

Smith Named Wolverines Football Coach

Written by Mike Kelly
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Watauga High football coach Ryan Habich has found his man. And, Habich feels, he's made the right choice. Mark Smith has been named the new football coach of the Watauga Middle School football team.

He replaces Steve Breitenstein and Dale Allred, who both officially retired last fall. And Smith, a special education teacher at Vallie Crucis Elementary School, brings a lot of coaching experience to his new position.

"Mark moved into the area last fall," Habich said. "He wanted to help us with the high school team last season, but he was moving in, and settling into his new position at (Vallie Crucis), so it was pretty hard for him to help out. But I felt he was the right choice all along. He brings a lot of energy and enthusiasm to the middle school football program."

Smith, a native of Maryville (TN.), graduated from the University of Tennessee. His wife, Cate (also a UT grad), is a professor in the Special Education Department at Appalachian State University. Smith has been a football coach at the middle school and high school levels for a number of years. He got his start under Maryville High (TN.) football coach George Quarles, the winningest high school football coach in the nation the last ten years, at the middle school level.

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And his coaching career grew from there.

"I am real blessed to have this opportunity," Smith said. "I'm honored Ryan recommended me for the job. I've been coaching football for a lot of years, especially at the middle school level. And one thing I know for sure, the middle school team is a huge feeder for the high school program.

"And I want to make Watauga a football powerhouse just like in Maryville. The middle school program there averaged nine, ten wins a year. We're going to work very hard on fundamentals here, and I want our players to develop a strong work ethic that they can take with them later in life. I had a lot of great coaches when I was growing up, and they instilled a lot of those qualities in me. It feels great to give it back."

Smith, who will be live on AM 1450, WATA Thursday at 11:30 a.m., has had coaching stints at Maryville Middle School, Austin East High School in Knoxville, TN., and he's coached in the Clinton (TN.) City School District at both the high school and middle school levels. He was named Special Teams Coordinator at Clinton High in 2009.

But Watauga will be Smith's first head coaching stint. He was a co-head coach at Clinton Middle School and helped that team to the Eastern Tennessee Middle School Championship in 2008. Smith has coached everything from linebackers, running back, offensive linemen, and defensive linemen. But his biggest contribution has been on special teams.

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"That's an area, especially at the middle school level, that isn't emphasized enough," Smith said. "Special teams set up your offense and defense. They're a big part of the game. Many games are won and lost based on your special teams play. I'm very happy to have found a job in the Watauga School District, when my wife got her position at ASU. I have double-dipped between middle school and high school in my career. I did that at Clinton before they brought me on full-time with the high school team. I love coaching football.

"And my goal is to prepare our players for the high school level here. I want to give them a true taste of the game. We're going to do a lot of the same things Ryan runs with his program. I want the kids to have fun, but I also want to develop a strong work ethic, and I want to instill pride in our football program. I want the young kids to have a strong interest in the game. My job is to teach the game at this level, and I plan to do it the right way."

Smith is still putting his coaching staff together. But he does have a couple of familiar faces joining his staff this fall. Ethan Poulos, who played for WHS, will be the Wolverines wide receivers and defensive backs coach. Bill Carr, who was an assistant coach with the Wolverines last season, returns and will coach the offensive and defensive lines; Bill Brown, who coached in the Fayetteville School District for 30 years, will be Smith's offensive coordinator. Brown's daughter, Amy Thomas, led Mabel Elementary to the Watauga County volleyball championship last fall.

"Steve and Dale did a great job for us at the middle school level," Habich said. "I owe those

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guys a lot. They did a great job setting the foundation for middle school football in this community. And Mark is a guy I felt could build on that. We'll do a lot of the same things we're doing at the high school level, but we'll modify things a bit for middle school. But we'll use a lot of the same terminology. I feel good about this hire. I'm excited to have Mark. The program is in good hands."

"I'm still putting our coaching staff together," Smith said. "But I'm very confident we'll have everything in place soon. And I appreciate the parents for allowing me to coach their kids. It's something I love to do, and something I'll never take for granted."

Photo Courtesy: Mark Smith, WHS Athletics