

Three schools to join Frontier League



Three schools have accepted invitations, or will soon, to join the Frontier League for the 2018-19 season and beyond.

Piper, Bonner Springs and Tonganoxie will be leaving their current home – the Kaw Valley League – to join the Frontier after all three were offered spots during a meeting in early April.

Their addition will now bring the Frontier League to 10 members, along with Louisburg, Paola, Ottawa, Spring Hill, De Soto, Baldwin and Eudora. The trio of schools made presentations to the current Frontier League members for admittance due to the fact the Kaw Valley is in the process of breaking up. Current member Bishop Ward is leaving the league next school year, which leaves them at six.

Piper quickly accepted the invitation following a vote of its board of education and is looking forward to joining the Frontier.

“We are extremely excited to get into a league with like-size schools and competition levels,” Piper High School activities director Doug Key said. “We believe Piper High School is good fit for the league due to the competition level in all activities and will match up well. We have played all current schools in various activities and felt like this would be a positive move for the future.

“Being in a league with various size schools and us being the smallest wasn’t going to be optimal. We are still are competitive in many areas, but we needed to secure a more balanced future. We feel like being in the middle, size-wise, will keep us competitive for years to come.”

According to this year’s classification numbers, Piper has a current enrollment of 601 students. Turner is the Kaw Valley’s biggest school with 1,114 students, followed by Lansing (910), Bonner Springs (758), Basehor-Linwood (710) and Tonganoxie (618).

Bonner Springs, Piper and Tonganoxie compare to other Frontier League programs. De Soto is the biggest school in the league with 854 students, followed by Ottawa (709), Spring Hill (699), Paola (612), Louisburg (563), Eudora (471) and Baldwin (410).

Bonner Springs’ board of education also approved the move to the Frontier League and Bonner Springs High School principal Rick Moulin echoed Key’s statement.

“We have competed against teams in the Frontier League the past several years,” Moulin said. “The schools in the Frontier League are a lot like Bonner Springs – we are competitive and value sportsmanship. The teams in the Frontier League are similar in size to Bonner Springs, which will be a great gauge for us as we try to compete at the highest level possible in 4A. Bonner Springs is a small town community, with great community support, much like the schools in the Frontier League.

“We are excited to be joining with Piper and Tonganoxie. We hope to continue to be able to compete against Basehor-Linwood, Lansing and Turner. I have a lot of respect for their schools and their programs. Ultimately, the Frontier League was a better fit for our students and our community.”

Tonganoxie hasn’t officially accepted the invitation, but it

is just waiting for its board of education to approve the move during its May 8 meeting. At that point, according to Tonganoxie High School principal Mark Farrar, it will immediately send letter accepting the invite.

"We are very excited to join the Frontier League," Farrar said. "This new partnership will be very good for our students as well as our community. Joining the Frontier League will provide some great opportunities for our students from an athletic and activities standpoint. Tonganoxie mirrors many of the activities that most or all Frontier League schools offer. We see it as a league that will be a good fit for many years to come.

"One of the things that I think gets overlooked is the idea that a strong league doesn't just offer opportunities on a playing field, but it also offers a chance for kids to network and make lifelong connections with students from all across the league. The Frontier League is a strong and stable league and we believe that it can advance the overall mission of what we want to do at Tonganoxie."

Louisburg High School activities director Darin Gagnebin now believes the league is healthier than ever.

"By adding teams to our league, it solidifies our league numbers for years to come ensuring that we, as a league, will remain strong and competitive whether schools decide to leave or stay," Gagnebin said. "We could have been in a situation in which the Frontier League could have dwindled to four or five schools, but instead we will be stronger at 10 teams, if all teams decided to stay.

That situation came about in March when it was reported by the Tonganoxie Mirror that Kaw Valley League member Lansing wanted to create a larger league that would have contained all or some combinations of Lansing, Blue Valley Southwest, De Soto, Leavenworth, Bonner Springs, Basehor-Linwood, Tonganoxie,

Ottawa, Piper, Spring Hill, Turner and Topeka schools Seaman, Shawnee Heights and Topeka West.

A meeting was held between all the schools to look at possibilities of building a stronger league that would rebuild the current Kaw Valley that has Lansing, Turner, Piper, Bonner Springs, Tonganoxie and Basehor-Linwood.

The Frontier League responded with meetings of its own shortly after to discuss each member's happiness in the league after De Soto, Spring Hill and Ottawa attended the March meeting with Lansing.

De Soto mentioned needing more competition at the sub-varsity level since it has a growing enrollment and looked at the possibility of playing in a league with bigger schools since it has made the jump to Class 5A.

Spring Hill's enrollment also looks to make that jump in three to four years, while Ottawa's enrollment usually hovers around the line between 4A and 5A. Still, all three schools stated during league meetings they were happy in their current position, with De Soto and Spring Hill stating they might need to make a move due to increasing enrollment numbers.

Faced with the possibility of losing at least two members, the Frontier invited Kaw Valley members to make presentations to join the league in order to fill those spots. Piper, Tonganoxie and Bonner Springs all made presentations and the Frontier League principals all offered invitations shortly after.

At this point, it appears the league is going to move forward with 10 members as no school has stated their desire to leave the Frontier – however, it doesn't mean it can't happen in the near future.

