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Lone stars

MU's Daniel and KU's Reesing may not be Texas-sized quarterbacks, but they have come up huge this season.

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AUSTIN, Texas | The interstate runs just past the state capitol, past the looming football stadium with the burnt orange seats. Inside that stadium, just 740 miles from Kansas City on I-35, a man thinks about two football players and the road that took them away.

Three years ago, Chase Daniel and Todd Reesing were both Texas players of the year. Both wanted nothing more than to end up here, at Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium.

And both were told by this man, the one with the salt-and-pepper hair standing in the ninth-floor hallway, that they weren't good enough.

No, check that. He told them they weren't tall enough. He shakes his head now.

"It wasn't just us," Texas' Mack Brown says. "There are a lot of people that didn't."

Any coach will tell you that recruiting is an inexact science. Even in the talent-rich Lone Star State, where Brown has the pick of more than 300 Division I-A caliber players each year, mistakes are unavoidable.

Daniel was 5 feet, 11 inches tall. Reesing was 5-foot-10. Texas wanted another Vince Young. There was no match here. The boys would have to go elsewhere.

Now, Brown will have to watch one of them play next week in the Big 12 Championship game. His Longhorns, after losing at Texas A&M on Friday, assured that they won't be there for the second straight year.

Behind them on their road to Kansas City, Daniel and Reesing left many footprints, from Austin to Waco to Big D and up through the Sooner State. At times, it felt like they'd never make it.

I-35, Texas, exit 230. 735 miles to Kansas City.

BEE CAVE, Texas | Texas hill country spreads out around Todd Reesing's childhood home, the sightlines never-ending. Out here, 20 miles southwest of downtown Austin, it's easy to think big.

On this quiet November night, in the cul-de-sac of a gated community, it's not hard to tell which house is Reesing's. It's the one with the alternating blue and red lights, the Kansas flag and the scarecrow -- wearing a Kansas No. 5 jersey -- left over from Halloween.

Debi Reesing opens the door and offers a welcoming smile. Along with most of Lawrence, she couldn't resist buying the blue shirt that says "Thank God for Todd." While the middle-school teacher is turning more Kansan by the minute, Debi proudly claims her Texan heritage.

"I'm fifth-generation," she says, sipping a glass of wine.

Most of those generations grew up in Texas, settled down in Texas, died in Texas. Todd has found his calling elsewhere.

Steve Reesing went to the University of Texas. He loved it so much that he came back to Austin to raise his family. Steve and Todd went to many Texas games and watched nearly all of them on TV. Todd was a star athlete, the quarterback in flag football, the pitcher in Little League. Being the Longhorns quarterback years down the road didn't seem that farfetched at the time.

What they couldn't foresee was that Todd would stop growing in the 10th grade. That was before he'd even start a game as the Lake Travis High quarterback.

Before Reesing, the Lake Travis Cavaliers had never won district. They went 0-10 Reesing's freshman year, then 3-7 his sophomore year. To get things turned around, Reesing would have to be a leader. Luckily, he'd had practice in the classroom as one of Lake Travis's top students.

Among his classmates, Reesing never minded standing out. At his junior prom, he wore a white tuxedo and carried a cane. He sat in the front row of his classes and raised his hand often. He was a student assistant in the guidance counselors' office, where the women marveled that he never hesitated to give his mom a hug in public.

Reesing graduated fourth in his high school class. He once organized a lunchtime Spanish vocabulary competition with other students. In the uber-liberal city of Austin, he was the lone Republican in government class, enlivening debate on a daily basis.

"Todd totally transformed my Spanish class," says teacher Laura Brito-Hazelton. "He had this zest for learning and for being the best. He was always leading the class, rallying them to do something more."

He would have to do the same thing as starting quarterback his junior year. That first year, Reesing rallied Lake Travis to an 8-3 record and its first-ever district title. The program has now won district four straight years.

Some people around here think a 5-foot-10 quarterback had something to do with that.

“There’s a fire in his heart,” says Lake Travis athletic director Jack Moss. “Todd was a catalyst.”

I-35, Texas, exit 301. 670 miles to Kansas City.

TEMPLE, Texas | Bret Stafford hasn’t been to a UT football game in a while. Now the owner of Best-Way Carpet in this midsize town just off the interstate, he was once the prize of Texas’ 1984 recruiting class.

Stafford was only 6 feet tall, but that didn’t stop the Texas schools from staging a recruiting war. It was a different time then, when the Wing-T and wishbone were all the rage and the spread was saved for mom’s Texas toast.

“Size wasn’t what mattered,” Stafford says. “I wasn’t a throwing QB anyway. We threw the ball 10 times a game when I was in high school.”

Now kids are just bigger. Now the best athletes play quarterback. Now Mack Brown has to deal with Rivals.com ratings and fans following his every recruiting move on message boards. Even if he did want a smaller guy, could he risk it?

