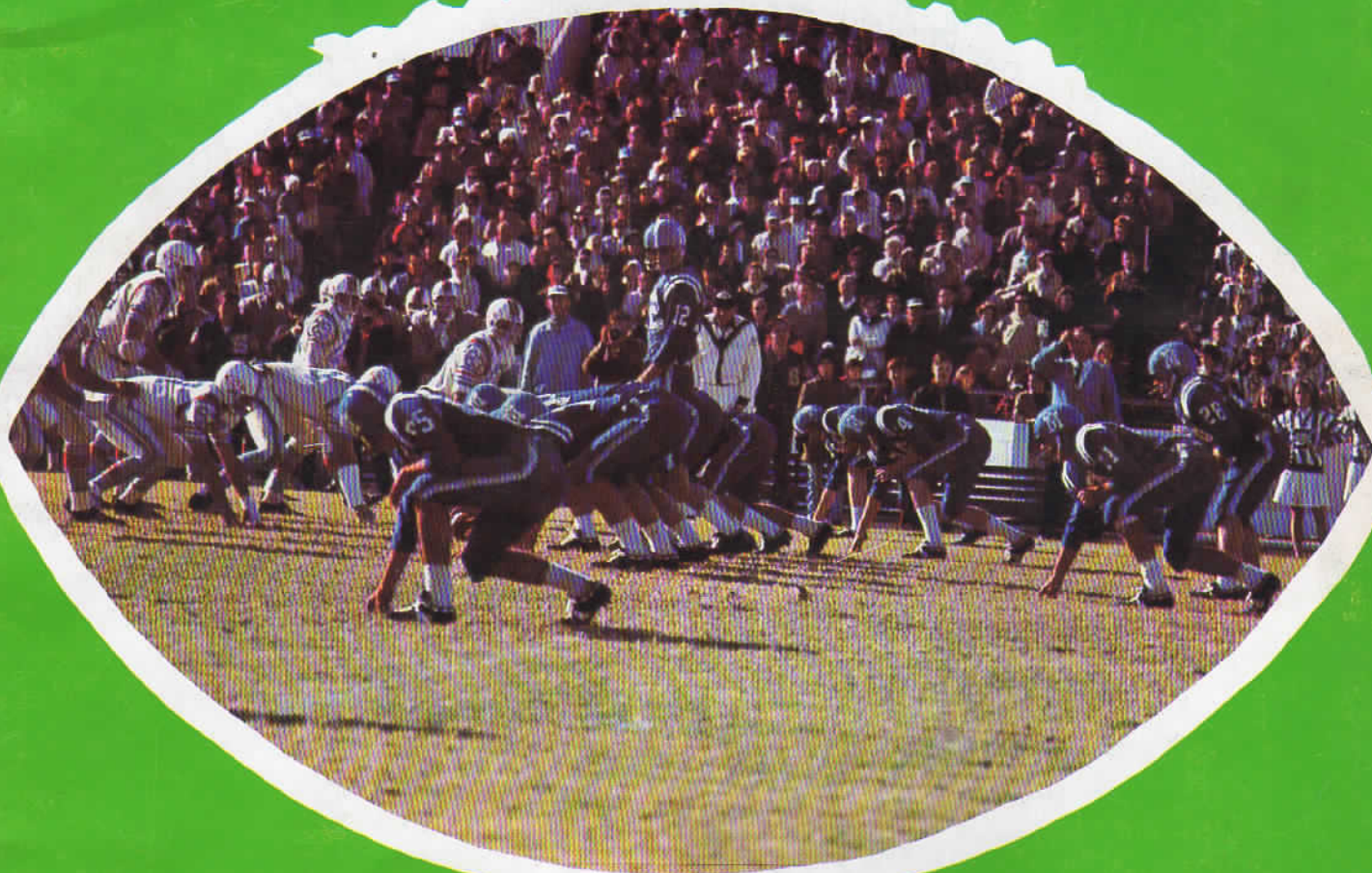


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COUNTDOWN



TO KICKOFF

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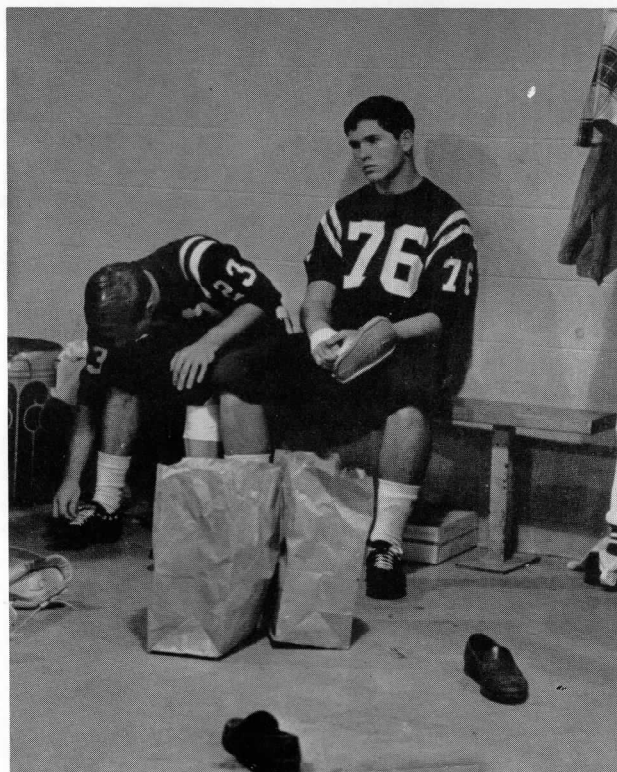
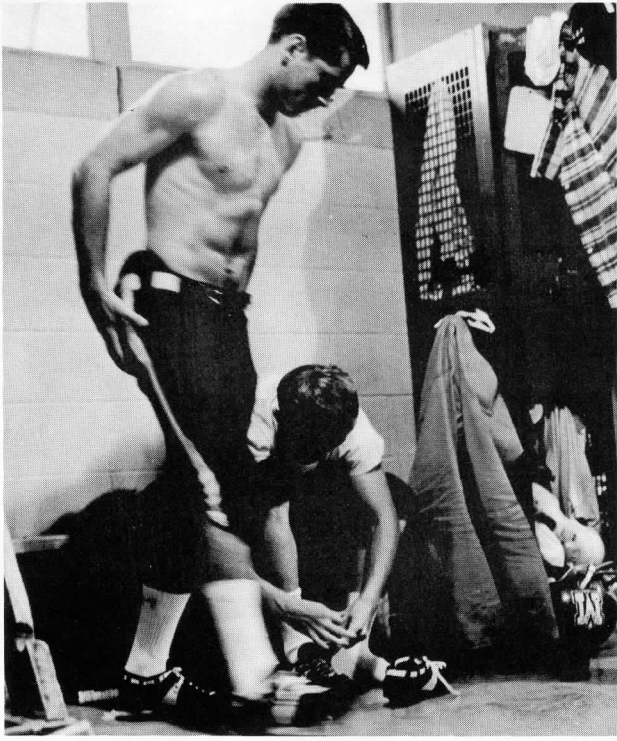
To the average San Antonio sports fan, no athletic event has more spectacle than the state high school football playoffs. To the players on the field, no battles offer greater glory—or greater pains. And to the coach on the sidelines, no competition is so dependent upon the breaks, the inches that so often separate victory from defeat. Each must be prepared to accept the fortunes of victory graciously . . . or the misfortunes of defeat without any bitterness, even when victory is stolen during the last minutes of play. The playoff games are microcosms of life in which are condensed all the challenges, skills, thrills, disappointments and great exultations of victory and defeat. This is a story of the 1966 playoffs, the story of a San Antonio team that almost made it to the finals and the throne room. It is the story of MacArthur High, the last unbeaten AAAA team to fall in the playoffs, and its bid to win the coveted state championship and lasting fame.

