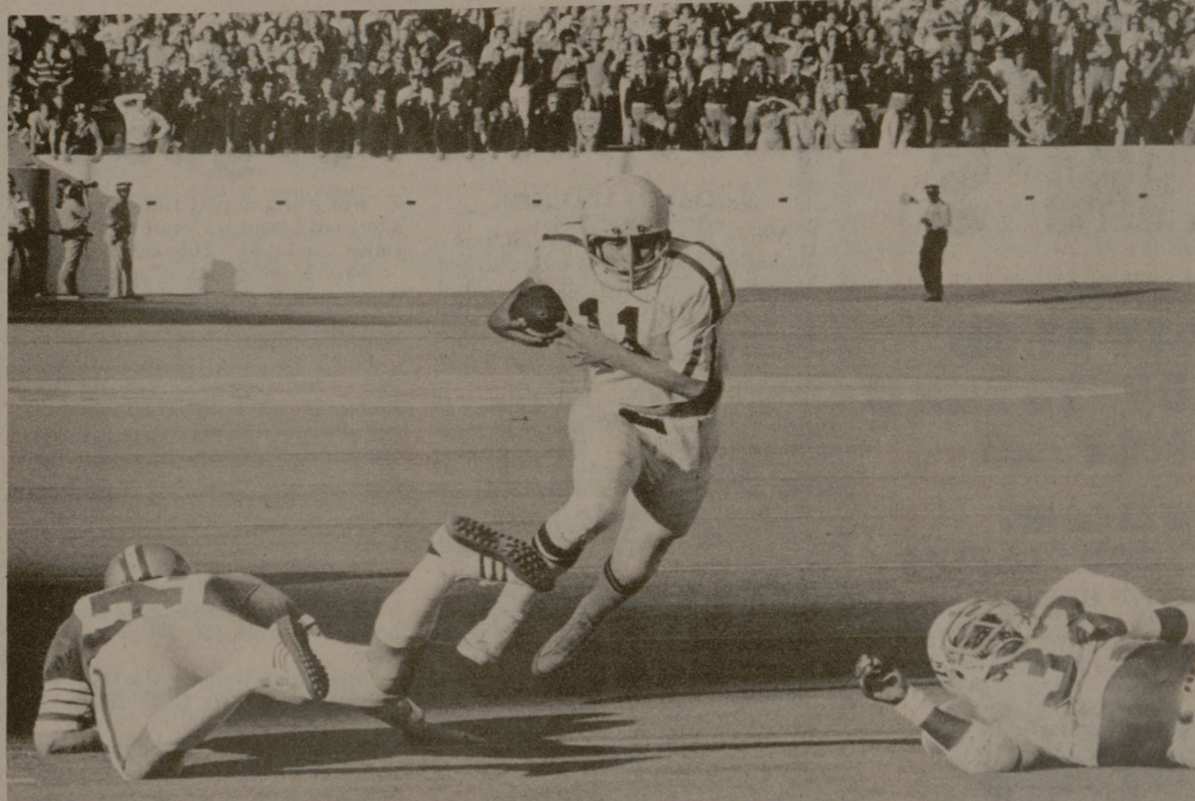




Sportfolio

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Staff Photo by Glen Johnson

Jay picks his way

Texas A&M quarterback Mike Jay performs one of the key options to the Wishbone attack — the keeper. The ex-Marine dashed for 83 yards against the Owls in his first start in two years. Jay was replacing the injured David Shipman, out with a hyperextended knee. Shipman, as well as the other Aggie walking wounded, will be suited up and ready for the upcoming showdown with Texas.

The number three ranked team nationally, A&M is an early 11 point favorite over the number five ranked Longhorns. A&M will

host the Horns November 25 with a seven game losing streak to Texas hanging over their heads.

The game will determine the Southwest Conference representative to the Astro-Bluebonnet Bowl and possibly the SWC champion.

