

By JOE SAGER

For The Derrick/The News-Herald

STANFORD, Calif. – Nate Byham is used to climbing ladders.

On the football field, the Franklin High School product shined on local gridirons, starred at tight end for the University of Pittsburgh and spent three seasons in the NFL.

As a coach, Byham reached the next rung when Stanford University promoted him to offensive coordinator last week.

“I am excited for the opportunity,” Byham said via phone between spring practice sessions. “It’s an amazing program and I get to work with two amazing people in Frank Reich and Andrew Luck.”

Luck, a former Cardinal and NFL standout quarterback, was named Stanford football general manager in November. He surprised many when he fired head coach Troy Taylor on March 25 and replaced him with Frank Reich, a former NFL quarterback and head coach, on March 31.

As part of the changes, Byham was elevated to offensive coordinator. He is focused on working with both men to spark Stanford’s offense.

“I think everyone was pleasantly surprised. I don’t think anybody had any indication we were bringing in Frank Reich,” he said. “Coach Reich is a legend, and I think Andrew did a great job going out and getting one of the best coaches there is. For us to get him is pretty awesome.”

Even though it's April, it feels like Christmas for Byham — he can't wait to get to the football facility to work with both men each day.

“Right now, I get the opportunity to breathe rare air. They are two greats,” he said.

“Coach Reich has been a part of six Super Bowls and won the Super Bowl in 2017 as a coach. Andrew Luck is arguably one of the top quarterbacks of all time as well. These are the guys I get to passionately talk football with and X's and O's and schemes. It's going to be a really unique opportunity, and it's going to be fun to learn from them and compete with them.”

Because of the late coaching change — Stanford's spring practice started last Tuesday, one day after Reich's hiring — any big changes will take some time to develop and implement. Byham has been burning the midnight oil working with the Cardinal's playbook to make it an easy transition.

“Right now, it's gelling the offensive philosophy that comes from what we've done in the past, with my thoughts and Coach Reich's and Andrew's thoughts and really blending them together and creating a really potent offense that our guys can learn and really play fast with,” Byham said. “We've been exchanging ideas and coming up with a game plan and just creating these football plays for our guys to be successful. We'll all have our parts in it and it'll be fun.”

The timing of the coaching change and start of spring practice made for a whirlwind first week.

“Going three days in a row kept me busy, though. Our young men handled it really well, and they are adapting just as you'd imagine Stanford young men would,” Byham said.

“They are picking it up quickly and learning from their mistakes and taking great mental reps. We are learning some fun wrinkles, and we’ll continue building on that throughout the whole spring and into the offseason as well.”

This isn’t Byham’s first time calling plays. Now in his third year at Stanford, he served as a co-offensive coordinator in one of his many roles during his eight years at Albany, but it’s his first time as the lone play caller for a program. He believes the Cardinal can build off their 3-9 finish.

“There’s a lot of passion and a lot of energy from our kids right now. The same with the coaching staff. We’re all fired up to work together,” he said. “We all understand we’re coming out of a really rare situation that really hasn’t happened in the past, and there will probably be a lot of people that may doubt us because of how things have changed and things are being done differently here. We feel we have the culture and the staff and — most importantly — the players to be successful. We’re really fired up and we’re all united.”

While the interim head coaching tag applies to Reich, Stanford’s staff and players are focused on what happens this fall.

“We look at it as, he is here to spread his knowledge and make us better coaches and make the players better players for this year,” Byham said. “We have to have the best season we possibly can in 2025 and really go from there. We’re all just focused on improving, and we all feel very fortunate to have him.”

Byham, his wife, Erica, (both Pitt graduates) and their two children Grayson (8) and Evelyn (6) have embraced life on the West Coast, but always enjoy coming back to western Pennsylvania.

“My kids have become California kids. They want to be in T-shirts and shorts 365 days of the year, and they’re outside every day,” Nate said with a laugh. “It’s pretty great. My wife and kids are happy and doing well. My son has flag football and soccer going on. My daughter has gymnastics and competitive dance going on. It’s keeping my wife really busy.

“We were in Franklin (two weeks ago) for our spring break. I was visiting my grandfather, and I was down at Leonardo’s having lunch and seeing family. I took the kids to Daffin’s and got them some chocolate. I was able to take the kids to the library and had a lot of fun just getting to enjoy Franklin and Venango County and seeing family.

“Franklin and Venango County are very special to me, and I am glad I was able to get back. I appreciate all the support that I get from everyone there. It’s awesome.”

With one week down, Byham and the Cardinal get back to work with four practice sessions each week throughout the rest of April.

“We have a really good culture here,” he said. “We have a really good group of young men who have bought into this program and are really excited about the future.”