

# The Battalion Sports

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## Sticks and ice

### Texas A&M hockey team overcomes unusual problems to survive season

by John Wagner  
Sports Editor

Tom Dobrez throws his head back and laughs. War stories? He has a few. In an unmistakably Southern accent — he's from a town close to Chicago — Dobrez offers up a netful of anecdotes that would make your head spin. Or your ice melt, in this case.

Dobrez is the only senior member on Texas A&M's ice hockey team — a team that wound up its inaugural season in March against the Austin Capitols. It wasn't easy, but the Aggies managed to play eight games — and win five of them — in a season beset with difficulties from the very beginning.

Anyone who is determined enough to play hockey at a school like Texas A&M is bound to have some kind of anecdote — some type of war story — to tell. A&M is a university that loves its football. The students wear shorts in February. Winter comes and goes, with no sign whatsoever of the white stuff. To Aggies, icing is something you eat on a cake.

It is not the kind of place you start a hockey team. But somebody did. And, as Dobrez and the other members of the team will tell you, things worked out just fine.

That somebody was Steve Mathiason, the team's first president. After several members of the Texas A&M lacrosse team sat down to discuss "good old days" up North, the idea of an Aggie hockey team was born. Dobrez calls Mathiason's plan "a brainchild."

Still, thinking of it was the easy part. And gathering up enough experienced players to field a team wasn't too difficult, either. The tough part came when the team had to actually play.

To begin with, the Bryan/College Station area doesn't even have an ice rink. The Aggies began practice this season using the Sharpstown Ice Center in Houston — a two-hour drive away — as their home rink. But a single stroke of ill-timed lightning put an end to that plan, hitting the generator at Sharpstown and melting the ice. The rink has still not reopened.

But another rink did. After the Aggies traveled to New Orleans to play two games against Tulane (they won one and lost one), Spenco International Waco opened its doors. The opening night attraction? SMU vs. Texas A&M in an intercollegiate hockey match.

Dobrez says it was a night he'll never forget. "Because of all the things we'd run in to," Dobrez says, "we really didn't get too keyed up, as far as expecting too much (from the rink). But it was impressive."

"We went into the locker room to get dressed, and when we walked out, there was a deafening roar. There were 550 people there, and I'm not exaggerating. The reception we got was so spontaneous and so incredible the whole team was just awe."

"And not only were there Corps people there, not only were there regular Aggies, but there were old A&M too. And they were there to watch Texas A&M play hockey."

"They were coming up to us and saying 'we didn't know you had a hockey team.' And we were saying 'we really didn't, either.'"

The Aggies finished out the season with two games against North Texas State, one game against the Austin Saints, and the season-finale against the Capitols.

Finding a place to play wasn't the only problem, however. There were little problems (finding a place to buy sticks) as well as big problems (paying for ice time). Both were nagging, to say the least.

"Ice time," Dobrez says, "is very expensive (approximately \$100 an hour at most rinks). So our primary concern was paying for the ice. We would've slept in the car if we had to, but we wanted that ice time. We were a bunch of hockey players who just wanted to play."

But hockey players need sticks to play. And one stick usually lasts only one, maybe two games — if you're lucky.

"If you walk into a pro shop in a city like Chicago — some place up North — there'll be sticks everywhere," Dobrez said. "And when you walk in there'll be maybe a 100 sticks to choose from — that many sticks displayed."

"Whereas down here there's like nine, and there's only two different kinds. It's either this one or that one. You walk in and you take whatever you can get."

"You grow up using a brand of stick, and you just don't want to change. A stick is a very vital, important piece of equipment — it's like a baseball player's mitt."

"So one time one of the players' father was coming down from Minnesota, and he called up his dad with an order of sticks. The dad was coming anyway, so he drove down with a good amount of sticks. Everybody put in their personal order."

Another problem licked. But practicing was another story. The Aggies tried working out in DeWare Fieldhouse, but the results weren't encouraging. It might have helped if DeWare had ice.

"Hockey is not so much a question of having strategy," Dobrez said, "as much as knowing the guy next to you — how fast he can skate, how he can catch the pass, does he pass, or does he shoot a lot. And every week we would have no practice. That was our problem — we never had any practices. We were lucky enough just to get games, let alone practice."

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Above, action from SMU game. Below, hockey team's most valuable players. From left to right, defensemen Joe Anderson and Todd Steinweg, goalie Blair Oliver and forwards Gordie Anderson and Tom Dobrez.

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