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Keiser's Seahawks set to join football ranks



New Keiser University football coach Doug Socha speaks at the Jacksonville campus Tuesday. (Clayton Freeman/The Times-Union)



Keiser University football coach Doug Socha (left) and athletic director Kris Swogger view a video presentation during Tuesday night's Jacksonville tour stop. (Clayton Freeman/The Times-Union)

Florida's newest college football program has campuses on three continents, no stadium, a coach hand-picked by a former national champion, 110 redshirts and 13 months to go until its first game.

So when Keiser University head coach Doug Socha discusses his new job, he's used to fielding a lot of questions.

"There's just a lot going on," he said. "We've got to fill a roster, we've got to recruit the state, fill a coaching staff... have daily conversations about facilities, where we're going to play and where we're going to put these kids."

The first-year college coach discussed the challenge of building a program from the ground up Tuesday at Keiser's Jacksonville campus on the Southside.

Socha's stop was the second of 17 visits on a statewide tour to spread the word about the fledgling football program at Keiser, a school that many people still associate with online learning.

The team plans to kick off in 2018 at a still-to-be-completed stadium with 1,500 to 2,000 seats on its flagship campus in West Palm Beach.

Athletic director Kris Swogger said Keiser just finished laying down sod for its practice field and is in the process of setting up a football locker room. The first practice is scheduled for Aug. 28.

The Seahawks compete in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, where their Sun Conference opponents include schools like Ave Maria and Webber International.

Even though they haven't yet taken their first snap, Socha said they've already signed around 110 players to letters of intent for the 2018 season. All will redshirt this fall.

He estimates that the average age range will be between 18 and 22.

"Our kids are going to go to school Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday. There might even be an evening class in there," Socha said. "So it's very traditional, like you'd think of a normal school like Florida State."

The U.S. Department of Education lists Keiser's enrollment at 18,018, a figure that exceeds many NCAA Division I institutions. But Keiser's student body is spread over 19 campuses, including locations in China and Nicaragua.

No playbook on the planet contains a call with a quarterback in Palm Beach and a receiver in Shanghai. And Swogger said the flagship campus in West Palm Beach, the one the football players will attend, has an enrollment of only about 900.

So the university's geographic spread presents some unusual logistical difficulties - and opportunities.

"We have the advantage in that we have faculty and students [from other campuses around the state] that can come to games while we're on the road," Swogger said.

Socha previously won a high school title at Plantation American Heritage in 2011, then moved to West Palm Beach Oxbridge Academy to launch the football program there before exiting in May 2016 amidst a major shakeup at the school. He spent last year on the Buffalo Bills' staff.

“Going to the NFL was great. It was the pinnacle of coaching, being around those coaches,” Socha said. “But it wasn’t how I’m wired.”

Keiser is his most unusual challenge yet. A year before the first kickoff, Socha already has a game plan in mind.

“We’re going to be an attacking-style defense, we’re going to play some man coverage and we’ll put a lot of pressure on the quarterback,” he said. “From an offensive standpoint, we want to be really wide open.”

Keiser’s efforts are drawing high-profile backing.

Howard Schnellenberger, the former national championship-winning coach at Miami in 1983, headed the search to hire Socha, while Rollie Massimino, the architect of Villanova’s improbable national title run in 1985, coaches the men’s basketball program at age 82.

So far, much of the athletic interest in Keiser has concentrated in south Florida. But about a dozen Jacksonville-area coaches in various sports attended the event.

“Any time you get another school opening and giving kids an opportunity to stay in state, it’s a good thing,” said White High School football coach Kevin Sullivan.

“Patience is probably the biggest challenge,” Socha said. “We just want it to happen now.”