"I cannot speak for other schools in the Frontier League about their desire to stay or to leave," Gagnebin said. "I know some

are considering their options and will do what they believe is in the best interest of their school, and I would support them in whatever they decide. I do believe though whatever they decide, with the addition of these new schools to our league, the Frontier League will remain solid in numbers and will continue to be one of the most competitive leagues in Class 4A.

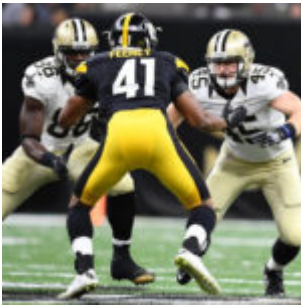
"I believe the three schools that chose to petition our league for membership will be a great fit for the Frontier League. They offer all sports and activities that are currently offered by the league at all levels. Their enrollments, though larger than Louisburg, will put them in the middle to upper middle in size within the league."

The league schedule will also look different beginning with the 2018-19 season, as there will no longer be a double round-robin schedule in certain sports and not every school will play each other in football.

"The biggest challenge will be league scheduling," Gagnebin said. "Although it will change how we schedule things as a league, most league schools already have some or all of these schools on some of their athletic schedules already. It could increase the amount of non-league games we have to go out and find in some sports, since with 10 teams you can no longer play a double-round-robin schedule as we have currently, due to the amount of games allowed by KSHSAA.

"This is both good and bad, meaning, it could increase travel and some expense, but it allows us greater flexibility in the schedule to play other teams outside the league as well. One negative will be in football. With 10 teams, we will not be able to play every team in the league as we do now. As stated before though, solidifying the league as far as numbers go and increasing the competitiveness of the league are also positives."

Griffin ready to take step forward with Saints



New Orleans Saints tight end, and Louisburg High School alum, Garrett Griffin (45) is ready to take what he learned off the practice squad last season and make the Saints roster this year.

As college football players around the country wait to hopefully hear their name called during this weekend's NFL Draft, Garrett Griffin remembers what that whole experience was like.

A year ago, Griffin wasn't sure if football was even going to be in his future. He was about to graduate from the Air Force Academy and he garnered interest from a few NFL teams.

They liked what they saw out of the 6-foot-4 inch tight end in his pro day, but Griffin was prepared to leave football behind and turn all his focus to the military life.

"After my pro day, I knew I might get an opportunity but I wasn't sure when it was going to come," Griffin said. "You usually have to serve two years in the Air Force first, so I knew some teams weren't sure how that was going affect me."

That doubt left Griffin undrafted, but once the Air Force delayed his service commitment, he was allowed to pursue his dream of playing professional football. That dream became a reality when Griffin signed a free agent contract with the New Orleans Saints last year.

Although he didn't earn a spot with the Saints out of training camp, New Orleans signed him to the practice squad where he spent all of the 2016 season – learning and soaking up what it takes to play in the NFL.

The Louisburg High School alum worked out at tight end, played a little fullback and also did some long snapping and special teams work. Griffin wanted to make sure he did everything he could to give him the best chance at staying with the Saints.

“During (training) camp last year, the coaches told me they kind of view me as a project and hopefully I can help the team in the future,” Griffin said. “I knew I wasn't ready to play (this past) year because I wasn't ready to do some of the things they were going to ask me to do. They told me I could be playing a lot of positions, whether it is a receiving tight end or fullback. It is also valuable that I can long snap. Just being able to do a lot things can only help me.”

Griffin's first year in the NFL was a blur as he didn't have much time to let it all sink in. He graduated from the Air Force Academy, then quickly moved on to work out with the Saints.

He had to get bigger, faster and stronger in just a few weeks time as training camp was just around the corner. Griffin had a good training camp, but he suffered a hamstring injury that cost him a couple weeks of workouts during the preseason.

“I put on a lot of weight, but I wasn't necessarily where I should have been,” Griffin said. “I was in good shape, and I was strong, but I put on weight so fast because that is what I needed to do and I don't think my body was ready to handle it.

I think that is why I messed my hamstring up during camp.”

Those lack of snaps left Griffin on the wrong side of the training camp cuts, but he never left the Saints as he was signed to the practice squad just days later. It was there where he stayed for the entire 2016 season.

On the scout team, Griffin faced off against members of the Saints starting defense on a daily basis.

“I got to go against Cam Jordan (defensive end) every day and I think that made me better,” Griffin said. “He is a Pro Bowler and to go up against him helped me out a lot just to get ready for what I can expect.”

Griffin also had some veterans take him under his wing as his locker is right next to veteran fullback John Kuhn, who was a longtime Green Bay Packer before signing with the Saints last season.

“I am not sure any one thing stood out, but it was just really cool to become friends with some really good dudes that I didn’t think I would ever meet,” Griffin said. “(Kuhn) is a legend in Green Bay. He is starting to become a legend in New Orleans just because he is a really good dude. He started his career in kind of the same situation as me. He went to a smaller school, but he was on the practice squad for the (Pittsburgh) Steelers and he has just helped me out throughout the year. He is just a really good guy to talk to and we come from similar upbringings.

