

Sports

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Should WVU bring back track?

Some say if school can save Rod, why not save a sport?

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Even though West Virginia University's administration was able to dig deep and find enough money to keep football coach Rich Rodriguez from bolting to Alabama last week, there are no plans to attempt to find financing to bring back either men's track and field or men's cross country teams.

Those sports, along with men's tennis and rifle were dropped in 2003 due to monetary and Title IX concerns.

Rifle, with help from the National Rifle Association and with its rich history that includes 13 national championships, has since been reinstated following a strong grass-roots campaign.

There is a group of track enthusiasts that include former track athletes, who have been pushing to find a way to get the sports reinstated and feel if there were a similar push by the university to find funding as there was to meet Rodriguez's

demands, this could become a reality.

The backers of such a campaign believe the timing is right, with the WVU athletic department riding high in nearly all of its programs, and with current president David C. Hardisty Jr. leaving next September.

However, Athletic Director Ed Pastilong says there is no discussion of bringing men's track and field or cross country back.

"Our attention right now is to continue to emphasize keeping the sports we have presently as strong as we possibly can and this requires putting what resources we have into them," said Pastilong.

WVU has seen great success in nearly every sport since it made the decision to size down athletically. It's football and men's basketball teams have been nationally ranked, as has its wrestling, men's and women's soccer teams and gymnastics team. The women's basketball team was runner up last year in the Big

East tournament and the women's track team produced a national champion distance runner.

Still, those backing the return of men's track and field argue the return of men's track at WVU is doable and necessary.

"It's a shame that when they decided to make the cuts they did not go through the same campaign and have the same enthusiasm for those five sports than they did in raising money for Coach Rodriguez," said Mike Mosser, a former All-American in track and former president of the Varsity Club.

"Maybe there's a Ken Kendrick out there who enjoys track and field more than football and maybe some day he will help us get the \$8 million we need to bring track back."

The \$8 million figure was what Pastilong told Mosser it would take for him to raise through a fund at Morgantown Community Trust to bring track back.

That group holds an annual fund

raiser through a twilight 5-mile run that benefits the effort to bring track back, but Mosser says "while we should gather some momentum from that, it won't bring millions in."

Martin Pushkin, who coached track and field at WVU for 20 years, believes the school should take a fresh look at the situation.

"They broke my heart when they did that," Pushkin said.

"I always felt we should try to get someone to reevaluate the philosophy concerning the Olympic sports they dropped," Pushkin continued. "I was hoping even Rod would see how important it is for the football team."

Pushkin noted many places have athletes who double in football and track, as did James Jett, Undra Johnson and a number of other WVU players in the past.

"Look around the country," Pushkin said. "Through the years places like Oklahoma, USC, Florida, Clemson all had kids run track and play football. A lot of wide receivers did it and a lot of defensive backs."

Pushkin believes its possible Rodriguez could lose some speedy prospects who want to double in both sports and have the opportunity elsewhere.

Paul Martin, another former WVU runner who today coaches track powerhouse Preston High, says the state is losing athletes to other states because there is no Division I program in West Virginia.

"Eric Ryan had to go to Cornell," said Martin, speaking of a state champion distance runner. "A kid like that could give back to the community but they lost Eric Ryan forever. He was the epitome of an outstanding citizen, but his mom moved away to be closer to where he is now."

Martin says a number of his kids, who could be contributors to a WVU track team, go to the state university because they want to stay in state but their track careers end.

Martin suggests at least bringing back a five-man cross country team, just to get started and see where it goes from there.