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Eating Better Now Eagles' Soccer Team On Upswing

MARK SELIG, Daily News-Record

BRIDGEWATER - When the Bridgewater College men's soccer team won on Sept. 4, a parent of one of the Eagles took the entire team out for dinner. The meal was at Massaki Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi Bar in Staunton, and according to mo-hawked goalkeeper Travis Morris, it was "really good."

For a team that had won just three games in the last two years, there was reason to celebrate. But now the taste of victory shouldn't be so foreign.

Under first-year coach Ryan Bennison, the Eagles matched their combined 2009 and 2010 win total in the span of eight days, beating Mary Washington, Ferrum and Wesley on Sept. 4, 10 and 11. The team lost 2-1 in overtime to Southern Virginia on Wednesday to drop to 3-3.

"The standard of working hard for 90 minutes, just wasn't there the first couple games," said Bennison, who came from Division III Anderson University in Indiana, where he was an assistant coach and once was the Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference Player of the Year. "Part of that was that they weren't in shape yet, so they couldn't work for 90 minutes. Another part was that they just weren't used to it yet. ... All of a sudden the third game, they started to do it."

The Eagles unanimously cite an increased work ethic for their turnaround this season.

Bennison, 32, stressed conditioning from Day 1, making the players run "Hungrys," a series of laps and sprints around the field.

He said the players' fitness and work rate weren't where they needed to be for the Eagles to enjoy success. Regardless of skill level, the willpower needed to show up first, he said.

"His standard is, it's got to be perfection," said Ryan Tavernaris, a junior and Fort Defiance High School graduate who leads the Eagles with two goals. "If we're not working during our practices, if we're slacking off or something, we'll run. We're either going to work when we're playing or we're going to work on the line, running. We choose to work when we're playing, because it's obviously more fun than running."

Tavernaris said this was bound to be a "big" season for the Eagles because previous coach Matt O'Toole recruited solid players who would just now be old enough to star. O'Toole went 3-29-3 in two seasons before resigning in the offseason, moving closer to home to be an assistant coach at Division III powerhouse Amherst College in Massachusetts.

When Bennison arrived, he was discouraged to hear the Eagles discussing an Old Dominion Athletic Department title before realizing the work it would take to attain one.

"If you're not working hard and you're not fit, that's not going to translate to winning conference and winning games," Bennison said. "So let's reset kind of what your equation is, so your expectation matches it. ... The good thing was, I think they wanted it, they desired it, they just didn't know how to get there."

In the preseason, BC was picked to finish 10th out of 11 teams in the ODAC. While winning the league may still be a tough goal to attain this season, the wins so far have at least bred a more genuine confidence for the Eagles.

"It's attainable, but only with work," Morris, a senior, said.

In his first three seasons at BC, Morris was akin to a shooting range dummy. He was in the line of so much fire it was nearly impossible for him to produce clean sheets. With a unit in front of him that is now grinding every second to control possession, he's put up stellar numbers, allowing just six goals in five games.

"I think the biggest change is we just weren't working hard enough," Morris said. "Not that we didn't want to, but we just

didn't realize what it took."

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