

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

After three seasons at the helm of the Liberal Redskin football program, Cliff Abbott is no longer the coach of the Redskins.



The announcement from USD No. 480 came after noon Thursday but did not say whether or not Abbott resigned or was fired.

According to the release the two opted to “part ways.”

But Abbott said that the decision was not mutual.

“I want the boys to know I did not quit on them,” Abbott said.

Abbott said that he was told by Athletic Director Roland Van Wyhe that he had decided to find a new football coach.

“We did not decide to part ways,” he said. “I was terminated.”

Speculation had been that after his son, Britton Abbott, had completed his senior year, Abbott would step down, but that was not Abbott's intent. A brief meeting took place in Van Wyhe's office Thursday morning when Abbott was informed of his termination as head coach, something he did not expect.

"It was very much a surprise," he said. "We knew it was a process, it would take some building. After implementing a weight program, running, camps, seven on seven — we are starting to see the benefits. I didn't get the indication in my meeting there was any problem with football or what has happened. I wasn't on campus. They felt they wanted a coach in the building all day long. I was there for first hour weights and eighth hour, just not during the day."

Van Wyhe said it was a goal to find a coach that would have a greater presence in the district.

"We will seek the best person for the position," he said. "I would like to see that person within the building or employed with the district."

Abbott and the Redskins qualified for the playoffs this season after winning two of three District 8 games.

Liberal finished with a 5-5 record this year, but Abbott had two 2-7 seasons prior for an overall record of 9-19.

Abbott continued to operate his business, Abbott Construction, while coaching the Redskins. He was able to coach two of his sons, Bram and Britton, and this year had his son Bo as an assistant.

Abbott was a Title 10 coach since he was not an instructor or employee of the district other than his role as coach.

Abbott did address the majority of his team Thursday morning after being informed he was no

longer the head coach.

“I expressed to them how I appreciated their efforts,” Abbott said. “We are not where we used to be but not where we want to go, either. The challenge was to continue and hang on to their dreams and build the Redskin tradition. I did tell them that I did not quit them, this was not my choice at this time, but because of the vision of administration, they thought it was better to have a different head coach. What we taught the past three years was not be committed when it is convenient but through the tough times. I am still committed to them. I will be in town and will be available to help them reach their dreams.”

College recruiting continues, and Van Wyhe said that coaches make contact with the school on a daily basis in an effort to get Redskins to the next level. He said those coaches can contact assistant coach Caleb Cline or could still contact Abbott.

Van Wyhe is in his first year as the LHS athletic director, and he said his criteria for measuring the success of a coach was not necessarily based on wins and losses.

“Numbers,” he said. “What I mean is the number of participants out for the sport. Do we have a sub-varsity, freshmen, JV? Are they are developing, more importantly, is the character of the team, of the program disciplined? Probably the overall is the consistency from the varsity all the way down to middle school and youth programs.”

Abbott’s coaching style was somewhat unorthodox when it came to the kicking game this season. Abbott opted to onside almost every kick-off and did not attempt a field goal after touchdowns, going for two instead.

Liberal’s offense was able to chalk up impressive numbers, especially this season, but the defense never developed into a strong force. An example was the first-round playoff game where the Redskins lost to Kapaun, 55-40.

Abbott’s three-year tenure was similar in duration to that of his three predecessors.

Steve Warner coached the Redskins for two seasons in 2004 and 2005 before moving on to Buhler. Warner qualified for the playoffs both seasons at Liberal and was the last coach to win a playoff game in 2004. Warner won a Class 4A state championship this season, his eighth year at the helm of the Crusaders.

Tom Schroeder coached from 2006 to 2008 and qualified for the playoffs all three seasons, finishing with a 12-18 record.

Wade Standley coached Liberal in 2009 and 2010 and turned in one playoff appearance.

Abbott took over in 2011.

Van Wyhe said that the plans were to form a committee that included himself, LHS principal Keith Adams and teachers to help make the decision on the next coach.

“Right now, we will accept applications,” Van Wyhe said. “Once we feel we have a sufficient number of qualified applicants, and once we feel we have found the right person we will make that offer. We won’t do that today or by Christmas. I will be patient on it, to make sure we find the right candidate, and if that takes until January or February then that’s what happens.”

After the fall season, Van Wyhe said that Redskin success needs to make the move beyond the area.

“I think right now, we are being competitive within the area and maybe even the region,” he said. “There is always room for growth and improvement. Right now I feel we are being competitive in most of our sports. We will take that, but advance that to the next step and see if we can be competitive throughout the state.”

Abbott added that he would be available to the team in whatever role he could.

“I was committed for a minimum of four years,” he said. “We had athletes, and we would have had a good test next year, but I wanted the team to be successful, and I will do whatever I need to make that happen. If that meant coaching, if it means cheering in the stands, that’s what I will do.”