



THE GAME OF THE CENTURY

BRACK vs. LEE '63

By Randy Lankford

In a society that can barely remember events from 45 minutes ago, what keeps a high school football game alive for 45 years? The moment in time, the backgrounds of the schools involved, the reputations of the players, the stakes, the setting? A great many things.

Would people still remember the 1963 Lee-Brackenridge

bi-district playoff game if Brackenridge hadn't been the defending state champion? What if the game hadn't been played a week to the day after John Kennedy's assassination? Did it matter that Lee was a new, predominantly white school in the Northeast Independent School District while Brackenridge was an older school with a mostly black student body on the south side of town? Was hulking Alamo Stadium, the Old Rockpile, a WPA project completed 23 years earlier, a factor? Or was it because two of the top high school football players in the state were going to face off for the first and only time?

It was all of the above. To strain an already much overused cliché, Brack-Lee '63, dubbed "The Game Of The Century" by the *Dallas Morning News*, was the perfect storm. A historic game was played on a historic night in a historic place by historic people. Lightning was caught in a bottle decorated with purple and crimson ribbons.

Attendance estimates run as high as 26,000. Then again, if everyone who today claims they were there on that freezing November night actually was, the crowd would have filled 10 stadiums. They came from different sides of town but it might as well have been from different worlds in 1963. They came to see two powerhouse teams fight for the city championship and the right to move on in the 4A playoffs, then Texas's highest high school classification. They came for the chance to distract themselves from the horror of the murder of a charismatic young president who'd visited the city little more than a week earlier. But mostly they came to see the two best running backs in the entire state. They weren't disappointed.

Before Earl Campbell, before Ricky Williams, before Priest Holmes, there were Brackenridge's Warren McVea and Robert E. Lee's Linus Baer.

Statistically, the Brackenridge Eagles should never have faced a second down since McVea, a 5 foot 8 inch, 165-pound slashing speedster, gobbled up an average of 10.2 yards-

per-carry. Baer, at 5 foot 10 inches and 185, was more of a bruiser with a gaudy 9.2 yards-per-carry average of his own.

Baer came into the game with 1,334 rushing yards for the season. McVea had 1,117. McVea had already scored 40 touchdowns to Baer's 25. Both had run back three punts for touchdowns and they not only carried the ball, they were also their respective teams' placekickers. They were one-man wrecking crews. And all of south Texas was eager to see what happened when they collided. The game was so highly anticipated it was carried live on WOAI TV.

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Brackenridge star "Wonderous" Warren McVea broke the color barrier at the University of Houston.

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Lee's Bill Knippa (85) scores the first of 15 touchdowns in the game the Dallas Morning News called *The Game Of The Century*.

Lee's 10-0 Volunteers were a slight favorite over 8-2 Brackenridge. Lee was bigger, Brack was faster. And they weren't just all offense either. Both teams had posted five shutouts during the season and Lee had only allowed opponents 62 points all year. Brackenridge was the highest scoring team in the 4A playoffs with 401 points for the season. Lee was second with 348.

Fans weren't sure what to expect. Two high-powered offenses were going to meet two stingy defenses. Even with two premier running backs, consensus was that it would come down to a low-scoring defensive slugfest. But McVea and Baer were not to be denied.

The game quickly turned into a track meet that Lee finally won 55-48. But that hardly matters now. Even then, with the city championship and a shot at the state title on the line, this was more about the show than the outcome. And what a show it was.

Both coaches, Brackenridge's Weldon Forren and Lee's Kirk Drew, were leery of giving the other one any more scoring opportunities than they had to. Neither team punted in the game, choosing instead to roll the dice on every fourth down rather than give the other side a chance to run back a kick.

The same strategy applied to kickoffs. All but one of the 17 kickoffs in the game were onside attempts. Each team was willing to give the other one the ball at its own 40 or so rather than risk a breakaway runback. The wisdom of the decision was

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Linus Baer (10) scores one of his five touchdowns.

McVea - Baer 1963 Season Stats

Warren McVea and Linus Baer had already proven their worth even before they met in the 1963 4A playoffs.

