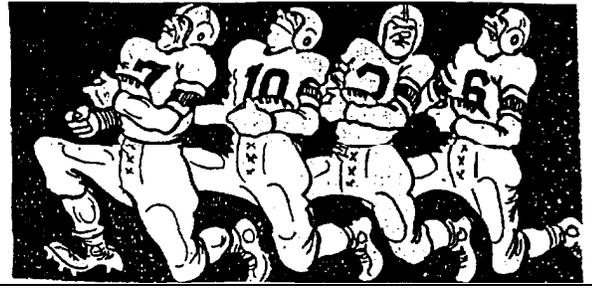

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BOBBY CAVAZOS A VAQUERO IN THE BACKFIELD

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Spike Dykes' decision to retire as Texas Tech head football coach following the 1999 season led school administrators to commence a nationwide search for his replacement. One individual mentioned as a potential successor, Clemson University offensive coordinator Rich Rodriguez, quickly emerged as a favorite candidate. Rodriguez was a hot commodity for in the two previous seasons he had helped improve sagging programs at Tulane University and Clemson.

Rodriguez visited Lubbock in November and impressed officials so much that local media claimed he had been offered the job. However, during the courtship ritual with Rodriguez, a most unpleasant event occurred at a Red Raider Club function. An individual, described as "an old blowhard," railed against administrators for considering "someone from Juarez" for this post. Rodriguez eventually turned down the job and, with time, the tempest faded.

This fiasco in Texas Tech football history revealed that for at least one backward thinker in Lubbock, individuals with Spanish surnames have no role to play in a sport that, many insist, instills the "keystones of character" in young American males. This gentleman's feelings blind him to a fascinating and important era of Texas Tech football, and the role that a Mexican played in bringing the Red Raiders national attention and eventual admittance to the Southwest Conference. Long before the Rodriguez incident, a proud son of the King Ranch, Bobby Cavazos, galloped into Jones Stadium and helped bring prominence to the Red and Black The 1953 season, during which Tech finished with an 11-1-0 record and Cavazos earned selection as Second-Team All-American, still ranks as one of the best in school history.

During the past 25 years the study of Mexican-American history has changed dramatically, and while much has been learned, Hispanic contributions in certain facets of American life still remain relatively unexplored. Athletic endeavor is one such area. The social history of football (at all levels) is still framed, almost exclusively, in terms of black-white interactions. Given Texas' ethnic composition, this omission leaves a gap in historical understanding. Was participation in gridiron competition by Spanish-speakers an avenue for improved social opportunities and racial relations? Confusion regarding this question is evident, and only further research can clarify the changes, if any, that took place because of athletic competition and interaction. Bobby Cavazos' story provides an opportunity to begin exploring such issues within 1950s Texas history.

The Cavazos' family history in South Texas can be traced into the 1800s, and Lauro Cavazos, Sr. was born in 1894 and arrived at the famous King Ranch (the massive cattle and horse ranch estimated in size between 350,000 and 600,000 acres) in 1912. During a storied career Lauro Sr. participated in skirmishes with Mexican bandits, helped develop the first American breed of

cattle, and in 1926 became the first foreman of Mexican descent at the King Ranch. He married Thomasa Quintanilla in 1923, and together they raised five children, a daughter Sarita, and brothers Lauro Jr., Richard, Bobby, and Joe. A 1982 article by a Houston Chronicle reporter described Lauro Sr. as “under-educated” and “church-mouse poor!” but his experience at the Ranch gave him a sense of better possibilities for his children.

While not formally versed in politics and the rhetoric of what historians have called “the Mexican American generation,” the Cavazos instilled in their children many of the same values and aspirations espoused by organizations such as LULAC and AGIF during the 1940s and 1950s. Education and loyalty to nation and family were particularly stressed. Lauro Cavazos Jr., who became president of Texas Tech in 1980, recalls that his father’s advice to his children was to “educate yourself. It’s the one thing nobody can ever take from you It is forever.” In an era when few Mexican American children completed elementary school, all five of the Cavazos siblings earned college degrees.

As the children of a King ranch official, Bobby and his siblings lived a different life than did most Mexicano and Mexican American children in Texas. Their father was a respected individual who was “the judge, the jury, the whole shebang, to the men under his rule.” Yet although they were members of a prominent “familia,” with impeccable credentials in the local community, Lauro Sr.’s children did not always escape all manifestations of racial discrimination.

