

Inside Tom Herman's Unsuccessful Tenure With Texas



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Tom Herman wasn't an especially popular choice among analysts attempting to evaluate Urban Meyer's first offensive coordinator hire when he arrived at Ohio State following the tumultuous 2011 season. A former wide receiver at Cal Lutheran University, Herman had worked his way up the coaching ranks after graduating in 1997, serving as a wide receivers coach at his alma mater, a graduate assistant at Texas and an assistant all over the offensive side of the field at Sam Houston State, Texas State and Rice from 2001 to 2008.

His performance as a play caller at his latter two stops earned him the offensive coordinator job at Iowa State under first-year head coach Paul Rhoads in 2009.

In Ames, Herman's offenses never set the Big 12 ablaze, but they did see steady improvement, putting up 20.5 points per game in his first year, 21.7 in his second and 22.7 in 2011, Herman's third and final year with the Cyclones. While his groups were never lighting up the scoreboard, Herman's style and approach to the game caught the eye of then-Oregon head coach Chip Kelly, one of college football's best offensive minds who was always keeping an eye out for rising talent. Kelly wasn't looking for an offensive coordinator in the winter of 2011, but his close friend, Meyer, was.

"It started with Chip Kelly and then some other very close friends who said, 'Look at this guy,' " Meyer told reporters before Ohio State's Sugar Bowl matchup with Alabama in 2014, Herman's final season in Columbus. "I got the question, 'Who is Tom Herman? You're bringing Iowa State's offense to Ohio State?' "

Meyer made the move. Herman was announced as the next offensive coordinator at Ohio State on Dec. 8, and with it came a flurry of compliments from his new boss, who called Herman one of the brightest minds in college football and compared his style to the approach that Meyer had used to make his name at Bowling Green, Utah and Florida.

"Tom Herman has one of the bright young minds in college football," said Meyer. "His philosophies are very similar to those of my own."

It wasn't a decision met with immense excitement in the Ohio State world. Herman was a relatively unknown figure in college football, and those Iowa State stats left a lot to be desired when contrasting

them with the usual expectations that came with a Meyer offense. Despite that, when Meyer landed on Herman at the end of his search, he called it a no-brainer. He claimed that he “wanted to have a guy that’s going to not have an ego, has a good understanding of our offense and be extremely intelligent to learn what we do and adapt it to what he does.”

Meyer was very clear that he felt Herman fit that bill. Herman agreed with him.

“It wouldn’t matter if (Meyer) called every play on Saturday or if I called every play on Saturday,” Herman said. “This is the Ohio State University, and this is an opportunity for me to learn from him and coach under him and be a part of his staff at this university. I’m like a pig in slop right now. It’s been awesome.

“What we’re going to do offensively is time-tested, it’s proven, it’s what they’ve been successful doing at many different stops for Coach Meyer.”

It wasn’t always smooth sailing for the Meyer and Herman partnership, including the infamous instance of Meyer referring to the passing attack that Herman - along with former wide receivers coach Zach Smith - directed as a “clown show” and “ineffective” in 2012. His issues with the group came, in part, from the growing pains felt by quarterback Braxton Miller and a receiving corps led by Corey Brown and Devin Smith that seemed to lack the kind of ability needed to win one-on-one battles.

The Buckeye rushing attack was strong in Meyer’s first year, but Ohio State averaged just 181.5 yards per game in the air, with Miller completing 58.3 percent of his passes. Brown, the team’s leading receiver, averaged just 11.2 yards per catch, as most dropbacks saw Miller fire to a receiver much closer to the line of scrimmage than Meyer would have liked. Herman came to Ohio State as the coach tasked with fixing the passing attack, and in year one, it simply wasn’t fixed.

However, Ohio State was not without progress to be excited about moving forward. Miller had his two best games in terms of quarterback rating in the month of November, putting up a 187.9 rating against Illinois on Nov. 3 and a 184.3 score in a close win over Michigan on Nov. 24. The young quarterback seemed to be taking steps forward under Herman’s tutelage.