Texas clearly has a mold it wants at quarterback. The raw numbers bear that out. Current starter Colt McCoy is 6-feet-3. Vince Young? 6-5. Chris Simms? 6-4. The only aberration is 6-foot Major Applewhite, and he was controversially replaced by Simms.

Brown, back in that hallway at the stadium, is asked about the process Texas uses to evaluate quarterbacks.

“Well,” Brown says, “this is an obvious question from a guy that came from Kansas City to visit with us.”

Sarcasm behind him, he continues.

“Quarterbacks and offensive linemen are the two toughest positions we feel like to evaluate,” he says. “Quarterbacks, some are products of their system, and there are so many. We can only take one and sometimes none. Everyone talks about what we don’t get.”

That’s how it is for Brown more than any of those other Texas coaches. When you can supposedly have anyone you want, your misses are magnified.

“We miss 325 guys a year,” Brown says, “and every one of them stays in the Big 12 area, and every one of them plays against us, and every one of them is mad at us.”

At least, that’s what it’s felt like lately. Two guys in particular have been thrown repeatedly in Brown’s face this fall. Guess who?

“They’re both great kids, too,” Brown says.

Stafford was one of those great Texas kids, too, the dutiful son of a well-known high school football coach. Long before he’d sell carpet for a living, Stafford received the red carpet treatment. He could have gone anywhere, but he was bred here.

Back then, that meant he’d stay home.

I-35, Texas, exit 335B. 635 miles to Kansas City.

WACO, Texas | Todd and Steve Reesing got in the car on the morning of December 11, 2004, and headed north.

Lake Travis had already lost in the playoffs to end Todd’s junior season, but there was a state semifinal game between undefeated Southlake Carroll and Lufkin just up the road in Waco. Todd Reesing wanted to see the Carroll quarterback play in person. His name was Chase Daniel.

It was well worth the trip. The kid was good. He drove those Dragons up and down the field that afternoon at Baylor’s Floyd Casey Stadium like he’d been programmed to do it. Well, that was partly true.

Carroll, under coach Todd Dodge, had built a football factory unseen even around Dallas, where \$5 million indoor practice facilities and season-ticket packages had become the norm.

Daniel was one of the most prolific quarterbacks in Texas high school football history. He grew up in Irving, in the shadow of Texas Stadium, as one of the city’s best young athletes. But he moved to Southlake because his parents wanted him in a better school system. Turns out, the move put Daniel in the position for a different kind of education.

Daniel would play for Dodge, a former UT quarterback who knew the game better than anybody. Dodge understood that things had changed since he was recruited as a 6-foot-tall, record-setting high-school quarterback out of Port Arthur. With colleges searching for the next John Elway or Peyton Manning, it would take more than big numbers to get the quarterbacks who ran his spread offense noticed by recruiters.

“It’s a beauty contest,” Dodge says.

So Dodge set up a program that would not only help his program win big year after year, but also help his quarterbacks end up the prettiest, so to speak.

Beginning in the seventh grade, Dodge pinpointed the players he felt were candidates to be the varsity starting quarterback. He preferred dual-threat guys, and Daniel, of course, fit the mold. Once he had made his evaluations, Dodge put the kids through what he calls

a performance course each spring. Daniel would spend hours at a time watching film and learning the offense.

Bill and Vickie Daniel, Chase's parents, always knew that Chase had something special inside of him, and they also understood that extra steps had to be taken for it to be noticed by the right people. They had Chase in everything: Passing camps, seven-on-seven summer drills, a conditioning program separate from Carroll that ran three times a week.

"I had the work ethic that I wanted to be ahead of the pack," Chase says. "My dad has put a lot of money into lessons. He said, 'We can spend as much money as you want on lessons as long as you take it seriously.' That's just the way I've taken it."

Lessons? By the time Dodge was done with him, Chase Daniel was so knowledgeable about football that it became academic.

"I can guarantee you," Chase says, "no one has the type of training coach Dodge provided to me when I was younger. Without a doubt."

Daniel, like Reesing, bled burnt orange. His older sister went to Texas, so trips to Austin were frequent and always appreciated by young Chase. Of course, before he could quarterback the Longhorns, he had to win the job at his high school. Daniel was forced to play wide receiver his sophomore year, but won the job that spring. He would take over the defending state champions.

Daniel won his first 15 games as the starter, leading the Dragons to the Alamodome and the state championship game against Smithson Valley his junior year. But the Dragons would lose, 16-15, the first real defeat of Daniel's life. He threw an interception late that ended Carroll's hopes.

After the game, Daniel could have avoided the 10 or 15 reporters that waited for him. Instead, he faced them. Dodge's boot camp had taught him how to act like a quarterback, too.

"I'll take it on my shoulders," Daniel said that day. "I'm going to come back and win it next year."