Ever since McMurray College quarterback Joe Bill Fox was named head football coach at MacArthur High School back in 1961, the blue-jersied Brahmas have made their presence felt in city and state AAAA football circles, fielding teams that have been continually ranked in the Texas top 10 and contended for the Alamo City crown.

But last August, Fox had little to hope for as the squad gathered to prepare for the upcoming campaign.

From a muscle-bound team that sent seven players to the Southwest Conference, that was regarded as the state's best in 1965 until being upset by Thomas Jefferson in district play, only quarterback Rocky Self, fireplug full-back Dutch Riefler, guard Dicky Thomas and tackle Bobby Hahn had reported back from the starting offensive and defensive elevens. District 15-AAAA coaches felt the outlook for the Brahmas was so bleak that they picked them to finish no better than fourth in the 1966 loop title chase. . . awarding the pre-season favorite tag to robust Robert E. Lee, 11-6 hardluck losers to Odessa Permian in the state finals the previous fall.

Two-and-a-half months later, however, Self, Riefler, Thomas and Hahn had become the talk of San Antonio, leading the brazen Brahmas to 10 straight victories without defeat, including a 38-6 thrashing of Lee. In the process, the bruising Brahmas stuck 31.5 points a game



on the scoreboard, held opponents to a meager 6 points per clash, and put a Fox-coached eleven into the state AAAA playoffs for the first time.

