

# Sports

## A&M-Auburn: A tale of two teams

No. 11 Ags, No. 16 Tigers followed different paths to Cotton Bowl Classic

By KEN SURY  
Assistant Sports Editor

For Texas A&M, winning the 1986 Cotton Bowl would be the perfect way to cap Coach Jackie Sherrill's most successful season since he came to A&M four years ago. For Auburn, a win in Dallas Jan. 1 would simply save face for a season turned sour.

The 8-3 Tigers are far from the team most people expected them to be when the college football season began back in September. Auburn was expected to defend its 1984 Southeastern Conference crown and perhaps play for the National Championship in the Sugar Bowl. And after Auburn's 49-7 whalloping of Southwestern Louisiana in its season-opener, those predictions looked sound.

The next Associated Press Top 20 poll put Auburn in the No. 1 spot (since the preseason's No. 1 team, Oklahoma, had yet to play a game).

But three weeks later the Tigers discovered just how fleeting success can be as Coach Johnny Majors' Tennessee Volunteers slapped them with a 38-20 defeat.

Auburn promptly, and justifiably, plummeted to 14th in the AP poll.

The Tigers never dropped out of the Top 20 completely, despite losing another game, 14-10 to Florida. In fact, going into its in-state rivalry game with Alabama, Auburn had managed to creep back into the nation's Top 10 at No. 9.

But a season-ending 25-23 loss to Alabama left Auburn in sixth-place in the SEC with a 3-3 record, behind Tennessee, Florida, Alabama, LSU and Georgia, and a drop to No. 16 in the national rankings.

While Auburn had been in the national spotlight from the start, A&M made a move from the middle of the pack to top dog in the Southwest Conference.

The Aggies were predicted at best to finish third in the conference and

earn their first bowl berth since the 1981 Independence Bowl.

A&M's 20-15 loss to surprising Baylor seemed certain to cut off any chances for a SWC title. But the Aggies slowly fought back and their "bend-but-don't-break" defense asserted itself in wins over Southern Methodist, Arkansas, Texas Christian and Texas.

Even the AP poll's sports writers found it hard to accept A&M's winning ways and didn't recognize A&M as Top 20 material until it defeated Arkansas, 10-6. The Aggies were No. 19 in the next poll.

After its 53-6 blowout of TCU, A&M moved up to 16th and then jumped to No. 11 after an impressive 42-10 victory over Texas. The win gave the Aggies the SWC championship and their first Cotton Bowl berth since 1968.

So now that the regular season's over, the team comparisons and Cotton Bowl pre-game talk has begun.

Although Cotton Bowl officials probably are happy to have their second Heisman Trophy winner in a row in Dallas (Boston College's Doug Flutie played against Houston in '85), Bo Jackson and the Tigers actually were the bowl's fourth choice behind Big Ten teams Iowa, Michigan and Ohio State.

With Auburn's loss to Alabama, the Cotton Bowl's hopes of having two big final game winners, and at least one Top 10 team to help draw a good television audience, were dashed.

No. 16 Auburn is the only team invited to one of the five New Year's Day bowls (Cotton, Fiesta, Sugar, Orange and Rose) with three losses. UCLA (8-2-1) and Tennessee (8-1-2) came close, however.

A&M's strong showing to end its season at 9-2 may have Auburn Coach Pat Dye a little worried about his team.

