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'Battle of the Brazos' a fascinating sports and mystery story

- By MARK LARDAS
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"Battle of the Brazos: A Texas Football Rivalry, a Riot, and a Murder," by T. G. Webb, Texas A&M University Press, 2018, 184 pages, \$27

Football is often compared to war.

“Battle of the Brazos: A Texas Football Rivalry, a Riot, and a Murder,” by T. G. Webb shows what happens when fans overdo that analogy.

The book relates events from an October 30, 1926, football game between Baylor University and the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (today Texas A&M University). Interscholastic rivalry flared into a halftime riot. One A&M cadet died.

Astonishingly, the game resumed after the riot and was played to completion. More astonishingly, although the fatal assault occurred before thousands of spectators, the perpetrator was never caught. The crime was never officially solved.

Webb examines all aspects of this incident. He opens with a history of college football in Texas. This includes the increasingly bitter rivalry between two of the Texas schools on the Brazos River: Baylor and Texas A&M. The annual matchup soon became labeled “The Battle of the Brazos.” Webb shows how both student bodies took that title too seriously. In the 1920s, incidents of increasing violence accompanied games before the fatal 1926 riot.

Webb provides a detailed study of the 1926 game. He looks at the buildup to the game, taking readers through a step-by-step examination of its events, including the halftime riot. He follows this by relating the aftermath of the riot. He shows how the schools reacted and what both schools did afterward. (He also peels away some myths. Despite many stories there is no evidence the Aggies commandeered a train to take a cannon to Waco to avenge the death.)

Webb also examines the mystery of who killed the cadet, and why the culprit was never caught. He offers several reasons contributing to the crime’s going unsolved. It was suspected the assailant was related to a politically connected Waco family. State law enforcement was primitive. A hired private investigator lacked authority to compel witnesses to speak. He came close to identifying the assailant, but lacked sufficient proof to obtain an indictment.

“Battle of the Brazos” is a fascinating mix of sports history and true crime mystery. Webb’s book offers insight to a bygone era in Texas sports.

Mark Lardas, an engineer, freelance writer, amateur historian, and model-maker, lives in League City. His website is marklardas.com.