

JMU Nation

FOOTBALL

Hello, Houston!

Coach ushers in new era of Dukes football

BY KEVIN WARNER ('02)

In his first two opportunities as a college head coach, Mike Houston inherited programs devoid of recent success and built them to compete at the national level. Now, at JMU, there is no need to rebuild or resurrect. The pieces are in place for Houston to make an impact quickly.

"The more research I did, I kept hearing the same things," Houston said as he settled into his new office in the Plecker Athletics Performance Center. "This is a place where you can win and where they care about athletics. That's really held up after I was hired. Everyone here wants to see JMU succeed."

Houston was formally introduced as JMU's new head coach on Jan. 19. In a whirlwind first few months, he filled an entire coaching staff, welcomed his first signing class of new student-athletes, led the Dukes through their first spring practice session and hit the road to make appearances with the Duke Club on its annual spring tour.

Houston also found time to move his family to Harrisonburg to become part of the local community. Houston is excited about the new home for himself, his wife, Amanda, and their boys, Owen and Reid, saying, "I think it's a place where we're going to be very happy, and I think it's a good place to raise a family."

One of Houston's priorities was to convince a new recruiting class to sign less than three weeks removed from his own signing with JMU. In an era of college athletics when many recruits claim loyalty to a coach more than a school, Houston and his staff were able to retain 15 of 17 JMU commitments.

'Everyone here wants to see JMU succeed.'

— MIKE HOUSTON

To Houston, that anomaly speaks further to JMU's status as a rare find in college athletics. He noted, "Really I would not have given this much of a chance of being able to do it when I took this job, so to be

able to have 15 kids who were committed decide to stay committed, that says a lot about JMU. It says a lot about what Madison has to offer and how much these guys wanted to be at this institution."

Houston had the chance to see that commitment firsthand on his own campus tour as part of a pre-signing day recruiting weekend. "On the tour, you keep hearing, 'Wow, this place is great.' We have a vibrant campus with great food, great facilities and a winning program. For the parents, we offer an outstanding education. So for all of the recruits, they saw that this is pretty special, and it's something different from some of the other places that are recruiting them."

The men Houston hired for his coaching staff—guys like Bryan Stinespring, Bob Trott, Byron Thweatt and Jeff Hanson—also made a difference in keeping recruits and in having a successful spring practice period. It is a far more experienced group than the previous staff and one with deep connections to Virginia's key recruiting areas.

Houston said, "The big thing to me was I wanted people I could trust. A lot of that goes back to having previous relationships with them, or having relationships with other people who trust them. ... I knew what kind of character men they were as far as how they were going to treat the kids, the way they're going to represent Madison when they go on the road recruiting or when they're interacting with our alumni."

As Houston and the staff immediately turn to recruiting the next class, they will focus on bringing as many recruits as possible to campus for tours or as part of camps. "We've got to do a great job with spring recruiting," he said. "We want to try to get as many rising high-school seniors on campus in the spring and summer as we possibly can because this place sells itself. They have a different vision of what Madison is once they've been on campus."

The current squad will spend much of the early summer focusing on academics and working with JMU's new football strength and conditioning staff to be prepared for fall camp.

As autumn rolls around, Houston looks forward to the opportunity to really make his mark on the program with winning results on the field and a foundation for long-term success in Harrisonburg.

"My biggest focus will be to build a program that consistently represents what Madison is all about and one that JMU alumni can be proud of, no matter where they go. That means being a first-class program on the field and off the field and achieving at a very high level, because that's what Madison is all about."



Head coach Mike Houston is excited about his new home and the future of JMU football.