As part of the family’s commitment to education the clan moved to Kingsville and established an in-town residence convenient to all the schools when the oldest child, daughter Sarita, reached high school age. Bobby followed his sister, Lauro Jr., and Richard and entered Kingsville High in 1946. Bobby quickly distinguished himself in athletic competition by lettering in football, basketball, and track during his freshman year, and at the end of the 1947 and 1948 seasons he earned Honorable Mention on the Kingsville Record’s All-South Texas football team. Bobby rounded out his high school career in 1949 by being named to the 14AA Sportswriters’ All-District basketball team, participating in the Border Olympics in Laredo, and helping Kingsville win the district’s track and field meet. After graduating, Bobby traveled to Stephenville and played one season for the John Tarleton Junior College Plowboys football team; distinguishing himself by finishing as the third leading scorer in the Southwest Junior College Conference before graduating from Tarleton J.C. in January 1950.

The Cavazos’ ties to South Texas seemed to prescribe Bobby’s return to Kingsville and a possible stint in the backfield with his hometown Texas A&I Javelinas. But the academic and athletic careers of his older brothers instead stimulated a move to Texas Tech, a campus on the plains of West Texas, more than 600 miles from the King Ranch. Lauro Jr. was the first of the brood to travel to Lubbock, as he accompanied a favorite zoology professor, Dr. J.C. Cross, from A&I. Richard, who majored in geology, soon followed in the footsteps of his older brother and made history at Texas Tech by becoming the first Mexican American ever to play football for the Red Raiders. He had played at Kingsville High and decided to try out for the squad at Tech in 1949. The team’s equipment manager, apparently surprised that a “Mexican” wanted to play football, refused to issue him a uniform until the coach told him to. Two days later, Coach Dell Morgan invited Dick to eat with the team, and on the third day he moved into the athletic dorm Bobby followed his siblings to Texas Tech in 1950 and starred on the freshman team that season.

The Cavazos brothers arrived in a locale with a significant Mexican American presence, but one in which Spanish-surnamed people faced difficult circumstances. The economic survival of most “familias” in West Texas was directly tied to cotton production, and author Andres A. Tijerina estimates that in 1950, roughly 3200 Mexican Americans lived permanently in a barrio in northeast Lubbock, while more than 40,000 migrant workers temporarily moved into the county every year and lived in labor camps on the outskirts of area cities and towns where they were

usually deprived of city facilities and utilities. Conditions for permanent residents were not much better than for migrants. According to a Lubbock city study, one quarter of barrio houses had more than seven persons per house; in addition to which more than 60 percent of the dwellings were classified as “dilapidated.”

The Texas Tech football program commenced in 1925 and had featured some outstanding teams that posted impressive won/loss records and participated in several bowl games during the 1930s and 1940s. The Red Raiders were often in the thick of the Border Conference title chase, considered a “minor” alliance, and fans, alumni, and administrators dreamed of a time when Tech would join other major Texas universities in the mighty and nationally prominent Southwest Conference (SWC).

Playing a minor conference schedule damaged the Texas Tech team’s reputation and chances for nationwide recognition. In 1951 the Associated Press writer Wilbur Martin laid bare the Red Raiders’ “shame,” when he stated that “Tech has a hard time attracting good football players. Most want to play in the ‘big league’ conference. In fact, while Tech is a major college, many sportswriters are inclined to value its players ‘Little All-America’ prospects instead of for the big team.” While not yet willing to bring African Americans onto campus, the school’s athletic chieftains eagerly scoured the country for young men to bring glory (and possible SWC membership) to the Red and Black. An August 1951 column by Don Oliver summarized some of the community’s hopes: “Hooray for us Techsans! We don’t care where the boys come from as long as they’re the ‘right kind’ of boys and can play winning football.”

Very soon after Bobby’s arrival he proved that, although a “Mexican,” he was one of the “right kind” of boys. An injury to starting halfback Frank Graves early in the 1951 season gave Cavazos an opportunity to prove his mettle in his first collegiate start against the University of Houston. Although Tech lost to the Cougars,

Bobby ran for 103 yards. He continued his dazzling running display against two of the better SWC teams that season, gaining 119 yards against Texas Christian (a 33-19 Tech victory), and 117 yards against Baylor (a 40-20 setback). After the Baylor loss, the Red Raiders crushed the lesser opposition from the Border Conference, finishing with a 7-4-0 record, and earned a spot in the Sun Bowl where Tech scored its first bowl victory, defeating College of the Pacific 25-14. Bobby finished the season with 706 rushing yards on 138 carries, nine touchdowns, and earned the first of three consecutive All-Border Conference selections. Mexican American or not, here was a player that could help Tech win consistently.

