

The End of an Era Football coach departs Allen

The end.

It means that the story is over, and there are no more pages left to read. Sometimes it's sad, and sometimes it wraps the story up. Sometimes it does neither. Sometimes it leaves the door open for something more. A sequel.

On the back of the 38-foot wide high-definition video board at the \$60 million Eagle Stadium reads "play like a champion." Sitting just above it, still on the video board, you can make out four footballs, each signifying a state title.

"It's a testament to the city and the program that Coach (Tom) Westerberg runs," alumni Kyler Murray said after win number 50.

Maybe it's holding an idea. An idea that Allen was and is the epitome of a high school football team in America.

"As the streak got bigger, that became an ideology of the city," senior wide receiver Kevin Ptak said. "Last year, and the year before that whenever it was only 20 or 30 games, no one really talked about that as much."

Proof that as of that moment, there was no one better than Allen.

But then the fall.

"A loss to to them is almost traumatic," offensive line coach Mike Carter said of how the players reacted. "You looked at their faces after the game, and they were still trying to absorb what had happened."

When that loss came from Austin Westlake in the State Semi-Finals, Westerberg knew he had helped create something special, that would last for decades.

"The bar is pretty high," he said. "There's not a whole lot of places to go when you win as many state championships in a row as we did."

So when he told Athletic Director Steve Williams over Christmas break that he was going to interview for a head coaching/athletic director position at a small town called Mont Belvieu, at their one and only high school, Barbers Hill, (who are coincidentally eagles as well), Williams was less than surprised.

"I think he had come to the point of wondering what more could he accomplish that he hadn't already accomplished," Williams said. "He was just ready for a new challenge in his life." Barbers Hill is a small high school in an even smaller town. As of 2013, the latest U.S. Census available, the population in Mont Belvieu was 4,509. The student body at Allen High School is 4,763. The 5A high school hasn't been to the playoffs the past two years, and when they went in 2012, they lost in the second round. It was perfect for Tom Westerberg, a small-town boy at heart. He saw something in their program — the same thing he saw in a small town back in 2001 when he first took over as head coach at Allen High School.

"It reminds me of Allen back when they were growing through the ranks and classifications," he said. "It is a very similar type of program and they're they're just now getting used to being in that [5A] classification."

Some people, even those that had known him since the beginning, couldn't believe the news.

"I never really expected Tom [Westerberg] to leave," Eagle Design owner and long-time supporter of the football program Chris Tripucka said. "I think some of the pressures of what's become the coach of our program aren't always fun, but I'm still very sad to see him go."

So why do you leave such a prestigious program? Why do you leave when it seemingly needs you the most?

Maybe because Tom Westerberg was never a big town guy. No one, let alone him, could have ever possibly envisioned a sponsorship with Nike and a \$60 million stadium. No one could have foreseen the No. 1 dual-threat quarterback in the nation leading the team to three state titles. Since the stadium was built, and since the beginning of "the streak," Coach Westerberg was more than just a coach. He was a CEO of a booming company.

"You have to understand and be a very organized person and be able to deal with the number of kids we have here competing," Williams said. "Everyone on the outside looking in thinks that anyone can win here at Allen, and I don't think that's a true statement. I think you have to understand the climate."

Not everyone can handle the stress that comes with this job, of playing in front of 18,000 citizens wanting to see if their tax dollars at work.

"It was tough," Westerberg said of managing the hype surrounding the streak. "Allen is a place that is out there on the map now. When you talk about Allen High School, they're at the top of everything."

The city has exploded since Westerberg joined the program. When he first arrived there were 188 players in the high school football program according to Coach Mike Carter, who came with Westerberg and Joe Martin from Garland High School. Now there are around 400.

With those kind of numbers there are always going to be questions and most of them not always the good kind. Questions of recruiting. Questions about the streak, and a four-star quarterback from Minnesota who was playing second fiddle.

"As a [head coach], when you have to deal with a lot of that stuff and it eventually turns into it being kind of like 'we just want to go coach football,'" offensive coordinator, Tom's son, Kyle Westerberg said. "Everything was just hyped around the win streak and hyped around the state championships that he had to answer to it, and with the expectations being as high as they are, that eventually wears on you and takes a toll on you."

No one ever knew, or will ever know to what extent that toll was on being the head coach at Allen High School during this run.

"People are going to expect you to win a state championship," Carter said. "Anything less than that and there are going to be critics. As a coach that's a hard deal."

The community expected so much, because so much had been achieved.

"The expectation is success, always success," Williams said. "What it all boils down to in the public's eye is winning."

There is a huge difference in wanting your team to win and expecting your team to never lose. That was the situation Allen and Westerberg were in. He never let it show. He never gave a hint that he was nervous for a playoff game against DeSoto or Arlington Martin. He never mentioned the streak other than to say the one thing that he became synonymous for saying: "We're just taking it one game at a time."

Tom Westerberg was the best because he didn't think he was just that. Coaches praise his work ethic and his ability to manage both players and staff alike.

"He studies so much tape, watches so much video, his preparation for a week's game is just tremendous," Kyle Westerberg said. "He does a good job of making sure coaches never get comfortable, never get satisfied, because when you get comfortable and satisfied that's when you get beat."

Both Westerbergs will be involved in the move to Barber's Hill, and according to the superintendent of the district, they intend to make it worth their while.

"We have full intentions of making Coach Westerberg one of the highest paid coaches in high school football," Dr. Greg Poole said.

For Westerberg this wasn't just about the money, although he is projected to make \$130,000 or above. It was about another opportunity. Renewal.

"It was just the right time in my career to start over and to build another program," Westerberg said.

So with four state titles in hand, he will depart from the only place he has ever head coached at.

"The big memory I have is when Dr. Jenny Preston finally pulled me in and offered me the [head coaching] job," Westerberg said of his most prominent recollection. "She trusted this guy that hadn't had any head coaching experience, and she believed in this vision I had, and I'm appreciative of her for giving me that opportunity.

He had to alter the way he did things from the beginning of his time here to the end of it. The city and the football program changed, so he did too.

"Tom had to do a lot of adjusting," Tripucka said. "He's not a spotlight sort of guy... I saw a lot of good changes in him over the years, so he did a really good job of adjusting to all the outside distractions."

The general community will never know of some of the things Westerberg did behind the scenes, such as making sure a player got the number of his grandfather, who had passed away a few years earlier.

He wanted to win, but for Westerberg it was always something more than that.

"What the ultimate goal really is, is to produce better citizens, college students and fathers," Westerberg said. "It's just a pretty big family."

His family has grown up. The city has grown up, and he has done everything in his power to make sure it will still thrive without him.

"Once you win 57 straight games in Texas 6A/5A and played the teams we've played there's no doubt about it that you've created a dynasty," Tripucka said.

The city of Allen will remember these years as more than just a good time for the football team.

"Looking back 20 years from now I think we'll say 'oh yeah that's the Westerberg era,'" Ptak said.

The era is over here in Allen, but Barbers Hill will be getting one of the best coaches in high school football history, who went 77-3 in district play at his first head coaching job.

"I'm excited about getting down there and getting the program started and going," Westerberg said.