“We are at least pleased with the progress,” Herman said in an interview with Big Ten Network shortly after the end of the 2012 season. “Satisfied isn’t the right word, but we are pleased with the progress. When you take a step back, I would say we are on a very good trajectory. Would we like to be at the pinnacle? Absolutely, but we understand Rome wasn’t built in a day. We are going to accelerate the process as much as we can, but we like the trajectory.”

Two years later, Herman and Meyer had constructed Rome - or the college football offense version of it at least. The 2014 Buckeye offense - led by a brand-new starter at quarterback in J.T. Barrett after Miller’s season-ending preseason injury - dominated the Big Ten in the air and on the ground. The zone rushing attack paired with a healthy dose of quarterback keepers terrorized opposing fronts, while Barrett quickly found his comfort in the passing game and put up one of the best seasons from a freshman signal caller in school history, racking up 2,834 yards through the air with 34 touchdowns and a 64.6 completion rate.

That it managed to kick into another gear entirely in the postseason with third-string quarterback Cardale Jones at the helm on the way to a national title was just a cherry on top. Herman had accomplished exactly what Meyer had asked him to when he hired him, while showing the nation what

Meyer had seen three years prior - that he was one of the brightest young minds in football. Not wanting to miss out on the opportunity to cash in on his newfound popularity, Herman signed on to be the next head coach at Houston on Dec. 15, 2014, considered to be one of the top jobs at the Group of Five level.

It was a move that earned Meyer's blessing, which mattered quite a bit to Herman. The two had grown very close, and Herman respected Meyer's opinion on just about everything when it came to football coaching.

"A great person, a great family man, a guy that understands football." Meyer said of Herman in 2015. "Very smart. He came to us with a tough situation. We asked him to learn our offense and help coordinate it, and he did a wonderful job.

"I think he matured and was really ready to take on his own program. I'm glad he went to Houston because of all the great players. He was looking at some other jobs previous to that, and I kept discouraging him because it's all about can you go get good players in your program."

Herman respected the Meyer blueprint so much that he openly embraced it as his own. He conducted interviews confirming that he wanted to be like his former boss, that he wanted to build his program as Meyer built Ohio State or Florida. The prevailing thought on Herman in the summer of 2015 was that while Houston couldn't get Meyer, it could get the next best thing: Meyer's clone.

His openness about his inspirations and intentions in Houston sparked a Wall Street Journal story headlined "If you can't hire Urban Meyer, can you clone him?" entering Herman's first year with the Cougars, featuring a direct mention of the comparisons from the man himself.

"People can say that I'm just copying Urban Meyer," Herman told the Journal. "You're damn right I'm copying Urban Meyer!"

Former Meyer players and people covering the team took notice as well. As soon as Herman stepped on campus, the Houston Cougars became his team. They would do things his way on the practice field, he would get after it on the recruiting trail, and he would demand respect while doing it, all directly pulled from the Meyer playbook.

"You can tell he's trying to be like Coach Meyer," said former Meyer player Dallas Baker in an interview with ESPN in 2016. "He talks and it's like, 'That's something Coach Meyer would say.' It helps recruit and get the most out of guys. Coach Meyer makes you feel like you could run through a wall, and Herman does the same."

That wasn't lost on those covering Herman either.

"One of the things that stuck out to me in Herman's two years at Houston, and especially that first year, was that his program very much mirrored the stuff that I read and knew about Ohio State," Sam Khan Jr., who covered Herman at Houston for ESPN, told BSB. "It very much was a program built in the image that Urban Meyer's Ohio State program was built. And to that point, I almost did a story about that.

"We ended up not doing it, but I'd considered doing it, something about just how they were trying to turn Houston into Ohio State South. That's what struck me. The core values and the way he talks, the

words he used – there were all types of parallels you could draw from how that program was run to how Ohio State’s program is.

“And to his credit, it succeeded. He went 22-4 in Houston in two seasons. They recruited their butts off. And obviously they did have very intense practices and they were very much on the aggressive end of physicality, and it worked to their benefit. As a football team, they were very successful. They were really successful as an underdog against highly-ranked teams in his time there. And he did a lot to change Houston football and to push the program forward from a team that was constantly trying to knock on the New Year’s Six door to actually one that was known that could do it and had the reputation of one that could do it on a regular basis.”

