

All in the soccer family

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They came to Cedar Rapids from different parts of the globe, all with the same intent. Little did they realize how much impact they would have on the local soccer scene in a few short years.

They met at Mount Mercy. John O'Connor and Corey Brinkmeyer were the first on the scene. J.P. Graham and Amir Hadzic soon followed.

Now they are four of the seven men coaching Metro prep soccer teams -- O'Connor at Jefferson, Brinkmeyer at Linn-Mar, Graham at Washington and Hadzic at Xavier.

O'Connor, a native of Ontario, Canada, and Brinkmeyer, from Illinois, were the first to arrive in 1993 as freshman for the Mount Mercy soccer team and quickly became good friends.

Two years later, Graham, also an Illinois native, transferred to Mount Mercy as a high scoring forward from a junior college in St. Louis.

"Corey was the only person that I knew when I came to Cedar Rapids," Graham said. "I met him in a camp in Illinois so I barely even knew him then, but he was the only person that I knew at all."

But the Mustangs took him in. Brinkmeyer and Graham were majoring in education together and O'Connor, who was pre-med at the time, had science classes with Graham.

“We were really good friends,” O’Connor said. “Corey and I were roommates for a year and J.P. lived in the same building with us. We did a ton of stuff together.”

“The three of us got along really well because we all had slightly different attitudes about things,” he added. “They say opposites work well together, so we all kind of brought our own dynamics and worked well. We had a blast.”

That year, the Mustangs were looking for a new coach and O’Connor, who had been a team captain as a sophomore, was on the committee to help select a new coach. That is the first time he met Hadzic, who found himself in Iowa after fleeing his native country of Bosnia during the war.

“I remember that he didn’t speak a whole lot of English, but he was genuine, he knew the game, he was enthusiastic for trying to make the program more successful,” O’Connor said. “I had grown up around soccer, so I had worked with guys that had thick accents and difficulty with the language so that was something that didn’t bother me.”

Despite the thick accent, the decision was an easy one for the committee as Hadzic became the new Mustangs head coach.

At the time, soccer was still a fairly obscure sport in Iowa. There were not many people that played in the area and so Mount Mercy had a small team and was not particularly well known for its soccer prowess. But, the players were very close to one another.

“We were a pretty tight-knit group,” Brinkmeyer said. “We still have a ton of stories that we tell whenever we get together. A lot of off the field stuff is what I remember. We weren't particularly good to be quite honest with you. We were pretty bad probably, but we worked hard and did the best that we could.”

O'Connor was the emotional leader of the team and played with a lot of passion. Hadzic joked that he was, "always covered in either mud or blood."

"John was an emotional player," Graham said. "When he was playing well, he was usually on fire. We was very physical player, also. He could crack some people with the best of them, that was an important part of his game. That is what I remember most about him. He also would pick out a player on the other team and try to get into their head."

That is also what O'Connor's Jefferson teams are known for, according to Graham.

"His teams are always in really good shape, they take advantage of winning balls in the air," he said. "They play physically, mix it up, and try to get into people's heads."

Graham, on the other hand, was all about getting the ball into the back of the net and helping his team win.

"J.P., when he first came, there were some people that questioned him," O'Connor recalled. "He seemed a little bit cocky. He was definitely a forward by heart and he loves to score. He likes to get possession of the ball and show off his skills. But once you got to know him, you understood it didn't have anything to do with cockiness. He just wanted to win. J.P. has one of the strongest winning mentalities that you would ever find."

O'Connor sees that mentality reflected in Graham's teams at Washington.

"When you play Wash you know you are going to get a bunch of guys that are playing to win," O'Connor said. "They go 110 percent. Everything is about scoring and they don't just stop at one, they want to score another and then another. You can see that hunger to score and that is purely J.P. That's who he is and that's the way he played."

Brinkmeyer was a little less physically skilled than the other two, but he was a very intelligent player.

“He understood the game and he wasn’t the top in skill level, but he made up for anything with his work ethic,” O’Connor said. “He was just hard as nails and when it came to playing he just really worked hard. He was the kind of player that you want out there because you could guarantee that he was going to go 100 percent every game.”

That work ethic and intelligence are what make Brinkmeyer’s Linn-Mar teams so frustrating to play against according to Graham.

“His teams do everything right,” Graham said. “His spacing is always correct, they keep it very simple, play one and two touch when possible, just like he did. They do everything the correct way. They make things easier on themselves by always being in the correct position. You can hardly ever catch them out of position.”

The former Mustang players also say that they have picked up a few coaching tips from their old coach.

“He has shown me how to get to know players on a personal basis and how to use that to your advantage,” Graham said about Hadzic. “When I first started I tried to kind of keep my distance from players, personally, just so that everybody was on an equal playing ground. But I learned from him that some kids need to be talked to more than other kids. Some kids need you to be their friend a little bit and some kids need you to be their parent a little bit.”

Hadzic is particularly pleased that his former players all stayed around Cedar Rapids and became coaches here.

“I always say, if I had one percent of influence on them as a coach to stay in coaching, stay in Cedar Rapids and give back to the soccer community, I would be the happiest coach,” Hadzic said. “You can have X’s and O’s but this is something that I really cherish.”

With all of them coaching in the same city and the same conference, they have each matched wits against one another from the sidelines for about 10 years.

“We know each other so well it is really hard to coach against each other,” Hadzic said.

Although the coaches are all close friends before and after the games, that does not detract at all from the competition on the field.

“It is definitely competitive,” Brinkmeyer said. “We don’t like to lose to begin with, but you definitely don’t like to lose to your friends because then you have to hear about it until the next time you play. There is a friendly rivalry. I would say that when all is said and done we probably work our kids harder for those games than maybe we do for others. And our players know my relationship with the local coaches, they know that it is on the line when we play Wash or Jeff or Xavier.”

Although the competition is always fierce when their teams face off, their friendship and respect for one another is what makes playing against each other such a rewarding experience.

“It is kind of nice to know that you are coaching against people that respect you and they know that you respect them,” O’Connor said. “It makes the game a whole lot easier. We know we are all going to play the game the way it’s meant to be played. We are going to play hard and play to win but we won’t do anything that is dirty or conniving in any way.”

And once the game is over, they trade scouting reports, wish each other luck and go back to being friends.

“It is not only coaching, it is staying connected in life,” Hadzic said.

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As they have grown up it has been harder and harder for the former teammates to see each other. Both O'Connor and Brinkmeyer are married and have two kids apiece. But even the kids know their fathers' old college teammates and coach, and run to hug them when they see them.

"I'm not married or have kids yet and they both are and their kids are kind of like my nieces and nephews," Graham said. "My family is back home in Illinois. I am a godfather to Corey's kid Graham, he even named him after me, so they are kind of my family. That is probably the best part of it all."