

Aug. 25 College Soccer

Fitzgerald's attitude change has Inverso enthused about Steinert grad

By Rich Fisher

Fish4Scores.com

Aug. 25: When Rider's soccer team begins the Charlie Inverso era at Seton Hall tonight, one of the starting outside midfielders will be Steinert graduate Ryan Fitzgerald.

While that might not sound like a big deal, it actually is.

Coming out of high school, one of the biggest questions about Fitzgerald concerned his temper. Would he be able to keep it in check long enough to survive in college soccer, or would it prove self destructive?

Considering that he begins his junior season as a starter, the answer should be obvious. He's a work in progress, but he's getting there.

"I don't think that he would deny in high school he had a little bit of a reputation as a hot head and he still has a little of that," Inverso said. "That's the stuff I'm trying to work on with him. I try to tell him 'Don't think being competitive means you're gonna get a yellow card or curse or take bad tackles and stuff like that.'"

And while it's still a slight concern, it's not nearly what it used to be.

"The first time I had individual player meetings we were talking about his temper and he said he's kind of calmed that down," Inverso said. "He told me after his freshman year he had an epiphany. And he's a bright kid, he's kind of been able to keep his temper in check since then."

Ryan is cut out of the same cloth as his father, Pat, and his uncle Mike. The twin brothers were as intense as it got as basketball players for Reynolds Junior High and Steinert in the 1970's. But Pat knows that too much intensity could backfire.

Some of Ryan's biggest outbursts came against his own teammates, along with opponents and referees.

"My dad had been telling me about that," Fitzgerald said. "He told me to go out and play my hardest, but to watch my temper. I give him thanks for correcting my outbursts. He was always on my back about that."

"I didn't want to be the guy known as the hot head. He told me 'Do what you know how to do, and at the same time re-direct your input to your teammates in a more positive way.' It's a mental game out there, when a player's feeling better he's gonna do the right thing. Me yelling at them isn't going to make them feel better."

Fitzgerald had a checkered career at Steinert. During his senior year he tallied 22 goals and 11 assists to earn All-CVC and All-State honors. Steinert reached the sectional semifinals that year. But during the Mercer County Tournament Fitzgerald became vilified when he got a red card for allegedly spitting on an opposing Notre Dame player during a Mercer County Tournament game.

Fitzgerald put that behind him, but admitted to a certain satisfaction during training camp this year when Mercer CCC transfer Mark Pratico, who played for Notre Dame during that game, told him "Fitz, you never spit on that guy."

During his freshman year at Rider, Fitzgerald started 15 of 17 games and tallied 20 shots, the fourth highest on the team. Last year, he started 12 games and scored his first collegiate goal in a 3-1



Ryan Fitzgerald is anxious to prove himself at the collegiate level for Rider's soccer team this fall (Photo by Pete Borg/Rider University)

win over New Jersey Tech. With a 3.5 GPA in accounting, he was also named to the MAAC All-Academic team.

This year has been a little different for Fitzgerald and the rest of the Broncs under Inverso, who has run a more intense camp.

“It’s very demanding, but I think we have a great coach who brought in a wonderful staff,” Fitzgerald said. “He’s an inspiration to the seniors who are still here and gives a great start to the freshmen. He’s a qualified coach who knows what he’s talking about. Our practices are looking good and guys are stepping up.”

Inverso has been pleasantly surprised with Fitzgerald, who he feels can help at both ends of the field.

“I really didn’t know him before I took the job, just what I heard about him,” the coach said. “He had that whole spitting thing and got labeled, and had that reputation as a hot tempered kid.

“To be honest, now that I know him, he’s nothing like I thought he was or anticipated how he was gonna be.”

Inverso was sincerely touched by Fitzgerald’s concern for his family, which has had a rough run in recent years. Ryan’s mother, Kathy, was been battling lupus and his cousin, Jimmy, was diagnosed with cancer. Because of those concerns, he decided to live at home rather than enjoy the fun life of campus living.

“I’m a sucker for a story like that, and I don’t think he was embellishing it at all,” Inverso said. “How can you embellish that? It’s a serious disease. I have a lot of respect for the kid when his mother and cousin are sick and it affects his whole life. That’s a big thing to carry around; a lot of stuff on your plate.”

Fitzgerald admits that it has been a burden for him. But earlier this week, he reported that both his mom and cousin were on the upswing.

“Thank God my mom is getting better and Jimmy fought through it,” Fitzgerald said. “My mom’s a fighter. The doctors were a little doubtful about where she’d be, but she’s managed to survive all those scary moments and is looking a lot better. I like to see her not struggling.

“Jimmy is finished his bone marrow transplant, he stayed strong and he’s looking much better.”

There are still concerns, obviously. But Fitzgerald tries to use soccer as an escape for a few hours each day.

“I would like it to be,” he said. “I can really relax and let things go from my mind that happened during the day. My thoughts are with my mom and cousin, and I need to go on the field and understand where they are at.

“It’s been a little bit of a challenge. With all that, I still have to give my teammates a high level of play. But I know my mom is happy that I’m out on the soccer field.”

Fitzgerald enters this season wanting to finally make his mark at the college level.

“I have something to prove, I haven’t done much stat wise,” he said. “I’ve been working hard. I have something to prove to myself, to my supporters, my parents, the rest of players on the team and my new coach.”

As far as the new coach goes, Fitzgerald has already proven to Inverso that some unwanted reputations are not what they appear to be from a distance.