

# BUILT IN THE TRENCHES: Coach Robert Valdez and the Soul of Saint Augustine High School

By Chris Fontenot



**I**n New Orleans,  
high school football  
is never just football.

It is culture carried under stadium lights on Friday nights. And, in the Seventh Ward, between Law and Hope Streets and

A.P. Tureaud and St. Bernard Avenues hums generations of pride, where Saint Augustine High School still lives by a number that feels more like identity than location.

2600 (which represents: “2600 A.P. Tureaud” to many diehards)

That number represents legacy. Discipline. Brotherhood. And under head coach Robert Valdez, that legacy continues to grow.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AB SYKES PHOTOGRAPHY



When Robert Valdez accepted the role at St. Augustine in December 2023, it wasn't just a career move—it was a return to the very city that shaped him.

His journey to this moment didn't begin with headlines or championships. It began as a young man, searching for something to hold onto.

"As a youngster, I couldn't make the weight limit cut-offs for NORD football, so I could never play," Valdez recalled in a recent interview. "It was not until junior high school at Edna Karr Junior High, under the guidance of Al Ott, that I found it.

"I just loved everything about it," Valdez added.

That love only deepened at O. Perry Walker High School in Algiers on the West Bank of New Orleans, where he played offensive tackle and understood early that football could be his pathway forward. College seemed far-fetched without a scholarship, but that opportunity came through Southern University, where he became a key part of national championship football teams in 1993 and 1995.

It was there, in Baton Rouge, that something clicked for him. Coaching wasn't just an option; it was a calling.

Valdez's identity as a former offensive lineman still defines everything he does. His teams are built from the inside out – on discipline and detail. No shortcuts. No compromises. That accountability shows

up every day in practice.

That approach has followed him through a coaching career spanning more than 25 years. It began with his first head coaching job at McKinley High School in Baton Rouge, followed by West St. John High School, where he reached five semi-finals in seven years.

Stops at Scotlandville and East St. John High Schools further cemented his winning reputation,

long before his perfect 15-0 championship season at St. James High School in 2019.

Valdez's pursuit of growth didn't stop at the high school level. In 2022, former NFL head coach Hue Jackson brought him to Grambling State as an offensive line coach.

"This was a pivotal moment in my coaching career," he recalled. "It fast-forwarded the learning curve. I learned that there is a requirement to pay attention to the details."

That attention to detail now shapes everything he does at St. Augustine, from practice structure to game preparation.

After his time at Grambling, Coach Valdez was prepared to accept the head coaching position at East Ascension High School. But, shortly before making that decision, he received a second offer from St. Augustine High School.

"At the time, my dad was in New Orleans recovering from prostate cancer, and my grandson was also growing up here. "I was also smitten with St. Augustine High School's mission to provide young Black men with a top-tier education and help them become part of a tremendous legacy of brotherhood,"

Valdez said.

"This place spoke to my soul," Valdez continued, "It was a great opportunity for me to align myself with the values of the school and its mission. St. Augustine is different. It prepares our graduates to lead. So, my wife and I decided that St. Augustine High School was the best place for us."

"While most people look at the wins and losses on the football field, said Valdez. "I look at the culture that we are establishing. The culture was here. We just need to refocus on it."

Father Howard W. Byrd, S.S.J., who has spent decades shaping young men at St. Augustine, sees that culture firsthand and credits the man leading it.

"I love the character of Coach Valdez. He's a very pleasant man," Father Byrd said. "I'm a die-hard fan at the football games. I have great seats, directly on the field. I can see the school's mission playing out on the field, even when things get a little rough," he added.

Valdez's "refocus on the culture" has already produced results. In just his second year of coaching, St. Augustine returned to the state championship game at the Caesars Superdome. But the real transformation is deeper.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AB SYKES PHOTOGRAPHY

# SPORTS COVER STORY



Raina Valdez, Leah Valdez, Lorynn Valdez and Coach Robert Valdez holding Hayze Valdez | PHOTOS COURTESY OF COACH ROBERT VALDEZ

“This is not all about the W’s and L’s,” he said. “What we do on the field is for fun. What we do in the hallways – that’s to develop leaders.”

The numbers support that mission, resulting in a 3.4 team GPA, 40 honor roll students, and nearly 20 National Honor Society members.

Ask senior wide receiver Ray’Quan Williams what stands out, and he doesn’t hesitate to cite the football team. It’s like a brotherhood.”

“Coach Valdez is a good person,” Williams says. “He gets us ready for the games, and he’s preparing us for life. I also like oach’s mental toughness,” he added. “I heard he broke his nose once and put it back in place himself. That’s my kind of coach.”

Even the school band gets into the action. The band members’ motivation emanates from Coach Valdez’s energy. “We can feel him working to be his best, and it shows in the results,” band member Preston Fleury continued. “It’s been about fifty years since we made it to the State Finals.”

For alumni like Louis Franks Holmes III, quarterback of the undefeated 1975 team, the similarities are undeniable.

“I saw that camaraderie again this past year,” he said. “Coach Valdez is connecting with the players and the mission. He’s brought life back to Friday night games.”

Coach Valdez is the first to admit his job demands his all. That honesty reflects the intensity he brings to the playing field. That mindset defines the program. He doesn’t just instruct, he models.

“I don’t tell young men what to do,” he said. “I try to show them.”

With most of the state runner-up team returning, expectations are rising. “The future looks bright,” Valdez said.

Players are ready for one more shot, and this time they intend to finish.

“We are experiencing a sort of renaissance, identifying who we are and what we represent, Valdez confidently declared.”

Father Byrd says, “Coach Valdez brought us great pride this year!”

At St. Augustine, however, that identity has always been bigger than football.

It’s about leadership.

It’s about discipline.

It’s about brotherhood.

And under a coach shaped by New Orleans, strengthened by experience, and driven by an unrelenting standard, that identity continues on as 2600 is forever rising!



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS FONTENOT



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS FONTENOT