

Lightning Lance

McIlhenny one of keys to Mustangs' fortunes

United Press International
DALLAS — Lance McIlhenny had a good reason to break down and cry on that October afternoon in Austin two years ago.

He was, after all, about to be fed to the Longhorns.

Texas was unbeaten and ranked No. 2 in the country. Longhorn fans were getting frothed up about a possible national championship. And here was McIlhenny, a mere freshman, starting his first game. He had done nothing to deserve the fate that was seemingly awaiting him on the floor of Memorial Stadium.

But McIlhenny was not crying because of fright. It was the sheer emotion of the moment that had finally overcome him.

"I stood there listening to our alma mater," he recalls, "and the next thing I knew there were tears rolling down my cheeks." The rest, as they say, is lore. McIlhenny and the SMU Mustangs barbequed the Longhorns that day, 20-6, starting them on a slide in which they lost four of their last six games.

Quite a few SMU touchdowns have been recorded since those tears welled up in McIlhenny's eyes. He has gone from anxious freshman to seasoned junior, he has quarterbacked a conference championship club and he has been a key factor in the splendid careers of Eric Dickerson and Craig James.



SMU quarterback Lance McIlhenny leads Mustangs

And Saturday night when the Mustangs defeated Tulane, he began what might turn out to be the most distinguished season in the history of SMU football. The Mustangs are picked to win the league title again and could battle for the national championship.

But if McIlhenny has been lying awake at night thinking about all sorts of post-season honors, he won't admit it.

"I've always been taught that it is important to worry about the next game you are playing and nothing else," said McIlhenny, looking directly into the eyes of the questioner. "We can't think about playing in the Cotton Bowl or playing somebody for the national championship."

Dickerson and James combined for almost 2,600 rushing yards from the tailback position last year and that total would have been far less had it not been for the smooth option quarterbacking of McIlhenny.

"He is," new SMU coach Bob Collins says, "the best option quarterback in the country."

His ability soon became evident in McIlhenny's first start. The critical play of the Texas game was a 53-yard touchdown run by James, who took a pitch from McIlhenny just as the quarterback was being leveled by a Texas lineman.

"I guess that (pitching the ball at just the critical moment) is what I do best," said McIlhenny. "You can't be shy when you pitch it. We've got great running backs and my job is to get them the ball."

"I've always been one to just do the best I can. I don't have the great statistics. But you do what the situation calls for. With repetition you get better and better at something. When there is trouble in front of you the idea is to get the ball to the running back and that's what I try to do."

McIlhenny has started 16 games for the Mustangs and his team has won 14 of them. And despite his vulnerable position he has yet to miss a minute of playing time.

"I have seen some stars," he said. "And after one hit I remember throwing up a little blood. But I have learned to get

out of the way now. When you pitch that ball you get upfield, you don't stand around waiting for somebody to tee off on you.

"The question is not whether you can stand a lick, but whether you can get up afterwards."

And as McIlhenny has continued to get up, respect for him has grown around the league.

"You know that freshmen don't carry much clout in college football," he said. "And when I came in as a freshman I had to prove to the team what I could do. Now I've been here for three years and I need to show some of the leadership qualities that some of the older players have shown to me."

"A quarterback has to be a leader."

McIlhenny has proven his leadership abilities over the past two seasons. He has absorbed the changes brought on by the new coaching staff and he has entered the 1982 season with the proper amount of confidence in his own abilities.

He began his career as a college quarterback with tears in his eyes. But ever since, it has been the opposition who's been crying.

Astros add to Atlanta's misery with series sweep

United Press International
ATLANTA — Most of the Houston Astros say they are pulling for Atlanta to win the National League West, but they've dealt a severe blow to the Braves' chances.

"I think a lot of teams are pulling for the Braves because they are a young team and this is their first real shot at being in contention," Astros' pitcher Nolan Ryan said after stopping the Braves 5-4 Wednesday night to complete a three-game series sweep.

"But we're going to play hard," Ryan said. "We want to be a factor in the pennant race."

The loss dropped the Braves 2½ games behind Los Angeles as the Dodgers completed a sweep over San Diego with a 5-0 victory for their sixth straight win.

