

A WHOLE NEW

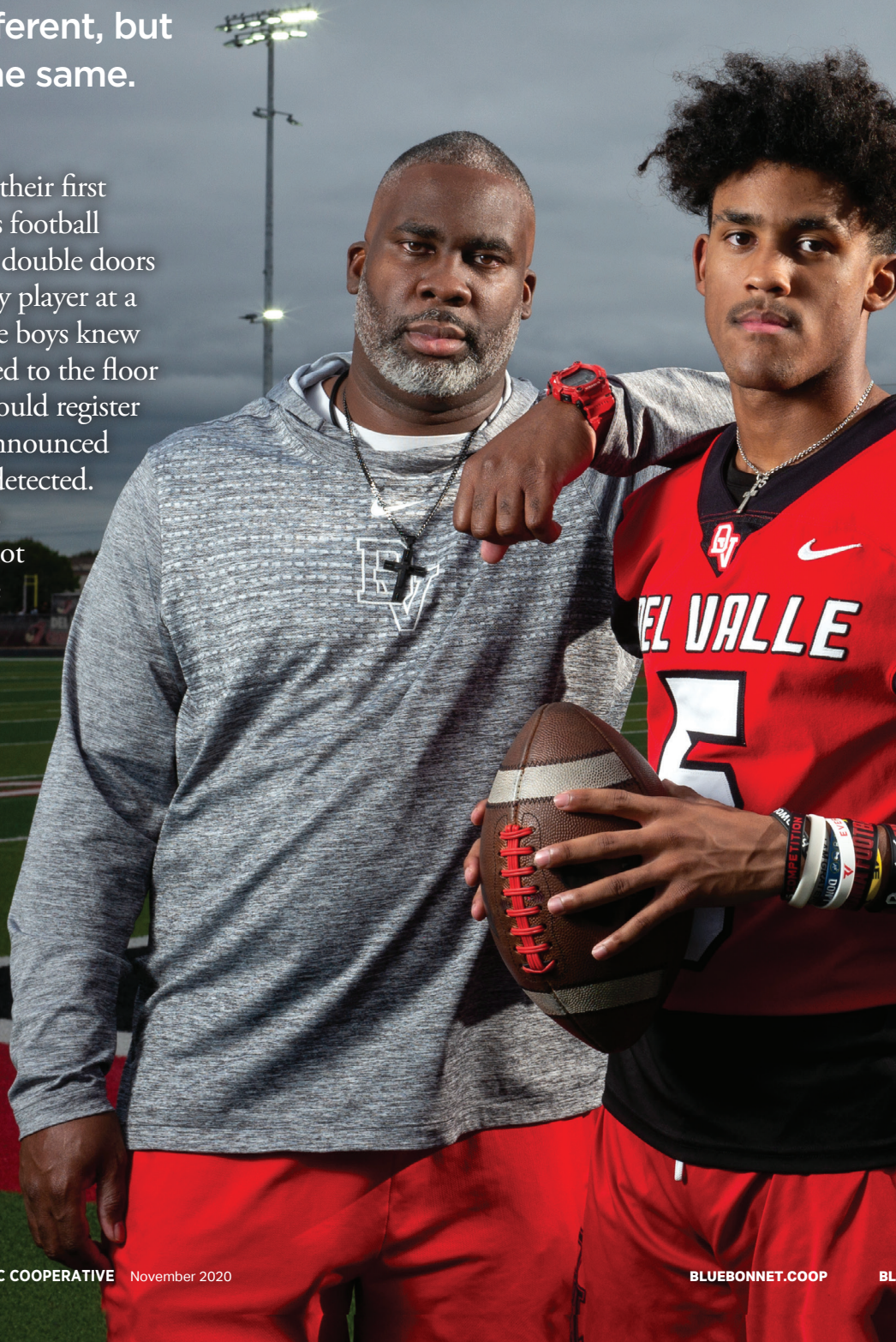
COVID-19 changed the rules for high school football across Texas. At Del Valle High School, everything looks different, but the game remains the same.

