

These Three Players Proud of Their Cincinnati Connections

BY AMY THORNLEY

For three local soccer stars, playing professionally in their hometown was something they never dreamed could happen. But thanks to FC Cincinnati and an enthusiastic showing of fan support, these hometown boys just might be back for good.

“Four or five months ago, living in Cincinnati wasn’t an option for me, with where my life was going,” FC Cincinnati defender Austin Berry says. Berry, 27, grew up in Anderson Township, playing a variety of sports, including baseball and basketball.

After exceptional performances as a defender at Cincinnati’s Summit Country Day School and the University of Louisville, he was drafted by the Chicago Fire in the first round and became the 2012 Major League Soccer Rookie of the Year. In 2014, Berry was traded to Philadelphia, and 2015 found him playing on loan to FC Anyang in South Korea. When the opportunity to play in his hometown opened, he leaped at the chance: Berry was one of the first 11 players signed to FC Cincinnati.

“It’s funny how things happen,” he says. “I always thought I’d be back in Cincinnati doing something. I just didn’t know when. I didn’t think I’d ever have the chance to come back and play soccer here. Now, I’m not only back, but I’m living in the same township I grew up in.”

Simply having a professional soccer team here in town would have been a dream for a young Luke Spencer.

“It’s certainly something I wish I had when I was young,” the FC Cincinnati forward says. Spencer, 25, grew up on Cincinnati’s west side, playing soccer for Winton Woods High School. He also has fond memories of winning a State Cup in youth soccer in 2009.

Spencer’s standout senior season at Xavier University, in which he had 14 goals and eight assists and was A-10 Player of the Week three times, led to his 2013 draft by the New England Revolution.

But Spencer returned to the Queen City to coach with Xavier University in 2015, then was signed by FC Cincinnati in early 2016 as the team was being launched. “Growing up in Cincinnati and playing soccer, you start to associate playing with your hometown. I definitely missed the soccer atmosphere here,” he says. And, of course, the local food. “I missed Skyline and LaRosa’s—the essentials.”

Berry adds: “I always joke, as soon as they signed on Donatos as one of the corporate sponsors, that’s when I knew I had to sign with FC Cincinnati. It’s one of the first foods that I would have coming back home.”

For FC Cincinnati forward Omar Cummings, returning to Cincinnati is a dif-



Austin Berry



Luke Spencer



Omar Cummings



Omar Cummings played for both Cincinnati State and UC.



Austin Berry grew up in Anderson Township.



Luke Spencer played soccer for Winton Woods High School.

ferent kind of homecoming. Cummings first came to Cincinnati from Jamaica in 2003, attending and playing soccer for Cincinnati State Technical and Community College.

“Other than the cold, it was pretty good,” Cumming says, laughing as he recalls his first impressions of the city. “For me, the weather that first year was crazy. It was like, oh my gosh, when is this cold going to end?” He transferred to the University of Cincinnati in 2005 and led the Bearcats to

the Big East title in 2006. Former UC men’s soccer coach Hylton Dayes has called Cummings the best player to ever wear a UC men’s soccer uniform.

Cummings returns to his self-described second home after a distinguished career in MLS. Drafted in 2007 by the Colorado Rapids, he played in 148 regular-season games during his six years with the team, scoring 39 goals, an MLS title and Most Valuable Player status among other individual nods. He also played with the

Jamaican national team.

But, in spring 2015, it was news of FC Cincinnati that got this veteran’s attention. “Honestly, it kind of freaked me out how excited I got. I was playing the day that I heard, and had a hard time concentrating on my game the rest of the day. I was immediately onboard.”

Even though home may be Jamaica, Cummings’ Cincinnati homecoming is a return to family. “I have a core group of guys here, from when I was a student.



Now that I'm married and have a family, it's great to be back somewhere familiar with friends who became like family to me."

Some in Cincinnati might be surprised that Cincinnati could be a soccer town, but these hometown stars are not among them.

"I definitely saw the possibility," Cummings says. "The support was there, that's a no-brainer."

Spencer points to the multitude of local soccer clubs as evidence of the homegrown soccer support. "The local clubs do such a good job of promoting soccer, making it enjoyable. Since Day 1, we've really had a great following."

However, knowing that the fans are out there is different from seeing them packing Nippert Stadium on game days. All three players are overwhelmed with the swells of support that they're seeing from the hometown fans.

"If you'd told me last year that we were going to have 20,000 people at a soccer game in Cincinnati, I would've shook my head," Berry says. "But the more that I've been back home, been around people talking about it, it's started to become more of a real possibility. It's great that we have that kind of support."

Spencer agrees: "Soccer is growing everywhere, but especially in Cincinnati, it's growing. I knew there was a soccer following in Cincinnati, but I had no idea that this club would have such a following, that we would be this well-received this early on. The other day, I went to get gas. I look over, and there's a guy wearing an FC Cincinnati hat. It's incredible."

Cummings, 33, says he's been around long enough to know a good thing when he sees it.

"I tell the guys, honestly, this is one of the best starts of any club that I have ever been a part of." Referring to the club's stunning preseason sweep of the IMG Suncoast Pro Classic, he adds, "I don't know of any club ever that started up and, three weeks later, was winning a miniature tournament."

Could professional soccer be the cure for what ails Cincinnati's professional sports scene? Only time will tell, but a dose of hometown pride in the form of these outstanding athletes is a great start. ■

	Luke Spencer	Omar Cummings	Austin Berry
Skyline or Gold Star	Skyline	Skyline	No chili for me
Ice Cream	Graeter's Mint Chip	Graeter's Coffee	Graeter's Black Raspberry Chip
Favorite Restaurant	Rusty Bucket	Island Frydays	El Coyote (Anderson)
Favorite Bar	Rhinehaus	Rhinehaus	Rhinegeist
Best Pizza	LaRosa's	No thanks	Donatos
Best Burger	Gordo's	No thanks	Terry's Turf Club
Favorite Spot to Kick Around a Ball	Nippert Stadium	UC Soccer Fields	Clear Creek Fields
UC or Xavier	Xavier	UC	UC
Best Spot to Watch a Match	Molly Malone's	Nippert Stadium!	My parents' back patio
Goetta?	Yes, please	No way	No way