

**By Mike Kilroy**  
**exploreVenango**

The most important moment of Austin Ion's young coaching career didn't come with a whistle, a handshake, or a spotlight.

It came quietly, before most of the day had even begun.

Ion was at work, routine settling in, when he scrolled through his phone and saw a post he almost didn't stop on — a head football coaching opening at Franklin High School.

He paused. Read it again. And felt something tug just hard enough to matter.

"I saw the job opening on Facebook the week of Thanksgiving," Ion said. "I was sitting at work early in the morning and I hopped on there and saw it. I thought, 'Wow. That's interesting.'"

Interesting turned into possibility. Possibility into prayer. A few months later, that early-morning moment became official (the day) when Ion, 27, was named the new head varsity football coach at Franklin High School. (Ion was introduced as the new coach at a Jan. 19 school board work session. His employment contract was approved at the Jan. 26 meeting).

It's a hire rooted as much in belief as résumé.

And one that asks a young coach to take on a program that hasn't posted a winning season since 2006 and finished 1-9 a year ago.

Ion didn't rush toward it. If anything, he moved carefully.

He sent the posting to his wife, Jessica. Then to Keystone head football coach Todd Smith. He reached out to friends familiar with District 10 football. On Black Friday, he submitted his letter and résumé without expectation.

"I at least wanted the experience of an interview," Ion said. "It's just not that often you get coaching interviews."

He ended up being the last interview. It stretched more than an hour. When it ended, Ion felt good — but not convinced.

"They called me a couple of days later and said, 'Hey, we've selected you. We want to take your name to the board,'" Ion said. "I said, 'What?' Not that I didn't feel confident, but it was a 4A program. I thought there would be a lot of candidates with more experience."

Experience, though, isn't always measured in years.

Ion is a 2017 Keystone graduate and a 2021 alumnus of Grove City College, where he played football and quietly absorbed lessons that would shape him far beyond the field. He spent eight seasons as an assistant coach at Keystone, pouring himself into a program he still considers home.

“Even when they offered it to me, I still wasn’t sure,” Ion said. “I look at Keystone as home. I put a lot of heart and sweat and blood and prayer into it for a long and fun eight years.”

Walking away was complicated by timing. Keystone, he believes, is on the cusp.

“I think if they stay healthy, they could play for a Class A state championship,” Ion said.

So Ion asked for time. Franklin gave it. The decision lingered through December, filled with conversations, reflection, and prayer.

“I spent the next couple weeks talking, praying, talking to more people, praying even more,” Ion said. “And finally, it just felt right. This was the move I needed to make. You don’t get many of these opportunities in life. You don’t want to let them sneak away.”

The belief that Franklin can turn things around isn’t blind optimism. It’s lived experience.

Ion arrived at Grove City as a freshman when the Wolverines were mired in a 30-game losing streak. That season, they went 4-6 and snapped it. The next year, they were 8-3. The foundation changed. The culture followed.

“I lived it,” Ion said. “I feel like that’s given me a really good foundation on what it takes to get there.”

Much of that foundation was shaped by Andrew DiDonato, Ion’s college head coach, whose influence extended well beyond play design.

“I was very intentional for those four years to learn as much as I could from him,” Ion said. “I watched him. I studied him. I paid attention to the way he carried himself in meetings and at practice.”

Those observations now form the backbone of Ion’s philosophy.

“If you want to win, it’s about vision, process and love,” he said. “You have to have a vision for the program. You have to have a process for achieving it, and you have to be able to trust and like the people you’re doing it with.”

At Franklin, that begins not with schemes, but with people.

“The first thing right off the bat is you just have to change the culture,” Ion said. “You have to get the kids excited. You have to get them interested. You have to want to work hard and want to show up and want to play.”

X’s and O’s will come later. Relationships come first.

“I’m going to spend the next couple of months getting to know the kids,” Ion said. “The first step is relationship-building.”

He will begin assembling his staff soon, meeting with current Franklin assistants, balancing continuity with vision.

“I’m eager to meet with everybody who is currently there and see about retaining some of those guys, or all of them, if they fit what we’re trying to do,” Ion said. “We have a few pieces in place, but it’s far from being done.”

Those who know Ion best believe Franklin found the right person.

“I think Austin is just what Franklin needed to turn their football program around,” Smith said. “He is a dedicated and passionate young coach who cares and will give everything he has.”

Smith has seen the investment firsthand.

“This is a natural step for someone with his vision and work ethic,” he said. “We’ll miss him at Keystone, but I’m genuinely excited to see him build something special at Franklin. I’m extremely proud of him.”

Ion knows the history. He knows the record books. But he also sees room.

“There’s a lot of potential there,” he said. “There’s a lot of talent. It could be a quicker turnaround than maybe anticipated. I’m not trying to set expectations, but there’s room for us to be a good football team quickly.”

For now, the feeling still hasn’t fully settled.

“It’s a mixture of shock,” Ion said. “A mixture of, ‘Am I dreaming?’ I’m pumped. I can’t wait. The more I think about it, the more excited I get.”