



Battalion File Photo

Texas A&M guard Don Marbury (3) grabs a rebound against Houston last season. Marbury and

the Aggies open the regular season against No. 15 Alabama-Birmingham tonight in The Summit.

## NIT to tip-off first round A&M faces UAB in Houston Summit

By BRANDON BERRY  
Sports Writer

Two weeks ago, the Texas A&M men's basketball team scrimmaged against a team comprised of former NBA players and collegiate All-Americans.

At 7 p.m., in the first round of the NIT Big Apple Tournament in The Summit in Houston, the Aggies will open the regular season against No. 15 Alabama-Birmingham, which touts present-day All-Americans and future NBA players.

"The road sure doesn't get any easier," A&M Coach Shelby Metcalf said. "Alabama-Birmingham (tonight's All-Star packed opponent) came within two points of going to the Final Four last year (in a loss to Memphis State).

"They run the fast break better than the Athletes In Action (the Aggies' All-Star scrimmage opponent). They play good defense. They're well-coached (by Gene Bartow). They don't have any weaknesses that jump out at you."

And UAB doesn't lack talent. The Blazers are led by senior guard Steve Mitchell, who was the team's leading scorer last year, averaging 21 points per game.

"Mitchell is a first round draft pick in the NBA," Metcalf said. "He has outstanding quickness. He can penetrate and he can hit the outside shot. We're worried about getting our guys in foul trouble because of his quickness — he should be a lot quicker than most of the guys that guard him."

Metcalf will start junior point guard Todd Holloway against Mitchell and then rotate players as necessary.

"The thing about Alabama-Birmingham that scares me the most," Metcalf said, "is that they won the Alaska Shootout last year, which proves they aren't a slow-starting team. But we're a little bit ahead of where we usually are at this point in the season."

Earlier this week, the Aggies received disappointing but not unexpected news that junior forward Winston Crite, who was drawing rave early season reviews until spraining an ankle, will not be ready to play against UAB.

Former walk-on Paul Crawford, who was named the unanimous recipient of the first annual NIT Big Apple Tournament Scholar Athlete Award, will replace Crite in the starting line-up.

"We're really pleased with Paul," Metcalf said. "He's had to make the transition from a 6-(foot)-5 post man in high school to a small forward in college, and he's handled it well. He's smart and he's a hard worker. The way we see it, he'll only get better."

Will the Aggies miss Crite's presence in the starting line-up and under the boards?

"Oh, there's no way we can replace Winston," Metcalf said. "Nothing against Paul, but in all of my years of coaching, I don't think I'll ever have the luxury of replacing a Winston Crite. He's just too good an athlete."

"The doctors say that if we win on Thursday, we could be able to have him ready to play a little on Sunday (against the Duke-Lamar winner in the regional fi-

nals should A&M defeat UAB). I'd sure love to have that opportunity."

For A&M to hear that much-needed knock of opportunity, Metcalf said the Ags must do two things:

"For us to be competitive, we have to keep them (UAB) off the boards and get back on the fast break," he said. "Sometimes, they may make some mistakes on the break, but it's not because they don't know what they're supposed to do or anything the other team does. They just give in to their talent."

Going the other way on the court, UAB plays multiple zones and man-to-man pressure defenses.

"They're a lot like Arkansas defensively, but they don't gamble as much," Metcalf said. "They try to score off their defense."

In addition to Crawford and Holloway, Metcalf will start junior forward Mike Clifford, senior center Jimmie Gilbert and senior guard Don Marbury, the team's leading scorer from last year.

"We need a good game out of Donnie," Metcalf said. "He's our best player. Winston's our best athlete and Donnie is our best player."

Metcalf is also hopeful to see less of the Gilbert he saw in the first half of the AIA scrimmage — passive, foul-prone and unable to hit the inside shot — and more of the second half Gilbert — rebounder, scorer and aggressor.

"That's the Jimmie you're going to see this season," Metcalf promised. "He's been playing like that in practice all along. He could be the best center in the (Southwest) conference this year. He should definitely be the best defensive center in the league."

The Aggie bench saw considerable playing time in the AIA scrimmage and could be a big factor against UAB. Seniors Al Pulliam and Gary Lewis contributed experience and leadership, from their forward and guard spots, down the stretch against AIA.

Meanwhile, senior center David Thompson had the best night of his brief Aggie career with 11 points and a more physical look to his game. Metcalf gave his own explanation of Thompson's recent emergence as a potential force under the basket.

"Just like I told the *Sports Illustrated* people, he's (Thompson) gotten over losing a loved one," Metcalf said. "He grew up on his parents' dairy farm and he had a cow that he was particularly fond of — Lucy. He's always had the talent, but now he's gotten over Lucy. Who knows how good he can be now?"

The same could be said for the Aggies.

"We've got a good chemistry and everyone seems happy," Metcalf said. "But right now, we're undefeated. It's easy for them to get along now, they don't have anything to fight about."

"That's why there's so many churches. I can remember when some friends told me about a really nice church with a congregation of 100 people. By the time I saw it there were two churches with 50 people each."

"If people fight in churches and in big cities and places like that, who can say what will happen in a place as complex as College Station?"

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