By Kevin Robbins

ON THE TUESDAY before their first game, Del Valle High School's football team stepped through a set of double doors for indoor practice, one groggy player at a time. It was not yet 6 a.m. The boys knew the protocol: step to an X taped to the floor so a scanner bolted to a wall could register their temperatures. A coach announced each reading. No fevers were detected.

Only then could the athletes proceed to their lockers, but not too many at once, because the district in southeastern Travis County allows only limited capacity in any small space, including the weight and training rooms inside a facility next to the stadium. The mere act of preparing for practice is cumbersome and complicated. Helmets off? Masks on. Hand sanitizer? Use it. Head coach Charles Burton persistently reminded players to keep a 6-foot distance from anyone else. Now it was habit, like snapping a chinstrap.

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BALL GAME



Ralph Barrera photo

Members of the Caldwell High cheer squad await the start of the school's football game against the Giddings Buffaloes on Sept. 18. More about the two teams, page 22.

THE GAME GOES ON despite half-full stadiums, fewer games and myriad new rules

Across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative region, high schools of all sizes are keeping the football season going. **Page 20B**

How the season is shaping up for larger schools in the Bluebonnet region. **Page 20D**

Lockhart's special moment goes viral. **Page 21**

UIL's new COVID-19 protocols. **Page 22**

Find more photos with these stories and a list of all Bluebonnet-area high school football teams at **bluebonnet.coop**, or on Bluebonnet's Facebook page

Del Valle head coach Charles Burton and his son, Caleb Burton, a junior wide receiver, at the Cardinal's Veterans Stadium in southeast Travis County. Everyone associated with football — coaches, players, cheer and drill teams, band, faculty and fans — are adjusting to restrictions imposed because of COVID-19.

Rodolfo Gonzalez photo

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“In football speak that’s two yards,” Burton says.

His players understand football speak. More than that, they understand the gift they have been given: a season many had accepted over the summer that they might not get. The coronavirus pandemic threatened to put a stop to many traditions. None mattered more to the Cardinals than the prospect of losing football. When the University Interscholastic League finally announced in July that big Division 6A schools like Del Valle could play 2020 football (but not until the first week of September) the Cardinals, and especially the senior Cardinals, cheered as if they’d been drafted by the Dallas Cowboys.

At that Tuesday practice in the cavernous indoor practice facility, Burton and his 11 assistant coaches covered their faces with gaiters and got to work. They watched Tavierre Dunlap, the graceful senior running back, slice through the defense, hurdling tackles. Even though the 6-foot, 210-pound Dunlap had already committed to the University of Michigan, he decided to stay and play with the Cardinals this year. Perhaps he could help them make a run for the playoffs. Then circumstances changed.

“I’m just glad I’m still playing, because there are a lot of people who aren’t playing,” Dunlap said, noting the number of U.S. athletes who lost their seasons, even their sports, as programs around the country were eliminated. “I’m just blessed that I get to play, honestly.”

The air conditioning hummed at full throttle. Rap beats poured from loudspeakers. In a typical season, a team like the Del Valle Cardinals would’ve endured hot, late-summer practices, lifted together in the 10,000-square-foot weight room and spent many hours studying their responsibilities with position coaches. But here they were, on Sept. 22, together for only the third week, and grateful.

They were still breaking in their new cleats.

Practice ended at 8 sharp. Burton called his boys to midfield and said: “Today was a winning practice.” He said he was proud of their improving grades. He instructed them to tell their sixth-period teachers they would miss class Friday. Their new game-day ritual would start at 2 that afternoon, when they would

Rodolfo Gonzalez photos



take three buses (not two) and sit one to a row (and no more) for the 30-mile trip to Round Rock to play the McNeil High School Mavericks.

Caleb Burton, a junior, listened on one knee, breathing hard through his mask. The stakes were more severe for the lithe wide receiver, son of the head coach.