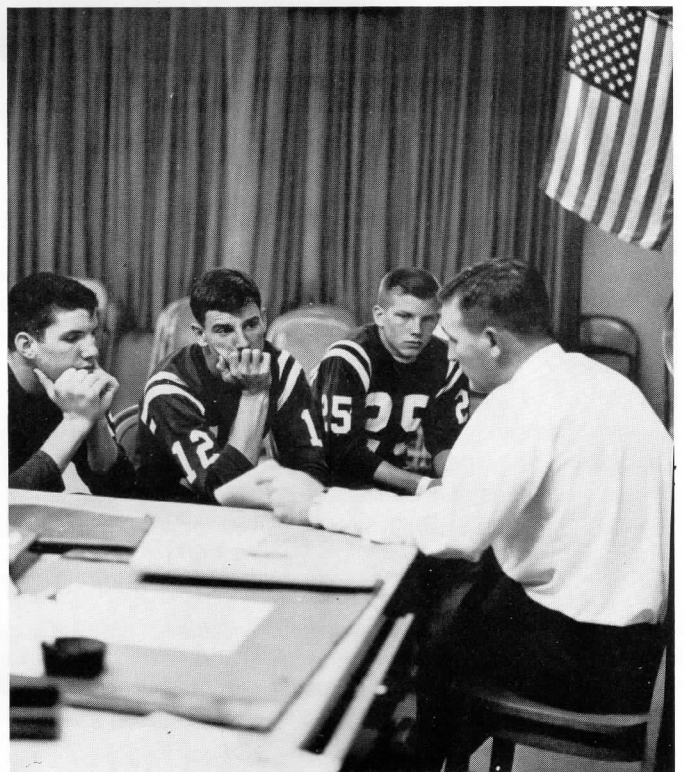
Back in the spring, we knew we had the makings of a fine club. Our biggest concern was our young linemen. We felt that if we could get by Victoria and Austin of Austin in our first two games without getting waxed, it would give the kids the confidence they needed. We beat Victoria 40-7 and stopped Austin 7-6. The following week, we got by Churchill 28-6. We knew then our line was ready. We had a lot of new kids who were fine athletes, blessed with all sort of ability, and it was just a matter of them getting some varsity experience under their belt. When we beat Highlands 8-7 in our seventh game, we knew it was going to take a real tough team to ever stop us.

Thus, on a warm and blustery night last November, the Brahmas launched the second phase of their drive for a state championship. Their first obstacle was hard-hitting Harlandale, flying equally high with a perfect 10-0 record under Clint Humphreys, and primed for the crucial bi-district clash. And a crowd of 19,660 was on hand at neutral Alamo Stadium to watch the battle of the unbeatens.

Our plan of attack, basically, was to try and run wide and loosen Harlandale's defense by throwing the football. We felt we had better team speed than they did and could open the game up a bit this way. Had we chosen to run tackle to tackle on them, I seriously doubt if we could have won the game. They were mean in that area.

Once on the field, it suddenly became evident that MacArthur was mentally ready to take the battle to Harlandale. The Brahmas whipped through the pre-game warmups quickly and solemnly, leaving no doubt in Fox's mind that his team was in the right frame of mind. The crowd, growing larger by the minute, began to sense the

At the school: Halfbacks Al Hook and Don Jellison (seated) dressed quickly as trainer Jim Terry finished taping Gordon Cox (64) and Mike Burk (56). Tackle Bob Huffman whiled away the time in meditation while Don Ylitalo cleaned his shoe. Later, Joe Bill Fox reviewed the game plan with quarterbacks Mike Stephens (14), all-stater Rocky Self (12) and Mike Bunker in an informal session.



excitement. Pep squads from both schools began their cheerful war, screaming to make more noise than the other, politely alternating their ear-piercing screams.

Both teams left the field together and, following the national anthem, appeared back on the field almost simultaneously. And suddenly, Alamo Stadium became a delirious madhouse, a bedlam of noise.

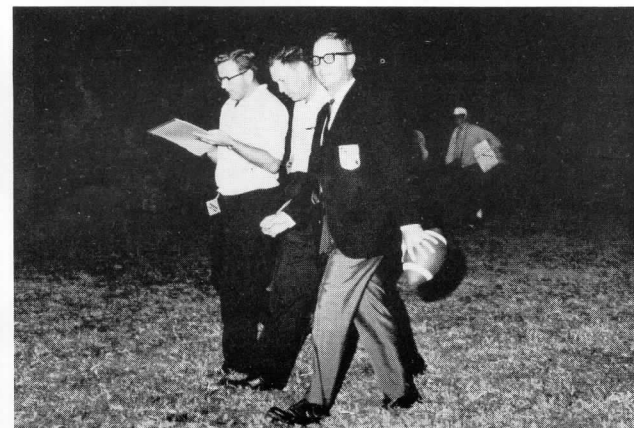
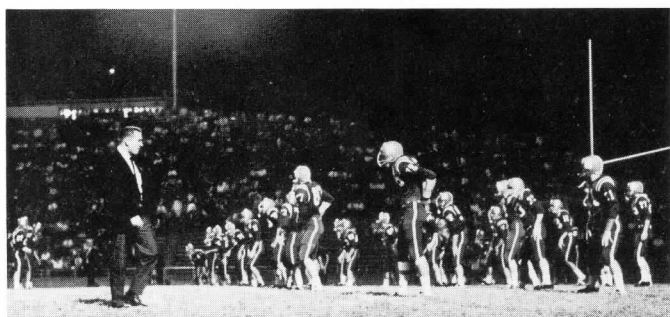
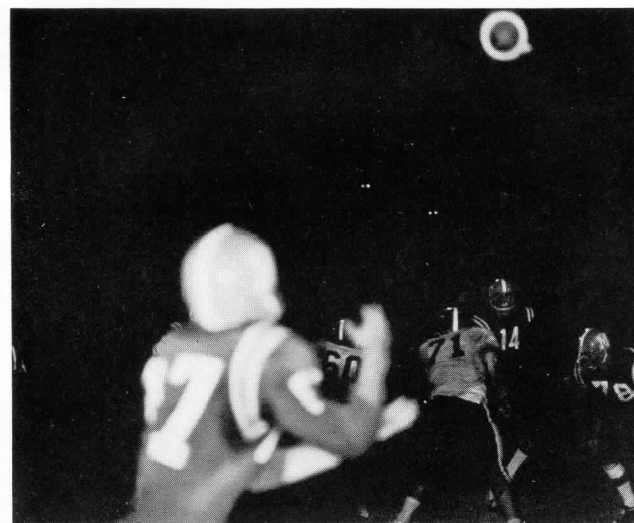
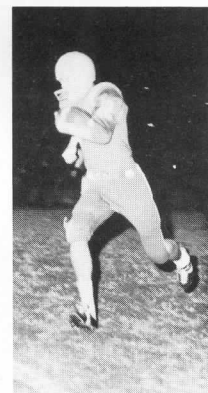
We felt Harlandale's plan of attack would be based on running their quarterback Rigney Mueller on the keeper, with him faking his backs into the line to hold our linebackers. So we told our ends and half-backs that they had to contain him... which they did. And except one time, when our defense broke down and they took a 7-6 lead, our kids — Jeff Davis, Don Jellison, Al Hook, and Rick Oberlies — did a good job containing him.