“Our locker room is great and I get along with everyone. I think everyone gets along and I don’t think it is like that everywhere. Any time you need something, the veterans are there for you and that is coolest part about last year is just to see how close everyone was.”

That closeness to the other players was important as the season started to become a grind. As a member of the practice

squad, he was in the same meetings as the Saints starters and practiced with the team six days a week.

When the players went to the team hotel following workouts on Saturdays, Griffin stayed behind to watch the games on television, only to do it all over again the next week.

"It is good being on the scout team because you are preparing like you are going to play, but you aren't really and it is a good learning experience," he said. "We traveled to two games. The home games, we have walkthrough and practice till like 2 on Saturday and the rest of the time we just try and relax.

"We went to an LSU game once and we try to go out and see New Orleans. I just wanted to take advantage of the fact that we have some free time and all the older guys told us to enjoy it because once you start playing every week, it is football non-stop."

Although he wasn't on the active roster, Griffin would still get recognized around New Orleans from fans and get asked for the occasional autograph.

"I don't see myself any different than when I was in high school," Griffin said. "Sometimes it is a little awkward because they think I am famous and I know that I am not. It is really cool though because everyone appreciates the fact that the fan base is great, and it is such a cool, historic city and it is great to be a part of that.

"After (Hurricane) Katrina, the Saints were what helped bring the city together. The fans know everyone. They know the practice squad guys and a lot of the people that work behind the scenes. They even know who our chef is in our cafeteria. They just worship Saints football."

Probably the most popular Saint is Drew Brees. The all-pro and Super Bowl MVP quarterback is looked up to by many in the Saints locker room and Griffin is one of them.

"I have had some interactions with him and he is a great guy," Griffin said. "There was a time where he broke a record and they were talking about it on ESPN. I was talking to him at lunch and he was embarrassed that it was even on TV. He is a really humble guy and he could care less about his stats. It is cliché to say that, but he is a great dude and he earns everything he gets.

"Quarterbacks have to prepare so much more than everyone. They are pretty much coaches. It is cool to see how hard he works and you realize why he is so good. When you walk in the door, he has already been there for two hours watching film. He has his routine and it is the exact same thing every day. He is a perfectionist. He is obviously talented, but watching how hard he works, he sets a great example for everyone else."

By the time the Brees era is over in New Orleans, Griffin hopes to become a target for the future hall of fame quarterback. He is behind veteran tight end Coby Fleener and a couple others on the roster, but Griffin is ready to do what it takes to move from the practice squad and on to the big stage.

Griffin is currently in New Orleans working out with the team as he prepares for minicamp, and then eventually another training camp later this summer.

"I think the ultimate goal for me is not only to make a team, but to contribute," Griffin said. "The thing about the NFL is that when you are on a roster, you are going to play quite a bit because there aren't many spots. Once you make a roster though, it is all business. It is a ruthless business and they can cut you any time they want. I just want to stay on the team, contribute and help win some games and maybe make the playoffs."

Following the conclusion of the 2016 season, Griffin returned home to Louisburg to spend time with his parents Gary and Lori

Griffin, his sister Gentry and other family and friends – people he didn't get to see much the last four years due to his service in the Air Force Academy and then spending the last seven months with the Saints.

"This is actually the first time that I have had off since I started playing sports in high school," Griffin said. "I just wanted to let everything heal, let my legs get back under me and just get my body right.

"I was able to see some friends from high school and I got a chance to just hang out at home, which was fine with me. My dad likes that I am home because he says my mom cooks a lot more when I am around. It was great to actually spend some time with both my parents and hopefully I didn't annoy them too much."

It was a much-needed getaway for Griffin as he had an opportunity to refocus and prepare himself for what he plans to be an eventful 2017 season with the Saints. He wants a chance at making the active roster and help New Orleans take the next step following a 7-9 season a year ago.

Still, Griffin knows his roster spot can be taken at any time and he could be left without a football home.

"It is a great way to make a living and it is a lot of people's dream to play in the NFL, but I don't think people realize just how stressful that it is," Griffin said. "You walk in on Tuesday, which is our off day, but everyone still comes in to work out. That is when they work out free agents and every week it seems like they are working out 20 people. Anyone can take your job at any time. Especially in camp, you are on edge 24-7.

"Coach (Sean) Payton always says that we are all on a train right now, but everyone gets off at some point. For some people it is sooner than others, so just try and enjoy it while you are on it. It is not long for most people."

For Griffin, he hopes that train doesn't pull into the station any time soon.

Koechner selected to play in Shrine Bowl



Louisburg High School senior Mason Koechner found out earlier this month that was selected to play in the 2017 Kansas Shrine Bowl later this year. Koechner earned all-league and all-state honors on the defensive linen this past season.

Once football season was complete, Mason Koechner watched as he began to get recognized by league coaches and media.

It started with first team all-league honors and first team all-state selections came shortly after. It was a barrage of awards that came following what was a successful season for the Louisburg High School senior.

Five months following his final snap on the high school football field, one more award came Koechner's way.

On April 3, Koechner was informed that was he was selected to participate in the 2017 Kansas Shrine Bowl. Only 68 seniors from across the state are selected to participate in the

charity all-star football game and Koechner was added to the list by different sports media in Kansas, along with the Kansas Shrine Bowl coaching staff.

