

FAITH ACADEMY RAMS

NEXT MAN IN

A resignation at Faith Academy turns a career assistant into a head coach for the first time in his life

BY MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — These days, there's a sign in training rooms and locker rooms of nearly every high school sports program in America. The wording may vary slightly, but the message is clear.

The sign often reads "next man in," or its cousin, "next man up." It's the admonition to every person who doesn't start or get significant playing time that the situation can change very quickly, and a well-conditioned and prepared athlete moving up suddenly has a greater likelihood to succeed.

One such "next man in" sign hangs in the football locker room of the Faith Academy Rams, but it was not until just a few weeks ago that the meaning hit home fully to Rams head coach Jeff Estes.

The morning that then-head coach Lance Lawley tendered his resignation for medical reasons became a life-changing experience for the career assistant coach who had cut his teeth for years in the rough-and-tumble east Birmingham football scene before becoming a Rams assistant in the spring of 2016.

"My resume is very short on paper," Estes said. He grew up in the east Birmingham community of Center Point, played ball at Erwin High School there, and after college he returned to start what he described as a "career assistant coach" journey. In 2011, Erwin High changed its name to Center Point High School. It's a 6A school.

Estes was accepted as a Faith assistant in the spring of 2016 and was on staff as the Rams broke a two-season, 15-game losing streak and tacked up three wins overall under Lawley in 2016, the only year Lawley was head coach.

Things changed for Estes on July 10.

"It was as unexpected as things come," Estes said. "We pulled up out in front of this building early that Monday morning, and we had an early staff meeting called, and he cancelled the staff meeting. He said he had a meeting up front and to get started in the weight room."



Jeff Estes

Photo by Mark R. Kent/Call News

"We did that, and it got to be about 9:30, and we still hadn't heard from him." Estes texted Lawley after weight training ended, and Lawley said to have the team inside at 10:45.

When that time approached, Estes got another text to send the team home, and for him to report to the headmaster's office immediately. "You never want to hear the word 'immediately,'" Estes said.

Still unaware of exactly what was going on, Estes reported to the office, where headmaster John T. Skelton, athletic director Woodie Head and Lawley were waiting for him. It was then that Lawley told him that he was resigning and Estes was suddenly that proverbial "next man in."

Estes said the other coaches, when told, took it at first "like a sledgehammer," but it was the next day when the players were told what had happened. That, he said, was difficult, as many of the players took it hard emotionally. But no one quit, he said. In that sense, the newly named first-time head coach had claimed his first victory.

As an assistant throughout his career, Estes, who himself was a 147-pound defensive back in his Erwin uniform, coached many aspects of the game, from offensive line to defense, receivers and more.

But his first decision as a head coach was not to scrap the offensive plan that Lawley already had in place for the 2017 Rams.

While pleased with the level of discipline he has to work with on this Rams team, Estes still has fine points he'd like to tweak. "We instruct them that there is one way you hang your helmet up in the locker in here," the coach said. "Look around; you can see some of the boys haven't got that right yet."

And Estes said he is not intimidated by the names on the Rams' schedule and in Class 5A, Region 1. Center Point/Erwin, after all, played in a region that includes Shades Valley, Pinson Valley and Clay-Chalkville, which won the 6A title in 2016.

That Clay-Chalkville team featured a superstar athlete in Ty Pigrome, and Estes was one of the Center Point coaches who had to figure out how to deal with him.

"Ty is a tremendous player," Estes said. "And I got to see him up close and personal, twice."



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