

By Joe Sager

Mount Union's coaching tree is one of college football's most prolific.

The Purple Raiders, who have won 13 NCAA Division III championships and advanced to the title game 23 times, boast two current high-profile alums in Philadelphia Eagles head coach Nick Sirianni and new Penn State coach Matt Campbell.

Oil City native Matt LaVerde, part of two Mount Union national championship teams, is thrilled to see so many former Purple Raiders continue to excel in the coaching ranks.

"The Mount Union coaching tree is really, really impressive," he said. "Alex Grinch was my teammate and he's been all over as defensive coordinator, but is now at Central Florida. He's a great guy and was a couple years behind me. Matt Campbell was the head coach at Toledo and Iowa State and he's just as good a guy as ever. Nick Sirianni is another one who has hustled his tail off to get where he is. I go back to Coach (Larry) Kehres, who made faith, family and football the hallmark of the program. Those guys are all carrying that with them. They are striving for excellence and competing every day. Continuous improvement is always the goal. That sticks with all of us to this day."

LaVerde was thrilled to see Penn State hire Campbell to lead the Nittany Lions this offseason. LaVerde grew up a massive Penn State fan and joined the football program as a preferred walk-on quarterback before transferring to Mount Union. LaVerde, a middle linebacker, and Campbell, a defensive end, were starters and major impact players for the Purple Raiders in their 2000 championship season. In a 10-7 Stagg Bowl win over Saint John's, LaVerde had 12 tackles.

“Matt Campbell is a great guy and he’s surrounded himself at Penn State with great guys,” LaVerde said. “I talked to some of my Penn State buddies and they are all excited about that hire. Campbell has done a nice job bringing in players from other decades to try to stay connected. He understands the tradition and importance of that. Whatever advice he can pull from everyone, he’s trying to do. He understands it’s bigger than just football.”

LaVerde got to witness Campbell’s transition in person. Matt and older brother, Tiger, who led Kirtland High School to an eighth Ohio state championship last season, got to stop by Happy Valley for a visit with Campbell, who became very familiar with Tiger LaVerde’s program while recruiting Ohio.

“Matt would recruit at Tiger’s school every year and he’d call me every year. When talking to him, he told us to come down, so we went down April 23rd to meet with Matt and talk to him. We sat with him for an hour and spent the whole day down there,” Matt LaVerde said. “Matt is a really, really good guy — a really good person. He’s really committed. He wants a great player experience and wants guys to compete every single day and have fun. Competition is really what it’s all about — being a good person, teammate and competing.”

The LaVerdes brought another guest along with them — Tiger’s youngest son, Jake. He became the first player in OHSAA history to start in four straight state championship games. He ran for 112 yards and a touchdown in the team’s 41-6 win over Hopewell-Loudon for the Division VI championship in December. Also a free safety, he had a team-best 10 tackles.

Jake finished his career with 3,167 passing and 3,174 rushing yards — the first player in program history to join the 3,000-3,000 club. He passed for 43 touchdowns and scored 40 on the ground, also the first player in Kirtland history to be part of the 40-40 club. He was named the co-Division VI Offensive Player of the Year. He finished with a 49-3 career mark. All of those numbers would be higher, except he missed seven games last year with arm surgery and ankle surgery this fall sidelined him for four games.

Those injuries hindered the recruiting process and left Jake contemplating whether he wanted to play college football. That all changed when Campbell offered him a preferred walk-on spot as a safety.

“Matt called about five days before we came down there for our visit and asked about Jake,” Matt LaVerde said. “He told us to bring him down with us because Matt wanted him. Jake was all about it. The frustrating thing for him was missing half of his junior and part of his senior season with injuries. He never got a chance to play healthy the last couple years. He played in the Ohio North-South all-star game and was named player of the game. That gave him some renewed interest in playing in college. I am super excited for him. He has worked as hard as anybody can work. I think that’s due to watching his older brother, Phil, who is a three-year starter at Case Western Reserve University.”

Like Campbell and Sirianni, Matt LaVerde is part of the Mount Union coaching tree. He spent time as an assistant under Sirianni’s brother, Mike, who is the head coach at Washington & Jefferson. He was an assistant under Tiger at Franklin for two of Tiger’s three seasons leading the Knights before taking over as OC’s head coach from

2008-15. He posted a 45-42 mark with the Oilers and led them to five playoff appearances.

Now the director of the Erie County Technical School, Matt, who taught and served as an administrator locally before heading to Erie in 2023, doesn't have time to devote to coaching between his professional and family commitments.

"I have been blessed to come to the Erie County Technical School. I just absolutely love it," he said. "In my work, I get to talk with the community, work with legislators in Harrisburg and D.C. and teach kids valuable things they can use for employment. It's really, really good stuff."

You better believe that fire still burns to get back on a sideline, though.

"I am sure I will be coaching in some capacity in the future," he said. "With my daughter in my life and school leadership keeping me busy, it's just tough. It's been a good experience moving up here, though."