“It is a great honor and I am proud to be able to represent Louisburg,” Koechner said. “I was pretty excited when I heard and I am definitely looking forward to it.”

The all-start contest will be held on July 29 at Butler County Community College in El Dorado and Koechner will play for the East squad under Rossville head coach Derick Hammes. The Shrine Bowl game, and events surrounding the contest, will benefit Shriners Hospitals for Children, which is a health care system of 22 hospitals dedicated to improving the lives of children.

The Kansas Shrine Bowl is a non-profit charity raising funds and awareness for the Shriners Hospitals for Children. The Shrine Bowl has been in existence since 1974, and since its inception, it has been promoting Kansas talent and the network of hospitals raising over \$2.5 million.

A week before the game, Koechner will practice with his East teammates and also spend time with Shriners Hospital patients. It was an experience that a former teammate, Anders Vance, took part in last season.

Vance represented Louisburg a year ago and Koechner heard several good things from him about his time at the event.

“Anders is a good friend of mine,” Koechner said. “He’s had nothing to say but good things. He made lots of friends that he regularly keeps in touch with so I am definitely looking forward to it and it seems like a great experience to be a part of.”

Koechner had a big season for the Wildcats on both sides of the ball this past season. As defensive lineman, he finished with 67 tackles, including two sacks and two tackles for a

loss.

On the offensive line, he helped block for an offense that totaled nearly 4,000 yards on the season.

“I am very excited for Mason and for the opportunity for him to play in the Shrine Bowl,” Louisburg football coach Robert Ebenstein said. “I know Mason will represent himself, his family, his school and this community very well in the game as well as the Shriners activities that they have planned for the week.

“I know the East coaching staff very well having coached with coach Hammes during my time at Rural. Coach Hammes is going to love Mason and the aggressiveness he plays with as well as his contagious positive attitude.”

Following his wrestling season in early March, Koechner had to have knee surgery, but he will be ready to go in time for the game in July and also for workouts with his new team – Garden City Community College – in June.

“I am doing as much as I can to recover as quickly as possible,” Koechner said. “They told me I should be fully recovered on June 1 and then I will report to Garden City for three weeks of summer workouts.”

Frontier League shakeup could happen soon



In a few months – or even weeks – the Frontier League as it currently stands could have a different look.

Since March, meetings have gone on within member schools of the Frontier League and Kaw Valley League to discuss possible realignment of both leagues.

The Frontier League currently has seven members – Louisburg, Paola, Spring Hill, De Soto, Ottawa, Baldwin and Eudora – and a meeting between the schools took place on March 28 to discuss where each school stood as far as their happiness in the league.

Brian Biermann, superintendent of USD 416, and Louisburg High School athletic director Darin Gagnebin attended the meeting on Louisburg's behalf and both relayed the fact that every school stated they were happy with the way the league is currently set up, but a couple schools came to the realization the Frontier League might not be able to offer what they are looking for.

De Soto and Spring Hill currently have growing enrollment numbers are interested in playing Class 5A competition. De Soto moved up to 5A this school year and Spring Hill will look to make the jump in the coming years with its larger enrollment. The rest of the schools all compete in Class 4A.

Both schools stated they would like more competition at the sub-varsity level that schools like Louisburg, Baldwin and Eudora cannot provide. Competing in a mainly 5A league would relieve some of those problems.

"De Soto said they will probably open next year with 950 kids

and they would grow by 100 the year after that,” Biermann said. “They are happy in the Frontier, but they feel like they need 5A competition and they feel like it could hurt them in football with seedings and tie-breakers. They could potentially get penalized by competing in a mainly 4A league.

“Spring Hill wants to be proactive. Their growth is coming. Their classes in the middle school are pretty good size. They won’t grow a lot next year, but they will in the next few years.”

What started the meetings is due to the fact that the Kaw Valley League is looking to rework their situation or create a brand new look altogether. The Kaw Valley currently has seven schools in Lansing, Turner, Bonner Springs, Tonganoxie, Piper, Bishop Ward and Basehor-Linwood, but one member – Bishop Ward – is leaving for a new league beginning next school year.

According to report in March from the *Tonganoxie Mirror*, Lansing wants to create a larger league that would contain all or some combinations of Lansing, Blue Valley Southwest, De Soto, Leavenworth, Bonner Springs, Basehor-Linwood, Tonganoxie, Ottawa, Piper, Spring Hill, Turner and Topeka schools Seaman, Shawnee Heights and Topeka West.

Many of those schools are either in Class 5A already or are close based on enrollment numbers. The idea of competing against bigger competition is intriguing to De Soto, Spring Hill – and possibly Ottawa – the three largest schools in the Frontier League.

An idea was thrown around of creating a league of two divisions between the Kaw Valley and Frontier. One division would be 5A schools and the other would be 4A.

“We visited with our board of education and we are not in favor of a mega-league,” Biermann said. “That has been talked about – having a league of 5A and 4A schools. We don’t want to invite new 5A schools. We are ok with Spring Hill and De Soto

staying in the league, even though they are growing, but we don't want to invite other 5A schools or have a mega league so they can have better competition.

