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Critic of former Rockets baseball coach is named successor; seeks players

Snow covers the field, but Cedar Grove-Belgium High School varsity baseball coach Mike Ruppel is eager for the season to begin.

Ruppel was approved as the new coach by the School Board on Jan. 14. He succeeds Mike Johnson, who resigned last year following a season that had to be forfeited due to a lack of players. Several players quit the team during the season and another player was injured.

Some people blamed the team's discord on Ruppel, who coached many of the younger players, including his son Josh, on Belgium Little League teams.

Ruppel and Craig Emperley, who heads the Belgium Athletic Association and coached the Pony League team last year, were the only applicants for the position, School Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger said.

Emperley was named assistant varsity coach and will coach junior varsity if there are enough players for a team.

Principal John Hocking and Athletic Director Dan Coopman recommended the two coaches to the Personnel Committee, who endorsed the appointments.

"There was some chat that this is a guy who was not very supportive of the last coach," Lautenschlaeger said. "But he's worked with the kids before, and they have a good rapport. They know what Mike expects from them. I think it will be a good fit."

Ruppel is a physical therapist for HealthReach Rehabilitation Services, which has offices in Brookfield, Oostburg and Sheboygan. He is certified as a pitching instructor and strength and conditioning coach.

"When you work in the clinics, you see lots of sports injuries, and a lot of it is from over use and improper conditioning or techniques," Ruppel said Tuesday. "I see a lot of sore arms in pitchers. I became a certified pitching instructor because I wanted to reduce the number of injuries.

"It's all about managing them carefully when they're young and in high school so they don't hurt themselves before they reach their full potential. The big thing is to avoid injuries and help them enjoy the sport and improve."

Ruppel held open gyms for strength and conditioning in November and plans to schedule more after the basketball season.

He realizes he will have to overcome some mistrust.

"I don't think so much with the players as with the parents," Ruppel said. "I've had a couple of conversations with Dan (Coopman) and John (Hocking). I know how some people have

portrayed me in the community.

“I made it perfectly clear that I will have an open-door policy and make myself available. Hopefully, I can change some people’s impression of me and they will give me a chance.

“My intention was never to get the old coach out. I wanted to help him, but our personalities clashed.”

Ruppel said he would not let his son Josh, who is a pitcher, quit the team last year.

“He wanted to, but I believe when you start something, you don’t quit,” he said.

Ruppel said he’s seen Emperley coach the Pony League team, but has not worked with him before.

He and Emperley are working with Lautenschlaeger to develop a youth baseball program similar to the Broncos youth football program that includes Belgium and Cedar Grove students and feeds the high school team.

Lautenschlaeger is in the process of developing a parks and recreation program in Belgium that will offer many activities, including Little League programs now run by the Belgium Athletic Association.

Ruppel and Lautenschlaeger received permission from Belgium and Cedar Grove officials to run a Little League program for both communities in Belgium. Until now, each had its own teams.

Having players from throughout the district working together on youth teams will enhance the high school baseball program, Ruppel said.

At the School Board meeting last week, board member Aileen Dahlke suggested junior varsity games be scheduled to encourage players to join the team.

However, Ruppel said he prefers to wait until they have enough players registered to do that.

Oostburg, Random Lake and Sheboygan Falls have junior varsity teams, so scheduling games will not be a problem, he said.

“I would love to have 30 kids go out for baseball, so we can have a JV team and kids will get to play rather than sit on the bench,” Ruppel said.

“We may struggle at first, but if you look at it three to four years out, you’re going to have a viable program.”