McVea		Baer
106	Runs From Scrimmage	145
1,117	Yards Rushing	1,334
10.5	Yards Per Carry	9.2
1	Touchdown Passes Thrown	2
40	Total Touchdowns	25
8	Touchdowns Passes Caught	1
3	Touchdown Punt Returns	3
2	Touchdown Kickoff Returns	0
37	Extra Points	20
227	Total Points Scored	170

Lee 55, Brackenridge 48

They proved it again when they met on Nov. 29, 1963

McVea		Baer
6	Touchdowns Scored	5
2	Extra points	7
215	Total Yards Gained	339
38	Points Scored	37

BOX SCORE

Lee	14	20	7	14 - 55
Brackenridge	6	13	14	15 - 48

First Quarter:

L - Knippa recovered fumble in end zone (Baer kick) Lee 7-0

L - Baer 5 run (Baer kick) Lee 14-0

B - McVea 56 run (kick failed) Lee 14-6

Second Quarter:

L - Baer 2 run (Kick failed) Lee 20-6

B - McVea 14 run (Kick failed) Lee 20-12

L - G. Kempf 12 run (Baer kick) Lee 27-12

B - Washington 8 run (McVea kick) Lee 27-19

L - Baer 46 pass from G. Kempf (Baer kick) Lee 34-19

Third Quarter:

B - McVea 48 run (Kick failed) Lee 34-25

L - Baer 47 run (Baer kick) Lee 41-25

B - McVea 20 run (Boone run) Lee 41- 33

Fourth Quarter:

L - Baer 95 kickoff return (Baer kick) Lee 48-33

B - McVea 45 run (Hines pass from McVea) Lee 48-41

B - McVea 4 run (McVea kick) Tied 48-48

L - Townsend 2 run (Baer kick) Lee 55-48

	Lee	Brackenridge
First downs	21	20
Rushing yards	248	395
Passing yards	109	18
Passes	4-6-0	2-4-0
Punts	0	0
Fumbles lost	1	2
Penalties - yards	2-19	1-5

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

Rushing: L: Baer 19-150, G. Kempf 15-73, Townsend 11-50. B: McVea 21-215, Boone 16-85.

Receiving: L: Baer 3-94.

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borne out when Baer returned Brackenridge's only deep kickoff 95 yards for a touchdown.

With two such closely matched teams, the game came down to a coaching contest. Ferron knew his team's one chance at winning was to have McVea handle the ball on every single play. For the only time in his career, "Wonderous Warren" played quarterback.

With all the advance hype the game received, it wouldn't be surprising if it didn't live up to expectations. And in the early going, it looked like it wouldn't. Lee drove 69 yards for a touchdown on its first possession when Bill Knippa recovered a Baer fumble in the end zone. The Volunteers recovered the ensuing kickoff and scored again when Baer went over from the five. Brackenridge was down 14-0 before ever touching the ball.

When the Eagles finally got their hands on it, McVea didn't waste any time. He scored his first touchdown on a 56-yard romp on Brack's fourth offensive play of the night but missed the extra point. Lee led 14-6 at the end of the first quarter.

The game rocked back and forth in the second quarter with Lee slowly pulling away. Baer, a two-yard run; McVea, a 14-yarder; Lee quarterback Gary Kempf, 12-yard run; Brackenridge fullback Elmo Washington, eight-yard run; Baer, 47-yard pass from Kempf.

Lee ran up 20 points in the second quarter to Brack's 13. Halftime: Lee 34, Brack 19. Trailing by more than two touchdowns, the game was slipping away from the Eagles. But what's a classic game without a classic comeback?

McVea tore off a 48-yard touchdown run on the second play of the second half. Baer answered with a 47-yarder of his own before McVea ended the third quarter with a 20-yard dash to close the gap to eight points at 41-33.

Lee pulled away again when McVea punched a kickoff too far resulting in Baer's 95-yard kick return in the fourth, possibly the most electrifying of the night's 15 touchdowns.

McVea put the Eagles back in the game with a 45-yard run and then added an unlikely two-point conversion by hitting teammate William Hines with a pass after scrambling all the way back to the 30 yard line. 48-41 Lee.

Brack managed to recover the resulting onside kick. There was no more deception, no more trickery. The surprise of seeing McVea at quarterback had long since worn off. Everyone on the field, everyone in the stands, everyone watching on television or listening on the radio knew number 42 was going to carry the ball for the Eagles. Knowing it and stopping it, however, are two very different things.

With 6:36 left in the game McVea went over from the four and then nailed the extra point. 48-48. Brackenridge had rallied from two 15-point deficits to tie the score. The bitter cold forgotten, the Rockpile rocked.

Perhaps fittingly, neither Baer nor McVea decided the game.



