

# Robert Morris hopes to play FBS opponents in the future

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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio — A week before Youngstown State went to overtime with Robert Morris on Saturday, the Penguins opened their season by giving Pitt a scare at Heinz Field.

The Panthers have played Youngstown State four times since 2005, and the Penguins even pulled off a 31-17 upset in 2012. For Youngstown State, a Football Championship Subdivision team, games against Football Bowl Subdivision schools like Pitt mean a big payday, win or lose.

Right now, that opportunity isn't really open to fellow FCS — formerly Division I-AA — team Robert Morris.

But the Colonials have taken steps to get there.

“This goes back to one of the reasons we cut sports a few years ago,” Robert Morris athletic director Craig Coleman said Thursday, “as we now are growing the scholarship numbers for the football program, we hope we are now getting to the point where we are meeting the criteria for a bowl eligible win for an FBS school.

“Those schools pay an awful lot of money. They aren't going to (play the game) unless it counts in terms of being bowl eligible. We're increasing our scholarships in the football program and hope that very soon we are able to be countable for them. We are very eager to play those games very often.”

The NCAA allows FBS teams one victory per season over an FCS opponent, but the win only counts toward bowl eligibility if the FCS team's football financial aid averages out to at least 56.7 full scholarships, which is 90 percent of the limit of the 63 allowed to FCS teams.

Youngstown State currently meets that requirement, and that's why the Penguins have been on Pitt's schedule recently. Robert Morris, though, hasn't reached that point. Not yet.

But, in December 2013, Coleman announced that the university was eliminating seven programs: men's indoor and outdoor track, cross country and tennis, and women's golf, tennis and field hockey.

Back then, Coleman said that while Robert Morris had a substantial athletic budget — around \$14 million — the amount it spent per athlete was low because of the number of programs.

After consideration, the university decided to focus on improving a smaller selection of teams, football among them. That decision is helping the Colonials boost their scholarship allotment.

As it stands now, the difference between Robert Morris and Youngstown State is about 17,000 stadium seats, four national championships and, perhaps most importantly, all those scholarships. That's why the Colonials taking Youngstown State to overtime was so remarkable.

When the Penguins won their first two national championships — they've have made six appearances in their 75-year history, winning in 1991, 1993, 1994 and 1997 — Robert Morris' program, founded in 1994, didn't even exist yet.

Saturday's game, the first meeting between the two schools, was also a guarantee game. But the revenue for the Colonials was nowhere near what FCS schools get from FBS teams, who often pay hundreds of thousands of dollars and sometimes even near \$1 million.

"It helps you tremendously financially," Coleman said. "These are pretty lucrative amounts of money that the (FBS) schools are paying. They are generating an awful lot of ticket revenue and other sorts of revenue for home games.

"For FCS schools that tend not to have as much money, that amount of money tends to go a long way in supporting the football programs."

Nearly two years after cutting programs, Coleman isn't exactly sure how close the Colonials are to their scholarship goal for football. Athletic and some academic money are included in the formula, and it hasn't been completely calculated.

But he hopes that someday soon, Robert Morris, like Youngstown State, will be able to reap the benefits of playing FBS opponents.

"I don't think we are there yet," Coleman said, "but we are not more than a couple years away."