

It has been two good years for Opie

By DERRICK GRUBBS

The long bus ride to Baton Rouge was only half over when I glanced at my watch and saw it was just a few minutes past 11 a.m. The Aggie baseball team had left at 7:40 that Thursday morning for their season opener with LSU the following day.

We were a few miles past Beaumont and my legs were cramping from having them folded between seats. I got up and yelled to the players at the rear of the bus:

"What's Opie doing?"

"Nuthin' right now," someone answered from among a small group of card players.

I made my way slowly to the next-to-last seat — carefully stepping over the card game in progress in the aisle — and sat down next to Opie.

"Opie" is junior lefthander Mark Thurmond, so nicknamed by his teammates in reference to Opie Taylor from the old "Andy Griffith show."

Thurmond had turned in a great sophomore season in 1977. He led the SWC in pitching with a 0.64 earned run average, won ten straight games before losing his last two decisions of the year, and had made all-SWC. He was also named to the all-District Six team and was a third-team all-America as well as first-team Academic all-America.

In only two years at A&M, the 6-0, 175-pound two-letterman from Houston has experienced many athletic thrills. Among them are his

three-hit shutout against Texas last season in leading his team to the SWC championship.

However, this past summer, Thurmond had an experience only a few college baseball players have. He pitched for the United States in the annual USA-Japan College All-Star Series.

The USA won the series, four games to two, winning for the fifth straight year. The blue-eyed lefty from Aggieland had a big hand in making it happen.

Thurmond didn't pitch in the first game played at Dedeaux Field in Los Angeles, a contest won by the Americans 4-3.

In the second game, he was the third pitcher in a battle that went 14 innings before the United States pulled out a 5-3 win. Thurmond went five innings, gave up six hits, one earned run, walked five and struck out three. He also went 0-for-2 at the plate.

The series then moved to Omaha, Neb. for the next three games. Japan won the third game of the series 4-3 as Opie watched from the dugout. In game number four, Thurmond worked three innings, gave up three hits, no runs, no walks, and struck out five but Japan still claimed a 4-0 win.

The USA got back on the winning track the following day with a 2-1 win in the fifth game. Thurmond didn't see action in that contest.

The teams flew back to Los Angeles and Dodger Stadium was

the site of game number six. Thurmond turned in his best performance of the series as he pitched the final four innings to persevere a 6-3 USA win. The victory clinched the series for the Americans. Opie struck out seven of the 12 batters he faced and again, did not allow a run or a base on balls.

The final game was played back at Dedeaux Field on the USC campus with the USA claiming a 7-5 win, taking the series, four games to two.

In three games he pitched, Thurmond went 12 innings, gave up 11 hits, one earned run, five walks, struck out 15. Those strike outs also broke the series record held by Arizona State's Floyd Bannister.

Thurmond's memory of those two weeks of international competition was the subject of my conversation with the 21-year-old Finance major as we rode the Greyhound into Louisiana.

"I was impressed with how disciplined the Japanese players are," said Thurmond. "Their coaches are much more strict and the players respect them, whether they like them or not. The coaches are very demanding also. I remember at one point their clean-up hitter made an error in the field. The coach immediately took him out of the game and that guy didn't play the rest of the series. They just don't tolerate mistakes."

But, as Opie pointed out, they don't make many mistakes, either. "The Japanese emphasize funda-

mentals and they work hard at perfecting their skills. Baseball is the most popular sport over there and they love it. Sadaharu Oh (Japanese home run king) is to them what Babe Ruth or Hank Aaron was to us."

Thurmond also said he was impressed by the endurance of the Japanese players.

"They don't play a long season, but they work harder than most American teams. They run before practice instead of just after. American players probably have more natural ability, but there's no question that the Japanese are in better condition."

I asked Thurmond what it was like playing against the Japanese.

"There wasn't a whole lot of difference really. Their strike zone is higher and the first game I pitched, there was a Japanese umpire behind the plate. I walked five and had trouble keeping my pitches up since we're taught over here to keep the ball low on the hitters. One other thing I noticed during our games was that their pitchers keep warming up in the bullpen. They're taught that the best way to get soreness out of their arms was to keep throwing."

Thurmond will likely see many more highlights in his career, but one he has already experienced — and will always remember — was pitching at Dodger Stadium.

"It's just a super place to play baseball. The mound was the best

I'd ever thrown on. It was a thrill to meet all the Dodger players, especially Doug Rau (who pitched for A&M from 1968-70). He told me a lot of things about pitching and