45 years later mementos still decorate Linus Baer's office.

Larry Townsend went in from the two with 18 seconds left to play to give Lee the final 55-48 win.

But Brackenridge's Forren had one more card to play. Trying to camouflage his star runningback, he had his Eagles line up for the ensuing kickoff facing the sidelines, concealing their numbers from the Vols. McVea was hidden among the linemen, anticipating another onside kick.

Lee would have none of it, refusing to kick until McVea was located. His cover blown, he retreated to the 10 and hoped the Volunteers would be reckless enough to kick the ball deep. They weren't.

Douglas Coffee, a linebacker for the Eagles, scooped up the squib kick and, instead of advancing, raced toward his own goal line to get the ball into the hands of the team's best hope. McVea made it back to the Brack 34 before he was brought down. A completed pass and McVea's last run brought the game to a close.

Players, coaches and spectators collapsed as the adrenaline that had propelled them all night, indeed all week, drained away. Even the Lee players, instead of cheering in victory, sagged in exhaustion, happy to have won, but wanting no more of the Eagles.

By the end of the night McVea had scored six touchdowns on runs of 21, 14, 48, 20, 45 and 4 yards. He also kicked two extra points. 215 yards rushing and 38 points, not a bad night's work.

Baer ended up with 150 yards rushing, 94 receiving and 95 on the only kick return of the night for a total of 339 yards. He scored on runs of 6, 2 and 47 yards. He also caught a 45 yard touchdown pass. His five touchdowns and seven extra point kicks brought his evening's scoring total to 37 points.

Baer went on to the University of Texas where he played for Darrell Royal and was a Longhorn captain his senior year. His college career was a painful one after he injured his knee in the

North-South Texas High School All Star game, where he and McVea were roommates.

Now 62 and a successful financier, he still gets asked about that night in '63. "It still means a lot to me," he says. "When you go to college, those are great years, but it's always the high school years you cherish the most. I still go to my high school reunions. That was an important time in my life and that game was important to me.

"It helped open a lot of doors for me in sports and business. Here we are, 45 years later and we're still talking about it."

Baer's clearest recollection of that night was when, in a rare occurrence in 1963, the two teams met in the middle of the field at the end of the game and knelt in prayer.

"Doug (McVea's first name, used only by his inner circle) and I knew each other going into the game. We competed every year in track and basketball but that was the only time we ever played football together.

"It was a big deal to us because we were playing the state champions. And I don't want to overplay this, but it was kind of a north side vs. south side thing too. There were a lot of minority issues going on at that time."

McVea, who now works for a courier company in Houston, took a different road. After breaking the color barrier at the University of Houston and earning All America honors twice, he went on to play with the Cincinnati Bengals and the Kansas City Chiefs where he earned a Super Bowl championship ring in 1970. He retired in 1976.

He says the death of his mother led to a string of drug convictions and prison time in the '80s and '90s.

"I'm not ashamed of what happened in my life," he says. "What happened just happened. There's no need to dwell on it. When I lost my mother I just gave up.

"I'm the biggest mama's boy you'll ever meet. When she died, I was just lost. Everything I ever did, I wanted her around. That's all I knew. She was a Christian and she would try to do anything I ever asked of her. I lost my way when she died. It took me a long time to get over that."

McVea credits much of his recovery to his college coach, Bill Yeoman.

"He called me one day and told me enough is enough. 'Either you turn your life around or I'm getting off the boat.' I didn't need to hear any more after that. He told me it was time to get back on board and I've been clean since then."

Also 62, the Brackenridge star makes a confession about that night in 1963. "I've never told anyone this, but I didn't want Linus to outdo me. But that didn't have anything to do with our friendship. We've always been friends and I hope we always will be."

The stars that crossed that night remain linked to this day. Both McVea and Baer were inducted into the San Antonio Sports Hall of Fame in 2003.

On that occasion, McVea choked back tears when he told the audience, "You people have stuck with me through thick and thin. San Antonio has the best people in the world, and I just want to tell you how much I appreciate that."

"I never doubted he'd come back," says Baer with an affectionate smile. "He's got a big heart. I knew he'd be okay." **SA**



Baer, now a successful businessman, shows off the "T" ring University of Texas players receive upon graduation. "There are All Americans who don't have one of these," he says.



Linus Baer led Lee to a narrow victory on a freezing night at San Antonio's rockpile.