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**Chicanos on South Texas Football Fields and
Sidelines: The Athletic and Coaching Careers of
Bobby Cavazos and E. C. Lerma**

During the past 25 years, the study of Mexican American history has changed dramatically. Scholars of Chicano history have examined the development of *comunidades* (communities) throughout the United States and have painstakingly detailed class, religious, and political diversity among the Spanish-surnamed. Much has been learned, but Hispanic contributions in certain facets of American life still remain relatively unexplored.

Athletic endeavor is one such area of scholarly production. Through the pioneering work of Samuel O. Regalado, the public has learned about the struggles and achievements of Spanish-speakers on the baseball diamond (at both the major and minor league level). During a highly productive decade of work, Regalado compiled data on oral histories on these individuals' athletic endeavors, their impact on society, and the importance of participation in sport and sport broadcasting in the barrios of Los Angeles. While Regalado's studies have detailed the role of *peloteros* (ball players) and the significance of community *ligas* (leagues) in Southern California neighborhoods, the historical analysis regarding Spanish-speakers in other team sports has been almost nonexistent. Given the increasing presence of Hispanics in all major sports, for example, the contribution of Scott Gomez to the New Jersey Devils' Stanley Cup run in 1999 and Tony Gonzalez's contributions to the Kansas City Chiefs, it is no longer possible to stereotype Hispanics athletes as only *peloteros*. Still, the social history of sports such as football (at all levels) is still framed, almost exclusively, in terms of black/white relations.

Given Texas' ethnic composition, especially South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, this omission leaves a major gap in the historical understanding of social relations and sport in a state where high school and college football can be compared to a

religion. This paper uses oral history interviews, newspaper accounts, personal diaries and papers, and secondary sources to begin the process of examining the role of Mexican Americans/Hispanics in Texas high school and college football. This essay focuses on the careers of two men: Bobby Cavazos, a multi-sport star athlete at Kingsville High School during the 1940s and his career as a halfback at Texas Tech University during the early 1950s and E.C. Lerma, the first Mexican American to play football at Texas A & I University (now Texas A & M University, Kingsville) and legendary coach at Benavides High School during the 1940s and 1950s. The lives and circumstances of these two men provide a glimpse into the racism and segregation faced by Spanish surnamed people in South Texas during the first half of the 1900s and shows how success on the field of athletic endeavor may have, in some cases, mitigated discrimination. While the research regarding the lives of two individuals is not sufficient to delineate state-wide patterns, this study provides a starting point toward addressing a series of significant, and previously ignored, questions regarding Mexican American life in Texas. What role, if any, did sports play in improving race relations between Hispanics and whites? Did Hispanics and whites form lasting bonds of respect and friendship through athletics? Finally, did success in sports provide Spanish-surnamed athletes with an opportunity to improve their social and economic standing? The model provided in this essay will begin the mining of a potentially profitable vein in Mexican American studies. The careers of Bobby Cavazos and E.C. Lerma offer a promising avenue for research into seldom explored facets of Hispanic/Latino life in Texas and the rest of the United States.