Of course, he would. As the Reesings looked down at Daniel from their seats in Waco, he was well on his way to personal redemption. He'd win that game and the next one, leading Carroll to a state championship his senior year. He'd be chosen the 5A player of the year for the second time.

Todd and his father got back on the highway that night and drove south, while Daniel arrived at the same road and went north.

Their paths would cross again.

I-35W, Texas, exit 52B. 540 miles to Kansas City.

SOUTHLAKE, Texas | Cookie Daniel, a mutt with Shih Tzu and schnauzer leanings, comes to the front door of the Daniel home wearing a Missouri No. 10 jersey.

“It’s a size three,” Vickie Daniel says, laughing.

The Daniels, like their son, are fast learners. Lifetime Texans, they’re wearing black and gold and even have a tiger-print chair in the living room. Chase’s bedroom, however, still resembles the room of the kid who loved the University of Texas.

Unlike Reesing’s old room, now turned into a guest room, Daniel’s is a shrine to his life and many accomplishments. In the midst of all the trophies and medals and scrapbooks filled with winning memories is a photo of Chase and Mack Brown at the Texas football camp the summer before Daniel’s senior year. Their smiles hint at the possibility of a future together.

Unfortunately for the 5-foot-11 Daniel, the only way that would have happened was if one of the two quarterbacks Brown preferred -- 6-foot-4 Ryan Perrilloux of Louisiana and 6-foot-3 Colt McCoy of Tuscola, Texas -- declined a scholarship offer. It appeared Daniel would be out of luck, as both players orally committed to the Longhorns.

Bill Daniel remembers a conversation he had with Texas offensive coordinator Greg Davis that just about sums up his son’s recruitment. Davis was commenting on how Chase had a full beard.

“Bill, look at him. He’s already a grown man,” Davis said. “He’s not going to get any better.”

“Greg, you’re wrong,” Bill said. “He’s going to get a lot better.”

Texas, along with Texas A&M and Texas Tech, was working off the prevailing logic about quarterbacks. Smaller ones can’t see over the offensive line, it goes. All of that extra work to win the beauty pageant, and Daniel wasn’t getting a fair shake. Still, he’d fare much better than Reesing, who barely could get on stage.

Greg Davis went to a few of Reesing’s practices, but the Longhorns were never really serious about the kid from their own backyard. Of course, nobody else was either.

Reesing, at 5-10, 190 pounds, had won the Class 4A player of the year award his junior year, beating out highly touted quarterbacks such as Georgia’s Matthew Stafford and Jevan Snead, now at Mississippi. Still, hardly any coaches called. Reesing waited. And waited. Debi Reesing imagined coaches simply crossing off Todd’s name when they saw the height in his profile.

A coach from Texas A&M actually had the nerve to call Todd, only to inform him that he was on their “B-list” of quarterbacks.

No one had ever told Todd that he couldn’t succeed at something. The Reesings weren’t going to give up. They invited a local recruiting advisor into their home, admittedly throwing their hands in the air. Be patient, he told them. Look for schools that are a good fit academically first. Duke, Purdue and Northwestern had shown some interest, so that’s where they started.

Things began to look up -- literally -- when Reesing received an invitation from none other than Bill Snyder to the Kansas State camp. Around that same time, during the summer of his senior year, Todd’s tape made its way to Mark Mangino in a rather circuitous way.

The Reesings had a family friend who had a strong connection to Pat Henderson, a former KU assistant who now works in the athletic department. Henderson passed the tape along to Mangino, who at that point hadn’t been recruiting Reesing.

About a week later, the Reesings went to the K-State camp. While they were in the area, they breezed through Lawrence and called wide receivers coach Tim Beck, who had made contact with Todd. On that trip, Reesing would meet Mangino for the first time. Mangino cut right to the chase.

“Hey,” he said, “you’re not a very tall guy are you? Well, let me tell you something. That’s all right with me. In my offensive scheme that I’m going to be running, height is not going to be an issue. And matter of fact, you might be able to run it better than a kid who’s 6-4.”

That was all Reesing needed to hear.

“He needed to believe that UT was going to give him a shot,” Steve says. “He didn’t want to go there if they weren’t taking the possibility of him being a starter seriously.”

Chase Daniel went through the same thing a year earlier. Missouri was the first school to offer him a scholarship. He felt the same trust with Gary Pinkel as he did with Dodge.

Chase believed he was the best around. No matter where he went, he’d succeed. Texas could have Perrilloux, whom Chase had once beaten in two 40-yard dashes at the Elite 11 quarterback camp.

But Perrilloux, the five-star Mr. Everything, would back out on his commitment to Texas just days before signing day. What happened next was all too predictable. Greg Davis called Todd Dodge and asked him if Daniel was firm on Missouri. Yes, Dodge told him, very firm.

