

# THE STREETS OF LAREDO

by: Ron Berler, The Sports Sherpa, ESPN.com

posted: *Tuesday, March 6, 2007* | [Feedback](#) | [Print Entry](#)

When my brother Richard "Heatwave" Berler met me at the Laredo, Texas, airport in January a few years ago, he was keyed up, distracted, as if spiking from a sugar high. He hustled me out of the terminal and into a desert swelter that left me gasping for air. "I don't want to get too excited," the city's No. 1-rated TV meteorologist said, trying to keep a lid on his emotions, "but this could be the first day of the year we reach 90 degrees."

We climbed into his Toyota and sped toward KGNS-TV, the local NBC affiliate where he works, windows open, the immense heat washing over our faces. At the first red light, he pulled what looked to be a meat thermometer from his breast pocket and took a fresh reading. Eighty-eight degrees. A grin began to play on his face.

Staring at the bleak countryside — a tired stew of mesquite, scrub brush, tract houses and 7-Elevens — I struggled to share my brother's enthusiasm. Though it was midday, the city looked abandoned. Small wonder: In a typical year, the temperature will top 90 degrees 178 times, and 100 degrees 81 times. Other than my brother, *nobody* walks the streets of Laredo. At least, not since the advent of air conditioning.

How shall I describe Heatwave? My brother is like a hothouse plant. He once drove through Death Valley in midsummer with the air conditioning off, to immerse himself in the stupefying swelter. "I've seen him riding his bike in 110-degree weather," marveled Richard Noriega, the station's onetime news anchor. "He seems to draw energy from the heat." Once in 1998 it shot to 114, burning the leaves of the city's banana trees like cigarette paper — a day my brother describes as one of the greatest of his life.

He chose Laredo because it is, quite literally, the hottest TV market in the country. He grew up in Connecticut and worked his first TV weather job in Duluth, Minn. The winters just about killed him. He'd curl up on his bed with a good meteorology book and dream about Sudan, the Amazon jungle ... Laredo.

The day he left Duluth, 19 degrees was the high. His first week at KGNS, in February 1980, the temperature hit 99. On air, he reported this with such passion, the rest of the news team stared at him in disbelief. "From now on," he instructed the anchorman, "I want you to introduce me as 'Heatwave.' " He's been at the station 27 years, yet almost no one in the city knows his given name.

Back then, KGNS had the feel of a frontier outpost. Bats, tarantulas and scorpions called the newsroom home. There was a hole in the building's foundation; one night a rattlesnake slithered around the studio while my brother and the rest of the Pro8News team delivered their reports.

Yet here in ranch country, where people treat weather seriously, the community has come to depend on him. During Hurricane Allen in 1980, he stayed on the job 51 straight hours tracking the storm and issuing weather advisories.

Now his fame is such that once, while riding his bicycle, the pilot of a low-flying border patrol plane spotted him and called through his loudspeaker, "Hi, Heatwave!" Viewers complain to the station when he goes on vacation.

When former Laredo Mayor Betty Flores heard I was doing a story on my brother, she insisted on speaking with me. "He is loved here," she said. "He has changed the way we feel about our city. If he left town, people would take it personally."

He has, in fact, instilled in its citizens a weird sort of community pride: Much as Detroit is Motor City, Laredo is now Heat City. Folks chart hot spells like old-time baseball fans followed Joe DiMaggio's famous hit streak. In 1998, they will tell you, the temperature reached 100 degrees 33 straight days, 55 days out of 56, a grand total of 115 times. Heat has become their identity.

There was a time, a few years ago, when my brother would tune to the No. 1 San Antonio station and grow envious of all the technology available to its weatherman. He'd wonder if he'd made the right choice, marrying himself to small-budget Laredo.

A few years ago, as a kind of 25th anniversary gift, the station purchased his wish list of high-tech gadgetry. Soon after, he signed a new, five-year contract. He called me to celebrate. He said, "I can't imagine a more perfect place to be."

He phoned the other day to invite me down for a visit. "We've gone big-time," he said. "We have professional sports teams." Not that I didn't believe him, but I checked just to make sure.

The Laredo Bucks have a lock on first place in the Central Hockey League's Southeast Division. March 16 the Bucks host the Austin Ice Bats at the Laredo Entertainment Center (6700 Arena Blvd, [Web site](#)). ([Buy tickets](#).)

March 29, the Laredo Lobos play the Bakersfield Blitz, to begin the defense of their last place, 2006 finish in the Arena Football 2 League, at the Laredo Entertainment Center. Tickets are not yet on sale.

It's 17 degrees in New York as I write this. I'm thinking back to that January visit, when I looked on as Richard waded through a jungle of wind, temperature and barometric charts piled on his desk. "It's going to get hotter," he insisted that day. At 4:02 p.m. the temperature officially hit 90. He slapped me five and ran outside to bask in the heat.