As Khan alluded to, it did succeed. Herman won immediately, and he won often in Houston. The Cougars, led by dual-threat quarterback Greg Ward, rattled off 10 straight wins to open the Herman era, knocking off Power Five foes in Louisville and Vanderbilt along with top-25 opponent Memphis on the way to the No. 13 spot in the AP poll. A loss to UConn on Nov. 21 broke Houston’s heart and ended its chances of truly competing for a College Football Playoff spot, but Herman’s group responded, much like Meyer’s did after a tough loss, with a trio of huge victories. The Cougars finished the year with a blowout 52-31 victory over No. 16 Navy, a 24-13 win over No. 20 Temple in the American Athletic Conference title game and a 14-point toppling of No. 9 Florida State in the Peach Bowl, 38-24.

Under its new head coach, Houston played with a 75-pound chip on its shoulder and the confidence of a top-five program. The Cougars took the direction of their head coach and carried themselves like national champions, which played tremendously well with the Houston fan and booster base.

“Because Houston is an underdog,” Khan said on why Houston fans took to Herman so quickly. “And that outward confidence, the Houston fans fed off of that. Because they love nothing more, Houston alumni, Houston fans, to stick it to the Texas, the Texas A&Ms of the world. And this was a guy that they thought, ‘Hey, he’s a really good coach.’ And then clearly, after his first year, he proves he can win. And then the thought is, ‘This is a guy that other people are going to want, and this is our guy. And despite the fact that we have fewer resources, despite the fact that we don’t have a roster full of five-star recruits, we are still going to take this guy and we’re going to beat you.’”

“And Houston fans feed off of a guy who can take the insecurity that comes with being a have-not in the college football world and allow them to still beat the teams that are the haves. They absolutely fed off his personality, his confidence. The #HTownTakeover thing, that became a huge deal. It was all over the program. You would go around the building and there was #HTownTakeover all over the walls. It was all over social media. It was catching on with the recruits. The fans wore a T-shirt with it. And that confidence that he had and the bravado that he brought was something that people really, really took to.”

For Herman, Houston provided the perfect opportunity to stick closely to the Meyer blueprint for success. He was allowed and encouraged to be cocky, to make himself the face of the program and to serve as both the head coach and as an almost Don King-like marketer of his team. Houston wanted to play fast, win big and then celebrate in its opponent’s face, which it did immediately to kick off the 2016 season in a 33-23 win over then-No. 3 Oklahoma. Houston didn’t just indulge Herman’s personality, it embraced it fully.

“He had carte blanche to do things how he wanted to do them,” Khan explained. “There was not going to be very much interference with how Tom wanted to do it. If Tom wanted this or that, they either tried

to do it for him or if they couldn't do it for him, Tom did it himself.

"There was a time where Tom kept asking the athletic administration for some new flooring going into the locker room because they were trying to improve facilities. Houston's facilities were a little bit outdated. And the administration kept saying, 'Well, the budget's not there for it. The budget's not there for it. We can't do that,' and that's a common answer at Houston. Well, guess what? He took Yancy McKnight, his strength coach, and a few other guys, and they went down there and took sledgehammers and they tore up the floor themselves. They're like, 'Well, can we now get a new floor?'

"Tom did that. And Tom had the freedom to do that at Houston. Because with his reputation, his pedigree coming from Ohio State and his history as coordinator, they very much thought he was a guy that could take them to another level. And so he had carte blanche to do stuff like that. And he took advantage of it. He renovated facilities. They did, I think it was a million-dollar locker room renovation. It's not a lot at a Power Five program that wins a lot, but at Houston, that's a lot of money to spend on the locker room.

"They started funding for an indoor practice facility that has since been completed. It's one of the better indoor practice facilities you'll find in the country. I think it was completed after he left, though. But those things, he was very aggressive about fundraising, very aggressive about facilities, very aggressive about recruiting."