The opponent in the Bluebonnet will be Colorado from the Big Eight and the Cotton Bowl choice went to Georgia representing the Southeastern Conference. Both schools have two losses on the year.

From high above in an eerie chamber, the ghosts of seasons past, of seasons present and of seasons yet to come peer downward. The mysterious trio casts an interested glance at a group of 11 figures clad in Maroon and in White. As they watch the action on the playing field, the three concur among themselves. "They are good, these Aggies."

Yes, indeed they are. The defense of Texas A&M, perhaps the finest group of defenders to grace the Southwest Conference, is currently ranked No. 1 in the nation, a position they have maintained a firm grip on throughout the year. You can't get much higher than that.

The Aggies hold down the top spots in overall defense, allowing 175.1 yards a game, and in rushing defense with an average allotment of 67.3 yards per contest. The two Rice touchdowns caused a temporary fall in scoring defense, erasing the defensive triple crown possibility for the moment.

One soon becomes hard put for adjectives for the human stone wall erected by defensive co-ordinator Melvin Robertson. Take your choice between impregnable, tenacious, hungry, experienced and downright nasty.

In this day and age of super pro-type offenses, Wishbone monstrosities and ground-burning running backs, the A&M defensive statistics are almost incredible.

The nine Farmer opponents have managed 138 possessions. Of these opportunities, the average gain has been 12 yards.

On 89 possessions the opposing team has failed to make even one first down. That means 65 per cent of the time the other team has not gained 10 yards.

On 106 possessions, the Aggie foe has failed to reach midfield and cross into friendly territory. Only seven touchdowns have been scored against Robertson's crew, and of those seven just two on sustained drives. The others came on long passes, long runs or mistakes.

Last year, A&M was second in the nation in the defensive categories, permitting an average of 206.5 steps a game. Subtract 30 from that to see the improvement.

Notre Dame was the defensive leader last season, but it was also the Irish who came to A&M earlier in the year to learn Robertson's technique.

Was the No. 1 spot on the Aggies' minds? "Yeah, it was one of our goals," said Ed Simonini, the All-American Methuselah in the A&M defense.

Simonini has starred since his freshman year in 1972, the same year Emory Bellard and Robertson came to town.

When one thinks of A&M, defense automatically comes to mind and Simonini has become synonymous with A&M defense. The Las

Vegas product has been the heart and fire in what transfers from Robertson's blackboard to the playing field.

Simonini says his presence in the limelight has not put any pressure on him. "The only pressure I feel is from inside to win. It comes from within myself," he said.

"That's a great group," Robertson said, referring to the entire A&M linebacking corps. "They are as good as you'll find anywhere."

Of the 802 primary tackles and assists by A&M, 350 have been by the linebacking crew. Three of the top four Aggie tacklers are linebackers.

"Anytime you're in the top you've got a hell of a defense," Robertson continued. But, he said, "You've got to be lucky. Everything has got to fall in place."

This is a factor that comes with experience. It compares with the aging of wine, the more the better. This is one reason Robertson feels that bowl games are an advantage: "You get in all that extra practice time. The more the kids practice, the more chance they have of getting into a game. Practice makes perfect," said the author of the press-hot book, "Winning With the Aggie 4-3 Defense."

While big plays and individual efforts are still a vital part of defensive play, teamwork has become the key phrase. "If we break down it's not going to be just because of me," said Simonini. "I'm not worried about making mistakes, because I know the other guys will make up for me. I still make mistakes now, but I'm able to get away with them," he said.

Robertson has a list of goals for each game, goals that have been met with amazing frequency. "All of our goals right now we have achieved in nearly every game, and that's phenomenal I think," Robertson said.

The desired items include:
—No touchdown passes over 25 yards. Only Illinois, Baylor and Rice have done so.

—Recover fumbles. That has been accomplished in five games.

—Intercept two passes. Six times (See 'defense' page 12)

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