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Eck ends 31-year career with Prairie Stars

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Welcome to your new life, Joe Eck.

After 31 years, today is the first day Eck is no longer with the Prairie Stars' men's soccer program, first with Sangamon State University and, since 1995, with the University of Illinois Springfield.

Eck, 54, announced his retirement earlier this month, citing family and employment reasons. Eck has worked at the university since 1981 and is assistant director for planning at the Department of Facilities and Services. He said the school's transition from NAIA to NCAA Division II status has "drastically increased" the paperwork associated with his part-time job as soccer coach.

"This year had no bearing on my decision," said Eck of his team's 2-14-1 record, the worst in his eight years as head coach and only his second losing season. "I seriously considered retiring last year after missing my son's state championship game (SHG lost to Peoria Notre Dame). "Most kids never reach a high school championship game. I felt badly having to miss the game. It hit me hard."

Eck, a Springfield native, began playing soccer when the sport was beginning to take hold in the city in the 1960s when the YMCA men's team was the only game. He graduated from Warren Wilson (N.C.) College — he was a 1977 first-team NAIA All-America — in 1978 with a bachelor's degree in physics, and he holds a master's degree in environmental studies from then-SSU.

"It's been an honor and a privilege to be a part of this program for 31 years," Eck said. "I thank Aydin Gonulsen (who coached the Prairie Stars from inception in 1977 to 2001) for offering me the (graduate assistant) position to be a part of this program.

"One of the most rewarding things of my coaching career are the friendships I've developed with the players, and to see them as young men getting their degrees and going on to be successful in life is a joy. That's the No. 1 reward. One of the benefits was being exposed to the many cultures. We've had Europeans, South and Central Americans and Africans, and each brought their own personalities from their country to the game."

Eck's first year as head coach was in 2002, and the Prairie Stars advanced to the first game of the NAIA tournament only to lose to Covenant (Ga.) College. That season was the only time the Prairie Stars went to the national tournament under Eck. In 2003, UIS went 13-6, his best record.

Assistant coach Milt Tennant has been with the Prairie Stars for 24 years, and this may be his last season, too. Tennant's appreciation of his years with the program transcends sports.

"I don't have a lot of friends, but Joe and Aydin are at the top of the list," Tennant. said "Joe Eck, at all times, is a gentleman. He is one of the most knowledgeable people of soccer at all levels. Even through this season, which is a low, he's always positive. He's never negative. My mom didn't give me brothers, but God gave me Joe and Aydin and I couldn't have asked for better."

Eck has a career head coaching record of 71-69-14. He was assistant when the Prairie Stars won NAIA titles in 1986, '88 and '93. He also coached two of the best players from the area on those title teams — John Krohe (1988) and John Lochbaum (1993).

"I loved playing for Joe," said Krohe, the men's soccer coach at Springfield College. "He's a player's coach. Joe has always had a calmness about him and a vision, too. He saw things we didn't see on the field. You won't find many people who love he game more than Joe."

Which is why Eck can't forsake the game that has been as good to him as he to the sport.

"I'll stay involved somehow, as a fan, doing camps, who knows," Eck said. "For sure, there are things I won't miss about coaching, like being on the road and being away from the family. I will miss the daily training sessions with the players. I enjoyed working with the kids to improve their game and everything that goes into the practice. Those players have kept me young."

Ron Dickerson can be reached through the sports department at 788-1545.

Quincy 1, UIS 0

Scoring: Jack Wedemeier (Corey Eatherton) 24:08 left.

Numbers: Shots: Quincy 19, UIS 7. Corner kicks: Quincy 6, UIS 4. Saves: Quincy (Kyle Dillman) 2; UIS (Jeremy Carnes) 6.

Shining Stars: The seniors – Carnes, Kyle Arendt, J.T. Nankervis, Drew Rynders, Anthony Longo and Brian Doellman.

Notes: UIS had two excellent scoring chances – With 23:25 left in the first half, Rynders cracked a direct kick from about 20 yards around the Quincy wall that Dillman knocked down, and Dustin Curtis' follow-up header went just over the bar. Curtis had a shot with about :10 remaining that scooted wide of the goal. An ensuing corner kick strayed across the end line before coming back into play, and Curtis converted a header that wouldn't have counted about :01 after the clock expired.

Quote: "The kids gave everything they had in this game, and I appreciate the effort they put out to try and get us a win. This certainly hasn't been a season we expected, and they've given this kind of an effort all year. I'm proud of them. It has been a privilege to have coached them." – Retiring UIS coach Joe Eck.

Records: UIS ended season 2-14-1 (0-13-1 GLVC); Quincy 8-7-2 (7-5-1; Friday night's conference game vs. Lewis University was cancelled because of inclement weather).

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