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Metcalf says 1984 Ags have found the Spirit

By TONY CORNETT
Sports Writer

The intangible will be back on the Texas A&M basketball team when the 1984-85 campaign gets under way.

That's the word from Aggie basketball coach Shelby Metcalf. And just what is that elusive "thing" that will make the difference between a successful season and a mediocre season?

"Aggie spirit," says Metcalf, "we've started to get that Aggie spirit back."

The Aggie coach went on to say that team at the end of last season reminded him of the Aggies of the late 1970s and of 1980. During that stretch from '75-'80, the Ags won the Southwest Conference championship 3 times: '75, '76, and '80.

"I think we're about a year away from where we want to be," says Metcalf. "We won't have any seniors, and in the past, the strong teams have."

The youth of the team is no secret. At the beginning of last season, it was generally conceded that a rebuilding year was at hand. The Aggies would have no chance of doing much of anything but playing for their lives.

As it turned out, the team finished out the season strongly, beating highly respected SMU in the SWC tournament and just losing to perennial power Arkansas by a basket.

The improvement of last year's team during the season was as dramatic an improvement as Coach Metcalf has ever seen in an Aggie squad.

"From the first game to the last game it was the most improved team I've had at A&M."

Consider that the Ags will return four starters to the hardwoods.

Jimmie Gilbert will return to the center position, Winston Crite will fill one forward slot, and Kenny Brown and Todd Holloway will return at guards.

Competition for those spots could come from the ranks of the returning lettermen or those of the new talent. There are three lettermen returning: forwards Mike Clifford and Al Pulliam and guard Gary Lewis, who returns from a torn ligament that caused him to miss all of last season.

As far as new talent, the Aggies boast a pair of junior college transfers in New York products Don Marbury and Reggie Hayes. Incoming freshmen Elbert Branch and Fred Burton are hail from New York. Paul Crawford, a freshman out of A&M Consolidated High School, will be redshirted.

"I like this team on paper," says Metcalf.



Texas A&M Head Basketball Coach Shelby Metcalf says the 1984-85 squad has put "Aggie Spirit" back into their game.

He smiles when he talks about having the kind of players who go into a game and do the grunting and crunching it takes to win. As he puts it, "the hard-nosed players."

"We have more of those now than we've had in the past," says Metcalf.

He concedes that it's early to tell whether that "hard-nosed" kind of play will actually materialize completely, since the Aggies can't begin formal workouts until October 16. He bases his feelings on what he calls an "educated guess" after being around and talking to his players.

Considering Metcalf's record of 341-230 going into his 22nd season as coach of the Aggies, one could call it a very educated guess.

Aggie center Jimmie Gilbert has played against some hard-nosed players himself and is excited about the prospect of rematches with some of his annual adversaries.

Joe Kleine of Arkansas and John Koncak of SMU will be greeted by a beefier Aggie in the middle when those confrontations take place.

Returning forward Winston Crite has his sights set on Texas Tech. The fact that the Aggies didn't chalk up a win against the Red Raiders last season has stayed with him.

"Tech is a grudge match," says Crite.

Looking around the Southwest Conference, it's obvious that last year's powers won't be handing out any free lunches. Metcalf isn't hesitant to name who he sees as the toughest competition.

"SMU's got all their starters back," he says. "Arkansas had the best season recruiting and talent-wise, Arkansas may have the best team they've ever had. Houston's always going to have a good team. You don't have to worry about that."

The Aggies will have to be ready

for some stiff competition early in the conference season. They'll face Arkansas, Baylor, Marquette, and SMU all before the A&M students return to College Station from the Christmas break. The Arkansas and SMU games are set for G. Rollie White Coliseum while the Marquette game will be in the Summit in Houston. The Baylor game will be in Waco.

"It's a very tough schedule," says Metcalf. "We're going to be in or out early."

When asked about whether this is the toughest he's ever seen the SWC, he replies, "I think so."

The coaching staff for the Aggies will consist of Metcalf, Assistant Coach John Thornton, who is entering his fourth season with the Aggies, Assistant Coach John Widdicombe, who will be coordinating the recruiting, Graduate Assistant Coach Randy Knowles, and Student Assistant Coach and former Aggie Player, Willie Foreman.

A recruiting coordinator is something that the Aggies have not had before. John Widdicombe will be on the road evaluating the talent that the Aggies will compete for on signing day.

"That's one thing that Coach Sherrill (Texas A&M Athletic Director and Head Football Coach) has done for us," says Metcalf. "We have a larger staff than we've ever had."

Noticing that A&M's roster only has three players from Texas on it, it's not surprising that Metcalf is pleased with having a coach who can devote his time to surveying the talent-rich areas of the country.

And what are the Aggies doing while they wait for the start of formal workouts?

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Sooners won't rebuild in '84

United Press International

NORMAN, Okla. — No one can decimate the Oklahoma Sooners — not even the National Football League.

On the surface, the Big Eight Sooners can be expected to have a down year defensively. Why not? The NFL took five players from their 1983 defensive unit in the first 36 picks of the 1983 draft.

Oklahoma's All-America tackle Rick Bryan and linebacker Jackie Shipp were selected in the first round last spring and tackle Bob Slater, safety Scott Case and linebacker Thomas Benson all went high in the second round.

That leaves Oklahoma with only five starters returning from a unit that ranked seventh in the nation in total defense a year ago. But Coach

Barry Switzer doesn't plan to rebuild that defense in 1984; he's plans to reload.

Heading the list of returnees is 1983 Big Eight Defensive Player of the Year Kevin Murphy, an end who lead the Sooners in tackles last year with 144. The only other returning lineman is 6-3, 272-pound nose tackle Tony Casillas. And that's one heckuva a start.

"No one in America has anyone better at those two positions than we do," Switzer said. "They're All-Americans. Murphy is as good a defensive end as we've had since I've been at Oklahoma. And Casillas is probably as good a player at this time (junior season) as any down lineman we've ever had at Oklahoma ... and that includes Lee Roy Selmon."

Everyone returns in the secondary this season except Case; safety Keith Stanberry and cornerbacks Brian Hall and Jim Rockford. But Hall isn't even starting. He has lost his position to redshirt freshman Andre Johnson, who is "as fine a first-year cornerback as we've had at Oklahoma," according to Switzer.

Johnson is one of three redshirt freshmen currently holding down starting spots. The other two are end Darrell Reed and linebacker Brian Bosworth.

Bosworth has the biggest shoes to fill in trying to step in for Shipp, who went to the Miami Dolphins. But the 6-2, 228-pound Irving, Texas native may have already filled them.

"I think Bosworth will be as good a linebacker as we've ever had at Oklahoma," Switzer said.