

By Chuck Livingston
Marion School District

Lance Clark's goal for his time as head football coach at Marion when he accepted the position in June of 2021 was a simple one.

Elevate the program to the heights of the top programs in the state.

It's safe to say that Clark did just that, by guiding Marion to a 37-21 record over the past five seasons, the best five-year run in program history.

Now, he's taking on a new challenge.

The Cabot school board approved Clark as its next head football coach on Wednesday evening, ending Clark's prosperous run at Marion.

"This has been an agonizing process for me over the past week," said Clark, a Huntsville, Alabama native. "It's not me being dramatic to say that it's been more emotional than excitement in a lot of ways. We are excited to be part of the Cabot community, very excited, actually, but this community here at Marion has been so great to us here. I'm proud of what we've built, and I'm still so excited about where this program can go. Leaving this place, which has been so special to my family, has probably been the hardest decision of my life so far."

"While we are certainly sad to see Coach Clark leave Marion, we are incredibly proud of the success he has brought to our program and the strong foundation that has been built here," said Dr. Glen Fenter, Marion School District Superintendent. "We remain committed to supporting an outstanding football program, and we are confident that the investments we've made in facilities, resources, and our student-athletes will ensure this position continues to be one of the top coaching destinations in the state. The search for his successor will begin immediately, and we wish Coach Clark all the best in his next chapter."

Clark pulled no punches about the potential of Marion's football program, whether he's leading the charge or not.

"I've felt for a very long time that this is one of the more attractive football jobs in this state," said Clark, whose 64 percent winning percentage is the best mark in Marion school history. "It's why I wanted this job, it's why it was so hard to leave. Here at Marion you have the facilities, the structure, the administrative support, support from parents, you have everything that you need to win at a high level. I couldn't be more proud about what we have accomplished in our time here, but I'm excited to see where it goes because this is a great football school."

Marion overhauled its football program over the past eight years, upgrading the turf at Southern Bancorp Stadium, improving the speakers and lighting structure, revamping the fieldhouse and locker rooms, and constantly refreshing team gear.

On the field, Marion never won fewer than seven games since Clark took over in time for the 2021 season, advancing three times to the playoff quarterfinals, and the third state semifinal in school history in 2021.

Program involvement has never been better at Marion either. There were just over 220 players in the football program (7-12) when Clark took over in 2021, but that number resides today more than 350 players in the same range.

Marion also faces a new reality in Class 6A without perennial state power Greenwood, which will be a member of Class 5A for at least the next two seasons, and defending Class 6A state champion, Shiloh Christian, which moves up to Class 7A because of the Arkansas Activities Association's (AAA) Competitive Equity Factor (CEF), a points system that rewards success by promoting private schools based on their on-field success.

"To me, Class 6A is really open because the two teams that made the finals the last two years aren't in this classification anymore," said the coach. "So, the other teams that have been knocking at the door, like us here, can now go farther than they've gone. There are more really good teams than ever before,

but the two strongest teams and programs have moved on, so it's a great time to be here.” Clark's tenure will likely be remembered for the consistent run of success on the field, in particular against Marion's chief rivals, Wynne, Jonesboro, and West Memphis.

Marion finished 5-0 on the field against West Memphis, 4-1 against Wynne and 2-1 against Jonesboro under Clark. The five victories over West Memphis double as Marion's only conquests in the series. “A goal of ours when we got here was that we wanted to have success against our region,” said Clark. “When you start winning games like that against teams you haven't beat much, or that are geographically close to you, you gain credibility across the state. Inside the program, it creates a greater sense of pride. Every game is important because you only get so many, but those are the games that I remember most fondly.”

Clark succeeds Scott Reed at Cabot, who guided the Panthers to a 47-35 record in his seven years at the helm, including a nine-win season in 2022, which culminated in a tight two-point loss to Bentonville in t
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