

# Batt sports

With talent and depth

## Linebackers anchor defense

By MIKE BRUTON  
Sports Editor

An old cliché says, "It's what's up front that counts," but that's not always true, especially when you're talking about the Texas A&M defense.

Granted, the Aggies have a

very capable front four, but the men backing them up could well be the best linebacking unit in the country. The Aggies possess an array of talent at the linebacker positions with two-time All-American Ed Simonini, and big-play artist Garth Ten Napel

on the outsides and two bone-crushing tacklers in the middle in Robert Jackson and Grady Wilkerson.

In this group of body thumpers is strength, size, agility and speed to burn. All these athletes are seasoned veterans, and they play

smart football. They all were a viable force in the 1974 Aggie defense that ended the seasoned ranked No. 2 in the nation, with the exception of Jackson who transferred to Aggie from Henderson County Junior College.

Simonini (6-0, 215), alias "the fiery Italian", plays in accordance with his nickname. For three seasons, he has thrilled multitudes of Aggie fans with his emotional performances. He plays with reckless abandon, tossing, twisting and maneuvering his body into the paths of oncoming ball carriers. At times it seems as if the senior superstar is running around aimlessly on the field, but he always ends up somewhere near the pigskin.

The sassy outside linebacker is very well equipped to handle his position at the strongside flank. He has excellent speed, a hold-over from his high school days at running back and ample upper body strength to meet blockers.

Simonini plays with extreme intensity, handling the run and the pass with efficiency. There is one aspect of his play that makes him lethal to opposing offenses: his quickness and his uncanny knack of zeroing in on the ball.

Simonini may be the star but he's not the whole show. Garth Ten Napel (6-2, 205) is an expert at making game breaking plays. He's always the guy that causes the fumbles or recovers them and he always seems to do it at opportune times. The flying Dutchman is a terror on the blitz, recording more quarterback sacks than any other linebacker last season. And there were countless times when he failed to nab the enemy signal caller but his eminent presence forced turnovers.

Ten Napel isn't considered large for the linebacker position, but he manages to throw his weight around adequately. He has what linebacker coach John Young calls savvy. He keeps his head in the game at all times and in the ball carrier's chest most of the time, as he was the leading tackler of the heralded A&M defense of 1974.

Like Simonini, Ten Napel's success stems largely from his quickness and his ability to close in on the ball in a hurry. He is a finesse player rather than an overpowering player. The experienced senior can play the pass, but is used as a blitzer in most passing situations.

The middle linebacker position at A&M has shown some interesting battles recently. Last year at this time John McCrumby and Ken Stratton were getting set for a second year of fighting for the number one spot. Stratton has exhausted his time with the Maroon and McCrumby is Buffalo bound after his recent signing with the Bills. But the war rages on, this time Jackson and Wilkerson are dueling for the position.

In the spring, Wilkerson and Jackson shared the starting position in the middle and A&M defensive coaches are still puzzled as to who plays best. Both men had a good spring and both are very capable of handling the reins of the mighty Aggie defense. Only time will tell who'll be the starter.

Wilkerson (6-3, 224), is known by most for his vicious striking ability. He is a headhunter, which is a prime prerequisite for being a good middle linebacker. If you were in Baton Rouge on that September evening last season when the Aggies played a fantastic game against LSU, you'd surely remember a thunderous sound made on one kickoff. That was Wilkerson giving the Bayou Bengal kick returner a love tap.

The Odessa-bred junior has the size and strength to play that tough inside game and he uses both very well. He has good range and two letters to show for experience. No matter who starts at middle linebacker next season, Wilkerson is sure to log lots of playing time.

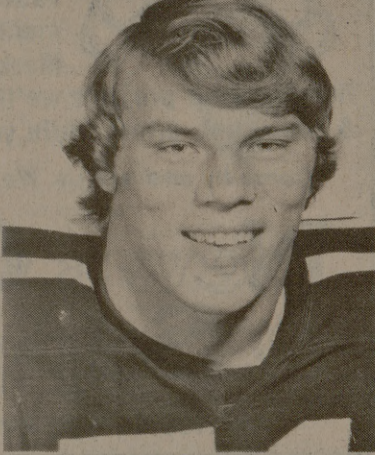
Jackson (6-3, 229), made a quick adjustment to the A&M defensive scheme this spring and put himself right in the thick of things. He is also a hitter and has amazing upper body strength. With forearms like his (of the large variety) an offensive blocker in a one-on-one situation would probably be at a disadvantage.

The muscular transfer student certainly owns the tools of the trade when it comes to playing middle linebacker. He stands strong in the middle with his huge frame. His quickness and speed extends his range from

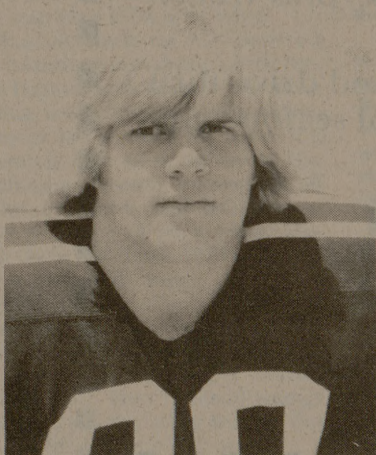
(SEE AG LINEBACKERS...Page 9)



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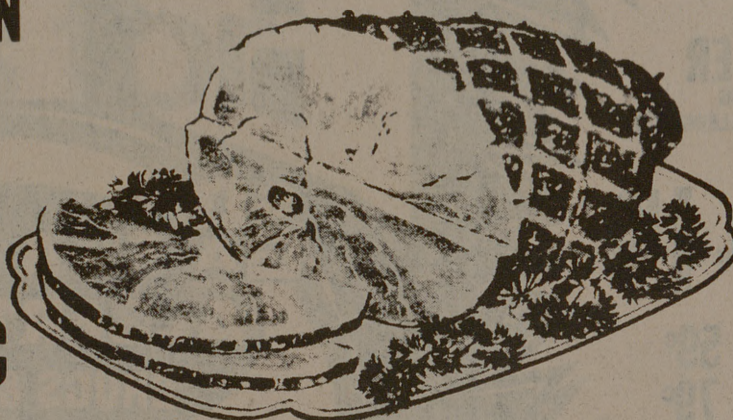
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