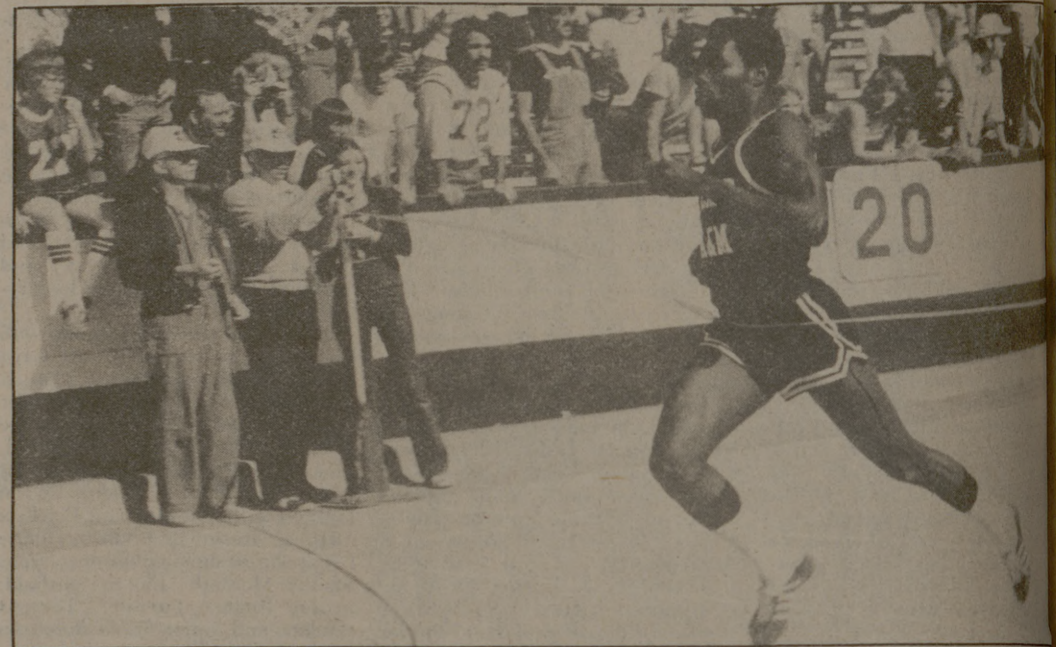
about his years as an Aggie."

Thurmond said Rau also gave him advice on taking care of his pitching arm.

"He said to eat a lot of bananas —

they have potassium which is for the arm muscles."

At that point, Opie grinned and shook his head.



Breaking the tape

A&M track star Leslie Kerr breaks the tape in the 400-meter dash. The Aggies won the duel meet against Rice. A&M will travel to

Laredo this weekend to participate in the Border Olympics.

Battalion photo by Jana Haidt

By David Boggan

Listen to the tournament; it will be 'Houston'

Thanks to the no television decision by SWC commissioner Cliff Speegle, I will be one of the thousands of "hard corps fans" who will be glued to my radio this weekend watching the third annual Southwest Conference Basketball Classic.

The winner of the tournament will represent the conference in the NCAA play-offs, and the field of hopefuls has been narrowed down to five. With the first game of the classic tipping off this evening (yes, the jump ball has been reinstated into the SWC), I think it is time for me to pick a tournament winner.

Pretty bold of me, right? I wait until four of the nine teams have been eliminated before I make any predictions. Well, I wasn't going to pick TCU or Rice to go all the way, anyway. Honest.

SMU, Texas Tech, Houston and

the conference co-champs Arkansas and Texas all have a shot at the tournament crown.

The Mustangs and the Razorbacks start things off tonight at 7. Poor Ponies. They did good getting into The Summit by beating Baylor last Saturday. But they will go no farther for three reasons: Marvin Delph, Sidney Moncrief and all-America Ron Brewer.

Tech and Houston will finish off the evening's events in what should be a close contest. If the Raiders play team basketball like they did against the Aggies last Saturday, it will be a good game. But the Cougar's strong corps of reserves will prevail in the end.

If my selections are correct, that will pit the Razorbacks against the Cougars. I will be sure to have my dial tuned in good for this one, because I believe it will be the best

game of the tournament. If these two teams do meet in The Summit, it will be their rubber match this season. Arkansas defeated Houston in Fayetteville during the Christmas holidays, and the Cougs knocked the Hogs off two weeks ago in Hoheinz. It was that game that knocked Arkansas off the national basketball throne after a one week tenure as king.

Ironically, the three reasons that give Arkansas a victory over SMU tonight will be three factors that give Houston the win Friday night. It's not that Brewer, Moncrief and Delph, along with their fellow starters Jim Counce and Steve Schall, play too much, it's just that the rest of the Hogs play too little. Lack of depth and experience will send Sutton's men back to Fayetteville on a Friday flight.

While Arkansas cannot afford to

bench Brewer, Moncrief or Delph for any great amount of time, look, or should I say, listen for the Cougars to substitute freely. If Ken Ciolli, Cecil Rose, Mike Schultz, Charles Thompson or Ken Williams start to work up a sweat, coach Guy Lewis can rely on the efforts of Cedric Fears, Chuck O'Neill, George Walker, . . .

That means Houston and Texas, who due to statistical circumstances received a bye to the finals, will play for all the marbles Saturday night, if my predictions hold true.

While Houston will be coming off two games in two nights, the Longhorns will be well rested. They haven't played a game since Feb. 21; make that too rested. That's one strike on Lemon's Longhorns.

Texas has two of the conference's top three scorers. Jim Krivacs and Ron Baxter averaged 21 and 19

points this season, respectively. Houston's leading scorer, Cecil Rose, averaged 18 points. So give the Cougars a strike.

But a team cannot score if they cannot get the ball. Houston grabs about five more rebounds per game than their opponents. They lead the conference in rebounding.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the rebounding column sits, that's right, the Texas Longhorns. Abe's army gives up about four more rebounds per game than they get. Give the Horns another strike.

And the straw that will break the

Longhorn's back will be the omnipresent Bayou City chant, "Houston, Houston!" Even if they can't get into the sold out Summit, Cougar fans will make sure they are heard by the "hard corps fans" sitting by their radios Saturday night.

The decision not to televise the

SWC Basketball Classic was based on the premise that "hard corps fans" can only be established if television is not involved. The opposite is true. Television Classic would not detract from the tournament but create interest. And that is the idea, isn't it?

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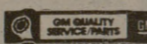
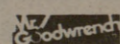
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