Watauga High's long search for a football coach finally came to an end Thursday night, when the school board approved the hiring of Ryan Habich

(pronounced Ha-bick) Thursday night. Habich is WHS' ninth head coach since 1995. He replaces Athletic Director Tom Wright, who coached the Pioneers on an interim basis last season before he stepped down in December. Habich was introduced at a press conference Friday morning in the WHS Media Center.

And Habich, who was also a possible candidate for the vacant head-coaching job at East Henderson, inherits a football team that was 5-7 last season. The Pioneers made the state playoffs, but were ousted in the opening round by Porter Ridge, which won the western title and lost to New Bern in the state finals.

But starting from scratch is nothing new for Habich. He was 75-29 during his eight-year (2005-2012) stay at Fuquay Varina. He led the Bengals to six conference titles in eight years, and two sectional finals in three years (2006 and 2009). Before that, the Bengals had won all of 22 games, including a 2-9 record in 2004.

He was also named the Tri-9 Conference Coach of the Year in 2008 and 2011. His teams were 50-14 in the last five years.

"I owe a lot of this to David Riggs (the man he replaced at Fuquay Varina. Riggs also coached at Raleigh-Sanderson and McDowell)," Habich said. "I learned a lot from him as an assistant coach. He's a great coach and great person. But being a football coach requires a lot of character and being a role model for our student athletes.

"I believe in hard work with no short cuts. My goal is to reach our full potential by doing it the old fashioned way. We want to be a successful program year in and year out by representing our team, our school, and our community in a positive way."

And he's looking forward to his challenge of turning WHS into a winner. Since the legendary Eric Breitenstein graduated (in the spring of 2008), the Pioneers have stumbled. They're 26-34 during that stretch with one winning season (7-6 in 2011) and one win in the state playoffs (against Alexander Central in 2011).

"You look at Watauga High school, the academics, the athletic program, Mr. (Principal Marshall) Gasperson's vision, and it made this opportunity very enticing," Habich said. "I wasn't looking to leave Fuquay Varina, but when this opportunity came open, I knew I had to apply for this position."

Habich was a quarterback at Division I Western Illinois University before he transferred to Division II Mars Hill College, where he played quarterback and safety. He was also a three-time letter winner and he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Physical Education at Mars Hill, and a Master's Degree in Exercise Science from Campbell University. Habich, who is 37-years-old and was born in Chicago, Il., previously coached at two Florida high schools: Cocoa Beach High (1999-2002) and Melbourne (2002- 2005). He is married to Amanda (they were engaged in Boone 15 years ago) and he has three children, Matthew (who is five-years-old), Mallory (who is three), and Mark (who is four months old).

Habich was the head coach and the offensive coordinator at Fuquay Varina last season. The Bengals averaged 28 points-a-game during his tenure, and they were shutout twice (both times

during his rookie season in 2005). He has served in a number of roles during his coaching career,. Habich has been a defensive coordinator, a running backs coach, he's worked with special teams, linebackers, defensive backs and quarterbacks. And at WHS, Habich inherits a quality quarterback in sophomore Aaron Dobbins.

Dobbins, who made his varsity debut against Hibriten on October 19, started three games last season.

"We're going to run a multiple wingbone offense, much like what Wofford (College) does," Habich said. "You can modify it every year based on your personnel. It's adaptable, and we were pretty successful with it at Fuquay Varina. And the athletes there were pretty similar to what we have here at Watauga.

"We're going to do what it takes to be successful. If that means throwing the football fine. But like Wofford, we have to play as a unit. And with the triple option, it's assignment football, and we're going to have an offense that's going to be hard to prepare for in two days."

Defensively, Habich says the Pioneers will play a 3-4. Habich inherits a young group that has put together two impressive seasons at the middle school level and as freshman last fall. The WHS junior varsity team was 8-2 last season, and it errupted for 54 points in a win against A.C. Reynolds.

"I did my student teaching under Bobby Poss at A.C. Reynolds," Habich said. "So I was familiar with Watauga, and I've been following them for years, even when I was down in Florida. Watauga has one of the best school systems in the state, and its a great place to raise a family. We're very excited to be a part of this community."

WHS received 89 applications for this position from 24 states, and 46 of the applicants were current or former head coaches. But Habich stood out in the crowd.

"We feel that we found a good man," Gasperson said. "We've found someone that can be a good role model for our student athletes. Some people thought that we might have taken too long to find a coach. But we took our time to do it right. We have found a quality coach and, more importantly, a quality man."

Habich, who officially starts teaching at WHS on April 8, will make his coaching debut Friday, August 23, when the Pioneers welcome Alexander Central to Jack Groce Stadium in their season opener.

"I thought it was necessary to be here to work with the student athletes to get things rolling for the summer and to be ready for next year," Habich said. "My family is going to move up permanently in July.

"And I'm anxious to meet with the assistant coaches. I'm looking for character, loyality, knowledge, and the skill necessary to get all of this across to the players. It's going to be a challenge, but I'm excited to be here. It's a great opportunity."

NOTES: Two of his former players at Fuquay Varina, Tyson Fernandez and Ricky Ferguson, are playing at Appalachian State University. Fernandez, a freshman, is an offensive lineman; Ferguson, a sophomore, is a running back.

Photo Courtesy: Ryan Habich, WHS Athletics