



Photo by Ashley Wirz

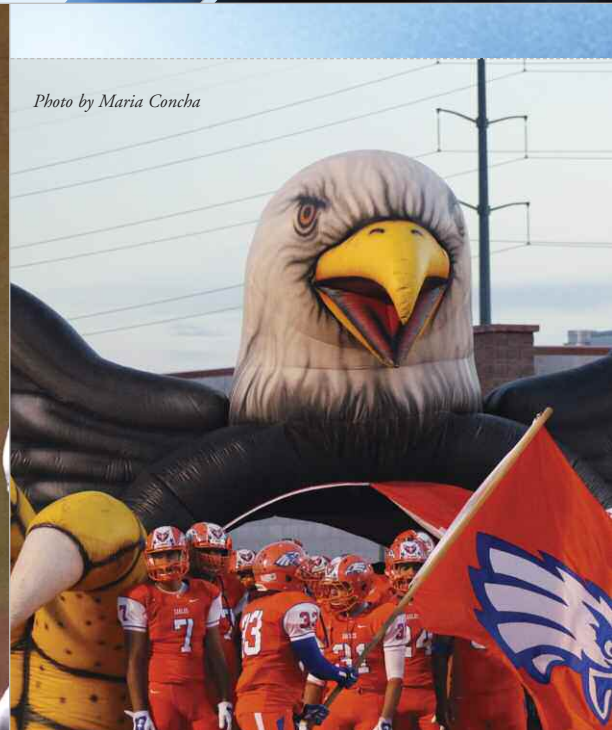


Photo by Maria Concha

SUN RISE

IN EL PASO, THE FOOTBALL FUTURE HAS NEVER BEEN BRIGHTER

By Greg Tepper, Texas Football

For most Texans, El Paso is more novelty than reality, more trivia than territory.

After all, Wichita, Kan., and Gulfport, Miss., are closer to Austin than is the Sun City, so named because it's tops in Texas, and sixth-ranked in the United States, in the number of sunny days per year.

You have to be going there to get there. Few visit — El Paso's tourism roughly a quarter the size of Austin's, and a tenth of Houston's. Fewer understand.

But spend 15 minutes in Texas' sixth-largest city, nestled between the craggy peaks of the Franklin and Hueco mountain ranges, and it's clear things are happening here, and residents are happy to tell you about them if you're ready to listen.

In Texas, though, the language that speaks the loudest is the language of football. Millions of Texans draw their map from football stadium to football stadium, between towns like Celina, Canadian and College Station, towns they know in large part because of football.

And for all intents and purposes, once you get west of the Pecos River, the silence is deafening.

But times are changing west of the Pecos. Two brothers, once reluctant arrivals, now favorite sons, chortle and rib one another between morning and afternoon workouts. A coach who made his bones in one of the toughest football factories in America grows about

the need to change his new team's football culture. A team that already has broken barriers does push-ups in the weight room while chanting "District!" on the way down and "Champs!" on the way up.

And all of them — the brothers, the coach, the team — want their voices to be heard in every corner of Texas football.

THE CANUTILLO EFFECT

Scott Brooks isn't even the most famous coach in his own family. His father, Don Brooks, is El Paso high school football royalty — winner of 229 games in 35 years as head coach of the Coronado Thunderbirds.

But as Scott Brooks reclines in his chair in the coaches' office at Canutillo High School, he cracks a sly smile. For once, he's got scoreboard on Pops.

"When we did it, I think my dad was more excited than I was," Brooks said. "He was thrilled that it finally happened in El Paso. I think someone was going to do it, and it just happened to be us, because we're getting better out here in football."

The 'it' here may seem trival to many, but for Canutillo — and, indeed, for El Paso — it was historic.

The Eagles' surge through the Class 5A Division II bracket in 2014 — past El Paso Ysleta, San Angelo Lake View, Azle and Everman and into the division semifinals — represented the first time an El Paso team made it past the third round of the playoffs.

"You heard those push-ups we do?" Brooks said, recalling his players' "District/Champs" cadence in the weight room. "Well, they started adding 'state' to it. I think they believed."

A few of the Eagles attended the 2013 division title games in Arlington and returned with the "why not us?" mentality, going so far as to write "State" in big letters on the locker room white board along with the date of the championship game.

"Growing up, we were aware that no teams were going to make it. We were one and done," said linebacker Frank Gutierrez, a leader of the defense that helped spark the Eagles' playoff drive. "We had the idea that when it's our turn, we want to do something special and put our city on the map."

With one playoff push, the Eagles nearly single-handedly pushed El Paso high school football firmly onto statewide radar screens. It wasn't Canutillo's moment; it was El Paso's moment. A team's success became a town's success as well.

"You feel like a little celebrity, I guess," Canutillo running back Joe Gutierrez, Frank's cousin, said. "Little kids are coming up to you and parents are saying 'good luck.' It was the whole city supporting us."