And from the start, except for the three short minutes that Harlandale held a 7-6 lead, MacArthur dominated the game. Self, following the game plan, enjoyed one of his most outstanding games passing and running; tailback Mike McLeod scored three times on 14, 32 and 60-yard runs, the latter touchdown sprint coming on the opening play of the second half to put the game out of reach at 35-7; and when Mike Stephens hit end Jon Ylitalo with a 14-yard scoring toss, that sealed a 48-7 MacArthur victory, throwing the Brahmas into the state quarterfinals against unbeaten and untied Alice.

Stephens will be coming back this season and we think he will be a boy in the mold of our past quarterbacks. He threw 20 passes during the season, completed 10 of them for three touchdowns, and had two other completions — long ones — for touchdowns called back. He has all the tools to be a good one.

Alice, of course, was, another story. Victors in 12 straight games, the Longhorns had deflated Austin McCallum 16-12 the week before and had the perfect mix of

At the stadium: Under the watchful eye of assistant coach Vernon McManus, the Brahmas appeared ready during the pre-game warmups. Tackle Bill Payne (78) set up an early score by deflecting Rigney Mueller's punt. Self ran wild, making Fox's sideline job easier. Stephens' pass to Ylitalo made it 48-7. Fox then told scribes Johnny Williams and Ned Sweet the story of how hardnosed play won the game.





personnel to be a state champion—speed, quickness, size, offensive power and the hardest-hitting defensive unit in Texas schoolboy circles. It was a team that frightened Fox.

But, it was to be a Friday night when the fortunes were with MacArthur.

Capitalizing on breaks early in the game, the Brahmas stuck to their primary offensive attack—sending Riefler up the middle on trap plays, quick-pitching to McLeod, and utilizing Self's running and passing genius—to take a lightning 14-0 lead, holding on to upend the Valley team 21-12 in one of the most bruising and punishing battles ever seen at Alamo Stadium.

It was a game that left the Brahmas battered, one the entire squad remembers somewhat painfully.

Without doubt, Alice was the hardest-hitting club we faced during the playoffs. They punished us something terrible. They could jar you loose from the ball and punish your backs to the point where they didn't run with effectiveness. We had to brace for Alice and once ahead, we were unable to slack up at all. You can look for them to be back in the quarterfinals this year. For a young club, they were fantastic.

The thrill-packed victory over tenacious Alice set the stage for MacArthur's semifinals duel with Spring Branch of Houston, a team that had upset highly-favored and No. 2 ranked Port Arthur 28-17 the week before and wasn't even supposed to be in the playoffs. But, coach Paul Register's big bad Bears had upended favored Houston Waltrip 22-7 in bi-district action and tripped district favorite Galena Park 27-6 to gain its playoff berth.

Its secret of success lay in the fact that it was a big club, quick in the line and strong on defense, well-coached and a team that made few mistakes, but was quick to capitalize on opponent errors. A 10-1-1 record proved it.

Fox, nevertheless, was confident the Brahmas could handle the Bears. His defense was equally sound, a bit

As the moment of truth neared, MacArthur tri-captains Bobby Hahn (55), for the coin toss. Referee Harold Matthews signals that the Brahmas will play as guard Charles Gremmel (67) led the way. MacArthur's rugged defense kept elusive Bear quarterback Don Wigginton (15) bottled up during the first half was a battle of offensive and defensive strategy (top right) as the wits. Self's passing (right) helped set up MacArthur's go-ahead touchdown



quicker, and his offense was more superb in every department—at quarterback, running back, and at fullback. He felt MacArthur had a good chance to win.

And on a cold and windy Saturday afternoon in Austin, before nearly 21,000 heavily-blanketed fans, the two Texas schoolboy powers met head-on in a pressure-packed 48 minutes that saw both clubs start off playing conservatively, probing for a weakness, awaiting the big break. Suddenly, up in the west stands, a Spring Branch booster waved a sign which read, "Do unto MacArthur as you did unto Port Arthur."

