

THRILLER IN

Tomah upends Sparta in overtime to spoil opening night at new Memorial Field

By ZACH RASTALL
Sports Writer

Opening night at the new Memorial Field was a special, highly anticipated occasion for Sparta and its fans. By the time the dust settled, it was Tomah who stole the glory in an unforgettable chapter in the two schools' football rivalry.

The Timberwolves (2-2 overall, 1-1 Mississippi Valley) outlasted the Spartans (1-2, 0-2) to eke out a 22-21 overtime victory in their conference clash Friday, September 9 in Sparta.

After delays and lingering questions on when it would finally be ready to host football, Sparta's new Memorial Field — featuring turf as its surface — finally made its grand opening with fanfare Friday night.

Following pregame celebrations to commemorate the occasion, the Spartans christened their new field with a bang thanks to a 41-yard touchdown pass from junior quarterback Thomas Laufenberg to senior wide receiver Carson Kelsey early in the first quarter.

Tomah sliced the deficit to 7-6 when senior running back Jacob Bullard bulldozed his way ahead for a five-yard touchdown run, but Sparta junior running back Emmett Brooks capped off a touchdown drive with a four-yard TD run to extend the Spartan advantage to 14-6 while still in the first quarter.

Though three touchdowns were scored in the opening frame, that 14-6 score held through the second and third quarters. The stalemate was finally broken when Tomah junior running back Keaton Vonderehe found the end zone on a four-yard touchdown run with just under 10 minutes remaining in the fourth quarter, then Bullard added a successful two-point conversion run to level the score at 14-14.

BELOW Tomah Timberwolves revel in taking back the rivalry trophy. **RIGHT** Tomah's Tom Hesse jogs the trophy on the team's way out of Memorial Field on Friday, September 9.

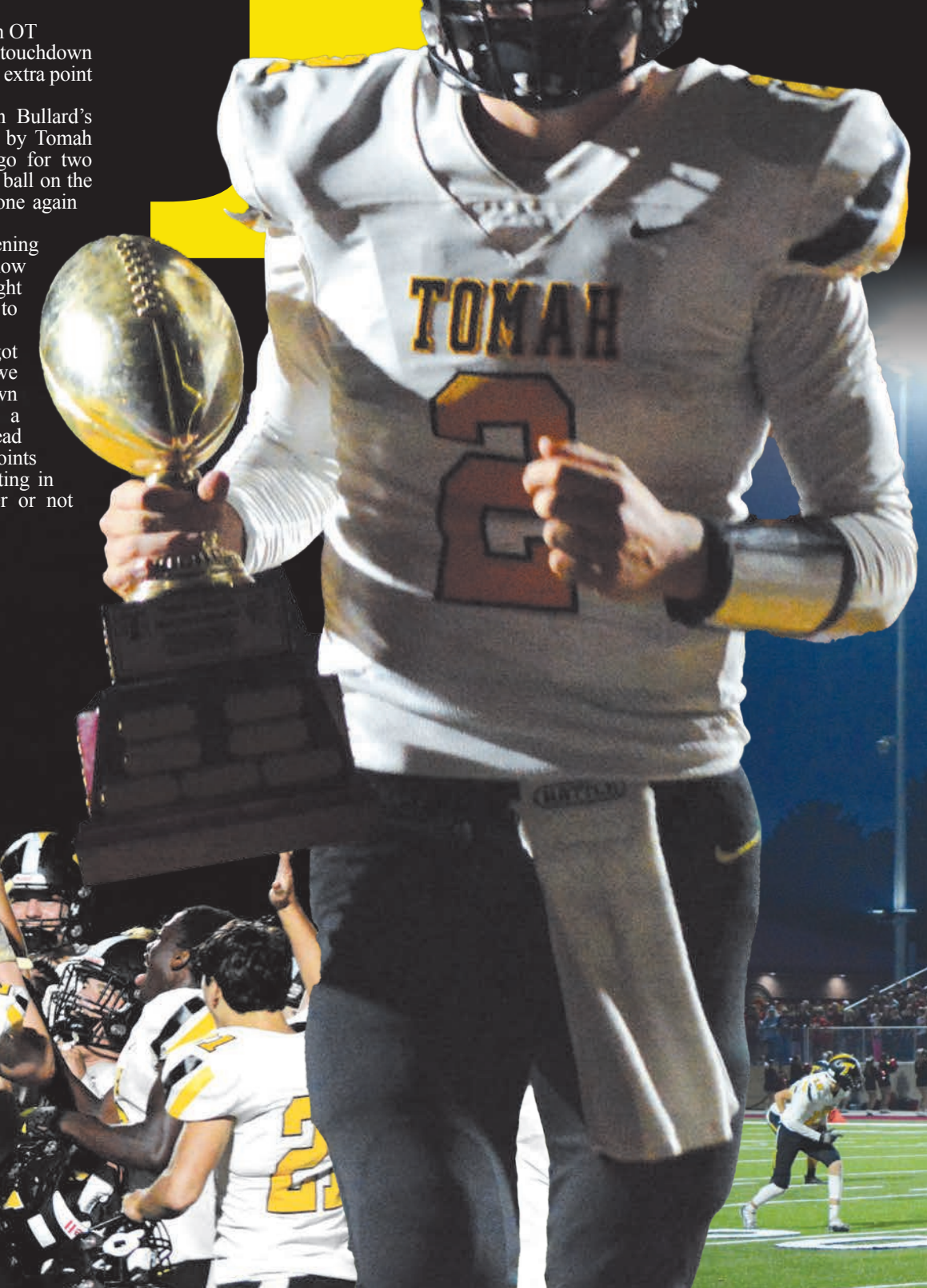
Neither team scored again in the fourth, sending the game to overtime.

