

# Family and football: How sports connect us all

BY MASON HINES  
DISPATCH RECORD

In my youth, I found a passion for watching, playing and understanding the game of football. This passion began to grow as I got older, from playing youth league sports to junior high games and then becoming a varsity football player for Lometa High School.

My love for the game reached new heights in 2016, when I convinced my dad to take me and two friends to the Texas High School State Championship games, played annually at AT&T Stadium in Arlington. Our biggest reason to attend was that Jonesboro, which Lometa had played in the opening round of that year's postseason, was a qualifier, and I was curious to see if the Eagles could pull off the unthinkable: winning a state title.

After attending the six-man championship game, since it was what I had been most familiar with, my curiosity grew. I wondered what the bigger-conference games would be like.

I offered a bigger proposition for my father. I proposed trading my Christmas presents that year for a trip to Arlington to watch all 12 Texas State High School Championships.

Now, after six years and attending 62 state championship games, my excitement for the football postseason has not wavered. Between close games, blowouts and even witnessing North Shore's "Hail Mary" to claim a title over Duncanville in 2018, the games are hardly a source of disappointment.

## THE AT&T STADIUM EXPERIENCE

The matchups at AT&T Stadium determine the football champion of each division for the University Interscholastic League's six conferences, 1A through 6A. It is a grueling schedule, as 12 games are played over the course of four days.

Beginning on a Wednesday, the event hosts three games a day, which begin at 11 a.m. and often don't conclude until 10 p.m. In addition to being a fun time for the whole family, the playoff atmosphere is heightened when playing in Arlington.

Though no two years are alike, the atmosphere of the championship games has risen consistently since my father and I first began attending.

A typical pregame routine features dance music, rowdy fans and an air of excitement. My favorite portion of the pregame festivities comes just before the opening kickoff, when the public announcer recites the words: "Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to play football. Make some noise as we kick off the state championship game." Without fail, those words send an excited chill through my body as the battle for a state crown begins.

Over the years, the games have become a heavily attended event, most notably for the central location at AT&T Stadium. And only recently has it included six-man football.

Lampasas High School graduate Jay Edwards also attends the championship games.

"The first year I went was 2015," he said. "Six-man was in Abilene, and the rest were in Houston. I think AT&T does a good job hosting [the championships]. The only downside is food and drink prices."

Edwards attends the games every year with his grandmother, Jani Edwards, and has taken his dad and wife a few times. He enjoys the competition and seeing great athletes compete.

"My favorite part is

seeing the best players and teams in each classification," Edwards said.

## PLAYING AT A NEUTRAL SITE

Greg Tepper, managing editor of Dave Campbell's Texas Football magazine, shared his thoughts on how the central site for the championships changed the landscape of high school



Mason Hines

football.

"The biggest change in the state championships in my time covering them is, undoubtedly, the central-site event," Tepper said. "It's hard to fathom now, but it used to be that the state championship games were scattered across the state at neutral sites. The UIL bringing the state championships under one roof is the biggest game-changer in Texas high school football since the advent of the spread offense."

Previously, state championships were played across different stadiums and on different days.

Borden County Head Coach Trey Richey, who won four titles in two stadiums, noted how unique it is to experience the AT&T Stadium atmosphere.

"My oldest won two titles at Shotwell [in Abilene], and my youngest won two here [at AT&T Stadium]," he said. "I think if you asked my oldest, he'd probably say that playing here would've been cooler. It's a once-in-a-lifetime moment for the kids and coaches as well."

Richey also mentioned the impact the new format has on smaller schools like Borden County and Lometa, which don't usually see crowds the size of a state title game.

"It's great for the kids, the fans that are here," the coach said. "This might be the only time they ever get to come to this stadium. Five thousand people is more than our kids are used to in the stands."

The event has taken on a life of its own, becoming a major bucket list item for many.

Lometa Head Coach and Athletic Director D.T. Torres attends the championship games with other coaches, as well as his family.

"We always plan on taking them if it works out," Torres said. "My boys always enjoy it. They were hoping to see Ezekiel Elliott or CeeDee Lamb [this year]. I have a picture of my oldest when Abbott won it at Shotwell in 2015."

Jonesboro High School Head Coach Eddie Gallegos rents a house with two other families to enjoy the weekend together.

"We get a house, bring the families, and we make a vacation trip out of it," he said. "The football junkies like you and me go to all the games, but even my wife and kids love coming. It's a great time, and we just love it."

## CAPTURING AN ELUSIVE TITLE

One noteworthy aspect of the state championships is the reaction from both teams after the conclusion of the games. Being named the second-best team out of 400 to start the year is an impressive accomplishment, but falling short of your ultimate goal can be a harsh reality.

No one knows that feeling better than Duncanville Head Football Coach Reginald Samples, whose Panthers had faced defeat three times in the last four years at the hands of Galena Park North Shore, prior to their 28-21 win this year. The victory not only cemented a legacy for Samples but also shows the difficulty of finding success in Texas high school football; a team can be so



China Spring players hoist the State Champion trophy high, following their 24-21 comeback victory over Boerne.

close, yet so far from that pinnacle title.

There is honor in making it to the state championship level. While some believe semifinal teams seldom are remembered, state runners-up often get recognition.

Lampasas' best season came to an end in heartbreaking fashion in 2019 when the Badgers lost to eventual-champion Carthage in the semifinals. Badger football players, including quarterback Ace Whitehead, attended that year's Conference 4A Division I final, which saw the same Bulldog team they had lost to by seven points beat Waco La Vega by 22 points. The question of what could have been for Lampasas that year is one many Badger fans are likely never to forget.

Through the years I've spent at these championship games, I have explored the stadium, and watched gut-wrenching losses as well as comebacks of epic proportions – including China Spring's 21-point comeback this year against Boerne to capture the 4A Division I crown. I also have witnessed the raw emotion associated with every play, good and bad.

At this point, if you're still asking why anyone should care about these games between teams you may never have heard of or seen in person, I will leave you with the best example I have. It occurred after the 6A Division I state championship game this year.

As mentioned previously, Reginald Samples has been through a championship purgatory of sorts with his Duncanville team. They have made multiple trips to the promised land, only to be denied again and again.

Samples and his team lost on the infamous Hail Mary play in 2018, lost their quarterback in the 2019 semifinal, and came up just short of the championships a year ago. Despite these setbacks, Samples and his team fought through to face the music one more time, against the same North Shore that had bested them in three straight meetings.

Duncanville took the lead with four minutes left in the third quarter, and the final period felt like time was moving in slow motion. What could go wrong? Would North Shore find a way to sneak through again? No. Duncanville held off a late surge, stuffing the Mustangs on fourth down, and finally added that elusive title to Samples' already legendary resume.

Through the chaos after the game, I found the coach sitting on the team bench,



Duncanville head coach Reginald Samples, right, is embraced by his son, Rashaad, after winning a state title.



Westbrook sophomore Grayson Jeffrey looks for running room during the Dec. 14 championship game.

having been draped with a gold medal, alone and in deep thought. I can only imagine the thoughts of joy and relief.

I approached him with tears in my eyes, proud and grateful that a football giant, with 32 seasons of coaching and 326 wins, had finally broken through.

"Coach Samples, my name is Mason Hines, and I was here in 2018 when you lost on the Hail Mary. I want you to know I am proud of you and this team. It's well deserved," I told him.

Then, as most stories with legendary coaches go, he looked at me, laughed

and said simply, "I'm just glad you got to be here for this one, son."

Trust me, Coach, I wouldn't have missed this one for the world.

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