohio Athletic Conference, just like it's done every year since 1992. There's a great chance the Purple Raiders will end up in the national

championship game again playing Wisconsin-Whitewater, the same team they've met in the Stagg Bowl each of the past six seasons - splitting those titles.

Whitewater, however, has won the last two, giving Mount Union the rare chance to have someone to chase.

If it gets there, it won't be hard to see why.

"We might be playing someone who's 0-8, but with the sense of urgency he's created, you'd think we were playing the national championship game," Vince says of his father. "Everyone knows the expectations here. We don't have to talk about them very much."

"If you strive for perfection, it doesn't matter who the opponent is. You're playing against yourself."

With what Kehres has built, no one else measures up.