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## **West Texas Storm**

Long before Southlake Carroll, another dynasty blew through the state. Abilene won 49 consecutive games in the 1950s.

The football team was so popular that in a long line people would wait through the night to buy game tickets. Of course, this wasn't an ordinary high school football team. Many of the players had been together for years, running the same plays in the same system, season after season. And so regardless of the situation or the pressure, they operated with uncanny precision, just like those wrist watches that John Cameron Swayze extolled on television.

And they always won. Overwhelmingly and relentlessly, they won, and that more than anything distinguished this high school team from all others — its invincibility, its array of victories, and its convergence with perfection, 50 years ago, in Abilene.

Yes, 50 years before the Carroll Dragons of Southlake, the Abilene Fighting War Eagles won three consecutive state titles and 49 consecutive games, which stood as a national record back in 1957. In Texas, Abilene was the archetype of the high school juggernaut, the original team that pushed everybody's envy button.

From the fourth game of the 1954 season until a playoff game in 1957 that ended in a tie, Abilene quite simply beat everybody, outscoring its opponents 1,773-276. Typically, Abilene won with a comfort zone of about 30 points, even though the starters rarely played much in the second half.

## The storm gathers

Abilene High must have provided high school football with its perfect storm. In the 1950s, Abilene was booming. Within 75 miles of the city, hundreds of oil fields were discovered. During the decade, Abilene nearly doubled in size, with its population growing from 45,570 in 1950 to 90,638 in 1960. And if thousands of people came for opportunities and jobs, they must have brought with them a resolute faith in the power of hard work, they must have believed in work and determination as virtues, and they must have passed that belief on to their kids.

Into this confluence of auspicious circumstances came Chuck Moser, the final barometric component. With a starting salary of \$7,000, he became the Abilene football coach in 1953.

Explaining the Eagles' 49 consecutive victories, Stuart Peake said, "The main thing was the coaching." One of the fastest Eagles, Peake played guard and defensive end on all three of Moser's state championship teams and then went on to play for Darrell Royal at the University of Texas.

"We had the most incredible coaches at Abilene," said Peake, who's a physician in Dallas. "Not to say anything against Darrell Royal, but our blocking [at Abilene] surpassed anything we had in college.... Our scouting was so thorough we knew everything there was to know about our opponents, except maybe their girlfriends' names, and our plays were very sophisticated."

## Students of the game

Every year, Peake recalled, Moser told his players that even if they weren't the smartest kids at Abilene High they were going to be the best students. Nearly 30 years before "no-pass, no-play," Moser, who was an Army veteran, introduced "eligibility slips."

Each week during the season, for each player, teachers filled out an "eligibility slip," commenting on grades and attitude. If deficient in either area, former players explained, the student couldn't play in the upcoming game.

"If a teacher had a problem, all that teacher had to do was tell the coach," said Elmo Cure Jr., of Cure Financial in Plano, the starting center for Abilene in 1954-55, "and he'd straighten up the kid the very next day."

Modernity might label Moser a strict disciplinarian, but neither teachers nor parents objected to the coach's standards back in the 1950s, according to those who played for him. Moser's rules banned alcohol and tobacco; he kicked at least one player off the team for drinking beer. Moser imposed a 10 p.m. curfew (11:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays), wouldn't allow cussing, wouldn't tolerate arguing, demanded a respectful

“sir” and required freshly shined shoes for each game, according to Al Pickett’s Team of the Century: The Greatest High School Football Team in Texas.

And playing for Moser, recalled Ron Luckie of Fort Worth, a member of the 1957 team, meant “you had to follow the rules year-round.”

In Moser’s first season, despite having only two returning starters, Abilene finished with four consecutive victories to win seven of 10 games. The foundation down, the coach then built on it by encouraging healthy habits and off-season conditioning.

He even monitored his players during the summer. Jim Millerman, who had started for two years on both offense and defense, worked as a counselor that summer at a camp about two hours south of Abilene. One afternoon, he recalled, just as he lay down for a brief rest, Moser walked through the front door of the cabin.

Millerman, who went on to play for Baylor and then work as an insurance executive in Dallas, chuckled at the memory, imagining a Moser admonishment. Most of all, though, Millerman said he was left with the impression that Moser was always watching and guiding his players.

The next year, Abilene shut out Highland Park and Sweetwater before losing to Breckenridge, 35-13. And the Eagles, as it turned out, wouldn’t lose again for more than three years.

For disciplinary reasons — an impetuous road trip — two starters were dropped from the team. But the Eagles, in their perfect storm, were coming together. Millerman would become all-state, along with teammates Twyman Ash and John Thomas.

Abilene defeated Midland and the Bulldogs’ great running back, Wahoo McDaniel, 28-14, to win the title in the 4A district known as the “Little Southwest Conference.” The Eagles shut out El Paso Austin and Fort Worth Poly, winning the games by 107 total points, then traveled to Houston to win the state title, defeating Stephen F. Austin 14-7.