Caleb Burton is one of the highest-ranked players in the nation and the top-ranked wide receiver in Texas, according to most recruiting services. He had 39 scholarship offers already, including from elite programs such as Alabama, Clemson, Georgia, LSU, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Notre Dame and Texas.

He admitted he’d been worried. He and his father wondered a lot about the future when they, like much of the coun-

try, had been asked to stay home in the early months of the pandemic last spring. Charles Burton tried to keep his 16-year-old son from dwelling too much and losing hope. The coach, who has led the football team at Del Valle for eight years, appreciated what was at risk. The elder Burton, who grew up in Houston, played college football at Syracuse. He wanted Caleb to have that same experience, the kind that can change a life.

“We’ve just stayed positive with them,” Charles Burton said. He was talking about his son. But he also was talking about his other sons: the 45 players on the varsity roster.

When he learned the UIL had approved the season, Charles Burton and the Del Valle administration began work





At left, the Del Valle drill team, down from 30 girls to 20, performs during the home opener against Liberty Hill on Oct. 2. Above, cheer captain Jayda Price leads the team in the school fight song cheer after a score. Below left, Del Valle's senior running back Tavierre Dunlap stands for the national anthem before the coin toss. Liberty Hill won, 44-27.

on a district-wide mitigation plan to manage everything from football to cheerleading to marching band while the virus remained a threat. His son simply thanked the heavens for the opportunity to catch footballs.

"I was super excited and blessed," Caleb Burton said.

So were many of his classmates. The UIL decision meant other fall sports at Del Valle also would proceed – the 49 volleyball players and four coaches, the 15 tennis players and two coaches, the 15 golfers and two coaches, the 66 cross-country runners and two coaches. Members of the marching band would march. Cheerleading teams would cheer.

Morganne Davies, fine arts coordinator for the district, built with her staff a new version of home game halftime and in-game entertainment. Band and drill team rehearsals began on Sept. 8. The band was smaller, with 80 musicians instead of the typical 120. The drill team, the Del Valle Belles, was down from 30 girls to 20. Band director Tom Guyton and head dance coach Catherine Zink collaborated with Davies to redesign choreographies to reduce close proximity. They replaced the flag corps with a junior-varsity drill team called the Cardettes. No one wanted anyone touching flags this fall.

"We're focusing on what we can do instead of what we can't," Davies said emphatically. Her goal is to make 2020 a year they won't forget, for all the right reasons and in all the right ways. "At the

end of the day, those are the memories they're going to take with them."

On the Thursday before the McNeil game, head cheer team coach Janet Ndomahina gathered her 16 cheerleaders for the annual "captain reveal." The cheerleaders already knew how their year would change: eight girls on the sideline at any one time, eight in the bleachers, switching out every quarter of the game. There would be no pep rallies. There would be no gift exchanges with cheerleaders from the opponents' schools.

But there would be a new captain.

Ndomahina had worked hard (and quite secretly) to make this particular reveal meaningful. She asked parents of cheerleaders to make video recordings, congratulating the new captain on her appointment. One of the mothers had made special T-shirts for the girls. The theme was Care Bears. Jayda Price, a senior, was wearing a Care Bears shirt at the reveal when she watched the video her mother — her mother! — made. It was for her. Price was the senior captain. "I'm so proud of the things that you've accomplished," Price heard her mother say.

"It was very, very heartwarming," Price said. "It made me cry."

It wasn't just the fact that she was captain. It was the weight of everything in the fall semester of her senior year. She once had dreams that no longer existed. She had goals that had to change. But, with the help of coaches and her cheer-

leading teammates, she also embraced new possibilities.

"We're going to make the best of it," Price said.

"We had so many plans for this year," said Ndomahina, her coach. "We wanted to go to camp in Dallas. We wanted to have auditions for a competition team."

They did not want a pandemic. They did not want a football season in which only eight cheerleaders could clap pom-poms on the sidelines at one time.