The Spartans had possession first in OT and scored on Laufenberg's 10-yard touchdown strike to Kelsey. Senior Isaiah Futch's extra point made it a 21-14 Sparta lead.

The Timberwolves answered with Bullard's three-yard touchdown run, followed by Tomah head coach Joe Protz deciding to go for two and the win. Bullard was handed the ball on the conversion run and found the end zone again for the conversion and the win.

It was Tomah's first lead of the evening and means that the two teams have now each won four games in the last eight meetings in this rivalry dating back to 2015.

"We had some drives where we got down to the 20-yard line where we either had some penalties or blown assignments. That was kind of a difference maker," said Sparta head coach Adam Dow. "If we score points on those drives there, you're not sitting in overtime having to wonder whether or not you're going to win the game."



TOP Sparta's Carson Kelsey breaks through the 'Tackle Tomah' banner as the team takes the field prior to the opening kick-off on Friday, September 9. **LEFT** Sparta's Emmett Brooks utilizes a block from Sparta's Tyler Schendel and attempts to run past Tomah's Jeffrey Baumgartner. **RIGHT** Tomah's Jacob Bullard is taken down by Sparta's Ryne Brueggeman in the first half of Friday's game at Sparta. **Herald photos by Logan Everson.**



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Bullard rushed for 141 yards and two touchdowns on 30 carries, while Vonderehe added 40 yards and a touchdown on seven attempts. Senior quarterback Tom Hesse completed 5 of 12 passes for 30 yards and was picked off three times.

On defense, junior linebacker Mason Downes led the Timberwolves with 12 total tackles, including seven solo tackles and three sacks.

As for the Spartans, junior running back Cody Morrow put up 85 yards on five rushes and Brooks finished with 81 yards and a touchdown on 17 carries. Laufenberg completed 9 of 19 passes for 157 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions. Kelsey hauled in four catches for 91 yards and two touchdowns.

Defensively for Sparta, senior linebacker Michael O'Rourke recorded a game-high 17 total tackles.

Tomah will next hit the road to take on Holmen (0-4, 0-2) and Sparta is set to also go back on the road to face Reedsburg (4-0) as MVC play continues. Both games are scheduled for Friday, September 16 at 7 p.m.

SPARTA'S NEW MEMORIAL FIELD

\$3.25 | **\$340,000**

MILLION IN TOTAL COST | IN FUNDRAISING BY SPARTA GRIDIRON CLUB

GRANDSTAND CAPACITY
1,750

4 NEW BANKS OF LED LIGHTS

TOTAL CAPACITY
2,000+



1,750-person capacity grandstand, over 2,000 total capacity including bleachers



New scoreboard, approximate cost: \$60,000

In an ideal world, Sparta's new Memorial Field would have been all ready to roll for its grand unveiling at the beginning of this 2022 season. Delays in finishing the project prevented that from being a reality and a cloud of uncertainty lingered all the way into last week as to whether it would be ready for Friday night against Tomah, but the new turf field finally made its anticipated debut. In a way, it felt right that this was the first game to be held at the new Memorial Field — the Spartans facing off against their biggest rival, a packed house and a thrilling game that took overtime to decide. Even though Sparta obviously would've liked to end the celebratory occasion with a win, it was still a resounding success of a night for the new field. "It's something for our area that's a nice facility and it's something to be proud of," said Sparta head coach Adam Dow. "It was a game that was high emotions against a rival team. It was probably the right way to christen that field."



Built-in soccer field lines