"Our stance is if De Soto and Spring Hill feel like they need 5A competition and leave, then they can work towards that and we can work on filling those spots with 4A schools."

Both Biermann and Gagnebin feel like the Frontier League needs to be proactive as changes could be made sooner rather than later.

"We aren't panicking as a league as much as the Kaw Valley schools are because they know they are headed for a break up," Gagnebin said. "We could easily stay with the seven schools we have. Pretty soon, De Soto will have close to 1,000 kids. It is more on them if they want to be in our league, and if they are happy, by all means stay. We are not saying they have to leave, but they have to do best what is for their school, and if this league isn't the best option for you, then you have to look elsewhere."

Due to the fact De Soto and Spring Hill could be moving on, the Frontier is being proactive and inviting some members of the Kaw Valley League to come make presentations at a meeting Wednesday to see if they would be a fit in the Frontier.

According to Biermann, Tonganoxie, Piper, Bonner Springs and Basehor-Linwood High Schools will all make presentations at the meeting and then schools from both the Kaw Valley and the Frontier will meet to discuss options at a later date.

"I led the (March 28) meeting and I wanted to make sure everyone was as honest and open as possible," Biermann said. "There were no hurt feelings. Collectively we don't want a mega-league, no additional 5A schools and that is firm from us, Paola, Baldwin and Eudora. Spring Hill and De Soto left the meeting, I think, that they need to start looking for potential 5A competition."

"The easy fix would be for De Soto and Spring Hill to join the bigger league and we take someone like Tonganoxie and Piper to replace them. Every school said they loved the Frontier League and competition, but it is time there has to be some conversations. The biggest thing is we don't have three baseball, softball or soccer teams to schedule, but De Soto and Spring Hill want that. We can't field C teams in some cases."

The leagues are on a sort of a time crunch. With football reclassifications and scheduling beginning this October for the next two years, it would be the best case scenario to get the reshuffling done before then so they can schedule for the 2018-19 season and beyond according to Gagnebin.

The Louisburg activities director also believes keeping the right number of teams is also imperative for a healthy league.

"We want to maintain the integrity of our league, whether that is with seven or even eight schools," Gagnebin said. "We want to maintain that number. Nine is a scheduling nightmare, and if you only have six teams, you are opening up a can of worms where if you leave an open spot, then the state could come in and assign certain schools to us that aren't a good fit."

"I don't necessarily want them to leave the league, but we need to be told if they are. I am more afraid of them leaving our league than them staying in our league. I am not afraid of the competition we face with them. We can compete with them in all the sports, but I am more afraid of us dropping from a seven to a five-team league."

However, one hiccup remains. The Frontier League bylaws state that a member school must give two years notice before leaving the league.

"If the dominoes start falling fast, the league could pass a bylaw amendment to allow for movement for De Soto or whoever, which is something I think they will have to do," Gagnebin

said. "Not much is happening now, but when it does it is going to happen quick. You better be ready to move with it and have a plan in place or you could be stuck on the outside."

Ebenstein hired as new Wildcat head football coach



Robert Ebenstein was hired as the new Louisburg High School football coach following the USD 416 Board of Education meeting. Ebenstein spent five years in Louisburg as an assistant and takes over for interim coaches Gary Griffin and Jeff Lohse.

Louisburg High School will have a new leader on the sidelines when the Wildcats take the field in September, but he is a familiar face to many with the program.

Robert Ebenstein was hired as Louisburg's new head football coach and it was officially approved Monday during the monthly USD 416 Board of Education meeting. Ebenstein will take over for interim coaches Gary Griffin and Jeff Lohse.

"I am pretty pumped," Ebenstein said. "When it became

available, I was definitely interested in it and it is really a privilege to be the head football coach. Everyone has been congratulating me on the job, but it really isn't a job to me because I love football so much as does every head coach. It is great to be able to do this in Louisburg because I can continue to make relationships, raise my kids here and have my family around."

Ebenstein has spent the last five years as an assistant for the Wildcats under head coaches Kyle Littrell and Griffin. He served as a line coach for Louisburg and before that he spent four years as an assistant at Washburn Rural High School. He also spent time as an assistant at Gardner-Edgerton.

It is that experience and familiarity that made it an easy choice for the Wildcats. The search for a head coach had been ongoing after the resignation of Littrell last August and Griffin and Lohse were named interim co-head coaches last season.

"I am excited about it," LHS activities director Darin Gagnebin said. "I think he will bring a new energy to the program. I know he is ready to move up to be a head coach. He is going to be faced with challenges with some coaching spots open, but he is ready to tackle that head on."

Football has always been a big part of his life. Ebenstein, a Spring Hill High School graduate, got into coaching a little sooner than he had hoped.

Ebenstein had offers to play college football, but late in his senior year he was in a car accident that resulted in a broken hip and a shattered pelvis.

"I felt like football was taken from me a little bit," Ebenstein said. "In my mind, I wasn't done with it yet."

Following high school, he had the opportunity to become an assistant coach at Highland Community College for two years

before finishing his degree at Pittsburg State.

“Football is something I have loved forever,” he said. “It is honestly a privilege. The kids in this community are so welcoming, especially to a Spring Hill graduate. From day one they have been nothing but respectful and any time we need something the parents are always there to help out. I am thankful for the opportunity and we will make the best of it.”

