

EMU Athletics Turns in Exciting Fifty Years of Excellence

BY JIM STREETER

The Eagles Take Flight

Eastern Michigan University has sponsored intercollegiate athletic competition for more than 130 years, and while there have been plenty of success stories during that time frame, the last fifty have been exceptional for the school, the city of Ypsilanti, and the state of Michigan.

The years from 1973 through the present have seen the athletic program turn in a record-breaking number of championships, upgrade its entire physical plant, and develop a major presence on the local, state, national, and international stages.

Perhaps two of the most important developments in EMU's athletic history began in the 1970s. One of those major moves was EMU joining the Mid-American Conference (MAC) in competition in 1973. The university became a proud member of the league, automatically gaining NCAA Division I status, after enjoying great success in the NCAA Division II or College Division classification. By agreeing to join the MAC, EMU partnered with a group of like-minded universities in similar-sized communities in the Midwest who all had common goals of promoting strong athletic competition.

Another major decision was the announcement that, starting in 1976, EMU would offer athletic scholarships to women's varsity student-athletes, which enabled ten women's athletic teams to join their ten male counterparts as varsity squads to compete in Division I.

The move to the MAC has evolved into a fifty-year competitive streak for EMU that has seen the varsity athletic teams lead the league in total team championships, recording 155 titles, 117 for the men's squads and 38 for the women's teams.

Student-Athlete Excellence

The past fifty-year period has included a multitude of individual and team athletic

highlights. In the 1970s, the baseball team jumpstarted EMU's success by turning the program into a national power under legendary head coach Ron Oestrike, a member of the American Association of Baseball Coaches Hall of Fame. The 1975 and 1976 Oestrike-coached squads reached the pinnacle of college baseball by qualifying for the NCAA College World Series. The team finished fifty in 1975 and made it all the way to the championship bracket in 1976 before taking a runner-up spot.

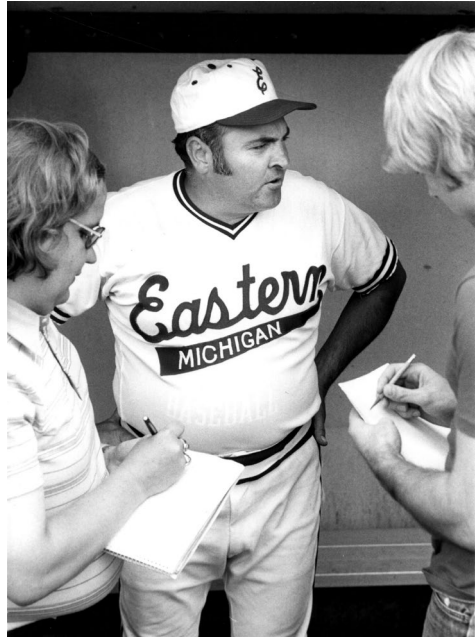
The 1987–88 school year was a special one for EMU's football and men's basketball teams. The footballers won the MAC title and represented the conference in the California Raisin Bowl in Fresno, California. The then-Hurons went into the game as a 17-point underdog against San Jose State University and stunned the nation with a 30–27 win.

Later in the 1987–88 season, the men's hoops squad won the MAC and qualified for its first-ever NCAA Division I Tournament berth. Eastern would lose a close contest to the University of Pittsburgh in that game.

The football team would move on from the California Bowl victory in 1987 to be invited to post-season bowl games in 2016 (Bahamas Bowl), 2018 (Camellia Bowl), 2019 (Quick Lane Bowl), and 2021 (Lending Tree Bowl).

Meanwhile, the men's basketball team enjoyed great success of its own after that initial NCAA Tournament appearance. Eastern made it all the way to the Sweet Sixteen of the 1990–91 tourney, defeated Duke in the first round of the 1997–98 tournament, and qualified for the 1998–99 NCAA Big Dance.

Not to be outdone, the EMU women's basketball team qualified for NCAA post-season play twice, in 2003–4 and 2011–12 after capturing MAC titles both times. Sarah VanMetre, a freshman on the '03–04 team, would go on to earn Academic All-American honors in 2006–7. Tavelyn James, a senior on the '11–12 squad, was named to the United States Pan-American Games team in 2011.



