LENOIR NEWS-TOPIC STORY ON CHANGES AT WEST CALDWELL

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By JOHN JOSEY

A year ago, Stephen McMasters was approached about changing jobs. He turned it down because he didn’t feel like the timing was right.

A year later, the same opportunity came around again. McMasters said he didn’t think it would come around a third time, so he accepted a position with Farm Bureau Insurance and is leaving West Caldwell High School after 11 years as the Warriors’ athletics director and 22 years of service at the school.

“Words simply can’t express what Coach McMasters has meant to the Warrior Family over the last 20-plus years,” said West Caldwell principal Craig Styron. “As a former student then teacher, coach, athletics director and mentor to so many students, athletes, teachers, coaches, parents and community members, Coach McMasters is truly the face of the Warriors.”

McMasters wore three different hats this year – girls’ basketball coach, volleyball coach and athletics director. One person stepping down opened up three jobs. Wrestling coach Aaron Annas has already been tabbed to run the athletic department, and McMasters said football coach Monte Simmons will take over the girls basketball team. He has prior experience and was an assistant this past season. McMasters said Simmons was the best fit because continuity is important for a young team. The volleyball job hasn’t been filled yet, and McMasters said it will most likely be filled internally.

McMasters, 45, said the decision to change careers wasn’t an easy one, but he said when he was approached again in March, he felt like it was a move he needed to make.

“A year ago, the time wasn’t right,” he said. “The time is right now. There’s no emotion involved in this decision at all. It’s what’s right for me, and it’s what’s right for my family. It’s a really good opportunity, and now is the right time to take advantage of it.”

He said there wasn’t anything behind the scenes that drove his decision other than being worn down by the grind of the three to four 15-hour days a week when West Caldwell has home games and a desire to be at home more because the long hours on game days have taken a toll.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I’ve been in this AD role for 11 years. This was my dream job. I landed in the job I always said I wanted to be in, but now with where I am in my life, this opportunity will allow me to reach some of my other dreams – personally and with my family.”

He said he felt like if he couldn’t give what he considers a full effort, it’s best for him to hand the reins over to someone who could.

“I care too much about West Caldwell to come in here and feel like I’m giving a half or three-quarter effort to a school and community I care about,” McMasters said. “That’s why I say the timing was just right.”

His last day on the job will be July 31, and Annas will take over as athletics director effective Aug. 1. McMasters said he feels good about where the school’s sports programs are even though this year has been difficult with all the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, and he said he thinks some new ideas will be beneficial to the entire athletic department. McMasters is excited to see what the 28-year-old Annas, who is the youngest head coach at West Caldwell, will bring to the table.

“Coach Annas will do an extremely good job,” he said. “Coach Annas is one of the most respected and liked coaches we have on our staff. He’s an extremely hard worker. There will be a learning curve for him, but I have no doubt there’s not a person in this building that would work as hard in this position he’s going to step into.”

McMasters said the community will see those same traits when Annas takes over, and he feels very strongly that the vigor Annas will bring to the job is exactly what the athletic department needs.

“West Caldwell athletics is in really good hands,” he said. “I go back and talk about that energy I don’t feel like I have right now, he has it. He has a way with kids and people, and you want to pull for a guy like him.”

After 11 years running the Warriors’ athletic department, McMasters has plenty of memories and personal highlights to reflect upon. He said his favorite memories have been watching the kids compete, whether it’s wrestlers going for state titles, a basketball team winning a conference championship or a team that hadn’t won a game in two years finally break that drought. There’s one performance in particular that stands out, though.

“Watching Lexton Ford play that round of golf where he won the state championship, man, that was unbelievable,” he said. “He didn’t know – it’s not like watching on TV and the guy hits the last putt and raises his hands. Lexton was one of the first kids that went off, but when he came in, we knew he was going to have a shot at it.

“There have been some challenging times here, but I walk out of here with nothing but great memories. Those things override the trying times by a million percent.”

Listening to him talk about West Caldwell, it’s easy to tell how much he loves it. He has spent half his life there either as a student-athlete, a teacher or the athletics director, and he’s a part of the community. He said his new job will be a sales job, but he also views it as a service job. That aspect of it plays into something he’s extremely passionate about.

“I’ve always just wanted to help kids and help people,” he said. “That’s a yearning that I have personally. In this job, it may be in a different capacity, but I’ll still be able to help people.”

Styron said McMasters exemplified that by always making sure teams and coaches had what they needed to be successful. He called McMasters one of his best friends on and off the field and said he treated everyone with kindness and never met a stranger. His impact in the school and in the West Caldwell community will be felt for years to come, and Styron said that community has no bigger advocate than McMasters, who said he will always bleed Warriors blue.

“This is a huge loss for West Caldwell, but we are excited for his next chapter and know he will be successful at anything and everything he has his hands in,” Styron said. “Truly one of a kind. We wish him the best, and (he) will go down as being one of the ultimate ‘Warriors!’

“Thank you, Coach McMasters, for your years of service and the thousands of young lives you have changed and saved over the years.”