Though Herman fell off a bit in year two with Houston, putting up a 9-3 record with close losses to Navy and Memphis (and a 38-16 stunner against a bad SMU team), it did little to affect his ascent to the very top of just about every Power Five coaching search in America. There couldn't have been more than 10 schools in America that didn't want a piece of the next coming of Urban Meyer, an offense-first, recruiting maniac who wanted to win every game by 100 points. Leading the pack were Texas and LSU, the former of which had just let go of another former Meyer assistant - Charlie Strong - while the latter was moving on from longtime head coach Les Miles and looking for someone to modernize an offense that had become stale.

As Sports Illustrated's Ross Dellenger uncovered in a 2019 story, Herman nearly landed with the Tigers. He had paperwork lined up and ready to go and was set to be the replacement for Miles in 2017 and moving forward. However, with LSU interim head coach and native son Ed Orgeron impressing after taking over early in the season, LSU found itself with chilly feet and wanted to be sure it was making the right decision. Meanwhile, Herman found himself in the same boat. Texas, which had given him one of his first shots in coaching, wanted him just as badly as LSU did.

After a bidding war orchestrated by Herman's agent, Trace Armstrong, LSU backed out and went instead with Orgeron, while Texas celebrated its coup, bringing Ohio State's former Texas state recruiting ace and the Houston hotshot who had managed to bring five-star defensive tackle Ed Oliver to the G5. It seemed like the perfect fit, one that Texas fans believed would bring the Longhorns back to the heights they had reached under longtime head coach Mack Brown.

At one of the biggest jobs in America, Herman had the fanbase on his side, and shortly after his first season, a 7-6 campaign, he earned a new fan in former TCU and new Texas athletic director Chris Del Conte, who was hired in December of 2017. Despite a slower-than-expected first season, the energy and excitement were high in Austin.

"I think a lot of it certainly was the newness factor that Herman had going for him," The Daily Texan

associate sports editor Stephen Wagner told BSB. "Texas (had) also (hired) a new athletic director. I think the hire of Chris Del Conte as the new AD definitely helped a lot, because Del Conte was a really big Herman guy and Del Conte really got the entire fan base behind Herman and behind the team. It really gave Texas an energy and a life that had, frankly, just been absent during the Charlie Strong era and during the last few of the Mack Brown days."

After that slow start, the hype around Herman seemed to be realized in 2018.

Texas landed a top recruiting class in Herman's first full cycle (No. 3 in 2018) and was on the precipice of another in the class of 2019, while it grew toward its ultimate goal of contention on the field as well. An early loss to Maryland stung, but quarterback Sam Ehlinger settled into the Herman offense as Texas rattled off six straight wins, rising to No. 6 in the AP rankings. A pair of close losses, one at Oklahoma State (38-35) and one against No. 12 West Virginia (42-41) again halted momentum, but it looked as though a switch had flipped in Austin. Herman was the guy, Ehlinger was the quarterback of the future, and Texas had found its own Meyer, even if it couldn't get the real thing - though not for a lack of trying.

"In 2018, I think what we saw was just that Texas finally started winning those close games that they were losing in 2017," Wagner explained. "You look at the Texas Tech game (in 2017), Texas was up by a field goal with less than four minutes to go. Then Sam (Ehlinger) threw two interceptions on back-to-back drives. Texas Tech scores the game winning touchdown, and Texas misses out on an eight-win season in Herman's first year.

"And you look at the USC game where Sam Ehlinger fumbled on the 1-yard line in overtime. In 2018, we finally saw Texas start to pull out those close wins. And I really do think that was a mixture of both luck, development and just a few other things too."

All of that came to a head in Texas' final game of the 2018 season. While it entered at just 9-4, the Longhorns earned a nod to the Big 12's New Year's Six game tie-in and were slated to take on No. 6 Georgia, which had come up just short of a national title the year prior. A win over the Bulldogs would further legitimize the Longhorn rise to prominence and set the tone moving into 2019 and beyond. Despite a late Georgia comeback effort, Texas did pull off the win, capped by Ehlinger exclaiming, "We're back," in reference to the running joke among college football acolytes that Texas is always on the precipice of returning to power but can never quite reach that peak. Herman, always the showman, went right along with his star quarterback, as it matched the ethos of the program he wanted to build. It was confident to the point of cockiness, and it painted Texas as the title contender that Herman promised he would build.