Ron Oestrike, EMU baseball coach from 1965 to 1987

Professional Quality

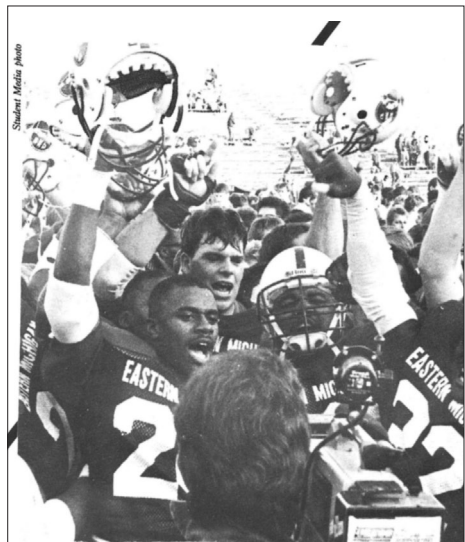
Eastern Michigan athletics advanced in the rarefied air of Olympic Games competition. The university produced men's and women's participants in sixteen consecutive Olympics dating back to 1960, when hurdler Hayes Jones was third in the 110-meter hurdles and came back to win in 1965. Over the past fifty years, another coaching legend, Bob Parks, coached sprinter Hasely Crawford into setting the bar high, earning the title of "World's Fastest Human" in 1976 by winning the 100-meter dash at the games in Montreal. He would go on to qualify for three more Olympics. Eastern's Earl Jones captured the Bronze Medal, placing third in the 800 meters at the 1984 games in Los Angeles. Clement Chukwu ran on the 4x200-meter relay team that was second in 2000, Nduka Awazie was on a 4x400-meter relay team that was second, and women's track star Savatheda Fynes won two medals, a gold on a 4x400-meter team in 2000 and a silver on a 4x400-meter team in 1996.

EMU athletics has also been the beneficiary of major successes in professional baseball with former pitchers Bob Welch and Bob Owchinko following up their baseball team success in Ypsilanti with their own recognition. Welch was the winner of the Cy Young Award in 1995 as the American League's top hurler, and Owchinko was named National League Rookie Pitcher of the Year in 1977.

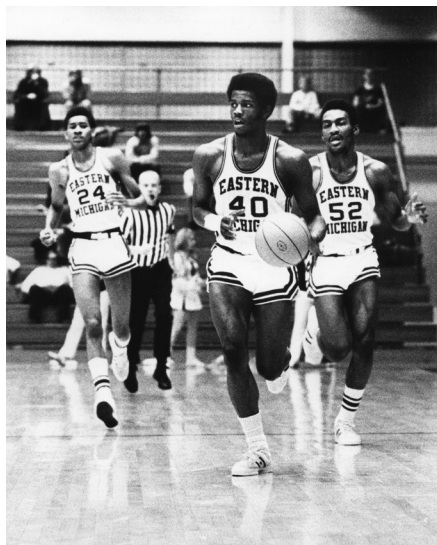
The football program has produced thirteen football standouts representing eight Super Bowl champion teams. Maxx Crosby, a second-round NFL pick in 2019, recently became the only EMU graduate to earn All-Pro honors in the NFL.

The Grounds for Success

Facilities have also been a major contributor to EMU's athletic success. Since 1973, Rynearson Football Stadium has undergone several upgrades to reach its current 30,000-seat configuration. A brand new Student Athletic Performance Center was added in 2019 in the north end of the stadium. The Olds/Marshall/Parks Outdoor Track has hosted numerous national and local events over the past fifty years. The EMU Indoor Practice Facility, the St. Joe's Sports Dome, located next to Rynearson stadium, is used for all EMU teams and available for rentals to the community. The most current addition



EMU football players celebrate victory in the 1988 California Bowl, 30 to 27



George Gervin, Class of 1972

to facilities is the installation of a women's soccer/women's lacrosse field on West Campus.

GameAbove, a group of former EMU student-athletes and university graduates, has become a major benefactor of the university and the athletics department. The philanthropic group endeavors to improve university facilities and to assist students and faculty. One of their most recent contributions was raising money to rename the 8,000-seat Convocation Center built in 1997 on Eastern's West Campus as the George Gervin GameAbove Center. Gervin was recently named one of the top seventy-five players in NBA history. And in addition, a few months

later, GameAbove helped break ground on an \$8-million Golf Center at EMU's Eagle Crest Golf Course.

Finally, one of the most interesting issues facing the EMU athletics department during the past fifty years was the dropping of the Hurons nickname and adoption of Eagles in 1991. That decision, based on feedback from the State of Michigan about the sensitivity of using Native American nicknames for university athletic teams, created a great deal of anguish among the athletic family. The issue, even after more than thirty years, remains a hot button for many older alumni and friends of the university.

The EMU department of athletics is proud of its long history of excellence and looks forward to continuing its success into the future.

A Note on Sources

My connection in the athletics field in Ypsilanti and EMU from 1970–2012 are most of my material sources for my composition. I also received additional information and assistance from the outstanding current EMU Athletics Media Relations directors Greg Steiner and Alex Jewell. Photos provided by the EMU Archives.

About the Author

Jim Streeter has a long history of working in the athletics field in Ypsilanti and Eastern Michigan University. He was a former sports editor of *The Eastern Echo*, worked as a sportswriter at the *Ypsilanti Press*, and also served as the Associate Athletics Director for Media Relations at EMU from 1974 to 2012.