

ROSITANO

From C1

As far as passing the torch, Rositano said he'll be pushing for longtime assistant Matt Kielian to succeed him.

"I remember the chance I had to coach my two daughters (Jenna and Abby) at Amherst and I had an unbelievable time," Rositano said. "He's got two boys — one a freshman and one an eighth grader — who are really good and part of this is I want him to have the same opportunity. He's been loyal for eight years, a great assistant to me and he deserves it."

"Maybe down the road we'll be coaching against each other."

Rositano, a 1981 Admiral King graduate who helped the Admirals advance to the 1980 basketball state final, coached under legend Mitch Gillam at his alma mater after graduating from Bowling Green. He was hired a decade later to run the Lorain Steelmen program, which he did for one year — leading the program to its lone district championship — before the school closed and he was hired to be the Admirals' head coach.

He spent eight years running the Admirals program — winning three Erie Shore titles and two sectional championships — before running the Comets girls program the next nine seasons — compiling a 147-77 record to go with a pair of district championships.

Rositano was hired to run the Titans program in 2013, and all he's done the last eight years is compile a 148-40 record and lead Lorain to four Lake Erie League titles, five sectional championships, four district titles and a state tournament appearance in 2018.

"You always remember the time that you win the game to go to the state tournament," he said. "Every player and coach dreams about getting to the final four in any sport, and when we beat St. John's in Toledo a couple years ago, that was definitely a moment that not only myself but a lot of people in Lorain will always remember."

It was the kind of success Lorain athletic director Bryan Koury envisioned when he hired Rositano eight years ago, although Koury didn't need to see the on-court accomplishments to know Rositano was going to flourish.

"I have a soft spot in my heart for John for a lot of reasons," Koury said. "A lot of people don't know but he was my freshman coach when I played basketball. I'll be honest, I would have never gotten into coaching if it wasn't for him. The influence he had on me as a freshman and then as an assistant coach when I played JV and varsity was the reason

why I wanted to be a basketball coach.

"When I graduated college, he brought me right in to where I started coaching freshmen and eventually coached JV and was a varsity assistant and I went on to be a head coach at Southview. That was 100 percent because of what he taught me and what he instilled in me."

Rositano has racked up the coaching awards during his three-decade run, including multiple coach of the year honors in conferences, Lorain County and Northeast Ohio. He was named Ohio's top coach in 2015, selected by the state's coaches association to coach the North/South All-Star Game in 2017 and was inducted into the Lorain Sports Hall of Fame in 2019.

"Obviously over the years he's had tons of accomplishments as a coach, whether it be at Admiral King or Lorain High — the former and current Lorain High — but most importantly I hope that everybody realizes that our kids have been unbelievable representatives of the community both in the classroom and on the court during his tenure," Koury said. "Our kids have been winners in life as a result of his influence, and I think that's more important than anything."

Rositano said he's been fueled by the support of his family over the years.

"My father and my brother, who's coached with me the whole 26 years, and my wife (Val) and two daughters," he said. "They are as big a part of this as I am. A coach's family ... it's not easy."

The run with the Titans has been the cherry on top of an impressive resume, and that run took some work to get going.

"It's funny that when I got the job eight years ago, me and (Kielian) were talking and my first year there the stands were half full," Rositano said. "I said, 'You know what our job is, we have to get these stands full. We have to create an atmosphere where Lorain basketball is thriving again, where there's packed houses and excitement.' I think we've done that."

"As a staff through the years we didn't take any shortcuts, we did things the right way and I think we did right by the kids. When you do things the right way, good things will happen. That's what we did. It was really neat to see the excitement back in Lorain basketball. The sellout crowds, the state tournament runs, the district championships, the conference championships ... and along the way we coached some very good players. A lot of really, really great kids."

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AP PHOTOS

Yu Chang smiles as he bunts during batting practice while Mike Freeman looks on during the Indians' first full-squad spring training workout Monday in Goodyear, Ariz.

TRIBE

From C1

Cy Young winner Shane Bieber isn't expecting that to change.

"Very confident," Bieber said when asked about the club's ability to stay competitive. "We had a young team last year and we've got a young team this year again. We were kind of learning on the fly last year. That's the beauty of baseball, Major League Baseball specifically, turning over rosters year after year."

"You got to learn each other and learn on the fly, but I guess if anything, it's fortunate we've got quite a bit longer season this year, a little bit more time to work towards our ultimate goal."