As if they had been awaiting the cue, the Bears suddenly came to life. Taking over at MacArthur's 40 following a punt exchange, redheaded quarterback Donnie Wigginton, a one-time Houston Baby Oiler, kept for a first down, prompting the Spring Branch band to strike up with the school victory song. Hearing this, the Brahmas dug in.

"Get touch! Get touch out there!" line coach Bobby Jack Price screamed at his defensive unit from the sidelines. "Start rootin' and get tough!"

But before the Bear trumpet section could get warm, Davis came up fast from his safety position to unload a jarring tackle on Bear tailback Ron Hickman, popping the ball loose. Brahma defensive end Chuck Dannis dove for it and came up with the ball on Mac's 29-yard line.

After scouting Spring Branch twice, we felt their only weakness might be susceptibility to our backfield speed and a passing attack. With McLeod and Riefler, we had hope to break one of them. A couple of times, they almost went all the way. But almost doesn't count. When we picked off this fumble, we opened up.

Self began waving his magic wand, faking Spring Branch's two brother linebackers Jim and Joe Achilles one way and bootlegging another. And after two straight pass incompletions, seeing and realizing the Bear defense was playing his receivers tight, Self ran twice for first downs.

Hahn (55), Dutch Riefler (28) and Dickie Thomas (68) come on the field as Brahmas will receive. Self mystified Spring Branch Bears early on the bootleg as rugged defense, led by end Al Hook (21) and tackle Jim Hamilton (75) during the first half as he scampered for air on this rushed pass play. The (right) as the Spring Branch offense and MacArthur defensive units matched and touchdown as Brahma pass blocking kept Bear linemen out of reach.



McLeod followed with a 15-yard dash around left end on the quick pitch to the Spring Branch 17, barely missing going all the way when John Conley made a shoestring tackle.

Two plays later, lightning struck as Hook, on a sweep to the left, southpawed a 21-yard scoring strike to Oberlies in the endzone where the husky split end made a lifetime catch over Conley and Jim Graf to put MacArthur out front 6-0 with 36 seconds left to play in the opening quarter.

Fox clapped his hands in glee, straightened his glasses, and motioned for Ylitalo, the ace kicking specialist, to get into the game. The eager youngster got halfway on the field before realizing he had forgotten his kicking tape. He ran back for it and got to the huddle as referee Hal Matthews threw his hand down to start the 20-second count.

Ylitalo's boot for the extra point sailed up . . . and wide to the right. On the sideline, Fox banged his fist into the palm of his hand and Price kicked the bench in disappointment. Everyone wondered if it was a bad omen.

Jon, who's a Swedish kid, kicked 31 of 34 extra points for us during the year. All three misses were on opening touchdowns. If we had to do it all over again, I'd want him to kick for us. A lot of the blame should be placed on me for not thinking about how cold it was that day. His leg was cold and I should have had Jon jogging a bit to loosen up his leg. In coaching, you learn from bad experiences, and I learned something that day. Had we gotten that extra point, it would have given us a big advantage. They would have had to decide after scoring whether to go for one or two points and the pressure would have been on them. Missing the extra point changed the complexion of the game . . . no doubt about that.

Following the kickoff, the quarter ended. Now Spring Branch was faced with the chore of driving the length of the field in the face of eye-watering winds that were reaching 30-mph in velocity in order to score. But, it was a chore the Bears were not up to handling.

Despite their team trailing 6-0 at halftime, Spring Branch's high-kicking performers were in high spirits at intermission. So were MacArthur fans as old Bull Brahma was paraded past. As Self (12) led his team to the attack in the second half, Spring Branch got tough, evidenced by defensive end Charles Crawford's effort (top left). The Bears went ahead 7-6 when ex-MacArthur student Jim Graf scored (bottom left) in the third quarter. MacArthur battled back, being halted at the Bear one (top right) with Al Hook (21) a hairbreadth from a first down. Bear quarterback Don Wiggington, seen here calling signals, padded the lead to 14-6 with a 35-yard scoring run. Fox checked statistics and found a tie would win.

And for MacArthur, it was a moment the Brahmas had been eagerly awaiting. Fox was certain Ylitalo would be able to back the Bears deep into their own territory with booming punts. He had come into the game with a 41.4 average and had been booting the football 60 to 70 yards during the pre-game warm-ups. Fox was also of the opinion that Self could take the Brahmas in for another score before intermission. The tall quarterback was throwing the ball well, was picking up big yardage on the bootleg, and the wind couldn't help but inject some power into the offense. However, the fates chose to rule otherwise.

