

EPHS 9/23/2011

Pat Wieland knows and accepts the numbers. The former Tiger linebacker understands that when the Austin and El Paso high school football teams meet tonight, the record books will indicate the 80th anniversary of a bitter rivalry.

Wieland, 65 years old and semi-retired from the real estate business, also realizes that statistics, figures or any other kind of quantitative data can never encapsulate the annual Battle of the Claw.

The game never happened in 1963 because of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. But Wieland and his fellow '64 classmates at both El Paso and Austin found a way to play it - even if it was 20 years late and will never show up in the record book.

The Battle of the Claw means that much, as the make-up game still resonates in Wieland's sharp memory.

### **Historic cancellation**

The sounds and sights of Nov. 22, 1963, remain vivid in Wieland's and his teammates' memories.

The day started like all previous Battles of the Claw with the simultaneous pep rallies. El Paso High students and staff packed their auditorium, while a few miles up the road and around the base of the Franklin Mountains, the student body

at Austin High assembled in its gym.

At around 11 a.m., the cheering started, broadcast live on KTSM radio for all of El Paso to hear. Each side received three allotted time slots for a deafening battle of cheers that would go back-and-forth for a half-hour.

"We are the Panthers, couldn't be prouder, if you can't hear us, we'll yell a little louder!," roared the Panther faithful.

El Paso answered emphatically.

"We are the Tigers, couldn't be prouder, if you can't hear us, we'll yell a little louder!," replied the Tiger crowd.

The adrenaline flowed that Friday morning, the atmosphere electric for the 33rd meeting between the two teams.

But the game never happened.

A few hours after the pep rally news quickly spread throughout the school that President Kennedy had been assassinated.

"Someone in the hallway came up running to me and told me the president was shot," El Paso linebacker George Look said. "I thought he was talking about the Austin school president. I didn't think in a million years the president of the United States."

Coaches then delivered a second shocker to the players: The Battle of the Claw was canceled.

It would not be rescheduled.

### **About the rivalry**

As players dealt with Kennedy's assassination, they also tried to come to terms with the canceled football game. Both depressed students. But it was the game, the highlight of the fall for the Class of 1964, that stung.

"Not to take anything away from the president's assassination," Wieland said, "but we were devastated about the game."

The rivalry, which began in 1930, matched two schools separated by 3.9 miles.

Austin player Stafford Werner and Wieland lived across the street from each other.

Austin and El Paso, particularly in the early years, were also the city's powerhouse teams. Their contest usually determined which team from El Paso would advance to the state playoffs.

Everything was on the line - from bragging rights to the season. The game and days leading up to it came to envelop the magnitude, including the broadcast.

Werner remembers an "E" burned into Austin's grass field. Another time, the Panther mascot was covered in black paint. The El Paso "E" on the Franklin Mountains went through a few disassembles as well.

In 1960, a trophy, called "The Claw" in honor of the mascots, was created for the winner of the game to claim for a whole year. "The Claw," now a replica because the original went missing in 2003, is on display as part of a Texas high school football exhibit at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin.

The trophy represents one of the five longest, continuous rivalries across the state.

### **Missed opportunity**

Wieland calls the 1963 game a chance at redemption. The Tigers had lost seven straight years to the Panthers, including the 1962 heartbreaker, when the Tigers rallied from a 22-0 halftime deficit only to lose 28-22 in front of a record 15,000 fans at Kidd Field.

El Paso, for the first time in years, was the favorite. Austin suffered injuries and had fallen to 2-7. El Paso entered the game 7-1-1, just one game behind Bel Air for the district championship.

"We were ready to end all those years of misery," said Willie Sanchez, El Paso's quarterback. "I don't think there was any doubt we were going to win."

The cancellation left doubt. It also meant El Paso would not go to the playoffs. Bel Air was awarded the district title in nine games.

For most, that was the end of football. No college scholarship existed. No more Friday night lights. No more packed stadiums. No pep rallies.

And several of the players, who had spent years sweating and laboring on junior varsity squads, missed their one opportunity to play for "The Claw."

### **Redemption: 20 years later**

The players, coaches, students and Wieland moved on, but he never quite forgot about the game. The what-ifs stuck like a thorn in his side.

Wieland attended Texas Western, soon to become UTEP, and eventually settled down in El Paso. One of his frat brothers and business partners was Werner.

One night in 1984 as the two dined and drank together, they began reminiscing. The details remain unclear, but Wieland, or so he says, threw out an absurd idea: What if, at the 20th reunion, the two schools ended all the doubt once and for all and played for The Claw.

Werner loved the idea. He went back to his reunion steering committee and pitched it.

A few weeks later, Wieland, who never thought the game would gain much traction, ran into Austin player James Luckett in Downtown. Luckett told Wieland the Panthers would win.

The game was on.

### **Back on the field**

The idea began as a friendly pick-up flag football game between 38-year-olds. It quickly turned serious.

Both teams practiced well before the showdown - El Paso three times a week for two hours a couple of months before the game; and Austin a few weeks as well. They worked out and got back in shape.

They even got coaches -Jackie Meeks, the old Tigers backfields coach for El Paso, and Jerry Wilson for Austin, who helped design playbooks full of reverses, post routes, and hook and ladders. They even set up audibles at the line of scrimmage.

At one point, the Tigers closed practice for fear of spies.

"It got dead serious," Wieland said. "It was like we were 17."

The scene on game day, besides a few gray hairs and some bigger guts, looked like what 1963 was supposed to.

It had all the hoopla - and more - of an intense football game between two archrivals.

The teams played at El Paso's Jones Stadium - where the 1963 contest was supposed to be held - in front of 2,400 fans on a hot July day. Referees were hired and the scoreboard was set. Both teams had color-coordinated jerseys and hats.

Cheerleaders worked the sidelines in full 1963 uniform - pom-poms, sweater, skirts and homecoming mums. They rattled off cheers, jumped and kicked as if they had hopped into a time machine. School songs blared over speakers from the Miller Lite truck while some band members, who had rummaged old instruments, played along.

The Tigers ran out onto the field through a hand-drawn banner that read, "Pulverize the Panthers."

"It was just like we were playing for real," Sanchez said. "And we weren't playing for funnies."

In the first quarter alone, El Paso committed two personal fouls. Sanchez remembers watching players persist through injury and do things 38-year-old bodies weren't supposed to, as Eddie Fisher ran through a pulled hamstring muscle just to score a touchdown.

The Tigers led the majority of the game, but as so often happened in this rivalry, Austin rallied to tie the game at 28 late in the fourth.

El Paso answered. On fourth-and-12, Tiger quarterback Eddie Ortegon threw a strike to Fisher for a 36-28 victory that set off pandemonium.

The Tigers carried Meeks off the field, celebrating like teens.

"I've been a part of some national championships (college) and some World Series," said Sanchez, who later was a scout for the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Yankees.

"But I'd have to put that game, that rivalry right up there."

After the game, El Paso held an awards ceremony.

It was emotional.

When Ortegon, a former fullback, came up to receive his award for Most Valuable Player, he limped to the podium with eyes welling up.

The lost game had been found. The void no longer there, Wieland's what-ifs answered.

Players, after 20 years, finally whistled closure on what should have been one of their most treasured teenage memories.