

Road trips now are much different for Poteau defensive tackle Vaka Tuifua than they were when he started his high school football career in Alaska. During his freshman and sophomore seasons, Tuifua and his Barrow Whalers teammates traveled to all their away games by airplane. Ground transportation wasn't possible in Barrow, the United States' most northern city, isn't connected by road to the rest of Alaska. The trips usually were for two or three nights. "It was kind of fun," Tuifua said. "We would fly out on a Thursday and play at 1 p.m. Saturday. Also fun for Tuifua was winning a state championship with Barrow in 2017. He made a goal-line stop on the Division III title game's penultimate play that helped preserve the six-point victory for Barrow's first championship. Tuifua, one of Oklahoma's top defensive linemen, would like to help bring Poteau (6-1) its first state football title. The Pirates are No. 3 in the Tulsa World's Class 4A rankings. "We definitely have a shot at it; this season has gone pretty good," said Tuifua, whose full first name is Vakameialo "his parents are Polynesian. Last year, Tuifua helped the Pirates go 12-1 and reach the semifinals, where he kept playing even after suffering in the first half a painful knee injury a stretched PCL (posterior cruciate ligament) in a 21-11 loss to eventual state champion Tuttle. It was a smooth transition to Poteau and Oklahoma football for Tuifua, except for the weather. In Barrow, temperatures make it above freezing only about 120 days per year. "My first practice here it was only 79 (degrees), but I felt like a melting popsicle," Tuifua said. "I got sick; I learned to drink a lot of water." Poteau coach Greg Werner was Hilddale's coach last year when he first saw Tuifua, who is 6-foot-2 and 315 pounds. "He changed our game plan," Werner said. "There were a lot of things we couldn't run with him out there. He's a dominant high school player. This is my 31st year of coaching and he's the most dominant player I've coached. He changes everything. It takes three people to block him." Last year, Tuifua had

55 tackles, including 38 solos and 12 for losses, and one interception. Werner believes

Tuifua could also be an impact player at the major college level. So far,

however, Tuifua doesn't have a major college offer, but does have offers from Houston

Baptist, Pittsburg State, Central Oklahoma and Northeastern State. "I don't think he's even approached

how good he can be," Werner said. "He works hard, he's a great student

and does the right things." And Tuifua, who has wrestled in high school and

plans to play basketball this winter, is an all-around athlete. Werner said that Tuifua

could also be used as a tight end or a power back as the

weather gets cooler. "He can do some unbelievable things," Werner said. "He's got the

best set of hands on our team and he can throw the football a

mile. He's fun to watch." Before moving, Tuifua was only familiar with the state

from watching University of Oklahoma football on television. He's hoping the move to Oklahoma

will help him fulfill his dream of playing college football. Tuifua, whose favorite NFL

player is the Los Angeles Rams' Aaron Donald, is enjoying many of the differences

between Oklahoma and Alaska. "I like being able to drive anywhere," Tuifua said. "There's

a lot more agriculture, I enjoy hunting and I baled hay for the first

time." Another difference is that in mid-October the football season in Oklahoma still has

six or seven weeks left for teams headed deep into the playoffs. Tuifua's season

would be over if he was still in Alaska. His former team, the Barrow

Whalers, lost in the title game Saturday. In this season's first seven games, he

has 30 solo tackles, with 13 for losses and six quarterback hurries. Poteau's defense,

which also includes another former Barrow player, senior linebacker Kagan Stockton, averages allowing 9.3

points and has not allowed an opponent to reach double digits in the past

five games. "Vaka is taking his game to a different level and getting better

and better," Werner said. "The sky's the limit for him." Fund established for Bartlesville

AD A GoFundMe account has been set up for Bartlesville athletic director Spence Rigdon,

who was diagnosed 3 ½ years ago with Stage 4 colon cancer. After surgeries and treatment, he is transitioning to hospice care. Rigdon's wish is that his wife and three children not be burdened with medical and mortgage debts. The account site is at: gf.me/v/c/47m/7u39w-bless-the-spence-rigdon-family where donations are accepted. Scoring record Graham in Class C, defeated Bowlegs 114-64 on Thursday, setting what is believed to be a state scoring record. Austin Fife scored nine touchdowns and Derrick Jennings passed for seven. Barry Lewis 918-581-8393 barry.lewis@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @BarryLewisTW Get in the game with our P Sports Newsletter Sent weekly directly to your inbox! Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.