Canutillo's run ended at the hands of eventual champion Ennis, but the Eagles shattered the Sun City's glass ceiling. And now, Brooks thinks the gap between the relative haves of the Dallas-Fort Worth

CANUTILLO MADE EL PASO HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL HISTORY IN 2014 BY BECOMING THE FIRST SUN CITY TEAM TO MAKE IT FOUR ROUNDS DEEP IN THE PLAYOFFS, EVENTUALLY ADVANCING TO THE 5A DIVISION II STATE SEMIFINALS. THAT HAS RAISED HOPES THAT OTHER EL PASO TEAMS LIKE CORONADO (BELOW) CAN CRASH THE STATEWIDE PARTY.

Photo by Maria Concha



and Houston areas, and the relative have-nots of El Paso, is closing.

"I don't think athletically we'll ever be as good, if it were a track meet," Brooks said. "But as far as a football game, we're getting closer. We're getting coaches who go to clinics and visit colleges and do the things that need to be done."

Across town, at the school where Brooks' father became a local legend, Coronado coach Bob Anderson used Canutillo as a benchmark for his own squad.

"We had a team meeting, and I used them as an example," Anderson said. "I hope every other team in El Paso uses them as an example. Anybody can do that. You have to have the pieces, and he had the pieces this year."

Anderson, who succeeded Don Brooks in 2013, is bullish on El Paso's chances of becoming a statewide presence in high school football, but said area schools must overcome issues that include financing, facilities and, in these scenic, wide-open spaces, size: There are 23 schools in El Paso.

To put that in perspective: Dallas ISD has 2,517 more students than the combined El Paso, Socorro, Ysleta and Canutillo school districts, yet has two fewer football-playing schools.

"I think we're gaining ground," Anderson said. "I think the coaches are getting better and the players are developing better. There's still the other factors,

though. I think we are kind of diluted here in El Paso. And you just don't have the dollar investments that other schools do. When you invest money in a program, you are going to have positive results."

But in many respects, the city's relative isolation can be an asset. Both coaches mentioned they're largely unaware of what goes on in other parts of the state — Canutillo "played some teams that I've never even heard of," joked Anderson — and that helps keep players focused.

For now, in the weight room, Canutillo's continuing its climb.

"I think what we did is break the ice," Frank Gutierrez said. "I guess some kids say we can't compete with the schools from Odessa and Dallas. You know now that we did it, and other schools can do it."

"We just have to get back there," Joe Gutierrez chimed in. "And you just stay humble and work hard."

THE KUGLER EFFECT

Sean Kugler has no time or inclination for small talk. The UTEP coach's idea of pleasantries is a firm handshake and a look that says "Now what do you want?"

Kugler looks like you'd expect a former offensive

line coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers to look: shaved head, goatee, hulking frame (his senior year playing for UTEP, the guard stood 6-foot-3 and weighed 275 pounds), piercing eyes. Seeing him behind a desk is like seeing a bull standing in line at the post office.

If you've never been in a college football coach's office, this may spoil the allure: the vast majority of them look the same. An oversized desk sits in front

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— FRANK GUTIERREZ, CANUTILLO LINEBACKER

of an oaken hutch populated by framed photos of family and players, with one wall a window overlooking the stadium.

It's standard operating procedure for college football, and it may be the only standard thing about Sean Kugler.

"I don't think we're there yet," Kugler said. "I think we're chasing some teams, like Rice and Louisiana Tech. But we're gaining on them. We know we have a ways to go, but we're getting closer."

The growing pains were real. In Kugler's first sea-

SUN RISE IN EL PASO

Photo by Maria Concha



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EL PASO'S FOOTBALL SPOTLIGHT IS GROWING BIGGER THANKS TO THE SUCCESS OF CANUTILLO (ABOVE) AND HOMEGROWN PRODUCTS LIKE UTEP RUNNING BACK AARON JONES (RIGHT).

son after taking over for Mike Price in 2013, the Miners bottomed out at 2-10, their worst season since 2003. But the brief decline has been followed by a quick rebound and a bright future, thanks in large part to the Miners' unique style.

In the age of the Air Raid offense, Kugler is a throwback who reflects his surroundings, with a grinding run game and a hard-nosed defense.

Only 10 teams ran the ball at a higher rate than the Miners in 2014, and three were the service academies. At a 65.4 percent rushing rate, they were a full five percentage points clear of the next-most run-happy team in Texas, Rice.

The result: a 7-5 record and a berth in the New Mexico Bowl, the program's first postseason berth since 2010.

Kugler knows full well the challenge he faces. A native New Yorker, he was recruited to El Paso as an offensive linemen by Bill Yung before being groomed by head coach Bob Stull and position coach Andy Reid.

He knows it can be difficult to convince kids to come to El Paso, because he was once a kid who had to be convinced to come to El Paso.

"I really didn't know much about El Paso," Kugler said. "I didn't know what to expect. But when I got down here, I really enjoyed the people, really enjoyed the school. I fell in love with El Paso."

