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A&M faces Alcorn State with new starting lineup

By BRANDON BERRY
Sports Writer

The Texas A&M men's basketball team will play its home opener against what Aggie coach Shelby Metcalf calls the "Grambling of College Basketball" tonight at 7:30 in G. Rollie White Coliseum.

"Alcorn State reminds me of Grambling in football," Metcalf said of the Aggies' second opponent this season. "David Whitney is a great coach and a great person and he has built a good program there."

"They (the Braves) were 23-7 last year and they lost in the NIT (National Invitational Tournament) by two points to Louisville. They've been in the playoffs, either NIT or NCAA, for the last eight or nine years."

For the second time in less than a week, the Aggies will have to contend with a ball-hawking, pressure defense and a fast-breaking offense. Last Thursday night in the Houston Summit, No. 16 Alabama-Birmingham edged A&M, 71-68, in the first round of the NIT Big Apple Tournament.

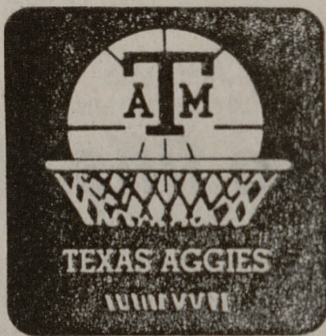
"They're (the Braves) a much more gambling defensive team than UAB was and we've just got to play heads-up ball against them," A&M assistant coach John Thornton said. "They run the break very well — it's something they take pride in. We've got to determine what they're going to do and just do a better job of running our half-court offense. We

know what to do. We've just got to go out and do it."

A&M will "do it" with a new starting lineup against Alcorn State. Metcalf will start 6-foot-9 senior Jimmie Gilbert at center and 6-10 senior David Thompson and 6-7 senior Winston Crite at the forwards. Don Marbury, a 6-3 senior named to the NIT All-Regional team, will start at one guard slot and 6-8 junior Mike Clifford get the nod at point guard.

Will Clifford be able to handle the pressure administered by the Alcorn State guards?

"That's a good question," Thor-



ton said. "We'll be interested to see what happens."

And Metcalf has his reasons for trying a new starting five.

"We're going to go with the lineup that brought us back against Alabama-Birmingham (the Aggies trailed by 16 points at halftime, but rallied to a 56-56 tie with five minutes left in the game)," Metcalf explained. "Mike ran our offense the

best out of all the people who play the point (guard position) for us. "Nothing against Todd Hollibaugh (A&M's regular point guard and starter against UAB), he's a great player and all, but he needs to get back to what he does well for us."

Alcorn State will counter with a lineup that features only two past-time starters from last year's squad.

"They don't have a lot of starters back, but they start almost all juniors and seniors, which means they've been there for awhile," Thornton said. "Their point guard (Drew Whitney, the head coach's son) is a prototype and he's lightning quick. And their big man (6-9 Drew Palmer) is physical."

But Metcalf seemed to take no potential adversity in stride.

"We're going to have a good team this year," Metcalf said. "We didn't play as well as we should have done in the tournament, but we're going to be alright. "Donnie Marbury and Winston Crite could play for any team we've ever had down here and they could play for almost anybody in the nation."

The Aggies follow up tonight's game by hosting Stephen F. Austin at 1 p.m. Thursday.

"They've already sold a thousand more tickets than there are seats, so I think we may end up with the biggest crowd we've had in the past years against Stephen F. Austin, but only because a few of the people want a place to sit before they go to the (A&M-Texas) football game."

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