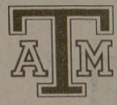


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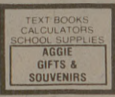
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R.B.: 'He's amazing'

By MARK PATTERSON
Battalion Staff

Show me a great team and I'll show you a great shortstop.
— Tom Chandler, Texas A&M baseball coach

What can a college coach do with a baseball player coming out of high school who has earned all-district, all-state and all-American honors? Texas A&M coach Tom Chandler put him at shortstop and let him do his job. And for three years Robert Bonner has held down that position so well that last year Bonner earned all-SWC honors.

Yet this year, with the Aggies winning the SWC baseball crown for the second consecutive year, has been more satisfying for the Corpus Christi native than all the other years that he's played baseball. "Playing with this team is like playing with a big happy family," said Bonner. "We've played as a team all year, which makes it all the more satisfying."

"But this year's championship meant more to us than the one last year. A lot of people said that we backed into the championship (last year). So this year we went out and took it from the rest of the conference."

Bonner had his sights on playing for coach Chandler since their first meeting, when Bonner was in the ninth grade in Corpus Christi. Since then he always waited for the day that he could play under Chandler. "When we first met I knew that I

wanted Chandler as my coach," said Bonner. "And I hate to admit it, but I would have gone wherever he was coaching."

"But it was a bonus for me that he was still here at A&M. I was contacted by Texas, Oklahoma, Tulsa and some other schools about playing for them but once I met Chandler I made up my mind and just told the other schools my intention."

And since his arrival at Texas A&M Bonner has made his mark on the team. After gaining his starting position R. B. (what he likes to go by) batted .335 his sophomore year. He fell off to .293 last year, when he earned all-SWC honors. This year Bonner is carrying a .343 batting average into the post-season tournament this weekend.

"I can't really explain my improvement in batting except that my hits are just falling in for me," said Bonner. "I've only struck out six times this year so that tells you that I'm not taking too many pitches. I've just made good contact on the ball."

"I really don't think I deserved all-SWC honors last year. (Steve) Macko (Baylor's all-America shortstop) really deserved it more than I did. But this year I guess I'm playing pretty good ball. But anybody who played with the team that I'm playing with would shine."

Bonner and second baseman Randy Woodruff have earned the praise they've received. The pair have combined to turn 57 double plays, a school record. Their 32

double plays in conference play broke the SWC record.

Bonner's accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. The Kansas City Royals drafted the shortstop in the ninth round of last year's college draft. Yet Bonner opted for his fourth and final year at Texas A&M.

"I just wanted to stay and play in the new field," said Bonner. "I really hated to leave this good team."

"But most of all I wasn't ready to go into pro ball. I wasn't ready to make it my career. I still wanted to play around and have a good time."

"But I'm ready to go this year. And I know I can make it. There are too many people playing pro ball now that I played with before. And if they can make it, I think I can. But it will still take some breaks."

"I've really been lucky that my wife (Becky) has supported me in my career. With her support I've been able to concentrate on baseball. And it's especially important that I get into pro ball this year. My wife is pregnant with our second baby and being from families who aren't too wealthy, I need to play ball so I can pay for the new baby."

But before Bonner can worry about turning professional he has to concentrate on winning the NCAA baseball crown. And the first step in the quest takes place in Austin this weekend.

"Going into last year's tournament we felt like we didn't have anything to prove," said Bonner. "But things are different this year. This time, winning the conference didn't have the impact that it did

last year. All we're looking for is Omaha (College World Series). But we still have to beat teams going to Austin. We have something working in our favor. We've beaten every team going to the tournament."

So the career of Robert Bonner playing in front of the home fans is over. And with his first appearance Bonner received the best memory of his baseball career. "The fondest memory that I have since I started playing baseball was when the fans gave me a standing ovation for my 200th hit at A&M. It was against Lubb Christian last Thursday. When the hit and everybody stood and applauded I just felt like crying. I knew that the fans had appreciated what I'd done."

The fans, players and coaches have appreciated the work Bonner has done. And his coach, Tom Chandler, will miss the shortstop. "Beyond a doubt Robert is a prospect," said Chandler. "I've never seen a man go 0-for-0-0-for-8 and never drop his head. Robert just loves to play baseball."

"He's the kind of guy that you pay to go and see. He can go out and make a great play and that's the greatest play I've seen," and he'll turn around and make a better one. He's amazing. And the kid's overcome some handicaps. Knee surgery on his knee and then the other one. He keeps coming back. I think when he graduates graduate with him."

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