

IF-A FOOTBALL

Eric Walkingstick is eager to begin his first season as the head football coach at Iowa Falls-Alden. The Cadets hold their first official practice of the 2023 season on Monday.



Vision for success

PHOTOS BY JUSTIN ITES / TIMES CITIZEN

Walkingstick eager to build culture at IF-A

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During a hot July morning, Eric Walkingstick was standing on the Cadet Field turf following a speed and agility workout.

In the nearly empty stadium, he was asked to describe his vision for the Iowa Falls-Alden football program he was hired to lead.

After brief reflection, the Oklahoma native gestured toward the line of trees that surround the north side of the complex.

"Look at those trees over there. When many people look at that tree line, I like to look beyond them to see where we need to go, Walkingstick said. "I'm a forward-thinking type of person and an optimist."

Every detail also matters to Walkingstick when it comes to his players.

The way they execute on the field, in the classroom and the way they speak to others is the path that the first-year IF-A football coach believes is the right one to success on the field and in life.

While Walkingstick believes there is an importance to fielding a successful team on the gridiron, he also values his players' lives after football and the men they're going to become off the field.

The sport of football has blessed the new Cadet football coach, and he believes giving back to others is the best way forward.

While Walkingstick is still in the process of getting to know his players, community members, and other school staffers, it is not difficult to project how he likes to run his program. He admits that others within the coaching circle have labeled him a "program builder." He doesn't necessarily agree with that, but views himself as someone who is good at treating people the right way.

Anyone who would be able to attend a preseason practice, will hear "LEO" expressed a lot.

"Love each other. Handshakes and hugs begin a lot of our time with the players. A lot of young men in our society are taught to show no emotion, but we want to build character and spread blessing around to each other," Walkingstick said. "I'm a big believer in team-bonding and that we as a staff have to make the sport of football fun for the kids. If they are not enjoying themselves, you won't get their best effort."

Walkingstick spent the past 12 seasons as head coach at Akron-Westfield, and his overall coaching record stands at 132 wins and 102 losses. He was chosen from a pool of six candidates for multiple reasons, but one of his most attractive coaching qualities was his ability to build a strong culture within his previous programs.

The Cadets are coming off a 2-7 season, the final campaign for previous coach Don Anderson, who compiled a 26-39 mark through seven seasons.

Moving on to the upcoming 2023 campaign, Walkingstick said he can only focus on what lies ahead for his new program. One of his goals is to steadily improve the roster numbers, which decreased last fall.

"We have to get our numbers up to the size of what a Class 2A program should be. Right now, we have grown a bit. I want to be at 50 kids for this season, but eventually I would like to be in the 60-80 range. So how do we grow this program? We as a staff have to make the sport fun and entertaining. Treating the kids right is objective number one," Walkingstick said. "When people think of a stereotypical football coach, you think of a screaming coach and that players can't show pain or weakness. There's more than one way to get through to kids, but I've always been a big believer that if you have fun, show you care about them, they will give back with effort. We have to learn as coaches that these kids are out here working for us and instead of just ripping them for something they already

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know, let's build them back up. Kids need to have confidence in themselves to do the things they want to do."

Walkingstick met the players on his new team back in February, and felt like he made an early good impression on them. That meeting was more of a quick introductory session where he laid out expectations and what to expect from him as a coach. He will also have ample opportunities to continue building relationships throughout the school day, as Walkingstick will primarily teach health curriculum within the school district. While he is still commuting to Iowa Falls for pre-season workouts, Walkingstick said he will be moving to the area. He became familiar with the Scenic City when his son Cade played quarterback for the Ellsworth Community College football program.

Looking ahead to this fall, he did not offer a number regarding victory total expectations.

"That is the quickest way to put you behind the eight-ball from the start. I look at the season in three phases - non-district, district and playoffs. Our three non-district games (Hampton-Dumont/CAL, South Hardin and Clear Lake) are tough. Hampton has a lot of good players back from a six-win team, South Hardin is a rivalry game, and Clear Lake is

always tough," Walkingstick said. "I want to see marked improvement after those first three games. We are not a six or seven-win team yet, and we have to work to get there."

When fans attend the season opener versus the Bulldogs at Cadet Field, they will likely see some non-traditional offensive formations that Walkingstick believes will stretch defenses and open opportunities to make plays. He is quick to point out that he is not married to any particular style, only the one that is working on the field.

"I like to think it's an entertaining style to watch from the stands and for the players to execute," Walkingstick said. "They (supporters) should see a fast-paced brand of football and we like to throw it around from multiple formations and looks. The kids seem to have fun with it."

As the first official practice begins Monday (Aug. 7), IF-A's players and coaches have been taking part in several team building activities to build chemistry.

"Building good habits and doing the little things that can make us successful. Our motto this season is 'The Way'. What we mean by that, is the way you go to class, or greet your teacher, classmates, teammates or parents. You build habits over time and you get better over time," Walkingstick said. "I'm excited. It's another opportunity for me to pay back to a sport that's given me so much." ■



New Iowa Falls-Alden Head Football Coach Eric Walkingstick addressed the players prior to the start of last week's camp. He begins his Cadet tenure with 132 victories.

