

Building a winning game plan

New AD is generating enthusiasm among coaches, staff, athletes, and community



New Northern Michigan University athletic director **Ken Godfrey '87 MAE** (pictured above) didn't spend a lot of time getting to know the Wildcat coaches, staff, players, and facilities. He didn't need to.

In fact, Godfrey may hold the record for NMU athletic attendance. A Northern employee since 1979, he has helped to oversee preparation of the athletic facilities for thousands of Wildcat sporting events, first as the PEIF and Superior Dome building coordinator and then as director of recreation services.

In 2001, he was promoted to associate vice president of recreation and athletics. Last January, he took on additional responsibilities as interim athletic director when Dan Spielmann departed for the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

This past June, Godfrey took the position on a permanent basis.

After interviews with three external candidates, Interim President Mike Roy met with the NMU coaches. They said they wanted Godfrey at the helm.

"Ken is passionate about Northern and NMU athletics," said Roy. "He is an extremely hard worker, an active community leader, and a Wildcat through and through."

With the 2003-04 season under way, Godfrey is in full swing. Like a coach taking over a program, he is incorporating a different offense, strategizing on the best defense, and getting to know his personnel.

The offense

Godfrey's offense is a proactive attack in the areas of community involvement, fundraising, and departmental reorganization. The latter involves combining the athletic and recreation services departments into one as a result of the university's budget reduction plan.

Dean Ellis '83 BS, coach of the men's basketball team since 1986 and the golf team since 1992, said he likes the department's renewed focus on increasing attendance and school spirit, two factors that may be key when his Wildcats hit the court.

"This year's team is the most talented I've ever had. Imagine what could happen if we have the kind of alumni and community support that is the department's goal," said Ellis. "First, we started building team spirit among ourselves and then we began branching out into the community. Already people are taking notice."

The defense

Coming into the year, two of Godfrey's top concerns were budget issues and meeting the NCAA requirement of having a women's spring sport.

As part of last spring's campus-wide budget reductions, the women's Alpine skiing and tennis teams were eliminated while women's outdoor track was added. The decision was made for both budgetary reasons and to meet the NCAA regulation.

"We couldn't cut a men's team because we're at the D-II minimum of five sports that will be required for both men and women in 2005," Godfrey said. "This was a heart-breaking decision—the toughest thing I've had to do in my career."

Godfrey anticipates a lot of interest in the track program, which will be led by cross country and ski coach **Sten Fjeldheim '86 BS, '93 MA**, but bringing the program on board is not without its challenges—one of which is the fact that NMU does not have an outdoor track.

To compensate for this, Northern will train indoors at the Superior Dome and will use area high school tracks for outdoor training and competition.

Budget issues have also caused Godfrey to place additional emphasis on fundraising. Second-year football coach Doug Sams agrees with this approach.

"The number one challenge facing our department is fundraising," said Sams. "The budget situation is tougher for Northern than for some because our travel expenses, both for competition and recruiting, are high-

er due to our geographical location and the fact that we are in a conference that is so spread out.”

Carl Gregor, in his fifth year as the 'Cats soccer coach, added that the budget situation also impacts home games.

“Travel to Marquette is too expensive for some teams when they can play others more affordably,” he said.

Despite these challenges, Godfrey believes that tough economic times can bring people together. “You have to be innovative and creative to keep moving forward, and we will be.”

The veterans

Northern's veteran coaches like the changes they see.

“Ken has the ability to unify people,” said Mike Geary, who enters his 15th season as head of the women's basketball program. “He knows our staff is still fairly young, but that we're all experienced and committed to running our programs with class.”

“We're mature enough to realize what's really important,” added Fjeldheim, who has coached at NMU since 1986. “Winning is important—we're all highly competitive—but preparing our students for the real world is what it's all about. And those on the staff who are relatively new to Northern seem to have the same attitude.”

Key returnees

Two of Godfrey's recent hires, **Walt Kyle '81 BS** and Jim Moore, are back for a second Wildcat stint. Kyle, a former National Hockey

League assistant, returned last year to replace former hockey coach **Rick Comley '73 MA**. An assistant at NMU from 1982-92, Kyle was with the 'Cats when they won the 1991 NCAA championship.

“There's a tremendous energy and cooperative spirit in Wildcat athletics. Collectively, we're going to accomplish a lot,” said Kyle.

Moore was NMU's volleyball coach from 1989-93 and led the 'Cats to the 1993 NCAA title. He went on to coach at Kansas State, Texas, and Chico State before returning to Northern in July.

“Our staff's personality is what the Upper Peninsula community is—strong, friendly, professional, kind of protective, and very family oriented,” Moore said. “There is an absolute belief and passion to win it all.”

The rookie

Jonathan Wilson, Northern's newest coach, has set a goal to guide the swimming and diving program back “to the level of its glory days” and write another chapter in NMU's strong athletic tradition. The former Ripon College coach said his team is ready to participate in the Wildcats' community outreach efforts.

“Connecting NMU with the surrounding community is an essential mission of the athletic department,” said Wilson. “All the student-athletes need to help build that bridge. Ken has set our pace. His enthusiasm for all things 'Northern' is not only inspiring, it's contagious.”

Catching 'Cat fever is exactly what Godfrey had in mind.

—**Cindy Paavola '84 BS**



Swimming and diving coaches Jim Rainey and Jonathan Wilson (left) get soccer lessons from Melissa Backus and Carl Gregor (with ball).



Volleyball coach Jim Moore (with ball) catches up with hockey coaches (left to right) Dave Shyiak '93, BS, Walt Kyle, and John Kyle '82 BS.



Ski and harrier coach Sten Fjeldheim demonstrates his punting technique to his assistant Jennifer Ryan, football mentor Doug Sams, and men's and women's basketball coaches, Dean Ellis and Mike Geary.

Coaches photos by Bill Davie. Photo of Ken Godfrey by Bill Sampson.