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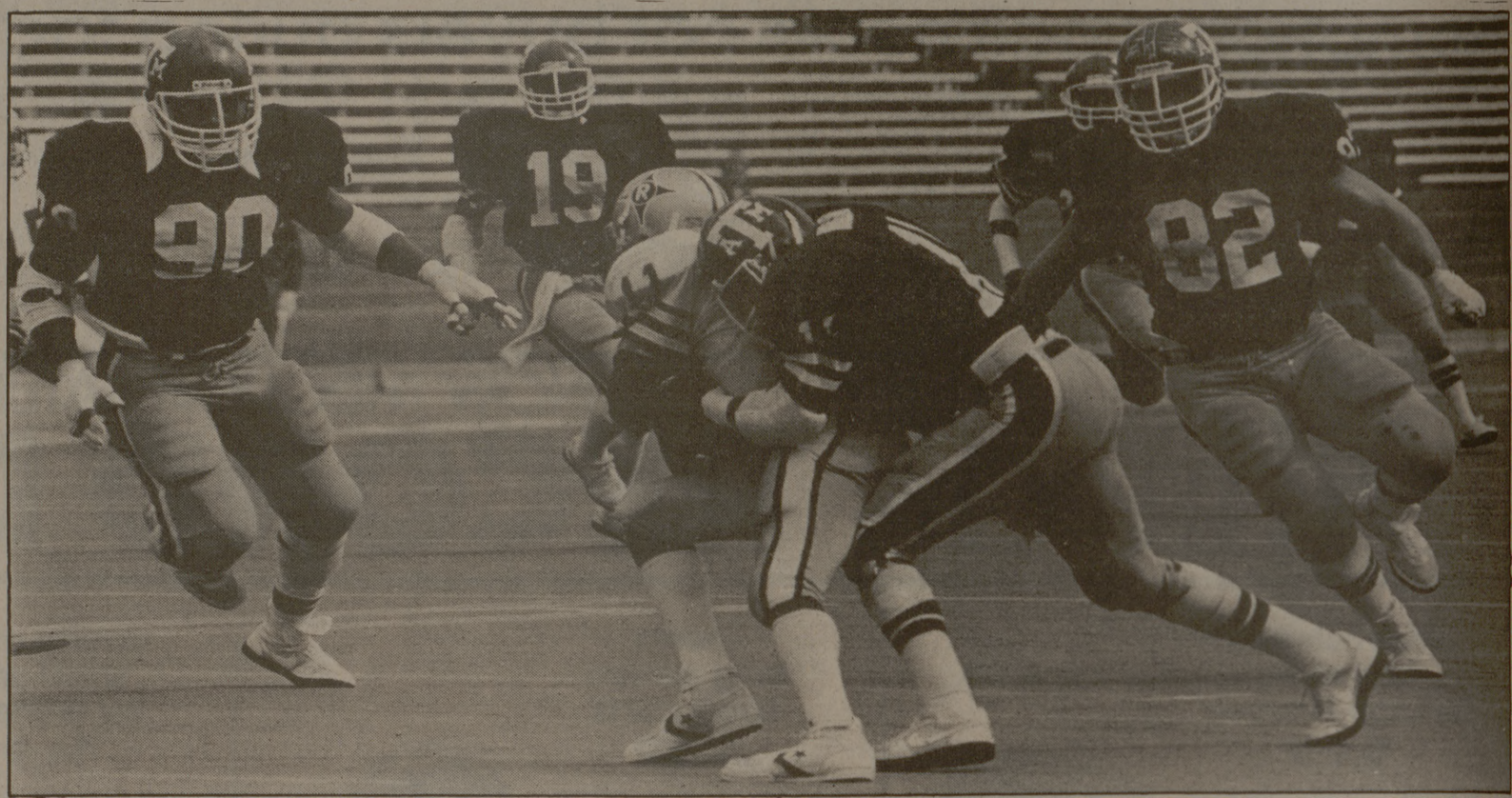
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SPORTS



Battalion File Photo

Last season, Rice quarterback Kerry Overton was one of many quarterbacks who found himself with nowhere to go against Texas A&M linebacker Johnny Holland. The Aggies' leading tackler hopes to harass Alabama quarterback Mike Shula a few times Saturday.

Glory days back for Ag defense

By KEN SURY
Sports Writer

Lots of folks remember how good Texas A&M's defense used to be. You know, the "glory days" when guys like Ed Simonini, Lester Hayes, Pat Thomas and Jacob Green roamed from sideline to sideline in All-America style.

Well, A&M defensive coordinator R.C. Slocum said the Aggie defense has returned to that vintage form in '85.

