

GOLF | Program cut leaves junior without team in final year of school

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in their grandson. He became involved in the junior golf program at Hidden Valley Country Club in the St. Louis suburb of Eureka, Mo.

Bentzinger quickly excelled and his experience at Hidden Valley made golf more a part of his life than it ever had been before.

"[Golf] was something that I immediately grabbed onto," Bentzinger said. "It was just a lot of fun. ... I enjoy spending time with my grandparents and so that was an excuse for me to use to get out there and be with them and play golf. I'm very competitive by nature. Having the combination of all that probably fueled my desire for the game."

As a golfer at Lutheran South High School [Mo.], Bentzinger made it to the state tournament four years. He said he knew most high school golfers did not achieve at that level and that he had a future as a college golfer. What he was looking for in a college was not only a chance to golf but a school with superior academics.

Truman men's golf co-head coach Jim Berrey said Bentzinger's high school golf record and personality made him the kind of player and person Truman golf was looking to recruit.

"He has probably from the day I met him represented himself very well," Berrey said. "Very business-like, very professional, very curious, so I can't say enough good things about him."

Bentzinger arrived at Truman in the fall of 2008 and began traveling with the team almost immediately. During his college career he has averaged 78.5 strokes during 21 events, earning three top-five and four top-10 finishes as an individual.

Now, as a co-captain along with senior Chris Kovach, Bentzinger coordinates practice schedules for his teammates as well as occasionally

setting up drills for the team when co-head coaches Berrey and Tyler Madsen cannot be at the course.

"Ever since he has been here he has been one of the most consistent players out there," Kovach said. "His freshman year, he had some really good rounds. He'd always have a bad hole here or there that would cost him a good score but ever since then he's learned to take that competitive nature and not get as nervous or anything out there. He's been one of our top two consistent guys out there for the last three years."

Facing the end

When the Truman athletic department announced it would be discontinuing men's golf on February 28 Madsen said he knew Bentzinger would take it as hard as any of his players because of the hours of work he gives the program each day.

"You know when we had the meeting, sit down to learn that the program was cut, that was the absolute first thing that came to my mind was Nik," Madsen said. "Basically he's in that spot. Junior, going to be a senior, not going to transfer, not going to throw away the chance to get a degree from a place like Truman to go play golf for one year. My initial reaction was my heart broke for the team and my heart broke for Nik."

Madsen said Bentzinger has been consistent throughout his Truman career. He and Kovach have formed a foundation for the Bulldogs' lineup.

"[Senior] Andy [Herrington] has been able to compete with that person in the three or four spot," Berrey said. "Nik and Chris [Kovach] have obviously been able to compete with the one and twos out there and so they're really the guys, all three of them have kept us in the competition mode out there."

Herrington and Kovach will graduate in May while the other players who have traveled to tournaments have

made plans to transfer. The remaining underclassmen who have never played an official round for Truman simply will become regular students.

Bentzinger is the only junior on the Bulldog roster. He said that due to financial commitments regarding housing here in Kirksville it would cost him approximately \$3,000 to transfer. Switching schools before his senior year also would ensure that he would have to spend more than four years in college to earn his degree in international business, which he currently is on track to receive in May 2012.

"[The relationships to teammates] are very close," Bentzinger said. "I didn't expect them to be that close. When I first came here I looked at them more as the guys I'm trying to beat out but now I'd say I spend more time with the golf team than I do anyone else and I'm in a fraternity, a social fraternity. I have a lot of other close friends but when it comes down to it I enjoy spending time with these guys."

Bentzinger said he thinks the University handled the discontinuing of the program poorly and he contends that Truman is not saving any money by cutting the men's golf program. He thinks Truman men's golf is worth saving due to the talent he and his teammates possess on and off the course, pointing to community response to the news of the cuts such as the Facebook group "Support Truman Golf."

Bentzinger cannot be able to compete in any NCAA Div. II sanctioned golf events as an individual next year since there is no NCAA program backing him.

"I think [as a golfer] it is good for a time to know what you need to work on," Madsen said. "To always want to be working on that and to want to get better. I think that is where a lot of the disappointment comes with not having that next year just because for him to get that culmination of the three



File Photo

Junior golfer Nik Bentzinger sinks a putt at meet in 2010. Bentzinger has averaged 78.5 strokes per round as a Bulldogs.

years finally put together for that senior year. I think it could have been something really special score wise and leadership wise for Nik. He'll still be able to take a lot of those qualities and characteristics with him but he

has worked really, really hard. Very much never satisfied."

For the man who has been swinging a golf club since he was 5 years old, the 2011 season will be his last on the links.

OFFENSE | 'Dogs go 3-3 in last six games of road trip

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you to have better at-bats. I see guys relaxing a little bit more and not thinking that they have to do something special every single time."

The doubleheader against Lincoln was Truman's first midweek game this season. Due to this, the Bulldogs started senior Michael Staihr in the first game. Staihr became the first pitcher — other than senior Kyle Veazey, juniors Ryan Trimble, Tyler Stefan and sophomore Jarrett Eiskina — to start a game for Truman this season.

Staihr lasted only two innings and gave up five hits and five runs in a 10-6 Lincoln win. Sophomore Matthew Grosch struggled in relief and lasted only two innings, giving up four runs on four hits.

Senior second baseman Luke Crader and freshman shortstop Tim Lee both scored a run and had two RBIs.

