

Pioneers Make Wright Choice

Written by Mike Kelly
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It didn't take long for Watauga High Principal Marshall Gasperson to name a new football coach. Just one week after Tim Pruitt resigned (he officially stepped down on June 4), Gasperson and the Watauga County School Board named Athletic Director Tom Wright the Pioneers' new football coach. And Wright, who takes over on an interim basis this season, is WHS' eighth football coach since 1995. And for Wright, it's his first head-coaching job since the 2000-01 season when he led the WHS women's basketball team to 17 wins and a state playoff berth.

But Wright, who has been the school's AD for three years, is happy to be back.

"Marshall and I talked about it," Wright said, "and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of getting back into coaching on a full time basis. I've really been in a fog the last couple of years (his son, Tommy, passed away two years ago). I need to do this; and I'm real excited about getting back into it."

"Tom Wright is a good christian man, and an excellent coach," Gasperson said. "I thought it was the best decision to make considering our position at the moment, and concerning the future of our football program. I must have made about a hundred phone calls after coach Pruitt stepped down. It's just too late in the season to find a quality coach. By the time we go through the (two week) hiring process, and get someone here, we're going to be in late July (WHS' season opener is August 17 at A.C. Reynolds). And looking for a coach this late in the year doesn't leave us with many options. Tom Wright is the best person for this job, and he's a quality coach. He's what we need right now."

This move also gives the administration time to find a new coach in 2013, if Wright decides not to come back. And that all depends on whether Wright will remain the school's athletic director, if he does decide to come back for a second season. As of now, the Watauga County School District does not want its athletic director being a head coach. That policy went into effect in 2002-03, when then athletic director and men's basketball coach Marc Payne left for Ashe County.

But for now, the focus is on 2012, and a team that returns eight starters from last year's group that produced the school's first winning season since 2007, finished second in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference, and picked up its first playoff win in four seasons.

And Wright isn't a stranger when it comes to building successful programs. He turned an anemic women's basketball team into a competitive program that won 89 games during his six year stay. His 1996-97 squad went 21-9 and got to the Class 4A Western Regionals. Had WHS beaten Greensboro Page that season, the Pioneers had a honest chance of winning the school's first state championship in women's basketball. And keep in mind this same team, during Wright's first year as coach, only won nine games and finished dead last in the old Northwestern 4A Conference.

He only made the state playoffs twice during his tenure with the women's team, but keep in mind that the 1997-98 team was hampered by injuries and lost a play-in game to East Burke that knocked them out of the state playoffs; the 1999-00 team was 18-7 and didn't make the state tournament; and his final team went 17-9 and lost to Greensboro Grimsley in the first round of the state playoffs.

And Wright isn't a stranger when it comes to football. He been pacing the sidelines for 22 years between stops in Florida and WHS. He was an assistant coach for six years with the Pioneers (four years with Adrian Snow and two years with Pruitt). He was also a middle school head

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coach for two seasons.

"I had my chances to be a head coach in football in past years at the high school level," he said. "But the coaching staff didn't really impress me. But the group we have here at Watauga was a huge selling point. There's a great group of guys, and they're excellent coaches."

Preston Clark and Klay Anderson, who directed WHS' stingy defense last fall, will both return. Other familiar faces include Chris Wallace, Dustin Kerley, Bard Isaacs, Sam Coe, Caleb Perdue, and Marshall Thomas, who will work with the quarterbacks again this season. And Wright has also added some new faces to the mix in former head coach Roy Carter, who will coach the offensive line, Todd Allen and Jerry Moretz, who was Wright's JV coach and a varsity assistant in women's basketball.

"Our coaching staff is so attractive for an incoming coach like myself," Wright said. "It's a strong staff that features a wealth of knowledge/ It's a good mixture of veteran coaches and young coaches that are anxious to learn. And we're going to need that with our team this season.

"We've got some good football players coming back, but we also lost some good football players to graduation. We'll be a little inexperienced on offense, and I'm confident with Klay and Preston that we'll be pretty good on defense again. But like any season, we just have to work at it, and get our players ready for the upcoming season. We just have to get to work. I'm just glad to be back, and I'm thankful the administration gave me this opportunity."

Welcome back, Tom. You've been gone too long.