"He was a guy who constantly talked about the national championship," Wagner said of Herman. "Picturing getting back into the national championship. Picturing bringing Texas back. After that 2018 season, when Texas won the Sugar Bowl and Sam Ehlinger had that kind of famous 'we're back' moment, Herman just kind of smiled and chuckled. He didn't exactly shoot it down. And I think that was his way of sort of saying, 'Yeah, we have arrived. Yeah, this is my program. And yeah, this is the new direction that we're going in and nothing's going to stop us.' But obviously something did."

Despite improvements in roster talent from two straight years of elite recruiting and another year of development for Ehlinger, Texas didn't take another step forward in 2019. In fact, it regressed, putting up an 8-5 mark that saw more close losses, this time to No. 6 LSU, No. 6 Oklahoma and No. 13 Baylor, along with dropped games against unranked foes TCU and Iowa State. Suddenly, Herman's big

personality and confidence were no longer being considered a positive or as a crucial part of his program. It was an inhibitor, and it took on a new name - ego. The story was no longer about Texas returning to form, it was about a supremely confident coach with very little to show for himself after three years of hype about bringing elite football back to Texas, or about making it the Ohio State of the South.

Herman's antics began to wear thin with the media as well. His former employer Meyer was consistently and openly combative with those who hoped to cover him, but he had never lost enough games to merit any significant pushback to that. Meyer won games, and when a coach wins games, it's difficult to question their approach. Herman was no longer winning games, at least not on that level, and he had alienated a significant portion of the Texas media base from day one.

"I think that was one of the things that ultimately kind of put him in a bad place with some media," Wagner said. "Certainly not all media, but Herman definitely tried to be the intimidator with the media. Shortly after he was hired, I think this would have been in 2017, he held sort of a meet-and-greet pizza party with some of the local press. And basically, he tried to use scare tactics to, for lack of better term, try to pressure some of the local media into writing more favorable stories of Texas.

"And he did that by saying that he's really going to run a super tight program. He's not going to have moles. He's not going to have rats on the inside. He's not going to have people leaking information about injuries. He's not going to have people getting away with that stuff. And if you try to do a slam piece or you try to expose Texas, the response to that is going to be that the amount of coverage that you're allowed to give is going to be limited or affected in some way. And I think that was an early tactic that Herman used that really sort of put him in bad faith or that at least got him off on the wrong foot with local media."

For Herman, the issues off the field weren't just sparked by his own actions and tack with the media. His team's struggles matched his own. Texas found itself oscillating wildly between excellent and terrible, buoyed by title-caliber highs and marred by losses so bad that they'd make a winless coach blush.

"A lot of what we saw was just a ton of inconsistency," Wagner said. "You saw Herman coach truly incredible games. You look at 2018, the win over OU in the Red River Rivalry. Herman really called an A-plus game. The Sugar Bowl that year as well, again, Herman just coached an all-around perfect game. LSU (in 2019), even though, it was a loss. From a coaching standpoint, I don't know if there was anything more that Tom Herman could have done to win that game. He pulled out all the stops, trick plays, going for it on fourth down, being ultra-aggressive.

"Then you look at other games, like the Iowa State loss in Ames in 2019, where Texas has the ball, there's about four minutes left, it's a grind-out-the-clock situation. And Herman runs straight up the middle twice for a gain of a yard each and then a jail screen gets deflected to the turf and Iowa State runs out the clock, kicks a game-winning field goal."

Entering 2020, it was clear that Herman would need positive momentum to silence a rapidly growing contingency of Texas fans and powerbrokers who were weary of his antics and wanted him out. It was the first time that he found himself without the support of a majority of the fan base in his short career as a head coach, the first time that his Meyer carbon-copy schtick didn't immediately yield wins. It was that personality, or, as Wagner defines it, that ego that ultimately led to Herman's downfall and eventual ouster at Texas in January of 2021, shortly after the end of a 7-3 campaign.