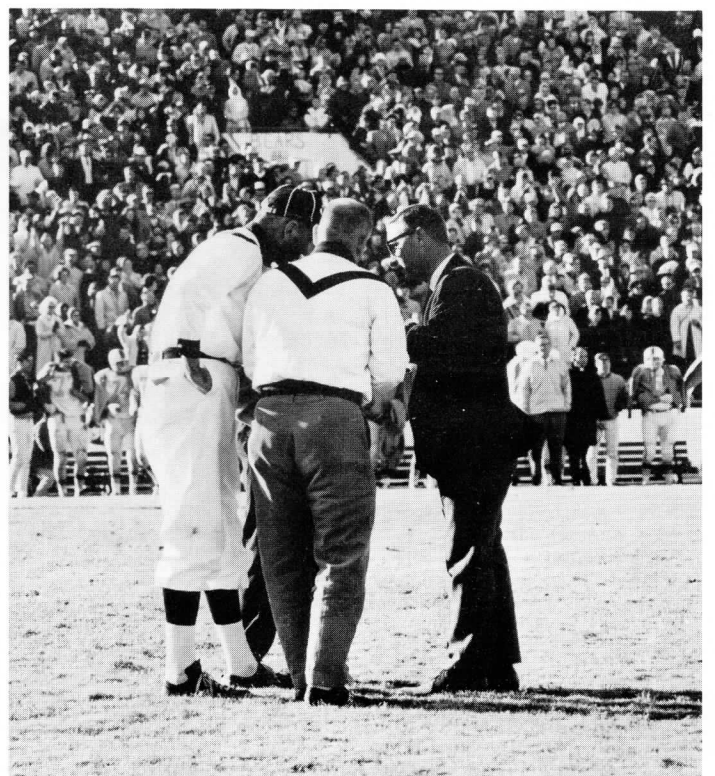
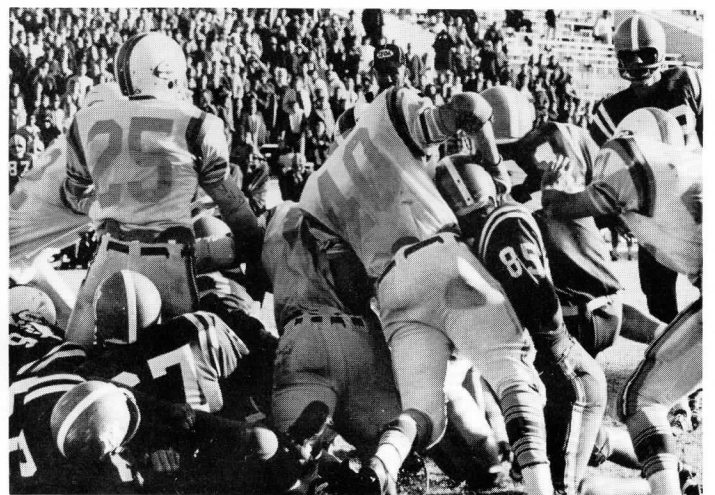
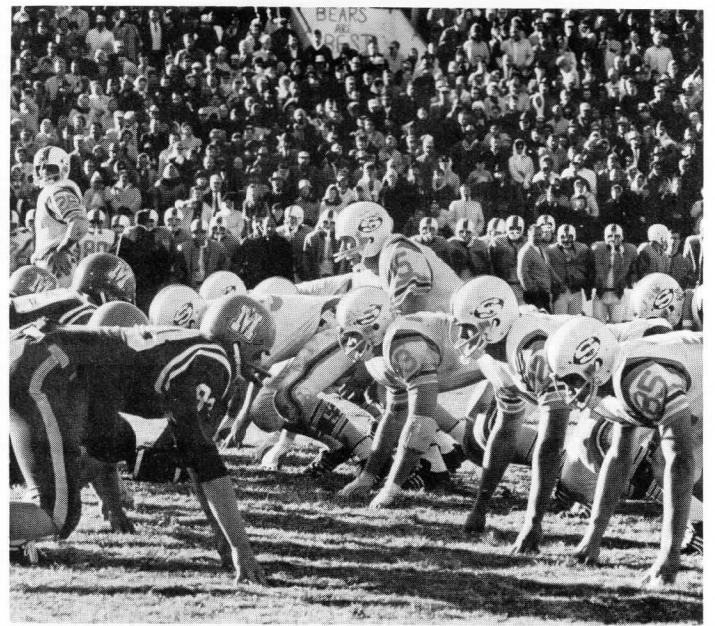
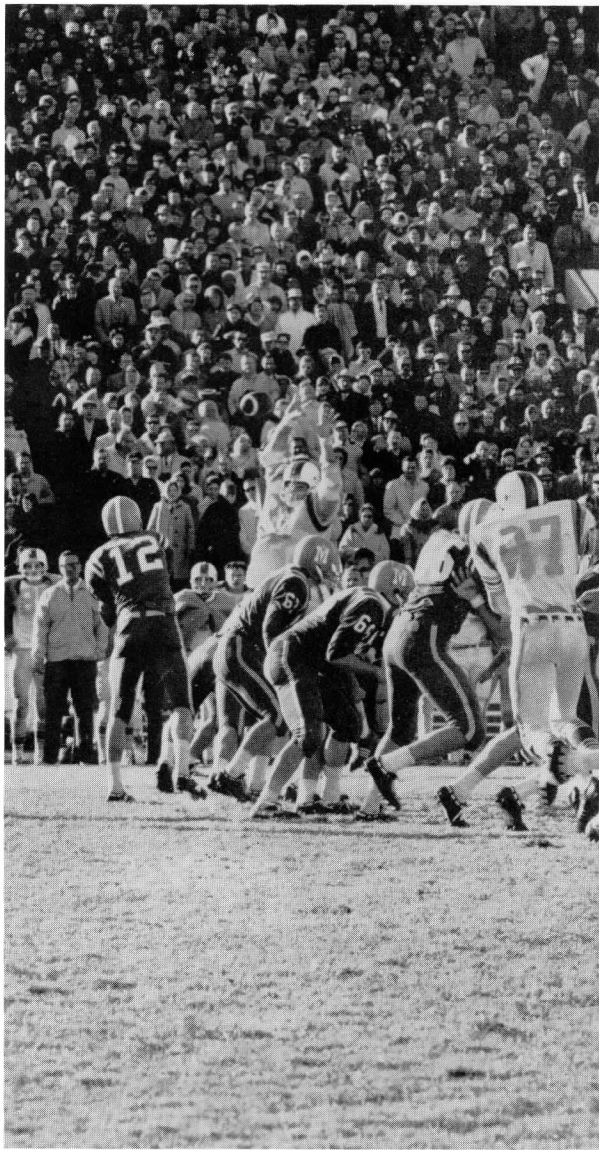
Ylitalo's first punt, rushed because of a high snap from center, carried only 18 yards to Spring Branch's 34-yard line. Three minutes later, with the Bear secondary drawn in, McLeod's line-drive quick kick barely cleared the line and was fielded after traveling only 17 yards to Spring Branch's 43-yard line. Self, meanwhile, was having problems getting his offense cranked up as fumbles and dropped passes began to plague the over-anxious San Antonians.