"Right now football season is the only thing we're looking forward to," Price said. Of her coach, she added: "When things get hard, she does not give up."

"I couldn't do it without having such great girls," Ndomahina said.

A day after the reveal, three buses idled outside Del Valle High School at 2 p.m. sharp. Players and coaches boarded, one to a row, masked, no exceptions.

When they arrived for the game, they were buoyed by the presence of spectators in the seats. Kelly Reeves Athletic Complex wasn't full. But it wasn't empty. It felt right.

The Cardinals scored early. Dunlap, the senior running back bound for Michigan, had an extraordinary game. He ran for 215 yards and scored two touchdowns. He caught three passes. Del Valle won, 28-13.

As any high school football player or coach in Texas will tell you, it's one week at a time.

After week one, the Cardinals were undefeated, and looking forward to their first home game the following Friday, when they could hear their band, watch their dancers and listen to their cheerleaders, eight at a time, with their parents up there in the bleachers, spread out. Whistles will blow. Lights will glow on the horizon there and all over Texas. One team will win and one will lose. But they'll be playing. They'll be thankful for playing.

The students at Del Valle didn't just get a football season. They got a year unlike any other year, a year they'll remember forever. ■

Editor's note: During the Del Valle Cardinals' first game of the season against McNeil High School on Sept. 25, star wide receiver Caleb Burton suffered a knee injury that ended his junior season. The Cardinals won the game, 28-13.

THE SEASON THAT ALM

Despite the pandemic, new UIL guidelines are in place and high school football is back in the Bluebonnet region.

By Suzanne Halliburton

IT WAS EARLY October in Central Texas, and finally, high school football was back — from Brenham to Bastrop, Lockhart to Manor, Dime Box to Lexington.

Stadium seats could only be half full. Fewer games were scheduled. Some playoffs, the goal of every team in pre-season, were bumped to January.

The new reality under the Friday night lights of 2020 across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area features players wearing school-branded neck gaiters or plastic shields inside their facemasks. There are fewer, if any, handshakes before or after games. Players bring their own water bottles to practice, and there are fewer big gatherings in the locker room.

But as long as players and coaches stay healthy and communities embrace the new pandemic reality, there are games and homecomings and still-loud crowds at high schools big and small across Central Texas.

This seemed unthinkable when high school sports shuttered in spring 2020 because of COVID-19.

“Football makes the world go round,” said Che Nwabuko, a standout tailback for the Manor High Mustangs. “I was a strong believer we could play. We kept working as if this football season was going to happen.”

The University Interscholastic League, which oversees athletics for Texas’ public schools, announced July 21 that high school football would happen, but with significant modifications. The an-



Stephen Spillman photo

For Manor’s Che Nwabuko, left, Carl Chester and Devin Lemear, COVID-19 masks are just another piece of protective gear worn prior to their scrimmage against McCallum High School at the Manor ISD Athletic Complex on Sept. 24.

nouncement came a day after California said it was pushing back the sport’s start until 2021. California, which has the second-largest high school football system in the country after Texas, was among 17 states that opted for the next-season delay.

The UIL said smaller schools, divisions 1A to 4A, would follow the same pre-season schedule as normal. Players reported the first week of August for training camps. Games started at the end of that month. The fall schedule had to be tweaked, sometimes because of a county’s COVID-19 restrictions or if an opposing team was in a larger division.

Bigger schools, divisions 5A and 6A, couldn’t kick off preseason practices until Sept. 7. The games for most of those high schools started at the end of September. Manor High, which made it to the final eight in the 2019 Class 5A Division I playoffs in 2019, had to wait until early October for its first game of 2020.

The UIL gave larger schools more time to deal with COVID-19 restrictions because most are in areas with higher-density populations where the

virus may be more likely to spread. Even before the UIL made its plans for the fall season known, Bastrop High School coach Todd Patmon had to halt his team’s summer workout program for two weeks after three athletes tested positive for COVID-19. He turned to Dr. Desmar Walkes, Bastrop County’s health authority for advice.