If there's one thing that Sean Kugler wants you to know, it's this: El Paso is safe. Yes, it's across the Rio Grande from Ciudad Juarez, which as recently as 2010 was ranked as one of the most violent cities in the world. But a study from CQ Press has ranked El Paso in the three safest cities in America every year since 1997, including the title of Safest City in the Country for four consecutive years from 2011 to 2014.

Those are the facts. But Kugler knows that telling a recruit and showing a recruit are two different things.

"Our main thing is getting them here," Kugler said. "There's a negative perception about UTEP and El Paso itself. But once people get down here, we have no issues. We sell the city, which is beautiful. We sell the facilities, which are some of the best in Conference USA. We sell the weather."

That fight to reverse the negative perception of El Paso continues, and it's a physical one. But if it were easy, Sean Kugler wouldn't be interested.

THE JONES BROTHERS EFFECT

In a conference room with enormous windows overlooking the scenic Sun Bowl Stadium, twin brothers are having a discussion about what's on the scales.



Photo by Richard Badillo

"He got fat," Aaron Jones joked with his brother, Alvin.

"I gained weight," Alvin shot back with a grin. "I filled out my frame."

"Yeah, I'm still working on filling out my frame," Aaron self-assessed.

Both have changed since their days as stars at El Paso Burges. Aaron Jones was a speedy but largely overlooked running back; now, he's entering his junior season at UTEP after rushing last season for 1,321 yards and 11 touchdowns, tops among players at Texas' 12 Football Bowl Subdivision schools.

Alvin Jones was even more under-recruited as a safety but is now one of the Miners' most valuable linebackers after beefing up for his position change.

SUN RISE IN EL PASO



Photo by UTEP/Michael Patrick Reese



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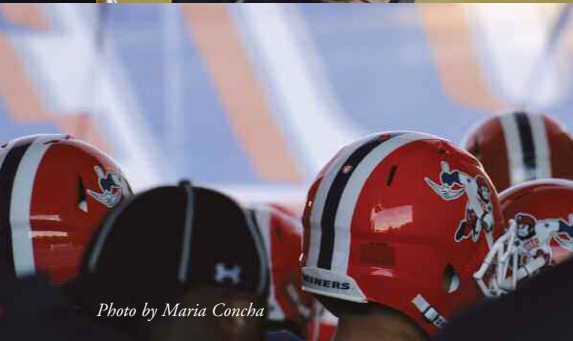


Photo by Maria Concha

UTEP HEAD COACH SEAN KUGLER, ABOVE LEFT, IS WORKING TO BRING HIS ALMA MATER BACK TO THE NATIONAL RADAR AND MAKE THE HISTORIC SUN BOWL ONE OF THE TOUGHEST PLACES TO PLAY IN AMERICA.

They're two of UTEP's most valuable players. They're also two of El Paso's most valuable ambassadors.

Homegrown talents can be hard to find in the Sun City. UTEP has 23 graduates of El Paso high schools on its roster, but they are the outlier; the fact is that recruiters don't mosey down this portion of Interstate 10 as often as they do I-35.

It's a refrain you hear everywhere in the Sun City: it's harder to get recruited out here.

"The ones that are Division I, that have the size and speed, they're going to come and look at them," Coronado's Anderson said. "It's the other ones, the ones who are kind of on the bubble. Those are the ones that are difficult to get noticed."

"Unless you've got a legit D-I kid, you don't get many schools coming to visit," Canutillo's Brooks said. "It's hard if you're not a D-I kid. Our kids have a lot trouble getting to camps. The nearest camp is (at the University of New Mexico), and that's a four-hour drive."

Even the Jones brothers, who dazzled in their junior and senior years for Burges, had trouble getting recruited. UTEP was Alvin's only offer; Aaron had only a handful.

"I feel like college coaches don't come here as much because they can see more players in Dallas and Houston," Aaron Jones said. "I feel like El Paso

is overlooked recruiting-wise."

The Joneses moved to the Sun City when the twins were in eighth grade and their military parents, Alvin Sr. and Vurgess, were transferred to Fort Bliss. Their initial reaction was about what you'd expect.

"Where's the water?" Aaron Jones remembers thinking. "There's nothing here. I wanted to go back (to Virginia). But I love it now. You have to get here, and you'll love it."

The Jones brothers have embraced El Paso. They are minor celebrities around town and regularly attend area high school events; of Canutillo's remarkable 2014, Aaron Jones said, "I was happy for the city of El Paso. They're doing tremendous things. I was really excited for them."

As local made good, they also help to sell other recruits on coming to UTEP.

But Aaron and Alvin Jones are more than just star players and recruiting advocates. They're the new face of El Paso football, of a city that may be planting its flag on the statewide (and nationwide) football map in the biggest way yet.

Aaron Jones' pitch for coming to play in El Paso is easy to understand.

"You get a lot of sun," Aaron Jones reminded. "It's always sunny here."

And the future in the Sun City may only be getting brighter.



Photo by UTEP/Michael Patrick Reese