"I think the newness really didn't wear off until this past season," Wagner said. "Herman was very publicly on the hot seat, and Texas was actively courting Urban Meyer (along with) Dan Mullen and James Franklin at Florida and Penn State. Where things really fell off is, quite frankly, I think a lot of it was just Tom Herman's ego. This was a guy who was touted to be the next Urban Meyer, both when he won the Broyles Award at Ohio State back in 2014 and when he had all that success in Houston. He was a guy who was touted as being the next big thing.

"He was the new big name. He was the hot, young name in coaching that everybody was hungry to get their hands on. LSU really, really wanted Tom Herman too. Everybody thought this guy definitely is the next Urban Meyer.

"From what we saw at Houston, he really did look like he was going to be the guy to turn Texas around. I think Herman let that get to his head a little bit. And I think at times he thought that he was a better coach than he actually was. I think he also thought that his tactics and his strategy was a little bit more superior than it actually turned out to be."

By the time Herman's final season at Texas rolled around, however, even his former employer - with whom Herman's relationship had soured - had completed a full flip on his outlook of the Longhorn head coach.

"Let's talk about the why. Here is the why," Meyer said of Texas' struggles on FOX's "Big Noon Kickoff" in October of 2020. "There's two reasons - No. 1, evaluation. You have to really, thoroughly go back and say, 'Are we evaluating the right way in our program?' But here's where I want to spend a second talking about development. Once they get on your campus, you have to develop them. And when I say development, it's weight room, it's training room, it's nutritionists - it might even be a sports psychologist - and then, of course, it's going to be the assistant coaches.

"So the what is, 'Yeah, they haven't had many players drafted.' That's fine. The average viewer can say, 'OK, that's the what.' But let's dig deep, lift up the hood and say why - it's evaluation process and it's development of the player. If the NFL draft doesn't start showing more Texas Longhorn players every spring, it's going to be the same old story."

The obvious question is one that Herman might be asking himself for a long time: Why didn't it work? How did Herman's approach work so well in Houston but fail so spectacularly with the Longhorns? The answer, as Khan puts it, comes back to expectations and environment.

"Houston was a place where there's not as much pressure," Khan explained. "Texas has a lot of external pressure from big money boosters, and it is the flagship program in the state of Texas. There is a certain pressure that comes with that. Houston has been on the outside looking in on Power Five conferences since the Southwest Conference broke up in 1996. The Texas and the Ohio States of the world are the haves. Houston is one of the have-nots, so to speak.

"There is obviously expectation there, but the fan support is not as rabid. They're not going to sell out their 40,000-seat stadium on a week-to-week basis. They're just not. It's just not what Houston is. And so the pressure is not there."

For Herman, that lack of pressure - or the willingness of a program to give him the reins - may be the key to all of this. Meyer's approach to coaching explicitly calls for him to become the face of a program, the man in charge of everything that happens within the football wing of his university. He requires full

autonomy.

If Herman's tenure in Houston is any indication, he can pull off that style. However, if his time spent in Texas is just as instructive, a school like Houston - one that lacks the kind of booster involvement and pressure of a school like Texas or Ohio State - may be the best place for Herman to do that. The best Herman, as Wagner explained, is an involved Herman, just as the best Meyer is an involved Meyer. At Texas, Herman just wasn't as involved as the job required.

"I think a lot of it just comes back to ego and the idea of, 'Well my players are superior, we're playing a team that we're perceived to be better than. All I'm going to have to do is step aside and let the players win this game. Because if I get more involved, I'm just going to lose this game for the players.' And in fact, that wasn't the case at all," Wagner said. "Whenever we really saw Texas at its best under Herman was whenever Herman was ultra-involved and he was ultra-aggressive, and a direct contributor to the play calling.

"But we didn't always see that, and as a result, I think things kind of fell apart, at least from a consistency standpoint. Finishing three straight seasons with at least seven wins and finishing in the top 25 all three years - that's really incredible for a lot of programs.

"But at Texas that's nowhere near the standard."