Almost three years later, Vickie Daniel walks over to the closet and pulls out a burnt orange Texas Starter jacket that Daniel wore as a kid. Bill Daniel chuckles.

“I’m trying to find someone to give it to,” he says. “Give it back to Mack Brown.”

I-35E, Texas, exit 428A. 555 miles to Kansas City.

ROCKWALL, Texas | Scott Smith and Braden Smith tell a familiar tale. Scott, the father and football coach, groomed his son to be a quarterback.

Now Braden Smith is one of the 1,100 or so starting high school quarterbacks in the state. That’s the first step. You win the job that everybody at your school covets. Then you somehow stand out enough among all the other winners to get recruited. When you think about it like that, what Scott and Braden have accomplished is already impressive.

Braden is a senior who led his team to the playoffs. He threw 24 touchdowns and only one interception in the regular season. Braden Smith is also 6 feet tall.

He has orally committed to SMU, but with the school’s coaching situation up in the air, who knows where he’ll end up. Coaches from bigger programs say things like, “We just want a little more height.”

It’s become a tired refrain, spoken up and down this stretch of highway, from Laredo, Texas, and the Mexico border to Duluth, Minn., and the Great Lakes.

But now, Braden knows that some programs are willing to look deeper than the surface. Mixed into the pile of mail he’s received this year are letters from Kansas and Missouri.

Texas isn’t recruiting him.

I-35, Oklahoma, exit 174. 300 miles to Kansas City.

STILLWATER, Okla. | On the biggest morning of his life, Todd Reesing rolled out of bed at a shabby-looking Quality Inn. Kickoff, set for 7 p.m., seemed about as far away as Austin.

Reesing’s rise had somehow been too easy, but also unpredictable. He graduated from Lake Travis early and enrolled for spring classes at KU. He lost his redshirt in the ninth game of the 2006 season and proceeded to lead Kansas to a 20-15 comeback win over Colorado. He already had a nickname, “Sparky.” He went into the spring and fall of 2007 in competition with 6-foot-3 incumbent Kerry Meier and played so well he gave Mangino no other choice.

Nine games he’d played, and nine games he’d won. Kansas was having the kind of turnaround that the people of Lake Travis felt was second nature to Todd. But the Oklahoma State game on Nov. 10 was now what mattered. The game would be broadcast

on ABC for most of the country, and the top crew of Brent Musberger and Kirk Herbstreit would be in the house, making constant Doug Flutie comparisons.

Earlier in the day, Missouri and Chase Daniel beat Texas A&M, 40-26. It was vintage Daniel, 352 yards and three touchdowns. Another Tigers win against another Texas program that didn't offer Daniel a scholarship.

Unlike Reesing, Daniel was supposed to be this good. It was only mildly surprising that he could be this good at Missouri. In his first year as a starter last year, the Tigers jumped to a 6-0 record, only to fall flat on their face and finish 8-5. Daniel finally understood all the Missouri jokes. This year, though, the Tigers didn't waver after losing in October at Oklahoma. They got better.

Daniel went home after the Texas A&M game and watched Kansas play Oklahoma State. He had not heard of Todd Reesing before this year. Nobody had.

That all changed against Oklahoma State. Reesing had 318 yards and three touchdowns, and KU hushed its doubters, 43-28.

Reesing returned to his Alabama Street apartment in Lawrence late that night. The town was changing. Some of his classmates had already gone to Allen Fieldhouse to begin camping out for Missouri football tickets that would be released on the following Monday.

When he went to bed that night, Kansas City and a meeting with Daniel were only two weeks away.

I-35, Missouri exit 2U. 0 miles to Kansas City.

KANSAS CITY, Mo. | On Friday afternoon, Todd Reesing and Chase Daniel both walked on the Arrowhead Stadium grass. They had spent all season trying not to think about this game, but finally, the moment had arrived.

In the stadium's bowels, they toured the locker rooms with their teammates. One more day, and they'd be facing each other for the first time in a long-raging Border War that has never had this much at stake.

A Big 12 championship game appearance. A chance at their schools' first football national championship. After LSU fell to Arkansas on Friday night, Kansas-Missouri would truly be No. 1 vs. No. 2, a Game of the Century for this region.

In one year, Reesing and Daniel have changed everything, transforming the way the nation views their programs and the way their programs view themselves.

"Maybe," Reesing says, "people will give some shorter guys a chance now from here on. Who knows?"

“He’s gone through a lot of the same things I have in his career,” Reesing says of Daniel, “so for both of us to be at this level playing in a game like this is awesome.”

When their walkthroughs were over Friday at Arrowhead, Reesing and Daniel had avoided each other for the last time. They have still never spoken.

Reesing headed back to Lawrence. Daniel bunked with his teammates in Overland Park.

They’ll be back today -- big as life.