

Van Buskirk returns to Metro East

After spending 12 years in Germany, former Granite City soccer standout works for Metro United soccer club

By [Theo Tate](#)

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Two decades ago, John Van Buskirk was a soccer standout at Granite City High.

Van Buskirk helped the Warriors win two state championships, including one in his senior year. He also was a team captain.

Now, Van Buskirk is back in the Metro East area. This time, he's a director and coach for the Metro United select soccer team. "Metro United offered me a great chance and an opportunity to finally settle down and give back to the little guys of what I've learned over in Europe," Van Buskirk said.

Van Buskirk has been working at Metro United for a year. Before he joined the select soccer program last June, Van Buskirk got a taste of soccer overseas. He played professional soccer in Germany for 12 years.

"For us, for the Granite City people and for the kids, it's a guy who the game was probably a little bit easier for," said Mitch Bohnak, who is the director of external affairs at Metro United. "He was a star all of his life whether it would be in the high school, college or in the pros. Now, he's giving it back to those kids. For us, it gives a unique perspective of a guy who has gone to Germany to live his dream. We have kids in our club who play professional soccer, but all of them are still here in the States. Someday, they'll be one of them who probably will have some questions about, 'boy, can I pick up and move to Portugal?' and John can give them some insight and say, 'this is what I did.' Of course you're nervous and of course you don't know the language, but it helps the kids through that process, so that will be a beneficial thing for our players down the road for sure."

Van Buskirk was playing soccer in Kentucky before he accepted the offer to play soccer in Germany.

"I was playing some semi-pro in Louisville and I got a phone call," Van Buskirk said. "They said we'll pay for the flight and we'll pay for the hotel. There were really no expenses for me and it was a two-week trial



[THEO TATE](#) PHOTO -- John Van Buskirk gives instructions to players during tryouts of the Metro United select soccer team on June 10 at the Collinsville Soccer Complex. Buskirk, a Granite City graduate, is now one of the the Metro United soccer directors after spending 12 years playing professional soccer in Germany.

basis. It was a no-brainer thing. It's every kid's dream to go to Europe and try to go to play soccer. I caught a lucky break when I got off the plane. They were playing 11 on 11 that day and they were missing a guy. They said, 'hey, put on your boots and you can kick with us.' We win 1-0 and I had the goal."

Van Buskirk played over 200 games during his career at Germany. He played one game in the German Bundesliga league, 78 in the Bundesliga 2 league and 193 in the Regionaliga league. He was a member of teams such as Rot-Weiss Erfurt, KFC Uerdingen, Siegen, LR Ahlen and BSV Kickers Emden. Van Buskirk finished with 63 goals during his long career at Germany.

Besides playing soccer, Van Buskirk also started a family in Germany.

"I married a German girl," Van Buskirk said. "We have twin boys. They're 7 years old and they'll be 8 this month. It wasn't like I was over there by myself. Of course, I missed my mom and dad and my brother. I had my own family over there, so I wasn't that lonely."

The 36-year-old Van Buskirk said the toughest part of living in Germany was learning its language.

"It was really tough, but living over there made it a lot easier," Van Buskirk said. "The club provided me with a private tutor five days a week. I learned the basics over there and living over there and talking to people over there. That's where you really need to be to really learn the language."

Van Buskirk started his soccer career when he was 4. When he was at Granite City High, Van Buskirk helped the Warriors win state titles in 1987 and 1989. Van Buskirk continued his college career at Indiana University, where he finished with 16 goals and five assists in his four years.

Van Buskirk said playing in Germany was one of the biggest highlights of his long soccer career.

"It was a beginning of a new life," Van Buskirk said. "I was really happy that I got to play for those 12 years. It was like starting over again. It was like you're 5 years old again."

After 12 years at Germany, Van Buskirk was hired to replace David Fernandez, who also was a former soccer player at Granite City High, as director/coach at Metro United.

"It's a coincidence that Granite City's second-most famous soccer player (With Former US Men's National Team, Steve Trittschuch as #1) was replaced by Granite City's third-most famous soccer player," Bohnak said. "It's good for us. Dave was great and he was a great trainer when he was here in Metro. Now we replaced him with John, who hopefully grows into the coach Dave ended up being."

Bohnak said Van Buskirk, who has a European Football Association coaching license, has been a huge addition to the Metro United program.

"He's got the above unique perspective to come back and be able to tell kids what it's like in other countries," Bohnak said. "He's coming from an area in Germany where it would be like being a St. Louis Cardinals fan here in St. Louis. Everybody plays soccer and everybody lives soccer and everybody breathes soccer and everybody wanted to be a professional soccer player one day. He was immersed in that for 12 years. Now, he gets to come back here and help us with that. He's got a great personality. He's a guy people are going to naturally want to be around because he's kind of care free and got a smile on my face, but he's also a stern coach. He's a strict coach learning the trade over in Germany. Now, he'll learn the trade over here."