Ebenstein even remembers a few battles with Louisburg while at Spring Hill – one in particular.

“I remember playing Louisburg and Griff (Gary Griffin) was the head coach when I was there,” Ebenstein said. “I remember getting screamed at by a Louisburg coach on the sideline because I got a little too close to the sideline for a hit. I just remember it was the coach who was wearing shorts when it was 20 degrees outside with huge calves and it was (former assistant) coach (Wayne) Whiting.”

Ebenstein realizes the Louisburg job is a healthy one because of those coaches that came before him that have established a strong tradition within the program.

“The staff here at Louisburg is better than anyone I have ever been with,” he said. “Working with Griff, (Larry) Aylor, Whiting, Lohse and (Billy) Neff, and then working with Littrell when he took over, they are all just a wealth of knowledge. They were very supportive of me through this process and I am very grateful to them for everything. If some of the coaches don’t end up being here next year, then I know they are just a phone call away if I need help with anything.”

Ebenstein plans to work on the offensive side of the ball, while Lohse will stay on staff as the defensive coordinator. But as far as any big sweeping changes, Ebenstein knows they don’t necessarily need to be made.

“The biggest challenge for me is to put my staple on something

that has been as successful and predominant as it has been,” Ebenstein said. “Also trying to let the players see there is a change, but at the same time balancing what Louisburg football historically has been about.

“If you stick to your core beliefs, you are going to be successful in staying consistent. Honestly, what Louisburg has been built on is what I have always valued and that is committing to what you are doing and have the belief that what we do works. There is no reason to change it if it is working.”

Ebenstein also believes a key to healthy program is staying involved with the community and he hopes his team can do that in many different ways.

“Once we get going and I can have meetings with the players, we are going to do some things to reconnect to the community a little bit,” he said. “Not that we haven’t in the past, but it hasn’t been a staple of what we have done. We will have an awards ceremony at the banquet, and to be in consideration for those, a player has to meet a certain criteria and one of those is community service and giving back to the youth leagues and camps. I think it is very important to have that connection to your community.”

Rizzo signs with Garden City Community College



Louisburg senior Dustyn Rizzo signed his letter of intent to play football at Garden City Community College on Mar. 1 at LHS. Sitting next to Dustyn are his parents Matthew and Denyse. Standing is Louisburg coach Robert Ebenstein and Kyle Littrell.

Following his final game as a Louisburg Wildcat, Dustyn Rizzo still felt the fire to play football.

Four months later, it is a fire that continues to burn strongly within Rizzo and he isn't about ready to leave the sport he loves behind. The Louisburg senior is ready to take the next step.

Rizzo signed his letter of intent to play at Garden City Community College on March 1 in front of family and friends at LHS and he is excited for the opportunity to play at the next level.

"This is probably not an opportunity I am going to have as I get older," Rizzo said. "I am going to have the chance to work the rest of my life, so I am going to take advantage of this right now and go ahead and go play and I am excited. I am not done with football yet."

The Garden City junior college seemed like the right fit for Rizzo as he looked for an opportunity to play, get better and eventually move on to a bigger program at a four-year school.

When Rizzo took his visit to Garden City, he came away impressed with what the Broncbusters had to offer on and off the field. Garden City finished its 2016 campaign with an 11-0 record, including a 25-22 win over Arizona Western to win the NJCAA national championship.

“I really like how everything is close together in Garden City,” Rizzo said. “Most of my classes are in the same building so that is nice. It is great to see how much football means to that whole town. I went and visited and everyone is about football and the football life. The coaches are extremely serious about football and I like how they are honest about things. They aren’t going to sugar coat anything.”

Rizzo, who is currently at 235 pounds, hopes to use part of his time at Garden City to put on a bigger frame. The Broncbuster staff told Rizzo they wanted to use him on the defensive line, where he experienced success at Louisburg.

“I am more geared for defense because I am quicker, smaller and I feel like I can get through the line. I just like making plays,” Rizzo said.

“The reason I am going to Garden City is to make myself the best football player I can become. I want to get the weight level and experience level where I can get acclimated to the game of college football. Hopefully I can play Division II somewhere down the line and make a name for myself.”



Dustyn Rizzo earned all-league defensive line honors the last two seasons.

Rizzo was a big part of the Wildcat defense the last two seasons as he was a two-time all-Frontier League player. Rizzo was a first-team defensive selection in 2015 and 2016 and he finished with 39 tackles, two sacks and a forced fumble this past year.

He has also been an honorable mention all-state selection the last two years. Rizzo attributes his success to the Wildcat football staff – more specifically former coach Kyle Littrell and assistant Robert Ebenstein.

“The coaches have been wonderful,” Rizzo said. “Littrell and

Ebenstein being my line coaches have just helped me tremendously. When (Littrell) resigned, I think that everyone took a hard hit from that. I think it made us more resilient and we had a great season. Both guys have had a big impact on me.

“Football has been life-changing for me. It is hard and there might not be a sport, other than wrestling, that is harder. You learn life lessons and it is a brotherhood. Playing here was amazing. Freshman year wasn’t that great, but my sophomore year when I saw my first Friday night that was crazy. Every Friday night from then on I knew it was getting closer to ending and playing with these guys. Every practice needed to be top notch.”