If anyone can make that statement, Slocum can. He coached some of those Aggie All-Americans from 1972-80. After that, Slocum coached briefly at USC and then returned to A&M in 1982 when Jackie Sherrill arrived.

So when Slocum says he "feels good" about this year's Aggie defense, there's got to be a good reason.

"There's a mixture of experience and youth which should generate a lot of excitement and emotion among the (defensive) players," Slocum said.

The only experience the Aggies lost was All-American end Ray Childress and second team All-Southwest Conference linebacker Ken Ford. Childress and Ford were the second and third leading tacklers on the team last year.

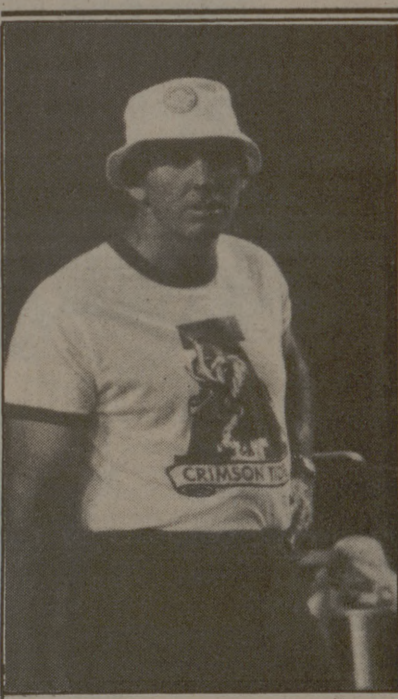
Slocum admitted losing two players of that caliber hurts, but since the Aggies' first leading tackler does return, who's got time to miss Childress and Ford?

"This year's group is the kind that does play together — a group made up of unselfish individuals," Slocum said. "(Linebacker) Johnny Holland is the closest player to being labeled a 'superstar,' but he's a totally unselfish person."

Holland was the tackler for A&M last season with 155.

A&M Head Coach Jackie Sherrill expects outstanding play from Holland again this season — and he's only a junior.

During the SWC Press Tour on Sept. 3, Sherrill said of Holland:



Defensive Coordinator R.C. Slocum sports a motivational shirt.

"There's a mixture of experience and youth which should generate a lot of excitement and emotion among the (defensive) players. This year's group is the kind that does play together — a group made up of unselfish individuals."

"You won't find a better linebacker in this conference."

You also may not find a better defensive end than A&M's Rod Saddler.

Saddler, who was A&M's fifth leading tackler in '84, fills the void left by Childress at left end.

Sherrill said, at this point in Saddler's career, he's a better player than Childress was.

The only thing that seems to nag Slocum is that there aren't any seniors on the Aggies' defensive front. But Saddler said he doesn't think that "seniors" have to be synonymous with "experience."

"We have some experienced guys (nine starters return from a year ago) out there, even though they're not seniors," Saddler said.

The only seniors on A&M's defense are found in the secondary.

Seniors Darrell Austin, Wayne Asberry, Domingo Bryant, Jimmie Hawkins, Lance Jackson and Tony Slaton combined for 256 tackles and accounted for seven turnovers last season.

But Slocum isn't relying exclusively on the starters. He said the second teamers are capable of playing with "almost anybody."

Well, Alabama isn't just "anybody," but Slocum said playing the Crimson Tide in the season opener is a good test.

"I like getting ready for a good opponent," he said. "It's got to help you down the road."

Slocum said he expects the 'Bama game to be a low-scoring, defensive

game. "Early season games are difficult to gauge team success by," he said. "because, even though most defenses will probably play at about the same level all year, most offense don't have their timing yet perfected."

Several Aggie defenders agree that the game will be a defensive struggle.

"It'll be a true test for us," Holland said. "But, we're the type of guys that like challenges."

Austin, A&M's right cornerback, said Alabama's offense, led by quarterback Mike Shula, showed him "they can strike at any time."

Austin said his biggest concern will be handling the Tide's quick wide receivers.

"I pride myself on having a little speed," Austin said. "We'll see how I fare. If I have a good game against them, it says a lot about my coverage."

Holland said he has confidence in the secondary controlling the pass and the defensive line stopping the run.

So does Saddler.

"We're going to get in there and play well," Saddler said, "because I think we're probably a little quicker than they are. They probably don't know it yet. They'll know after Saturday night."

Saddler said the Aggies' quickness might surprise more people than just the Tide players.

"People haven't seen our defense play since last year and we had a pretty strong defense last year," he said. "I think we're going to be even a step quicker this year and we may have the quickest defense not only in the conference, but maybe in the country because no one on our defense runs (the 40-yard dash) over 5 (seconds) flat."

"I don't think too many (teams) in the country can say that."

As far as first game jitters are concerned, Saddler said most of the players are used to pressure. But

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