That would be winning a World Series for the first time since 1948.

This year, perhaps more than ever, the Indians, who also chose not to re-sign first baseman Carlos Santana or closer Brad Hand, will rely on a solid starting staff led by the 25-year-old Bieber. In just three major league seasons, the right-hander has become one of the AL's most dominant, front-of-the-rotation starters.

Bieber pulled off pitching's Triple Crown in 2020, leading the majors in wins, ERA and strikeouts. It's not a stretch to think he can't get better, which is scary for opposing hitters and equally worrisome for the Indians, who will have to pay him market value at some point.

The team has contractual control of Bieber until 2025 — he'll be arbitration eligible the next three years — and the right-hander said Monday that he'd welcome a chance to talk to the team about a long-term contract extension.

"It's absolutely something I'd be open to," he said. "But in terms of conversations, nothing has really come about. Everybody is kind of on the same page, you know, one step at a time. We have a very new group coming in this year, and there's a lot of turnover from last year, so it's a different look and everybody just kind of wants to get the ball rolling, get on the same page."

"In terms of conversations, it really hasn't happened yet, so that's something I'd love to



The entrances to the Indians spring training facility are closed to the public due to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak.

dive into and hopefully that will be reciprocated as well."

After dealing Lindor and Carrasco, the cost-conscious Indians invested some of the saved money back into the roster by signing free agent outfielder Eddie Rosario (one year, \$8 million) and re-signing second baseman César Hernández (one year, \$5 million), two players who can help them stay in step with the Twins and White Sox in the AL Central.

Reyes, who may get a chance to play some first as well as DH, is active on social media. He's aware of what's being said about the Indians this season — and it's not all flattering.

Expectations are low, and that's to be expected with the changes.

Reyes, though, feels the Indians are being short-changed.

"It's not like I'm offended, but I know my team and I know my teammates," he said. "I know we can make a lot of noise. I know we don't have Frankie anymore and we don't have Carlos, but we have a lot of good players. And with Rosario there — both Rosarios — and then the guys that we got, I know they're very good players, too, because I've seen them before."

BROWNS

Watt still mulling choices

Scott Petrak
The Chronicle-Telegram

J.J. Watt isn't in a hurry. The free agent defensive end who's being pursued by the Browns and several other teams responded to someone on Twitter who asked about his plans to sign.

"I scroll through door dash for like an hour before I pick a restaurant man..." Watt tweeted Sunday night to his 5.6 million followers. "You're gonna have to give me a second to choose a new team and city."

Watt asked for and was granted his release by the Houston Texans on Feb. 12 after 10 years, 101 sacks and three NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards.

The Browns reportedly expressed interest immediately, as they have a pressing need for a pass rusher to pair with All-Pro end Myles Garrett. Cleveland has a lot of company in the chase, and the speculation prompted a tweet from Watt on Wednesday.

"free agency is wild," he wrote. Watt saying he's going to need some time to determine his future is interesting. His release gave him more than a month of a head start before free agency is set to begin March 17.

Waiting to sign until the league year starts would allow more teams to create salary cap space, increasing the number of options. But it would also flood the market with talent, including plenty at edge rusher, competing for a finite number of dollars.

Watt was scheduled to make \$17.5 million with the Texans in 2021, the final year of his contract. That would seem a natural starting point in discussions with teams but might be too high for someone who's turning 32 in March and missed 32 games combined in 2016, '17 and '19 with injuries.

Watt played all 16 games in 2020, finishing with five sacks, 17 quarterback hits, 14 tackles for loss, seven passes defensed, two forced fumbles, an interception returned for a touchdown and a fumble recovery.

Celebrity chef, Cleveland native and Browns fan Michael Symon made his pitch on Twitter on Sunday.

"Cmon @JJWatt we can figure this out ..." he tweeted. "I'll take care of food"

@CJMcCollum will teach you the 3 ball & @BradPaisley will give free guitar lessons ... we got you covered in the CLE ... @Browns"

OTTO

From C1

Graham is rarely mentioned when Brady is almost universally recognized as the NFL's Greatest of All Time. Not only is perspective slanted toward recent events, the NFL gives extra weight to the Super Bowl era, which began in 1966 after Graham's career and the Browns' glory years had ended.