Rizzo won’t be the only Wildcat joining the Garden City team as teammate Mason Koechner signed with Garden City in February. He knows having Koechner there will only make the transition that much easier.

“It is going to be nice to have someone there that I know,” Rizzo said. “We are going to room together and we have been playing football together forever. So it will be great knowing that I have a buddy down there with me and it will make easier. It will also make the six hour drive a lot easier too.”

Koechner to continue journey at Garden City



Louisburg High School senior Mason Koechner signed his letter of intent Wednesday to play football at Garden City Community College. Sitting next to Mason are his parents Scott and Beth Koechner. Standing (from left) are Louisburg football coaches Robert Ebenstein, Gary Griffin and Zach Livingston.

Playing at the highest level college football has to offer has always intrigued Mason Koechner.

The Louisburg High School senior has his sights set on competing at the Division I level – one day. His journey to reaching that goal is still ongoing, but Koechner took the next step Wednesday when he signed his letter of intent to play at Garden City Community College.

Koechner believes the junior college route will allow him to grow and get better at the game he loves.

“I am not ready right out of high school to play Division I, but I really think this will be a great stepping stone for me to get me where I want to go,” Koechner said. “Hopefully I can spend one or two years at Garden City and then be ready for bigger and better things.

“I really liked their coaching staff. They are really good guys and the campus itself is really nice. The coaches talked to me and convinced me that they can get me to the next level and that is really what I want to do. I hope to play well at Garden City and then see what happens.”

Koechner, who was a Class 4A first-team all-state player on

both sides of the ball, was a pivotal part of the Louisburg football team that finished the season with a regional championship. He played tackle on an offensive line that accounted for nearly 4,000 yards of total offense and led the Wildcats on the defensive side with 67 tackles, including a pair of sacks.



Mason Koechner (right) will be ready to take on a new challenge with Garden City this coming fall.

However, it is the offensive side he will continue to improve on in college. Koechner, who stands at 6-foot-2, is undersized to play the tackle position in college, so the Garden City coaches have a different idea for him.

“For my size, the coaches want to put me at center since I am not as tall so that will be different since I played tackle in high school,” Koechner said. “If I want to go somewhere

bigger, I won't be able to do that as a tackle, but playing center I can get away with only being 6-foot-2 and they think that will be a great fit for me."

Mason has also had a wealth of knowledge in his corner during the recruiting process – his brother Jared. Jared, also an LHS graduate, went the junior college route before eventually signing with a Division I program in the University of Alabama-Birmingham.

Jared has been there to guide Mason through it all and give him some words of wisdom when he has needed it.

"Jared is probably the one who has helped me the most with my decision," Mason said. "He has been with me every step of the way. I am glad he has been there and he has helped me with what questions to ask and how it all works. He has been a big help for sure."

However, football isn't Mason's only passion. He is currently the No. 2 ranked heavyweight in Class 4A and has a 30-1 record on the season for the Wildcat wrestling team.

Wrestling and football have worked hand-in-hand in helping Mason become a better all-around athlete.

"In wrestling, I know how to use my body and other people's bodies against them," Mason said. "I have gone up against guys bigger and stronger than me, but I can still handle them. Wrestling teaches you a lot of mental toughness, which is really helpful when it comes to football. The coaches all say that they love recruiting wrestlers because there is a mental toughness about them and they know how to use their body in their favor."

Although he will be preparing for college soon, Mason will not forget the time he spent in Louisburg and all those times under the Friday night lights.

"It is crazy," he said. "I started playing in fifth grade, but time has gone by so fast. It feels a little weird signing for college, but it doesn't seem like it should be here yet. I am ready to take this next step though."

"I have many awesome memories of this place. I wouldn't want to grow up anywhere else than here in Louisburg. It is the best place to grow up and play football."

Hankinson inks with Missouri Southern



Louisburg High School senior Korbin Hankinson signed his letter of intent Wednesday morning to play football at Missouri Southern. Sitting next to Korbin are his parents Dan and Sherry Hankinson. Standing (from left) are Louisburg football coaches Gary Griffin, Robert Ebenstein and Zach Livingston.

Korbin Hankinson recorded big play after big play for the Louisburg High School football team this past season.

The Wildcat senior had several big games offensively, defensively and in special teams as he returned several kickoffs and punts for touchdowns. He hopes to have that same

type of production at the college level and he is going to get his chance.

During a signing day ceremony at Louisburg High School, Hankinson signed his letter of intent to play for Missouri Southern University and he is excited to join the Lion program.

"It has been a dream since I was playing pee wee football," Hankinson said. "I have always wanted to play college football and now I get the chance.

"It is very surreal to me right now. I am going to miss playing football with all my friends. I've talked to a lot of people who have played in college and they tell me it is nothing like high school football. I am definitely going to miss it more than anything, but I am ready to play at that next level."

Hankinson was productive on both sides of the ball for the Wildcats and was a first-team all-league selection on defense and also earned honorable mention all-state honors. He finished the season with five interceptions and five deflections.



Korbin Hankinson had almost 900 total yards of offense to go along with 13 touchdowns for the Wildcats last season.

