

Legendary Miner back Pug Gabrel dies at 80

By Bill Knight

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Pug Gabrel, one of UTEP's all-time great running backs, passed away last Monday while on a fishing trip near San Angelo. He was 80.

Gabrel, who teamed with coaching legend Hayden Fry to help Odessa High School win a state football championship in 1946, played for the Miners from 1947 through 1950. He still remains sixth on the Miners' all-time rushing list with 2,239 yards, second in rushing touchdowns with 27 and fourth in yards per carry at 6.43.

"Pug lived a very colorful life," said El Pasoan Jack Wilkinson, a teammate of Gabrel's through his Texas Western years. "He was quite a character and he had about the fastest start I've ever seen in football. He had a great career at Odessa High, winning the state championship there. And, when he finished at Texas Western, he was the school's all-time leading rusher. He's since been passed a few times. But we led the nation in rushing in 1948 and 1949 and Pug was a big part of that."

He also played in two Sun Bowl games. He carried 18 times for 71 yards and scored the game's first touchdown in Texas Western's loss to West Virginia on Jan. 1, 1949, and he carried 11 times for 85 yards and scored two touchdowns in the Miners 33-20 win over Georgetown on Jan. 2, 1950.



Gabrel

Gabrel had a long and successful coaching career after his playing days ended. He was an assistant at New Mexico State for two seasons and then the head coach at Austin High School from 1954 through 1959, winning a district championship and tying for another. He left coaching, then returned in 1961 as the backfield coach for Fry at SMU from 1961 through 1966. The Mustangs won the Southwest Conference and played in the Cotton Bowl in 1966.

Gabrel was offensive coordinator at Northwestern State in Louisiana for two years and then offensive coordinator at Oklahoma State in 1969-1970. He was offensive line coach at Texas A&M and then offensive coordinator again at SMU from 1973-1975. He then left coaching and went into private business.

"Pug owned some of those old stripper wells in Oklahoma and did very well for the last 20 years," Wilkinson said. "He was very successful for the last 15 or 20 years after he got out of coaching."

Gabrel recruited El Pasoan Ken Haddad to SMU.

"I didn't play directly under him, I played in the line," Haddad said. "But I got to know him much better after he

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moved to El Paso, after my playing days. Those are my fondest memories. First of all, Frank Sinatra, old blue eyes, had nothing on Pug. He had the deepest blue eyes you ever saw. You just fell into them. He was one of the kindest, most generous people you ever met — generous to a fault. He would take strays off the street, give them a Bible lesson, give them a few bucks and tell them to do right — and more often than not, they did. Swear to God. He was an inspiration."

El Pasoan Ben Collins, former head football coach and athletic director at Texas Western, was Gabrel's running back coach during his Miner career.

"Pug could hit the quick dive play quicker than anybody I've ever seen," Collins said. "He came from a good program out in Odessa and he was highly touted and he turned out to be everything we expected. He was a good football player, a good athlete, a good student and a good person."

"He wanted me to join his fishing group on this trip," Collins said, "but I was unable to go this time. I was sure taken back when Jack (Wilkinson) called and told me Pug had passed away. He was such a good guy and you have so many memories. I remember his high school sweetheart, Helen, who became his wife, followed him out here to school. She was at registration and she started crying. She was upset she wasn't getting to spend enough time with Pug. We all tried to console her. Of course, they both did a great job out here. You just remember little things like that. We're going to miss him."

Gabrel was on a fishing trip at the Devil's River between San Angelo and Del Rio and suffered a massive heart attack last.

Wilkinson said, "A bunch of us used to go on that fishing trip. We've probably had at least 10 of 'em. But we've all gotten too old. Pug called, wanted another one. It's already pretty hot down there this time of year. I told him we were too damned old to be going down there. But Pug went anyway."

Gabrel's body was returned to his home in Woodward, Okla. Burial services were Saturday.

"He was a good guy and a good friend and I'm going to miss him," Wilkinson said.

Haddad said, "Even at 80, he was still one of the most competitive people I've ever met. He would still bet you on any hole on the golf course. He was just an incredibly wonderful man."

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