



Cougars turn to Turner after Hicks
By: Ray Cox, The Roanoke Times
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PULASKI – Once he found out Tuesday that he was going to be the third varsity football coach in Pulaski County High School history, Jack Turner had some telephone calls to make. One of the first was to the losing candidate. "I told him we're behind him all the way," said Rodney Landreth, like Turner an assistant on the staff of the retired Joel Hicks.

Turner said he would have said the same thing if Landreth had been the man. "I would have been just as happy if he'd gotten it as I am to get it myself," said Turner, 36. "I'm excited, overwhelmed and humbled."

Turner was offered the job, then announced by the Pulaski County School Board at its meeting Tuesday. Some would say Turner faces an awesome task in replacing Hicks, who might as well have invented the cult that is Cougars football in his more than two decades on the job there. Turner doesn't see it that way. "There's no doubt there's tremendous pressure to win here, but it's the good kind of pressure," he said. "It's our responsibility to continue in the direction Coach Hicks got us started."

Hicks tried to keep a low profile in the process of finding his replacement. Privately, he supported the two that would end up being the finalists. Either one of them will work out fine, he'd say.

Not much was said as the search process worked out. In the end, the choice was clear-cut. According to sources familiar with the process, applications from outside the system were few and none particularly strong.

Both Turner and Landreth are former Cougars standouts themselves. Turner graduated in 1985 and went on to a standout career as a defensive end at Ferrum. He then was a graduate assistant under his college coach, Hank Norton, as much a legend at the collegiate level as Hicks was in the high schools. Turner spent three years at Franklin County as an assistant coach before returning to Pulaski County in 1995.

"When I was a little kid, I dreamed of playing for Coach Hicks," Turner said. "Then after I did, I dreamed of coaching with him. In the back of my mind, I always hoped that one day I'd have this job. I never dreamed it would be this soon."

The current staff is close to being a full-fledged Cougars alumni society: Perry Reese, Scott Vest, Randy Dunnigan, Doug Dunavant, Drew Lane, Eric Westberg, Landreth. Mike Cole is a former head coach at Christiansburg. All are expected back. Longtime staff member Dan Newell was recently named head coach at George Washington-Danville.

"Before I got the job, I told Rodney that we're in this together," Turner said. "I would have never taken this job if I didn't think these guys were coming back."

Landreth, 34, played defensive back for the Cougars and later at East Tennessee State before returning home. "Jack's a great choice," Landreth said. "There's a huge microscope on him from without and within, but he's going to do great. These guys that are here are going to rally around him and work hard for him." If that gives you the idea that no radical changes are in store, you would be correct.

"Pretty much what you've seen since 1979 [Hicks' first season] is what you're going to keep seeing," Turner said. In other words, nonstop pounding from the wing-T offense, suffocating defense and a peerless kicking game.

The new coach is going to have plenty of help, but the challenge will be stiff. Here's one stretch of next season: at Northside, at William Fleming, home against Patrick Henry, at Franklin County, home against E.C. Glass. The remaining Blue Ridge District schedule includes Blacksburg, Salem, Cave Spring and Hidden Valley.

"I don't know any Group AA team in the state that plays three AAA Division 6s in a row like we do," Turner said.

Pulaski County, 5-5 last year, ought to be up to it. Eight starters on offense, including the entire backfield, and seven on defense are coming back.

Hicks said when he retired with 302 career victories he wanted to leave his successor with a strong team. He did.

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