Texas’ high school football season wasn’t as chaotic as the start of college football across the country. Some major conferences decided not to play, then changed their minds. Players with COVID-19 or who had come into contact with someone with the virus had to quarantine. This temporarily wrecked rosters or impacted schedules at schools including Baylor, Houston, Texas Christian and Southern Methodist.

The high school season kicked off with a few hiccups, too.

After the first week of the smaller schools’ games, UIL officials received reports of teams and fans ignoring COVID-19 mitigation rules. The UIL reiterated the restrictions, including wearing masks and social distancing, and threatened penalties.

MOST WASN'T

Ralph Barrera photo



Rodolfo Gonzalez photo



Social distancing signs are common at fields and stadiums across the region now. The coin toss is different, too. At left, before the start of their Sept. 18 game, Giddings head coach Wade Griffin, left, and Caldwell head coach Matt Langley meet referee Alan Peacock in the end zone to call the flip.

Rodolfo Gonzalez photo



Dime Box wide receiver Jer'Perion Gilbert, a senior, shares a moment on the sideline with his dad, Kendrick Gilbert, during the game against Prairie Lea on Sept. 11.

"Any allegations of not following COVID-19 Risk Mitigation guidelines will be handled in the same manner as other UIL violations," the league announced on Sept. 2. Those penalties could range from a public reprimand of a school to shutting down a team.

The larger threat that can change everything very quickly is COVID-19 itself.

If a member of a team tests positive for the virus or too many players are directly exposed to someone with COVID-19, the program can be temporarily shut down. A player with a positive test has to be cleared by a doctor to return to the team. If a player lives in the same home with someone who has COVID-19, that player must quarantine for 10 days.

Coaches know the risks.

"We've got to understand that things are changing weekly, by the month," Lockhart coach Todd Moebes said.

Luling was forced to cancel its season opener after one of its players tested positive for COVID-19. Eleven players and two coaches were in close contact with the player, so they needed to quarantine. The one positive made more than half of Luling's 23-player roster unavailable.

In September, the powerhouse Lexington High Eagles team, which was fourth in Texas' 3A ranks early in the season, had its game against Cameron's C.H. Yoe High School canceled five days before kickoff. A Cameron player had tested positive for the virus, and the school had to shut down varsity football for a week.

It was one fewer game for Lexington's Jarred Kerr, a junior who plays multiple positions and is a top recruiting prospect in the area. By mid-September, he announced via Twitter that he'd picked

up his 17th major scholarship offer.

Jackie Edwards Jr., a three-sport star at Lockhart High, said it's easy to keep the Lions team from being tempted to stray away from social distancing and mask rules.

Edwards is the quarterback, so he's considered a team leader. He tells his teammates to appreciate what could be taken away through no fault of their own.

"I try to tell my teammates every time we're on field," Edwards said, "you never know when it could be our last time."

In tiny Dime Box, in the center of farm country not far from Texas 21 in Lee County, the team is focused on a football first despite the pandemic.

Their Longhorns are making a UIL football debut, becoming one of 218 schools in Texas playing 6-man football in division 1A, for schools with fewer than 105 students.

Dime Box fielded its first football team in 2019, rolling to a 4-1 season playing an independent schedule. The team plays home games on a reconfigured baseball field.

The team played one game in September, defeating the Prairie Lea Indians. If COVID-19 doesn't dash the Dime Box Longhorns' plans, they will play six games in the regular 2020 season.

Maybe a small team of UIL rookies, despite the distractions, can make its field of playoff dreams come true. ■

SNAPSHOTS

Some area high schools' 2020 football hopes

By Suzanne Halliburton

High schools in the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative region range from the smallest Division 1A to two big Division 6A schools, each with more than 2,200 students. Here's a quick season roundup for the area's Division 3A-6A schools.