“I’ve been around a lot of coaches in my career,” said Wally Bullington about Moser, “and I’ve never known a better coach.” Bullington worked as an Abilene assistant and succeeded Moser as head coach. Bullington later coached at Abilene Christian University, where he won two NAIA national titles.

#### Other homework

Abilene, Bullington said, was many years ahead of what other high schools, and most colleges, were doing at the time. Assistants would put together detailed scouting reports on each opponent; players had to pass tests on the scouting report, and there was only one passing grade, perfection.

Players met in groups every day before school, Moser met with the quarterbacks every day at lunch. And for each opponent, the coach would design special plays that he called “junk.”

“He taught us how to recognize defenses in a second,” said David Bourland, who played defensive back and quarterback at Abilene and later played baseball at Texas Tech. Moser would use flash cards, Bourland said, to quiz the quarterbacks daily on defensive alignments.

“We had to know the name and size of every player on the other defense,” Bourland said, “and we had to know if a player was better going right or left. He [Moser] expected a lot.”

But he got a lot. Abilene blew through the state like a West Texas storm in 1955, winning its 13 games by a combined score of 501-90. Only one team, Breckenridge, got within two touchdowns of Abilene. And several players said that the championship game was the Eagles’ finest moment.

For the state title, Abilene played Tyler at Amon G. Carter Stadium. A chartered train brought Eagles fans to Fort Worth at a cost \$4 for a roundtrip, including a bus ride from the station to the stadium. On the second play of the game, a “junk” play called the “Tyler Special,” all-state back Glynn Gregory ran more than 40 yards, and that, as they say, set the tone. Abilene won easily, 33-13.

And it was more of the same the next year, 14 wins by a combined score of 496-64. Only Waco, with 14, scored more than seven points against Abilene.

A stunning ‘loss’

Mike Bryant of Fort Worth was an all-state tackle for Abilene in 1957. The Eagles, he said, were just faster than other teams. When they weren’t playing football, they worked on agility drills; in the summer, they worked outside to stay fit. Even the Eagles’ linemen were fast.

And so it was “devastating,” he said, when the streak ended in 1957, in a 20-20 tie with Highland Park in the state semifinals at the Cotton Bowl. The Star-Telegram of the next day, Dec. 15, called it a “stunning ‘victory’” for Highland Park.

In retrospect, not much went right that week for Abilene, Bryant said. One player even forgot his lucky shirt. At least one player and probably more couldn’t play because of their “eligibility slips.”

But, most of all, Bryant said, the streak ended because of the Highland Park fullback, Johnny Florer, who scored the Scotties’ first touchdown and was relentless all afternoon. Although the score was tied, Highland Park, which had more penetrations inside the 20, advanced to the state finals.

The Eagles were 78-7-2 during Moser's seven seasons as their coach. He became athletic director of Abilene public schools and then coached briefly as an assistant to Emory Bellard at Texas A&M. Moser died in 1995.

He often told his players, Peake recalled, that if they worked diligently and determinedly they would surely succeed, and then they would win for themselves something they could remember for many years. And 50 years later, his players still remember.

## **ABILENE'S STREAK**

### **Loss before streak:**

**Breckenridge 35-13 in nondistrict on Oct. 1, 1954**

**1954**

### **Opponent, Result**

**Borger, 34-7**

**Odessa, 21-7**

**Pampa, 41-7**

**Amarillo, 47-0**

**Lubbock, 35-7**

**Midland, 28-14**

**San Angelo, 27-0**

**El Paso Austin, 61-0**

**FW Polytechnic, 46-0**

**Houston Austin, 14-7**

**1955**

**Opponent, Result**

**Highland Park, 34-0**

**Sweetwater, 45-20**

**Breckenridge, 13-0**

**Borger, 35-6**

**Odessa, 47-0**

**Pampa, 40-12**

**Amarillo, 35-13**

**Lubbock, 62-7**

**Midland, 28-7**

**San Angelo, 35-6**

**El Paso, 61-0**

**Dallas Sunset, 33-6**

**Tyler, 33-13**

**1956**

**Opponent, Result**

**San Antonio Edison, 41-6**

**Sweetwater, 39-7**

**Lubbock Monterey, 41-0**

**Breckenridge, 41-0**

**Lubbock, 49-7**

**Waco, 45-14**

**Big Spring, 42-6**

**Odessa, 47-6**

**Midland, 41-6**

**San Angelo, 20-0**

**El Paso Ysleta, 42-6**

**FW Paschal, 14-0**

**Wichita Falls, 20-6**

**Corpus Christi Ray, 14-0**

**1957**

**Opponent, Result**

**San Antonio Jefferson, 26-13**

**Sweetwater, 34-13**

**Lubbock Monterey, 58-0**

**Breckenridge, 41-20**

**Lubbock, 39-0**

**Waco, 27-7**

**Big Spring, 32-0**

**Odessa, 19-0**

**Midland, 41-0**

**San Angelo, 12-6**

**El Paso Austin, 60-0**

**Amarillo, 33-14**