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Grunzke hired to coach UIS baseball team

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The University of Illinois-Springfield's newest athletic program has a head coach.

UIS athletic director Rodger Jehlicka announced Friday that Brian Grunzke will coach the fledgling baseball program. Grunzke's two previous coaching stints were as an assistant at NCAA Division I schools.

"I'm humble to be named the first-ever coach of a program and I'm excited to get it going," he said. "It gives you an opportunity to lay the foundation. Obviously, when you have the chance to put the first baseball team in UIS history on the field, you're excited every day to come to work."

The Prairie Stars will play their first season starting in the 2010-11 school year. By then, UIS will have completed the transition from NAIA to NCAA Division II.

There were more than 175 applicants for the head baseball position, according to Jehlicka.

Grunzke, 52, brings loads of experience with him. He has coached college baseball for 30 years.

"That was the defining difference between the candidates that were interviewed," Jehlicka said. "We had three really good candidates, but he had so much background and such an in-depth background."

"He's going to bring with him the passion to start a program and he's going to be able to handle those obstacles that we will go over in the next few months. He's been there and done that so many times. A lot of the things that are going to be thrown at us in the next nine months are not going to be new to him."

Grunzke was an assistant coach at the University of Northern Iowa this spring. At the end of the season, the school dropped its baseball program in a cost-cutting measure. He was an assistant at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock during the 2007 and 2008 seasons.

Grunzke's resume includes a 16-year stint as head coach at his alma mater, Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa. His record was 388-344-1 and eight of his teams reached the National Junior College Athletic Association's Region 11 finals. Waldorf won 40 games in 1994, including 23 in a row. Grunzke began his college coaching career in 1979 as an assistant at Waldorf.

He was head coach when Waldorf made the jump from junior college to NAIA.

Grunzke will assemble a staff in a couple weeks. He officially assumes his position at the end of the month. He was in Springfield on Friday with his wife, Dawn.

They have three children and five grandchildren.

"My list is two pages long, but the most important thing I feel like I have to do in the first two or three months is recruiting," Grunzke said. "I've got to find the best players in central Illinois and the Midwest area. Then, meet with all the high school coaches, junior college coaches and people that are interested in baseball in central Illinois."

For five years, Grunzke worked for Perfect Game, a national service that scouts high school players.

With a coach in place, Jehlicka will tackle the task of finding a location for the Prairie Stars to play their home contests. He also will begin scheduling non-conference games.

"Will we play a whole schedule that first year?" Jehlicka asked. "In my conversation with Brian, we may play 45 or 48 (games). It really depends on where we are in recruiting."

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