San Marcos: DIVISION 6A (2,200 students and higher) — One of the two largest high schools in the Bluebonnet area with 2,309 students, San Marcos has high hopes for a huge hire made in May. John Walsh is the new coach of the Division 6A Rattlers, and he brings with him one of the highest profiles in Texas high school football, having led Denton's Guyer High School to two state titles in four championship game appearances. He'll be challenged at San Marcos to turn a 1-9 team into a winner.

Del Valle: (6A) — The largest Division 6A high school in the Bluebonnet region, Del Valle has 3,337 students. **See story, Page 18.**

Cedar Creek: DIVISION 5A (1,230 to 2,219 students) — The Eagles were 5-5 in 2019, the first time in the school's short history it had a non-losing year. But there's reason to believe the 2020 team could do better than break even, returning its quarterback and top running back along with an experienced offensive line.

Elgin: (5A) — The Wildcats want to end a five-year playoff drought. Elgin returns 12 starters from last year's 3-7 team, including quarterback/running back Peter McFarlin and linebacker Willie Simmons III, a senior who is committed to play at North Texas. Coach Jens Anderson hopes for a winning season, as the Wildcats have celebrated only 10 victories in the last three years.

Bellville: DIVISION 4A (515 to 1,229 students) — The Brahmas sported a 9-4



Sarah Beal photo

Bastrop High School's Coach Todd Patmon, left, and five of his players, from left to right, linebacker Joseph Gonzalez, quarterback Romeo Flores Giles, lineman Cayden Scott, center Chance Wilson and defensive back/receiver Conrad Pace.

Bastrop: (5A) — The Bears returned 10 starters from the 2019 squad that rallied for three straight victories to finish 6-4 last year. Coach Todd Patmon selected Seth Mouser as his starting quarterback at the end of training camp, hoping the sophomore can help push Bastrop back into the playoffs.



The Brenham Banner-Press

season in 2019 to reach the regional semifinals. This year, 15 starters have returned and are poised to contend with the Sealy Tigers for the district title. Tailback Richard Reese broke a school record with 323 rushing yards in early September against the Cameron High School Yoemen, earning him state player of the week honors.

La Grange: (4A) — Leopards quarterback Caden Cooper, a senior, started the season with early success, throwing for a career high 339 yards against the La Vernia High Bears in September. A solid running attack led by senior D.J. Taylor also should help the Leopards improve last year's 8-4 season.

Smithville: (4A) — Smithville's Tigers finished 7-5 in 2019, reaching the area finals. This year, 13 starters returned. If coach Cyril Adkins needs to plug in players used to winning, he can tap someone from last year's junior varsity team, which was 10-0. Senior Christian Adkins returned as the team's leading rusher.

Lexington: DIVISION 3A (230 to 514 students) — The Eagles feature 17 starters from a year ago when they made the regional semifinals. Lexington's top player is running back Jarred Kerr, a junior, who is attracting a ton of recruiting attention from major college programs. He had consecutive 200-yard-plus games in September.

More team reports on next page

Brenham: (5A) — The Cubs had a good transition in 2018 from former coach Glen West, who won 185 games in two decades at Brenham, to Eliot Allen. The Cubs were 10-3 in 2019 and made it to the regional semifinals for the second straight season. They were preseason picks to win district again in 2020.

Brenham High coach Eliot Allen gives the team a pep talk during a scrimmage against Cypress Park on Sept. 18 at Cub Stadium in Brenham.



Ralph Barrera photo

Lockhart quarterback Jackie Edwards, left, and outside linebacker Josh Ramos warm up during a recent practice. Edwards said he has been patient and safe during this unusual season.

Lockhart: (5A) — This is Todd Moebes' second season with the Lions as head coach. Lockhart made the playoffs in 2019 and finished 5-6 for the year. The Lions should be more comfortable in their coach's spread offense, but the team returned only eight starters.

A special night for Lockhart's Desmond Pulliam

Lockhart High's football team savored a play that went viral on social media this season. In the final moments of the Lions scrimmage against the Bastrop Bears, Sept. 17, defensive lineman Desmond Pulliam, a favorite of his Lions teammates, recovered a fumbled snap and returned it for a touchdown.