The Braves, who open a weekend series in Cincinnati Friday night, can only hope the Astros can help even things up when they travel to Los Angeles this weekend.

"We were very disappointed we got swept by the Dodgers at home last weekend," Ryan said. "We wanted to play the spoiler role against them at home. Now, we want to go to Los Angeles and play that role."

With the game tied 2-2, short-stop Dickie Thon bloomed a two-out, opposite-field double over first base with the bases loaded in the seventh inning to drive in three unearned runs and give the Astros the victory.

Ryan, 15-11, allowed seven hits and four runs in eight innings and Dave Smith finished up for his 11th save. Tommy Boggs, 2-2, was charged with all five Houston runs in 6½ innings.

The Braves made it close in the eighth on Bob Horner's two-run homer, his 32nd of the sea-

son, and convinced Ryan he was ready to come out.

"I didn't have real good stuff tonight and basically struggled," Ryan said. "I felt like after the eighth inning that if I stayed out there in the ninth I might jeopardize the outcome of the game."

Smith, who set the Braves down in order in the ninth, said he was "looking forward to going out to LA and trying to sweep those guys. That would really make the season for us. I

would rather see the Braves in there. I don't care for the Dodgers too much."

A Houston sweep in Los Angeles would be fine for Atlanta manager Joe Torre, who shut his door after the game and had nothing to say to reporters for the first time this season.

"There's not much to say, really," Atlanta's Jerry Royster said. "You can talk until you are blue in the face and that doesn't get any hits or runs up on the board."

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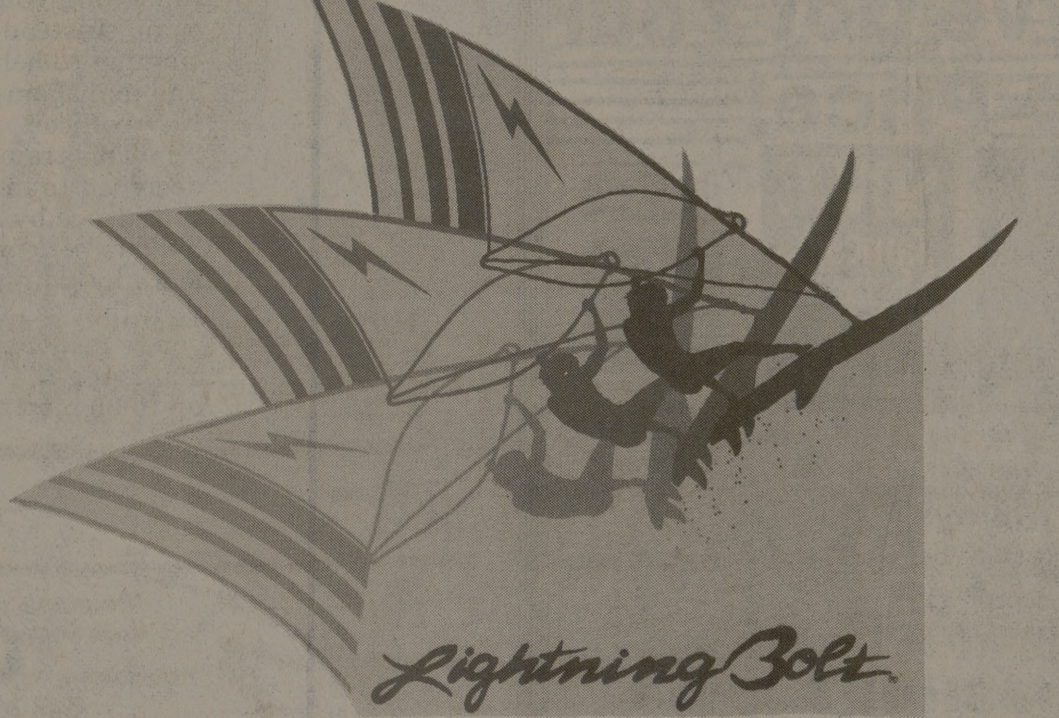
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