Prior to the 1952 season athletic directors of the SWC once again raised the question of the Red Raiders’ admission. To impress officials with their drawing power, Tech agreed to add 13,000 temporary seats to Jones Stadium for a game against Baylor. Unfortunately, the Bears won the game 21-10 and 1952 turned out to be a sour season on the field and in the boardroom as Tech failed once again in its bid to enter the SWC. While Coach Dewitt Weaver’s squad slipped

dramatically (falling to 3-7-1 and leading the nation in fumbles lost), Bobby continued his stellar play. He rushed for 674 yards on 124 carries and scored 10 touchdowns, a lone bright light in an otherwise dismal season. The impact of these two campaigns led Bill Holmes, the university's sports information director, to initiate a campaign designed to garner All-America honors for Tech's 'Kineno"—Bobby Cavazos. During the 1953 season neither Bobby nor his teammates disappointed the fans of West Texas.

Vaquero imagery tying Bobby to the famous King Ranch was on constant display during his senior season. Meant to improve his standing with the national media, some of the materials used stereotypical imagery of his "Spanish' roots. One article likened Bobby to several of the Ranch's famous racing horses: "From the King Ranch which gave . . . Assault and Middleground to the racing world, comes another front runner, this one a football player.' One cartoon depicted Bobby as a swashbuckling "conquistador" using a sword to defeat his opponents. The publicity blitz, backed by Tech's impressive on-field play, drew increased attention for both Cavazos and the Red Raiders. His best performance came during a 52-27 rout of the Arizona Wildcats, as Tech ran up an impressive 568 yards of total offense with Bobby accounting for four touchdowns, 169 yards on 13 carries, and one pass completion for 17 yards. By this point local writers began referring to Bobby as having played his typical "All-American type of game.

Various personal and team honors followed the storybook 1953 campaign that saw Tech finish 10-1-0 in the regular season. Bobby's selection as a Second Team All-American demonstrated to both media and football fans that a Border Conference team could field athletes that compared with big-school stars. Cavazos finished second in the nation in scoring (with 80 points that included 13 touchdowns), and racked up an impressive 757 rushing yards on only 97 carries (7.8 yards per carry). Although his statistics were comparable to other major stars around the country, Bobby's talent could not overcome his conference reputation as a "second tier" league.

In December 1953 the Texas Tech football team received an invitation to play in the 1954 Gator Bowl game in Jacksonville, Florida against the Auburn Tigers. The national stage, that for which so many of Tech's fans had yearned, was finally acknowledging the Red Raiders and, in large part, the exploits of a 'Mexican" who got them there. The King Ranch's native son performed brilliantly in his final collegiate appearance, rushing for 141 yards and scoring three touchdowns, in leading the Red Raiders to a 35-13 victory over Auburn. The performance earned Bobby the Payton B. Burkhalter Memorial Trophy as the game's most valuable player.

In their chronicle of the history of Red Raider football, authors Ralph L. Sellmeyer and James E. Davidson pinpoint several individuals that helped Texas Tech gain entry into the SWC in May 1956. Those named included head football coach Dewitt Weaver and faculty chairman of athletics, Dr. J. William Davis, whose persuasive talents "cultivated the faculty representatives from the (various) Southwest Conference schools." The political and administrative machinations behind the scene may have helped, but it took success on the gridiron to entice the SWC to add its first new member since 1922. The championship season of 1953 was not the only reason for Texas Tech's admission to the SWC, but it certainly helped. Although a key member of a team that brought unprecedented attention and credibility to Texas Tech football, Bobby Cavazos' 1953 season did not warrant mention by the two authors.

The last two awards Bobby Cavazos garnered as a result of his 1953 feats are of particular importance in providing clues to answering the question of whether athletic prowess can mitigate potential discrimination related to ethnic backgrounds. First, Bobby won an on-campus popularity contest as classmates selected him "Mr. Texas Tech University" quite an achievement since an examination of the 1953 edition of *La Ventana* (the school's yearbook) reveals only about a dozen Spanish-surnamed students in attendance. Finally, the Texas Junior Chamber of Commerce awarded Bobby its 'Texas Amateur Athlete of 1953" award in February 1954. The

year's tally of favorable news reports and notoriety indicates the value of athletic achievement in assuaging the impact of discrimination, at least for this individual, and the positive coverage of Bobby Cavazos' exploits was surely a welcome change of pace for members of the local Spanish-speaking community.

The story of this son of the King Ranch effectively challenges the assertion of the "old blowhards," in Lubbock and elsewhere, who believe that people of Spanish-speaking descent have not participated in the history of Texas football. More importantly, the Bobby Cavazos story presents a model that can be utilized to explore other facets of Mexican American and Hispanic history. The recent work by John Carroll, Fritz Pollard: Pioneer in Racial Advancement, shows how biographies of athletes can clarify varied aspects of minority life (for example, issues relating to business and entertainment history). Few in the historical profession have mined this potentially profitable vein in Mexican-American studies. The life story of Bobby Cavazos, Texas Tech All-American (and later a soldier, rancher, businessman, musician, politician, and author), offers a promising avenue for research into seldom explored facets of Mexican American life.