In the second game, Lincoln's offense stayed hot as the Blue Tigers won 11-5. Stefan got the start and went four innings, giving up 11 hits and seven earned runs. Junior catcher Devon Myers led the way offensively for the Bulldogs, going 2-for-4 with two RBIs.

"They took advantage of every mistake we made," Davis said. "We made a lot of mistakes too. We did OK [offensively] at times. The scores look better than they actually are because we put up some big numbers in two innings during both games. Overall, we were on base a lot. I guarantee you we left a whole herd of cattle on the base paths."

The Bulldogs offense exploded against Southwest Baptist, as they scored 31 runs in the four-game series. The worst offensive game for Truman was the first, as the Bulldogs won 2-0 behind Trimble's complete game one-hitter. He walked one batter and struck out three in seven innings.

Solid pitching continued into the second game as the team won 12-0. Eiskina picked

up his third win of the season after going seven innings and striking out 10 batters. Southwest Baptist was held to two hits.

"The pitchers have been amazing all season," Crader said. "Baseball isn't this easy, but they're making it look really easy right now. All around, our pitching has put us in a position to win every game."

Truman split the final two games against Southwest Baptist. Stefan picked up his first win in an 8-2 victory in the first game of the day. He pitched five innings and gave up five hits.

Veazey took the loss in the final game of the series. The Bulldogs lost 9-11 as Veazey gave up 11 hits and seven runs.

"It took some weight off of my shoulders," Stefan said. "It was great pitching with the lead. I was a lot more comfortable and was able to attack the hitters. I didn't have to be as fine. There's no pressure when you're up by eight."

Senior second baseman Mike Reese led the way for the Bulldogs offensively during the Southwest Baptist series. He hit .563 with five runs and five RBIs. Freshman Daniel Jewett ended the series with a .500 average and added four RBIs. Juniors first baseman Dan Plecki and third baseman Scott Doggett each had three RBIs. Plecki batted better than .400, and Doggett scored four runs.

The Bulldogs play this weekend at home, against Fort Hays State University starting 1 p.m. Saturday.

"I don't think there's anytime that we can relax or take a game off," Davis said. "Our conference is so tough, anyone can beat you at any time. SBU is down a little bit this year. They've got some injuries. But, they never gave up the fight. They had already lost the series, and they came out in the fourth game and still were fighting like wild hyenas trying to win a game. And they came out and put it on us pretty good."

ROTATION | Starting pitching shows promise

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was going to have a front row seat for some slow, poorly pitched baseball. The Bulldogs haven't had a winning season since 1982 when they were 17-12 and only 3-5 in the MIAA. It was one of only four winning seasons in the 45 year history of the program.

Last fall my expectations for the Truman pitching staff this spring were low. I thought the starters at Truman were going to be bad. I was wrong.

"The main thing I've noticed this year compared to my other years is that every single time we pitch this year I feel like we have a chance to win the game," junior pitcher Ryan Trimble said. "In the past it would be kind of up and down. One time we would pitch good and then the next start out that person would not do as good. I think this year the main thing that we've all been able to do is be consistent and have consistent starts every time out on the field."

The Bulldogs starting staff is on a tear. An RBI double given up by senior reliever Jordan McLaughlin in the third game of a four game set against Southwest Baptist University last Saturday ended a streak of more than 30 scoreless innings. That is a lot of scoreless ball.

Truman's starting four originally got off to a slow start. The Bulldogs lost Trimble's first three starts. He was removed from the opener after four innings during which he gave up seven hits and four earned runs.

But the real story has been Trimble and Eiskina, who have a combined 1.85 ERA. The team has won Trimble's last three starts. Eiskina has a record above .500.

"Just coming in as a freshman he didn't put up quite the same numbers, but you could tell his stuff was there," Trimble said. "He was kind of getting used to pitching college baseball."

Eiskina pitched well against Missouri Southern State University in a game where the wind was blowing hard. It looked like the movement on his pitches was due to the

wind moving across the diamond from corner to corner. What seemed like a wind-aided fluke of a game appears as something very different in retrospect. It is starting to look like Eiskina and the rest of these Truman starters are the real deal, or at least they are an upgrade compared to what this program has had to offer in quite sometime.

On March 27, Trimble toed the rubber, beating Northwest Missouri State University 2-0. It was the first complete game shut-out thrown by a Bulldog pitcher since Paul Cornejo beat Missouri S&T 7-0 April 29, 2000. Yes, that's right, 10 plus years. When I saw what Trimble had done I thought to myself, "We better all enjoy it. It might be a while until we see those kind of results again." Eiskina went out in the next game later in the day and threw a complete game shutout.

In their next two starts, which came this past weekend against SBU, Trimble threw a complete game one-hit shutout and Eiskina went seven scoreless innings.

There were doubts as to whether Trimble could meet the standard he set for himself last season when he went 5-5 with a 3.25 ERA. Those doubts are all but gone now. So far this season he is 3-3 with an ERA of 2.18.

The Bulldogs have taken the last three MIAA Pitcher of the Week awards. Trimble has won twice and Eiskina once.

The starting rotation's ERA sits at 3.95 heading into a weekend series with Fort Hays State University. The best team ERA in program history was the 1968 team's 2.32 mark. This year's staff as a whole has an ERA of 4.89. It was even lower before giving up 21 runs in a double-header against Lincoln University Tuesday. This year's ERA is not 1968 good, but for most of the year it has been lower than most Truman fans have seen it in a lot longer than they care to remember. A conference title might be tough to swing but the 'Dogs have at least found a way to be relevant.

So much for terrible baseball.



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