Coach Todd Moebes had been working with Pulliam, a senior with a developmental disability, for two weeks on the art of the defensive scoop and score. Courtesy of a willing Bastrop team, Pulliam got his chance for scrimmage stardom to the cheers of teammates and fans.

An Austin sportscaster tweeted the video clip, which had more than a million views. Even ESPN gave it a retweet bump.

"Hopefully it was six seconds that everybody in attendance was able to take a little bit of a deep breath and say, 'You know what? Everything is going to be all right,'" Moebes told reporters at the scrimmage.

"Desmond is certainly to thank for that."

At the end of September, the NFL's Washington Football Team sent along a video congratulations and a signed jersey to Pulliam. Washington kicker Dustin Hopkins, who lives in Austin in the off-season, saw Pulliam's touchdown. Hopkins' son has a developmental disability similar to Pulliam's.



See the viral video at <https://tinyurl.com/y5nm5k4p>

Team roundup continued from previous page



Stephen Spillman photo

Manor head coach James Keller watches as his players warm up before a scrimmage against McCallum on Sept. 24.

Manor: (5A) — It's James Keller's first season as head coach, but nothing much will change. He's been coaching at Manor for 16 years. The Mustangs, with 13 returning starters, reached the regional finals in division playoffs in 2019 despite team injuries. Hopes are higher this year. On a team known for speed, Che Nwabuko, whose dad played for Manor, could be the fastest player on offense.

Luling: (3A) — After canceling the 2020 season opener due to COVID-19, the team was also forced to cancel its first game in October against Austin's Travis High Rebels. Coach Stacey Martin said the decision was not forced by the virus, but too many injuries meant there weren't enough players to safely field a team.



Ralph Barrera photo

Giddings players Evan Young, left, and Jakota Moore wear masks and practice social distancing on the sidelines of their game against Caldwell on Sept. 18. Giddings defeated Caldwell 50-14.

Giddings: (4A) — The Buffaloes, a regional semifinalist in 2019, returned a dozen starters from a playoff team that was 7-6. Giddings has a strong offensive line and a dynamic player in senior Gage Jaehne, who runs the ball, catches passes and is also the ace return man. He opened this season by returning the first kickoff 88 yards for a touchdown.

Caldwell: (3A) — The Hornets are playing on new stadium turf this fall. Matt Langley, in his second year as coach, hopes a talented sophomore class can help him improve on 2019's 3-7 record. Standout player senior Larry Davis, a receiver and defensive back, was named all district on both sides of the ball last year.

GAME GUIDELINES FROM THE UIL

The University Interscholastic League, which oversees athletics for all of Texas' public schools, issued guidelines that schools must adhere to if they play football games. The restrictions follow guidance in an executive order issued by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on July 2.

Everyone attending a game — school employees, parents, visitors and children 10 years and older — must wear a face covering to enter an area where a game is being played.

Attendance at a game cannot exceed 50 percent of capacity during the season. To help fans who cannot attend games because of these rules, the UIL allows schools to live stream the games. All game attendees must maintain standard 6-foot social distancing.

An exception will be made if the home team's county has had 20 or fewer new COVID-19 cases in the previous two weeks, according to the governor's mandate. ■



Rodolfo Gonzalez photo

A temperature check is a standard part of entering a stadium or field of play these days, including at 6-man football games like the one between Prairie Lea and Dime Box on Sept. 11. Dime Box won the season opener 45-0.

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Bluebonnet field operations employees get new uniforms



Sarah Beal photos

We're rolling out fresh uniforms for field workers. At left, line design technicians Billy Bolen, left, and Dylan Iselt have the choice of a polo or button-down shirt. These technicians help members who are requesting new service. Line workers, including Kendal Fiebrich, right, have switched from tan shirts to lighter weight gray shirts.



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