However, it will be offensively where Hankinson hopes to make his mark on Missouri Southern. Hankinson scored 13 touchdowns offensively and on special teams. He also had 441 yards rushing and a team-high 489 receiving yards.

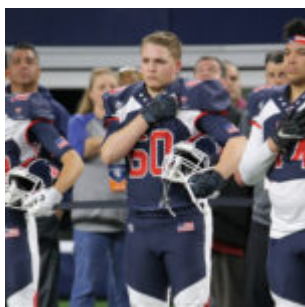
“They want me to play a slot receiver and possibly return some punts or kickoffs,” Hankinson said. “That is something I really enjoy doing and I am looking forward to it.

“The last couple of years they have struggled a little bit, but they have gotten some new coaches in. When I went down there they really made me feel welcome and made me feel like I was a part of their football family. I really liked all the coaches down there and feel like I fit in well there more than anywhere else.”

Hankinson had a couple of different options to choose from as he was offered a spot on the Baker football program as well, but he was excited about the opportunity to play against tougher competition in the MIAA Conference and Division II level.

“It came down to them and Baker, but I really like the coaches at Missouri Southern,” Hankinson said. “Plus I like the location of the school being in Joplin. Then when it came down to it, I always wanted to play against Division II competition and play against schools like Emporia, Pitt and all them. I wanted to play against that higher competition. I really like the campus as well.”

White helps USA to win in International Bowl



Louisburg High School freshman Brayden White (60) stands at attention during the national anthem prior to the International Bowl on Jan. 17 in Arlington, Texas. White played on the defensive line for USA football as it defeated Ontario, Canada 63-0.

Brayden White walked onto the turf of AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, and prepared to help USA Football get a win

over Canada in the International Bowl.

It was the same stadium, that just a few days prior, hosted an NFL playoff game between the Dallas Cowboys and Green Bay Packers. The atmosphere of playing in an NFL venue was enough to make anyone a little star struck – much less a high school student.

However, the Louisburg High School freshman didn't think about that much. For the second time in as many years, White traveled with USA Football to compete in the International Bowl – and for the second time in a row he left with a big win.

White helped the USA Football 16-and-under team to a 63-0 win over Ontario, Canada, on Jan. 17. Last year he helped the 15-and-under squad to a victory as well. This time, though, it was a little different for him.

“This year was a lot harder,” White said. “The kids seemed quicker, bigger, faster and stronger than last year. It was in the 30s most of the time and rained almost every day, too. We had three practices a day, most days and the coach really expected a lot from each player. The practices and the team bonding we did in the hotel during our off time made it more memorable.”



Brayden White lines up for snap during the International Bowl on Jan. 17 in Arlington, Texas.

White started on the defensive line and made several plays for team USA, whether it was a tackle for loss on the first play from scrimmage or getting to the quarterback.

To get to this point, White had to earn a spot on the National Developmental Team, and then played in a showcase game in July in Canton, Ohio. A few months later, rosters were released for the USA Football team and White earned a spot.

He had to go through the same process in 2015 as well, which led to his first selection for USA Football. According to White, he has learned a lot about the game in these last two years.

White received instruction from head coach Jason Mohns and his

staff. Mohns is the head coach of Saguaro High School in Scottsdale, Ariz., and had led his team to three state titles and almost 60 wins since 2012.

"I have a broader understanding of the game by being exposed to different coaching styles," White said. "I feel it has made me a better player by starting to prepare me for the next level of football. For example, the way practices are set up and ran, traveling with the team and staying in hotels with a roommate, etc."

The LHS freshman also had a strong contingent there rooting him on as he had several family and friends in attendance to watch as No. 60 caused havoc on the defensive line.

"I was very thankful and blessed to have my family there, which included my parents, siblings, grandparents, aunt, uncle, cousins and a good friend supporting me at the game," White said. "They made signs and really cheered me on. I was there for six days and most of the time we started our day at 6 a.m. and didn't finish till 10 or 11 at night."

When White was about ready to come out onto the field for the start of the game, he couldn't help but think of his hometown.

"When we were in the tunnel ready to take the field, Canada was ahead of us," White said. "I started singing 'We Ready' to myself as that's what our high school team here always did before we took the field, and then the rest of my teammates heard me and started singing it with me. It was cool to bring a part of my team from home with me to the game."

Griffin signs new deal with Saints



Louisburg native Garrett Griffin will get another shot at making the New Orleans Saints next season after spending the past year on the practice squad.

According to nfltraderumors.com, and NOLA Saints beat writer Herbie Teope, Griffin has signed for a reserve/future deal with the Saints for the 2017 season. A future/reserve contract is an opportunity for players to compete for a roster spot in offseason workouts and during training camp.

In May, the Saints tight end signed a three-year deal with New Orleans last May as an undrafted free agent from the Air Force Academy. He didn't make the 53-man roster out of the preseason, but was later signed to Saints practice squad, where he remained throughout the 2016 season.

During his collegiate career at the Air Force, Griffin caught 41 passes for 678 yards and eight touchdowns in 23 games.

Griffin graduated from Louisburg High School in 2012 where he helped the Wildcats win the school's first state football championship in 2010.



Garrett Griffin made his way back to Louisburg in June to catch at Wildcat football practice.