

The Barrio Relays A Running Story

Back in the '60s the town of Canutillo was an agricultural community. And one important aspect of the town were its defined barrios. There existed *Hollywood*, a barrio named so because the teenage girls from this barrio would wear the latest Hollywood fashions. The *Fort Bliss* barrio was full of Army barracks converted into homes (brought from Ft. Bliss). *El Barrio de Las Chivas*, where I grew up in, got its name from the fact that just about every household raised goats. There were other barrios but one that must be mentioned is the *Borderland* barrio; it is the community at the end of Borderland Road across from Doniphan Drive (incidentally, my wife grew up in this barrio).

In the Spring of 1966 the kids in my barrio would get together after school to run around the block. We were at different grade levels in Elementary school (I was in the 4th grade). In retrospect, we were mimicking the local track and field meet held at Canutillo High School called the Eagle Relays. (I'd like to mention that the track coach at Canutillo back then was Julius Lowenberg, if any of you old-timers can recollect a local coach by that name.)

This after-school running led to us transforming this activity to Track & Field practices. We formed 440 yard and mile relay teams. Back then the running events were not measured in meters. We even formed a "medley" relay team --- consult your old-timers on the explanation of how this track event was run! We practiced the hurdle events using old car tires as hurdles with rocks inside to hold them up. We built pole-vault and high-jump pits using bales of hay to fall on (plenty of hay around). We had no problem finding real shot-put balls or real discuses to use for practice --- our barrio talents came in handy when the need arose to procure these items! Keep in mind that the distances were estimated, the heights of the hurdles were set to the height of the tires, and in those days there were no public sport stores where you could buy a shot-put ball over-the-counter. As far-fetched as this story sounds, it really happened.

At the end of that spring before school led out for the summer, *El Barrio de las Chivas* held its first track meet. The competition was just amongst ourselves; it was our barrio thing. We ran the relays, did the 100, 220, and 440 yard dashes. Ran the hurdles (or tires). Did the high-jump, long-jump, pole-vaulted ... you name the Track & Field event, we did it. Again, keep in mind that the "track" was around the neighborhood block; the field events were in the back yards of homes; and the mile course was on a desert road that is now paved over by that outlet shopping mall in Canutillo (next to Transmountain Road). Summer came and we disbanded.

The following spring we started our barrio track season right where we left off --- everybody was back and we were as committed and dedicated as before. But this time it was better, another barrio, *Fort Bliss*, also formed their own track team. We hosted a track meet with barrio *Fort Bliss* followed on with another meet at their place. Our team easily won both meets. (Of course we won, this is my story!) Seriously, the easy victory was probably due to our prior year's experience. Summer came and we disbanded, but this time we were excited about the next track season.

The Spring of 1968 turned out to be the track season that made an imprint on the local residents to this day. Keep in mind that we were a bunch of 9-12 year olds doing this on our own --- boys with no adult supervision, that's the way it was in the barrios back in the '60s. This year, a third barrio, *Borderland*, joined in with quite a team, in numbers. Plus some kids began training on their own (referred to as "unattached" in Track & Field lingo). There were the usual one-on-one barrio meets, but nothing cohesive until our high school siblings decided to interfere.

By now, *El Barrio de Las Chivas* was the team to beat. So our high school siblings decided to hold a real track meet to determine a champion. They were able to borrow just about all of Canutillo High's resources: the track and field, real hurdles, stop watches, batons, etc. The only things missing were the flags and the speaker system at the stadium. (Maybe we had them but I can't remember!) But I do remember the winner's podium because I stood on it! Thus, the Barrio Relays were held.

There were well over 100 Elementary-aged boys who participated in the Barrio Relays. Award ribbons were issued to the contestants, plus a winner's trophy and a medallion to the highest scoring kid. My team, *El Barrio de Las Chivas*, was the favorite to take the track meet. However, as the meet progressed, the track meet was shaping very differently. The size of the *Borderland* team was leaving less spots for my team to score; in addition team *Fort Bliss* was showing much improvement, and the unattached runners were also placing. To make a long story short, the champion of the track meet would be determined by the winner of the final event, the 440 yard relay.

El Barrio de Las Chivas had the best qualifying time for this event; so my team was almost celebrating before the event. We knew that our baton exchanges were close to perfect (track team members from the high school had coached our relay teams in baton passing). My team crossed the finish line in 1st place with 5 yards to spare! Well, the winner of the Barrio Relays was *Borderland*; *Fort Bliss* came in second, and *El Barrio de Las Chivas* was in last place. What happened? Our anchor man did not drop the baton, but instead, crossed over the lane and therefore, our 440 relay team was disqualified --- we scored zero points in this final event and lost the track meet. What made the hurt worse was that the line judge who faulted us was our anchor man's older brother (one of the high schoolers involved in organizing the meet). I will never forget the line judge's words to his kid brother, "I cannot choose sides, I must be fair."

The Spring of 1968 was the first Barrio Relays, and the last. Maybe it was due to our high school siblings graduating, or it may be that most of us went on to Junior High, or the Junior Olympic Track & Field circuit coming into town; who knows why it ended. To this day I encounter a nephew, niece, child, or some relative of a participant of the Barrio Relays who wants to verify that this really happened --- it did.

There are many smaller stories to be derived from this nostalgic event that transpired in my life 40+ years ago (e.g., the bare-footed runners on our team), but suffice it to say that when people ask me how long have I been running; my answer, "since the 4th grade."

By Juan Gonzalez
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