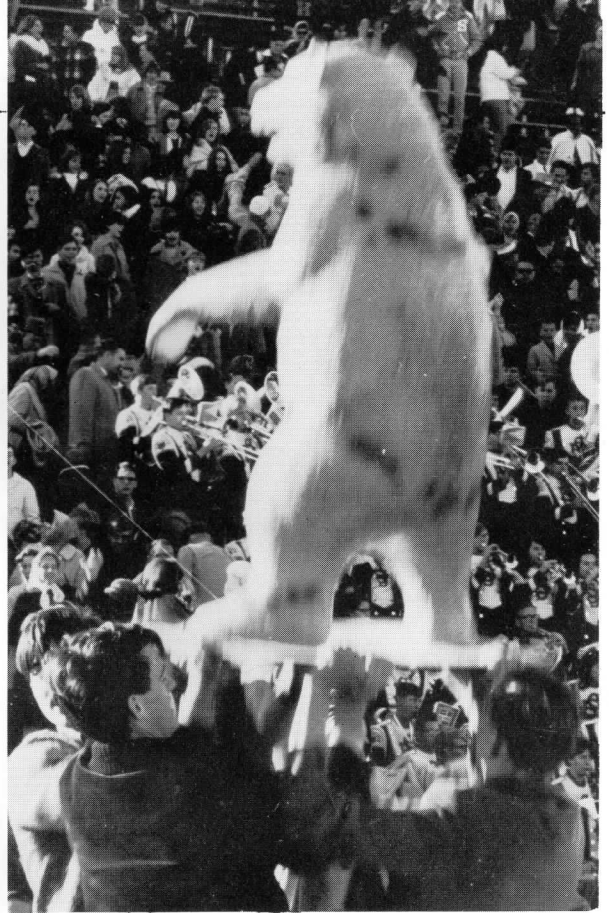
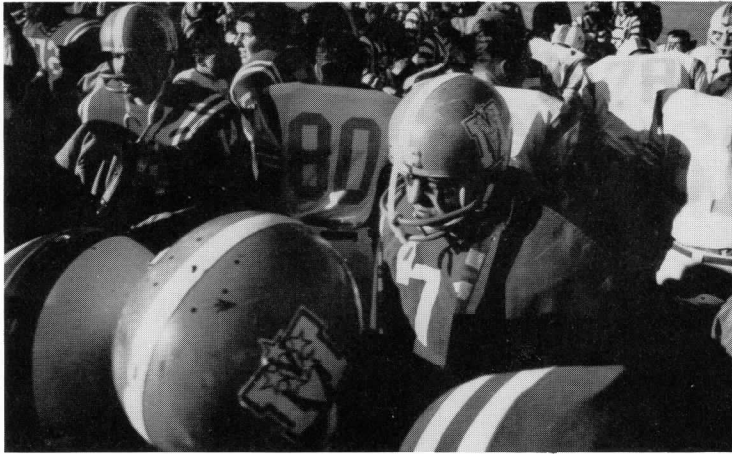
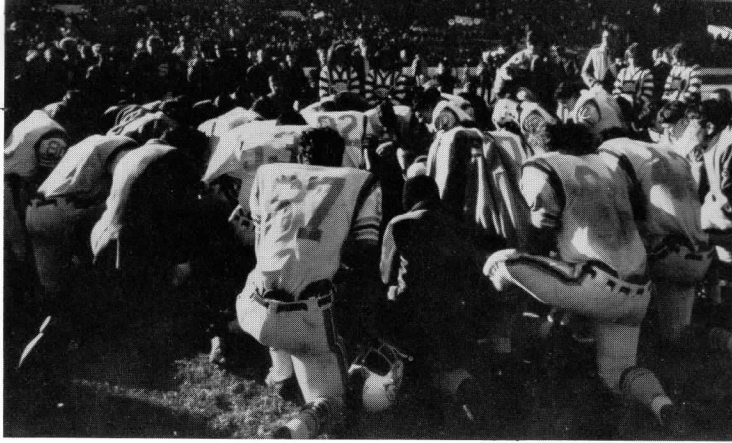
Nothing worked. It was still 6-0 at halftime. In the dressing room, Fox told his captains to take the wind at the start of the second half.

