

# Escalante, Coronado's combined team prepares to play in new class, district



TIERRA AMARILLA — So much changes in the span of eight months.

A revamped Class 2A.

A new district.

A newly formed co-op team.

So, why not a new haircut?

Perhaps the early surprise of the 2018 prep football season was the new hairdo Escalante/Coronado head coach Dusty Giles sported. Gone were the long locks that curled up under his hat that were so prominent for the past two years.

Still, it fit the theme that already defined the season for Giles and the Lobos. Change began just a few weeks after last year's 55-7 drubbing at the hands of Fort Sumner/House in the 2A championship game, in the form of the latest classification and alignment proposal by the New Mexico Activities Association. No longer would the class be defined by the "Gang of Eight" teams — 2A grew to 19.

The sudden expansion also took away a burgeoning rival in the Foxes, which moved to the eastern District 6/7-2A, but brought back an old foe in McCurdy to 1/5-2A. In the spring, Escalante entered into a co-op arrangement with Coronado, a school of about 54 students, that Giles expects to add about a dozen players by the time the Lobos kick off the season against Tucumcari on Aug. 24.

However, after three days of two-a-day practices, that number is two — sophomore Robby Binion and junior Ricardo Chacon. Binion might not contribute right away with the varsity team, since he transferred from Cuba to Coronado in February and played for the Rams the prior two seasons. Binion said he and his family filed a hardship petition waiver with the NMAA but he isn't sure when his case will be heard.

Binion, whose dad coached at Escalante in the early 2000s, said the experience between Cuba and Escalante was like night and day.

"It's a lot more organized," Binion said. "Every one here wants to win. It was one of the main reasons I'm here. I think more [Coronado students] will show, once they see the guys who are out here."

Binion is proving his worth, finding his place on the team as a defensive end, and Chacon has been solid at linebacker. Their new teammates already have taken notice of their contributions.

"They're not chumps; they can play," senior offensive tackle Randy Ferrell said. "I go against them every day in practice, and they work hard. They put in the effort. Even from when we were doing chalk talk, you could see that they were getting [the schemes]."

Not that the Escalante side of the co-op was in dire need of players. The program played in four of the last five 2A championship games and won three of them. Still, the Lobos learned a tough lesson that a lot of small-school programs face when it comes to injuries.

Just before the halfway mark of the 2017 season, junior quarterback Esteban Archuleta went down with a knee injury. Stepping into his place was Cody Russom, who filled in admirably throwing for 299 yards and running for another 419 until he tore his ACL in a 35-8 loss to Fort Sumner/House in the regular-season finale.

“We were rolling, we had everything set, and then it was just one bad play,” senior running back Anthony Ulibarri said. “But we couldn’t let that one injury hurt us, and Cody filled in great.”

Amazingly, Russom was on the field with Archuleta and the rest of the team for the 2A championship game, but the injuries had a lingering effect on the Lobos.

“That injury was very humbling,” Archuleta said. “It was like starting all over. I was out for six weeks, came back and then I hurt it again [in the championship game], and I was out for another three months. It was humbling to have to rebuild [the strength in the knee].”

Rebuilding is not something the Escalante/Coronado is not accustomed to hearing. Even though the Lobos lost Russom and fellow senior Anthony Martinez in the backfield, Archuleta and Ulibarri return to give the Lobos’ Veer offense a strong one-two punch. Ferrell is the lone senior on a young offensive line that will be a bit undersized, as only one expected starter weighs more than 200 pounds.

But that’s how it has been in the program for years: a small but scrappy team that always seems to surprise its bigger opponent. Just ask Santa Fe High, which lost to the Lobos 39-6 last year.

“We don’t rebuild, we reload,” Ulibarri said. “We’re just making everything better in every aspect.”

It’s the one key aspect that hasn’t changed with the football program in the Chama Valley — even with a slightly different name.