

# It's time to step it up

*LBJ, McCallum decide to keep rivalry alive for good reason*

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It's Sept. 29, the morning of the of the LBJ game. There's a certain buzz in the air on the McCallum campus. The football team has a perfect record through four nondistrict games. Slashing through Anderson, Lehman Seguin and Akins, the Knights arrive at the LBJ game a perfect 4-0. There is talk in the hallways all day about the strengths that LBJ brings to the table, but then someone counters that we have Alexander Julian, our unstoppable running back, or Max Perez, our golden-armed quarterback, who has been completing pass after pass so far this season to receivers such as Mason Bryant, Deron Gage or Davis Roe. You read tweets throughout the day coming from LASA students insulting Mac students and players. A LASA student even drops a diss-track laying out all these insults in one place. McCallum drops one right back, spitting lyrics about the rumored separation between LASA and LBJ.

I listen to this track as my best friend and I head to our usual game-day lunch spot, Thundercloud. We go back to school and head to the pep rally. The gym is loud and filled with screaming students, band songs playing overhead, cheerleaders and Blue Brigade members dancing and a general buzz of excitement. Coach Taylor comes over the microphone and tells us how hard they're going to work to beat LBJ tonight. We all believe him.

7:30 finally arrives, and Nelson Field is packed with students, from both LBJ/LASA and McCallum. I stand on the sidelines ready to capture all of the big plays on video and to soak it all in. My last LBJ game. The game begins, and both sides are playing well. Before halftime, Gage pads the McCallum lead with a touchdown making the score 21-13. By the end of the game, however, things get awfully tight. In the final seconds of the game, Mac leads by five points, but LBJ is at the Mac 10-yard line threatening to score what would be the winning touchdown. But the McCallum defense repels the Jags as Tyrell Washington makes a game-saving tackle on the 3-yard line on fourth down and goal. The game is over, and McCallum wins 38-33. Coach Taylor and the team's 22 seniors said at the year-end banquet on Jan. 28 that the team's victory over LBJ was the moment when the team truly started believing that they were destined to have a special season.

So, the LBJ game is much more than a rivalry.



Many middle schools send their students to either McCallum or to LASA/LBJ, so when these games happen, you're seeing friends you haven't seen in months along with some great Texas football. But last week, UIL district realignment, which happens every two years, threatened to end the rivalry because LBJ/LASA will be classified as a 25-5A Division 1 school while McCallum and most of the other AISD high schools are smaller and will be classified as 5A Division 2.

But the school district decided not to keep the rivalry alive. Instead of the McCallum-LBJ game dissolving because of LBJ moving to DI, McCallum and the other District 25-5A schools (with the exception of Austin High which is moving up to 6A) opted to move up with it, changing potential match-up games completely. Instead of us working against LBJ on the defensive line, we will be working with them to keep the rivalry alive for at least two more years.

McCallum's move to DI is clearly the correct next step. The rivalry is not just good for the players, but it is good for the community. If only LBJ were to move to DI, leaving McCallum behind, that would throw them into unknown territory, having to compete against suburban schools such as Cedar Creek and Pflugerville. When it comes to football, those schools are established powerhouses: they have team rosters

with more than 90 players while McCallum's roster this season hovered around 39 varsity players. With realignment this year, the Austin High rivalry that was first re-introduced last year will come to an end as Austin High moves back to 6A, playing teams such as Westlake and Bowie.

To me, that forced move is ridiculous. I understand that realignment is judged on student population, not talent, but our "inner city" school beat Austin High handily two years in a row. Then we went on to beat out four playoff opponents even when it seemed that their entire towns had come out to support their teams. The Knights even beat legendary power Calallen, even though every single prediction bracket for 5A DII had us losing and Calallen going on to win the state championship. If we are judging on pure talent, the only school that should be moving up to 6A is McCallum, but as an "inner city" school on Sunshine Drive, we will be holding down the 5A DI fort so we can keep most of our AISD neighbors as district foes.

Moving with LBJ to DI not only keeps the rivalry alive, but it also challenges McCallum when playoffs come around. It can be argued that the reason why we breezed through the first three rounds of playoffs this past season is because we were in the DII bracket, giving us opponents who were not as competitive as the DI

McCallum squared off against LBJ on Sept. 29 and came away with the 38-33 win. In 2018, McCallum will still have its district rivalry with LBJ but will be also face Dripping Springs and Seguin in district play. Photo by Ian Clennan.

Head coach Charles Taylor speaks to his team after it defeated LBJ. Taylor and several players said last week at the year-end banquet that defeating LBJ showed them that they were destined to have a special season, one that saw the Knights finish 14-1 after advancing to the 5A Division 2 semifinals Photo by Ian Clennan.

bracket that LBJ faced. In order for our school's football program to improve, we must challenge ourselves. This can only be done by playing more difficult schools that make us hone in on our skills and show our weaknesses and what needs to be improved upon. This can be compared to people who do the same workout over and over again: they will never improve or strengthen other muscles. You need to switch it up in order to improve, just like the football program needs to play against harder opponents in order to build a stronger, more competitive program.

Some Knights fans understandably believe this is the wrong move for the school. McCallum staying in DII does guarantee a much easier playoff schedule. Going to DI for the 2018-19 season is risky, because of the 2017-18 team taking with it 22 seniors, leaving many underclassmen to pick up the slack. A less experienced team will have to really step it up not only for playoffs but for district play as well, which we might find out in the fall, may be a big ask.

In the grand scheme of things, this move will benefit both sides more than will hurt them. Our team will have the chance to flex its muscles at the DI level, making us competitive with those large suburban high schools. It will show if we are really able to bark with the big dogs, and if moving to the more competitive division is something we would be able to handle. Even though the LBJ rivalry may end in the next five years because of the eminent LASA/LBJ split to different campuses that was decided in the billion dollar bond this fall, we can at least savor a few more LBJ vs. McCallum rivalry games before the two schools will be split into separate 4A schools—making the LBJ rivalry nothing more than history.