Centennial Perspectives: Forward Falcons!

No history of Bowling Green State University in its centennial year would be complete without a review of its outstanding teams and athletes. Conference champions, national champions, and Olympic athletes have called BGSU home over the years. Meanwhile, national attitudes toward college sports have evolved as teams first played only their local rivals, then established regional conference systems, and finally developed national championships, with many athletes going on to professional sports careers.

Pre-War Athletics - 1910-1940

As head of a teacher training institution, President Homer Williams' mind was not on athletics as he planned the college's curriculum and activities in 1910. Courses in physical education and gymnasion classes were added thanks to the efforts of faculty member F. G. Beyerman, who also sought to develop an athletic program as soon as possible. Sports contests were a natural part of student life from the very beginning. Everyone was encouraged to participate in sports as part of on-campus social activities. Two literary clubs, the Wilsonians and the Emersonians fielded women's and men's basketball teams from their earliest days.

Nationally, intercollegiate men's sports were only just coming under the control of the colleges that sponsored them; but decades of publicity about the rivalries between Ivy League schools gave varsity sports a kind of glamour. Proud BGSU students were interested in promoting the college, and many saw a football team as a natural ambassador, taking the school's name into the region as they played against other area colleges. With only a small number of men enrolled (a number which dropped still further with the coming of World War I), virtually every male student had to be recruited in order to put a varsity team together. The first varsity football game was played in 1915 against Ypsilanti State Normal College. Soon, men were also able to compete in basketball, baseball (added in 1918), tennis, and track (both added in 1923).
In contrast, the emphasis in women's sports was on participating for the joy of the game and the development of the participants, rather than for the entertainment of the spectators. In fact, many people viewed the public competition of women's teams as "un-lady-like." Intramural competition was the norm, and women played a variety of sports: basketball, tennis, field hockey, soccer, track, volleyball, and hiking. The BSU Women's Athletic Association was formed in 1926 to foster participation and to encourage "comradeship, good sportsmanship, health, honesty, reliability, and honor." An annual women's sports day with competition among various on-campus teams and perhaps an invited college "rival" provided an opportunity for competition and socializing.

It did not take long for the college administration to realize that buildings dedicated to sports and recreation played a vital role in attracting new students to campus. The first building for this purpose was the Men's Gymnasium (now part of the Eppler Complex), constructed in 1927. The Great Depression put a stop to construction of all kinds, and it was not until 1938, with the support of programs like the W.P.A. that the Natatorium was dedicated, with the Women's Gymnasium completed in 1939.

At left, the Wilsonian's women's basketball team for 1919.

**War-time and the Post-War Era - 1941-1960**

The Second World War affected athletics on campus in a variety of ways. Male students were lost to the draft, and coaches, too, joined the armed forces. For instance, Bud Cox, the swimming coach, was tapped to train cadets at the Naval Academy. The arrival of the V-5 and V-12 military training program on the campus changed the academic calendar to conform to the Navy's scheduling needs. The men were permitted to join the varsity teams, but their service obligations came first, which affected the quality of practice and sometimes did not allow them to complete a season.

Women's athletics continued as they had before the war, and a number of new sports were added: equestrian sports, fencing, and synchronized swimming were very popular. The Swan Club gave a major "aquacade" performance each spring that was the highlight of the women's athletics season. Gertrude Eppler joined the faculty as head of the Women's Physical Education Department (which was administered separately from the men's program) in 1941. Under her leadership, the department grew from three to twenty-nine instructors by the time of her retirement in 1969, reflecting a strong academic program as well as a university interest in competitive sports. In 1951, the Women's Physical Education Department enrolled 140 majors, making it one of the largest in the nation. Most of these women went on to teach and coach after graduation. Also influential was Iris Andrews, who oversaw the creation of the first fencing team and many other club sports.

The post-war years saw the flowering of the men's athletic program, beginning with Coach Harold Anderson's basketball team. In his first year of coaching the Falcons, 1942, Anderson had begun recruiting the best, tallest players he could find, including future professional athletes Moe and Don Otten. This attention paid off as Anderson took the team to the National Invitational Tournament six times and the NCAA tournament three times, establishing the win-loss record of 362/185 during his twenty-one years here. The basketball arena in Memorial Han (completed in 1960) was dedicated to Anderson in 1963.

Likewise, football coach Doyt Perry's (MS 757) tenure from 1955-1964 was highlighted by the undefeated 1958 season when the team became the Small College National Champions. Perry mentored future pros and coaches alike, including Bernie Casey and Bo Schembechler. The Doyt L. Perry Stadium (1966) is named in his honor.

