

By Joe Henderson

The Derrick/The News Herald

After Matt Turk stepped down as the football coach at Franklin High School in early November, a four-person committee was tasked with finding a new leader for the football program.

Following an exhaustive search that lasted more than two months and featured interviews with nine different candidates, the committee — which featured Athletic Director Becky Barnes, Co-Principal Tom Holoman, Central Elementary Principal Joe Keenan and Assistant Athletic Director Chris Romanowski — chose longtime Keystone assistant coach Austin Ion to be the face of the program moving forward.

“We had nine qualified candidates for the job, but we really liked the plan Austin had for the program, including his ideas on community involvement,” Barnes said. “We think he will relate well with the players. I know it was tough for him to leave his previous job at Keystone, but I think he’s excited to join us and I feel we are lucky to have him as our football coach.”

Ion is no stranger to the sport as he played quarterback, wide receiver and defensive back at Keystone under head coach Dan Reed before playing wide receiver at Grove City College. After graduating college, he’s spent the last eight years as an assistant coach with the Panthers under head coaches Ryan Smith and Todd Smith. In his eight

seasons at Keystone, Ion coached receivers, defensive backs and special teams while also serving as the junior varsity head coach.

With such strong ties to Keystone, it wasn't an easy decision for Ion to leave the program, but he's ready for the opportunity to be a head coach for the first time at Franklin.

"It's pretty exciting. I'm pumped. When you get into coaching, I think a lot of people want to lead their own program, so to be able to get that opportunity is very exciting. It's definitely something that I've worked for and I'm excited to see how it goes and how it all comes together," Ion said. "I spent the last eight years coaching at Keystone for two great coaches in Ryan Smith and Todd Smith. They taught me a lot about how to lead and how to run a program at the high school level. I think they did a very good job of equipping me for this opportunity."

Keystone's program has been on the rise the last few years with a strong nucleus of players, including recent all-state selections in Dom Corcetti, Joey Spence, James Rankin and Jacob Henry, making it even tougher for Ion to leave the program he helped build.

"When I was offered the job, I asked for a couple of weeks to make a decision on what I wanted to do. It was definitely a tough decision and one that I wanted to make sure I was comfortable with. I've put a lot of time and effort into the Keystone program as a player and as a coach, and I feel they have a really good squad coming back that I was super excited to work with. It was one of those things where I had to be sure that I was

OK with walking away from what we were building over there to essentially start from scratch and rebuild from the ground up.”

After working with Ion for the last four years, Todd Smith was sorry to lose him as an assistant coach, but he knew that this day was eventually going to come.

“Austin is a dedicated and passionate young coach. He really cares and he gives everything he has. He pours his heart and soul into everything that he’s doing. He is a go-getter and he would do everything that I asked him to do,” Todd Smith said. “I could see that he had a lot to offer and that this was going to happen for him some day, so I would really put things on him and put him in situations that I thought would help him grow. He definitely has a vision and a work ethic and I think he could be a very good head coach.

“I could always count on Austin and that really helped me out when I went to Keystone,” Todd Smith continued. “I didn’t know a lot of people when I first started there, but I could always count on him. Anytime I needed something or if I asked for something, he was always the first person there. He has a lot of enthusiasm and no one’s going to put more effort into the job than him.”

Franklin’s football team has struggled of late as it hasn’t had a winning season since 2006 and is coming off of a 1-9 campaign. But, Todd Smith feels Ion has what it takes to turn the program around.

“I think he was what Franklin needed — a young guy with some enthusiasm that is going to change the culture. Obviously, it doesn’t happen overnight, but I think he has the things that a program that’s been in the situation that Franklin has been in is looking

for,” he said. “I’m excited for him and I’m appreciative for all that he’s poured into the Keystone football program, but I’m genuinely excited to see what he can build. I think he can build something special at Franklin. I know it’s a step up and they play a tough schedule, but football is football and I think he knows how to get the guys playing well.”

With all of his years of experience in football, Lon plans of putting what he has learned to good use..

“I put a lot of emphasis on building relationships. You have to have strong relationships with the players, parents and the community,” he said. “You want to keep things simple for the players. You don’t want to overload them with a lot of information. You want them to play loose and free and trust that their skills and instincts will get the job done,” he said. “We also want to have fun or nobody is going to want to be there. You’ve got to make it enjoyable for the players. They need to know that we are going to work hard and we are going to get stuff done, but we are going to enjoy it while we are here.”

Lon isn’t coming to the program with any preconceived plans or schemes, he plans on building around the team’s strengths.

“Offensively, we’re going to mix things up and do whatever benefits what we have athletically and talent wise. Defensively, we will try to get after it, but you have to build your schemes to what you’ve got on the field. You want to adapt to what you have. We are going to show up every Friday night and play to the best of our ability and try to

execute to the best of our ability. I just want the kids to play hard every snap and have fun, and I think everything else will fall into place after that.”