

Mukwonago hires former Fond du Lac head coach (and Arrowhead assistant) Gnewuch to lead football program

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(Photo: Doug Raflik/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

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As a large program nestled within the Classic 8 — almost certainly the state's best top-to-bottom football conference — Mukwonago certainly figured to get interest from some big name coaches for its football head-coach vacancy.

That proved to be the case.

Mike Gnewuch, a former Arrowhead football assistant who turned the Fond du Lac program around over the past six seasons, has been brought on board to lead the Indians. Clay Iverson resigned from the post earlier in the offseason after six

seasons leading Mukwonago.

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"I miss Waukesha County," Gnewuch said. "Mukwonago has given me the opportunity to get back to my roots, and I like everything about the district. It's a great place for my kids and my family. I don't know if there's ever a right time (to change jobs), but now is as good a time as any."

Mukwonago athletics director Andy Trudell said Gnewuch (guh-NAY-vock) was the strongest of the 34 candidates who applied, though the pool of candidates served as a reflection of the program's continued standing among the area's most attractive jobs.

"We had a lot of guys similar to Mike, guys with years and years of very successful head coaching experience and guys who were coordinators in big time programs," Trudell said. "(I was struck by) just how positive he was in the interview, the strong focus on the kids. I don't know how many times he said 'you need those student leaders if you're going to have a successful program. It's all about developing kids, and it's ultimately their program.' Just his character and his positive nature (stood out), as well as his background."

Gnewuch was a defensive coordinator and special teams coach at Arrowhead under Tom Taraska, helping fashion one of the state's most powerful squads. He was then a finalist in 2011 for the Arrowhead position that ultimately went to Greg Malling, and he stayed on one more year as a coordinator before taking the job at Fond du Lac.

"I had some really good friends down there that are part of the teaching staff and coaches, as well," Gnewuch said. "I never lost contact with them, even since moving north to Fond du Lac. I've been kept in tune to what's going on over there. They're

doing a whole lot of things that are really good for kids in general and attractive to me as an outsider as a guy potentially looking to move."

MHS has been undergoing a massive renovation targeted for completion in summer 2018.

Gnewuch led the Cardinals to the playoffs the past five seasons (with at least nine wins each of the past four years and Level 3 appearances each time). Three of the past four years, state powerhouse Kimberly has been the one to end Fondy's season, though his team twice nearly snapped Kimberly's state-record winning streak in the process. The Cardinals fell by a touchdown both in the season opener and in Level 3 of the playoffs against the Papermakers.

Fondy will get another swing to snap the 70-game record in the 2018 season opener.

But Gnewuch will be coaching at Mukwonago on Aug. 17 against Catholic Memorial.

"I'm leaving the program in a good state right now," Gnewuch said. "We have 16 starters returning for next year, and we've made Level 3 playoff appearances the last four years. I was asked how successful I view it. I'll let you know that in a decade when the young men (whose lives) that I was so fortunate to have been a part of are off doing jobs in the professional world and are husbands and fathers ... That's a true success of a coach, if they're able to impact young men and turn them into men and make their lives better.

"As far as wins and losses, we've been pretty darn successful but obviously didn't accomplish what we wanted to accomplish here (in a state title). I'm not going to let that define me, and I hope that the guys that I've been so fortunate to coach and teach, that they've been impacted and their life is better in the long run."

Gnewuch was at least interested in the Kettle Moraine position that opened two years ago but elected not to pursue it, with the position opening in the summer and giving only a limited window to introduce new game plans. That job ultimately went to Justin Gumm, who has had two excellent seasons with the Lasers and put KM into the playoffs for the first time since 2008 in the 2017 season.

"I knew if I left I wanted to be at a Division 1 or Division 2 school," Gnewuch said. "I like bigger high schools, and I like what they have to offer."

In his new conference, he'll get to see Kettle Moraine and Arrowhead on a regular basis, as well as the Classic 8 school now coached by Malling: Oconomowoc. Malling left as Arrowhead coach two seasons ago for a job in Minnesota, then returned for the 2017 season to the neighboring school.

Trudell said he employed the services of an eight-person committee to discuss the selection, with representatives from many different facets of the Mukwonago football community.

"I felt good through the entire process. everything felt right," Gnewuch said. "I know this is the right decision.

Trudell said Gnewuch is expected to join the MHS staff next year in the social studies department and also has a license to teach physical education.