The Browns began play in 1946 and won all four All-America Football Conference championships before joining the NFL in 1950. They earned instant credibility by beating the defending NFL champion Eagles 35-10 in the opener, then topping the Rams in the title game, as Graham picked up yards running to set up Lou Groza's winning field goal. Graham lost three straight title matchups — by seven, 10 and one — before winning two in a row and retiring at 34 years old.

"I think it's the thing that sets him apart. He was a winner. Brady's a winner," Mike Brown said. "That's pretty remarkable stuff. Otto did it over a shorter span of years. You can argue that that sets him over Brady, or you can argue that Brady was able to do it all the way to age 43 and maybe he'll continue to do it even more. That's extraordinary. They're both extraordinary players. Otto does deserve to be in the conversation when you talk about the top guys."

Graham, who died in 2003 at 82 years old, didn't miss a game in his 10 years and made five Pro Bowls. "Automatic Otto" retired after winning championship No. 7 and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1965. The Browns unveiled a statue of him outside FirstEnergy Stadium on Sept. 7, 2019.

"The thing that Otto had was a certain physicality about him," Brown said. "He moved in the



AP FILE

Browns QB Otto Graham scores from the 1-yard line in a 38-14 win over the Rams in the 1955 NFL final.

pocket. He could move outside of the pocket. So when I think of comparables, probably (John) Elway is more comparable than Brady's style or (Peyton) Manning's style.

"Otto was a great athlete. He could run with the ball effectively. He chose not to unless it was absolutely necessary in order to protect himself and that protected the team."

Graham was an All-American football and basketball player at Northwestern University. He played a season in the National Basketball League with the Rochester Royals and won a championship. He then joined the Browns and rushed for 50 touchdowns in 10 seasons.

Anyone who's seen Brady's 40-yard dash at the 2000 scouting combine knows Graham was the better athlete. Brady made his career with a strong, accurate arm, subtle movement inside the pocket, great deci-

sion-making and the ability to thrive in the biggest moments.

Graham had the same characteristics.

"As a passer, he had the ability that the great quarterbacks have, which is to find the open receiver and to get the ball to the open receiver in a catchable, accurate fashion," Brown said. "Otto could do it at all ranges."

The numbers support the testimonial.

Not only did he lead the league in passing yards five times, completion percentage four times and touchdown passes three times, Graham is the all-time leader with 9.0 yards an attempt, more than half a yard more than anyone else in history. Hall of Famer Sid Luckman and Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes are second at 8.4. Brady ranks tied for 29th at 7.5.

"That has always been considered the principal standard, and that's the

one that seems to identify the top quarterbacks best," Brown said. "And it speaks well for Otto that he registers well in that category."

NFL Network ranked Graham No. 16 in 2010 on its list of greatest players. Brady was No. 21 after winning three Super Bowls. Hall of Fame coach Don Shula presented Graham after growing up watching him then becoming a teammate.

"Otto certainly has to be one of the best of all time," Shula said during the video. "All you got to do is look at his accomplishments. You go and look at Otto's record, and all he ever did was win championships. And how else do you judge a quarterback. Every season that he lined up the Browns were in the championship game."

"It's hard to pick anyone any better."

Running back Jim Brown was ranked No. 2 on the list, behind

49ers receiver Jerry Rice, but Mike Brown gives Graham the edge in Browns history.

"He was the Browns' greatest player," Mike Brown said. "Those who were fortunate to see their history the way I did, which is most of it, the player who is at the top of the heap is Otto."

"Jim Brown was a great player, but he was a running back. Otto was a great player and he was a quarterback. It's just that the quarterback in NFL football is the position that matters most."

Which is why Brady gets all the love he does.

Brady is a three-time MVP who's completed 64 percent for 581 touchdowns, 191 interceptions and a 97.3 passer rating. He had to play more games in a season, beat more teams (the NFL was 13 teams in 1950 and 32 in 2020) and win more playoff games than Graham did to earn a ring. At the most, Graham claimed a title with two postseason wins, while Brady has needed at least three, including four this season.

Terry Bradshaw and Joe Montana won four Super Bowls apiece, and Elway made it to five, winning two. Brady's separated himself from everyone in the last three generations.

"He's the player that they are seeing, the one they remember," Brown said. "They didn't see Otto. And Brady, let's admit it, he's special, too. You tend to give a little bit more credit to the ones who are recent."

Just don't forget Graham.

"I'm glad you're onto this as a topic because Cleveland should be proud of Otto," Brown said. "He was their player and I wish more of them had had the chance to see him play that I had. He deserves it."

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