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The 1960s were an exciting time for athletics. Increased enrollment after the Second World War led to a campus building boom, but not until the mid-1960s was there much improvement in athletic facilities. In addition to the basketball and football venues, the decade saw the dedication of the Warren E. Steller Field (1964-5) and the completion of the Ice Arena (1967). Ice hockey was new to Bowling Green when the first games were held in 1964, but it quickly became wildly popular. Early coaches, Jack Vivian (MS 1130), who coached from 1967-1973, Ron Mason from 1973-1979, and Jerry York from 1979-1984 amassed winning records, setting a standard of championship play that included a legendary record-length game for the 1984 NCAA Division I tournament. Two Falcon athletes, Ken Morrow and Mark Wells, were members of the gold medal-winning 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team.

Long-time track and field coach Mel Brodt (MS 647) also contributed an Olympic gold medalist in Dave Wottle (1972 800 meters). Wottle’s teammate Sid Sink was a seven-time track All-American who went on to coach at BGSU.

Women athletes also had a share of Olympic glory. Falcon swimmer Louise Kenney was a member of the 1964 Canadian team. Many women athletes in swimming and track and field have placed highly in Olympic trials over the years. The Olympic Games themselves encouraged women to compete and to develop their skills to a more advanced level. More women than ever competed on club teams. Archery, softball, golf, table tennis and lacrosse were popular. Sports Days were held throughout the 1950s, with colleges inviting each other to visit campuses and compete with a large number of people. During the 1960s, sororities joined in an annual Intramural "powder puff" football tournament.

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The Women’s Athletic Association (later the Women’s Recreation Association) eventually became the Women’s Intramural Association in 1959, with three divisions: clubs, intramurals, and extramurals. The extramurals included the several varsity teams with coaches and formal intercollegiate competition. Despite this evident interest in sports, women athletes were dissatisfied with the competitive opportunities for women. The Women’s Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s encouraged adoption of greater opportunities for women in every field of endeavor. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, and with this as a foundation, activists began working harder than ever to bring women’s athletics to a new level. Women’s varsity programs were folded administratively into the men’s programs and scholarships and grants-in-aid were made available for the first time.

Athletics participation was not just for varsity athletes. When the Student Union was dedicated in 1956, it included a bowling alley. Students could also take advantage of the golf course, tennis courts, and swimming pool when they were not in use by the teams. By the mid-1970s a growing awareness of the importance of lifetime fitness and the popularity of club and intramural sports led to the construction of the Student Recreation Center (completed 1979).
As BGSU strove to comply with Title IX provisions and provide equal opportunities for men and women athletes, the women’s teams were re-organized on the same plan as men’s sports. The associations which had previously set rules and standards for women’s competition (such as the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) were superseded by the NCAA. A rigorous schedule of competition with teams from other colleges and universities in the Mid American Conference was established and BGSU’s women’s teams soon became a force to be reckoned with. The swimming and diving team was a particularly strong group, as was the women’s basketball program.

Fans can experience that program’s proud history, thanks to a recently completed WBGU-PBS documentary “BGSU Women’s Basketball: A Legacy of Excellence.”

Likewise, volleyball coach Denise Van De Walle has amassed a record of well over 500 wins in her time at BGSU.

Along with these gains, there have been losses as well. The new Olympic-sized pool proved to be too large for effective use for synchronized swimming, and the program has been discontinued. Field hockey, a traditional women’s game, has disappeared, perhaps succeeded by soccer (varsity) and lacrosse (club).

Meanwhile, the men’s programs have also experienced many highs and lows during the last twenty-five years. The cost of fielding teams with their expensive equipment, travel, training, coaching and other support staff took its toll on the Athletic Department budget, and a number of men’s programs were discontinued, including tennis and swimming. Even ice hockey was threatened. However, the Falcon alumni and fans have come through with funds for scholarships and new and improved facilities. The Sebo Athletic Center (2007), attached to Doyt Perry Stadium, features physical conditioning and rehabilitation facilities and is available to all student athletes. Likewise, when the Stroh Center is completed in 2011, it will serve as the new home of men’s and women’s basketball and volleyball, as well as providing a venue for commencement, concerts, and other public programs. Ice hockey, making a strong comeback, should be better than ever.

The intramural and club sport opportunities continue for students across campus. The Student Recreation Center is known as one of the best places on campus to meet new friends and have fun, and the Charles E. Perry Field House (1992) is home to an array of intramural and club teams, available to every student.

The Falcons are looking forward to a bright future for BGSU Athletics!

--Lee N. McLain