With the wind at our back, we felt we would be fresher and might be able to get some quick points on the scoreboard. Too, even with the wind at their back in the fourth quarter, Spring Branch would be tired. And since Wiggington was not a great passer, we weren't worried about him throwing the bomb on us. Spring Branch also had not been able to make a sustained drive on us, other than just before the half when they got to our 20, and we felt we could hold them since our defense was doing such good work. Without a doubt, this was the best defensive game our kids played . . . despite the outcome.

Fox had the right idea. On the opening kickoff, Oberlies and Mike Bunger almost recovered the ball in a scramble for the fumbled pigskin on the Bear 11-yard line. But, the shaken Bears came up with the ball . . . the break again







The struggle over, both teams paused to give thanks that each squad came through the game without serious injury. Then, heads bowed in bitter disappointment, Brahma players walked off the field as Bear fans hoisted their symbolic mascot in happy celebration. Spring Branch, the following week, lost to San Angelo 21-14 in the state AAAA championship game.

going against MacArthur. Nevertheless, Spring Branch had its back to the wall.

It was now obvious that only a minor miracle could save the Bears, a team that had been pulling off miracles all season. And it came, followed in quick succession by one after another. For following punter Wayne Sebastian's listless 22-yard effort, the tide of battle began to turn as the ball began bouncing Spring Branch's way.

Ylitalo's ensuing thump punt barely rolled into the Bear end zone; Self's pass to McLeod in the clear in the end zone on the following Brahma offensive series went between the back's outstretched arms; and Fox's decision to pass on fourth down at Spring Branch's 30 on the very next play backfired against him.

I kept thinking Self was going to make the big play, hit the big scoring pass, because he had been on target all day. Too, I felt our defense could keep Spring Branch from driving 70 yards against the wind to score on us. So, I decided not to punt. It was my decision.

The Bears, however, had other ideas. Taking over at their 30, the District 10-AAAA champs punched and powered their way 70 yards to paydirt in eight plays, Graf scoring from one yard out. With 1:01 left in the quarter, Travis Coombs booted the point and the Bears led 7-6 . . . and now the pressure was on MacArthur.

At this point in the game, we weren't too concerned because there was still plenty of time left. A touchdown, a field goal, a safety would have put us ahead. So we didn't have any reason to panic . . . we felt we could put a scoring drive together.

Then came the play that wrecked MacArthur's season and destroyed its dreams of a state championship.

The Brahmas, riding on the punishing blasts of Reifler and Self's clutch passing and running, moved quickly to a first down on the Spring Branch 11-yard line, needing only 8 plays following the kickoff to put themselves within the shadows of the Spring Branch goal posts. There, on

the first play, Hook ripped through a gaping hole at left guard on a linebacker trap play, reaching the two.

Needing only a yard for a first down and two for a score, we went with our workhorse Riefler. But we didn't block well. We went with Riefler again to a different hole, giving him the option of cutting off our strong side when he saw daylight. Again, we didn't block well. Their linebackers, the Achilles brothers, hit him and he spun off them for what our kids thought was a first down. But . . .

Now, facing fourth and inches and only a couple of feet away from a go-ahead touchdown, Fox sent in husky Mark Lepick for McLeod with instructions to run Hook on the same power play. Hook rammed over the left side again, penetrating for what appeared to be more than enough for a first down and possibly a score. It was short.

The officials said no . . . and wouldn't even allow our kids a measurement. There is a possibility that they forgot about the first down play and were concentrating on the goal line. But, it's water under the bridge now. I didn't even consider kicking a field goal at this time because I just knew our kids would take it in for a score.

Still, the Bears had to fight off two more threats before putting the game on ice . . . recovering Self's fumble and picking off one of his passes inside their 35-yard line. Moments later, trying to run out the clock, Wigginton broke through MacArthur's ball-hawking stacked defense and raced 35 yards to score with 58 seconds left and give his team a 14-6 lead . . . as Coombs booted the PATD.

We still had a chance to pull it out of the fire. Upon checking with the official statistician, we could have won it by tying them 14-14 because of penetrations. And after their onside kick, we had the ball in good position at our 44-yard line.

Spring Branch was not to be denied victory, however. Two plays later, Joe Achilles picked off Self's hurried pass and that brought MacArthur's season to an end.