

## Changed for the better: Austin plans to open up its passing game in '08

By [Lenny Jurado / El Paso Times](#)

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Claws & effect: Austin senior quarterback Ernest Raya, top, will be looking to cut into the competition once again with the help of key returning players such as senior wideout and defensive back Ray Calhoun, bottom. The Panthers finished 11-1 last season. (Photo by Mark Lambie; illustration by Charlie Ruybe / El Paso Times)

EL PASO - If there's one constant with Austin High School's football team, it's the repetitive image of the quarterback handing off to a running back.

Take last season, for example. The Panthers rushed a hefty 53.8 times per game - no, that is not a misprint - and bothered with only an average of 7.3 pass attempts.

As it turned out, Austin trampled opponents to the tune of 375.8 yards rushing per game en route to an 11-1 season.

However, a 47-21 loss to Lubbock Estacado in the Class 4A area playoff round last year reinforced just how important a potent passing game is.

The Panthers passed only 13 times - a season-high - against the Matadors for 113 yards, their third-highest total of the year.

With a lesson firmly learned, Austin plans on opening things up a bit in 2008.

"In El Paso, we're just running and running, but going up against out-of-town teams, it looks like if you pass more, it'll help you out more," senior wide receiver Ray Calhoun said.

Calhoun (5-foot-11, 163 pounds) represents a new receiving regime for the Panthers. Along with fraternal twin Marcus Calhoun (5-10, 157) and senior Shawn Luna (6-2, 174), the trio plan on giving incumbent senior quarterback Ernest Raya (5-8, 160) more options for scoring.

"It'll be exciting, fun, and hopefully that will help our offense score a little more, put some more points on the board," Ray Calhoun said.

Of concern, the three have little to no experience catching the ball on varsity

Last year, Luna caught only one pass after an early-season injury limited him to special teams duty. Meanwhile, the top returning receiver is tailback Ben Sustaita, who had just four receptions.

Even so, Raya remains optimistic.

"Honestly, I trust my receivers," said Raya, who passed for 774 yards in 2007. "I feel that if I just throw it up in the air, they'll come down with it. And I'm confident my line will give me time to throw."

Coach Ruben Batista doesn't seem worried, either.

"We really never had the true wide receiver-type of kid who could run with some of the other defensive backs in town, but (this year) we've got some guys who can run and catch the ball," he said. "They're one miss away from getting downfield. Ernest is really good, as far as his ability. The biggest plus he has is he can take off at any time. But he has a great arm, and he's not afraid to launch it. He also sees the field really well."

Among the receivers, much of the buzz is about Luna.

"I'm bringing in speed, and I can say I have decent hands," Luna said. "I'll catch the ball when it's coming to me. And I also have pretty good size. I don't think there are that many tall (cornerbacks) who can (match) my height and my jumps."

Raya has confidence he and his new pass-catchers are up to the task.

"I've been completing a lot of passes, but we'll see when the pads go on," he said.

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