"We're looking forward to playing See A&M-Auburn, page 8



Photo by JOHN MAKELY

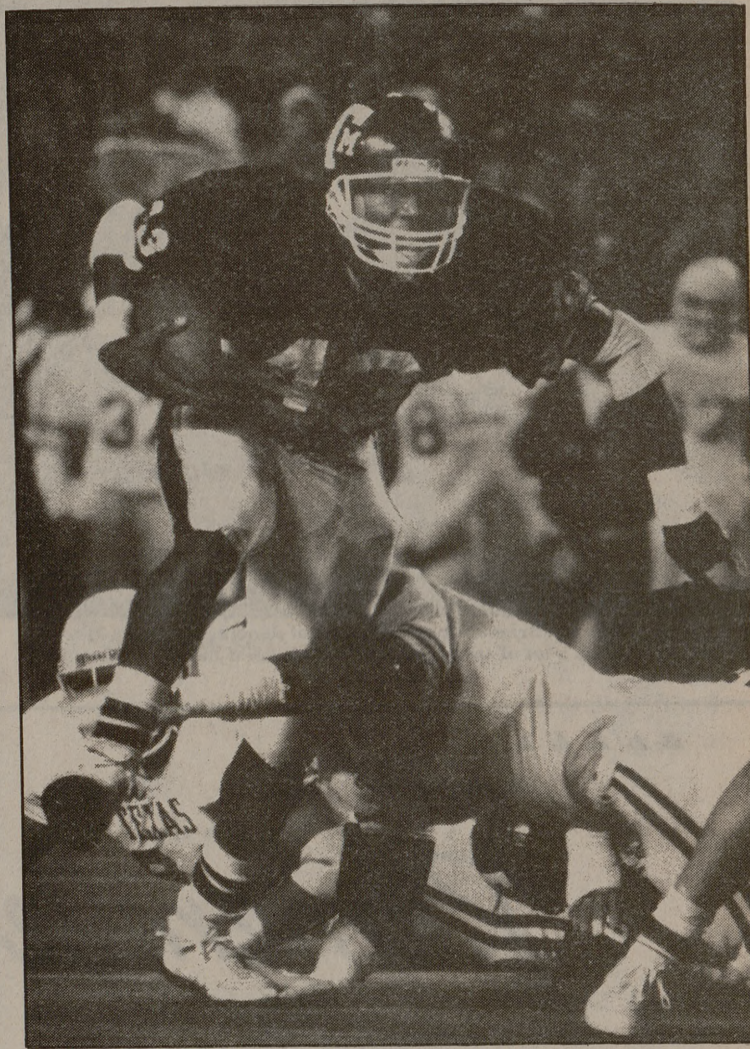


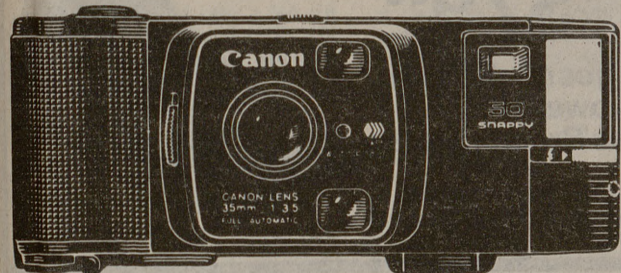
Photo by JOHN MAKELY

The A&M defense, ranked first in the Southwest Conference in total defense, allowing only 281.9 yards per game. But they will be tested by Auburn's Bo Jackson in the Cotton Bowl on New Year's Day.

A&M fullback Roger Vick is looking forward to the opportunity of playing against Heisman Trophy winner Bo Jackson in the Cotton Bowl. Vick, who splits time with Anthony Toney, gained 764 yards on 171 carries, while Jackson rushed for 1,786 on 278 for Auburn.

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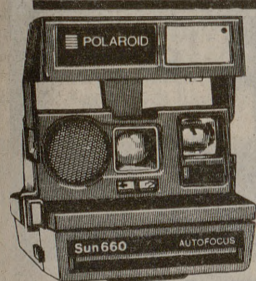
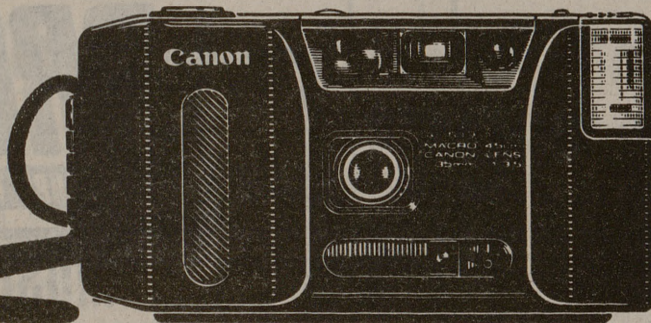
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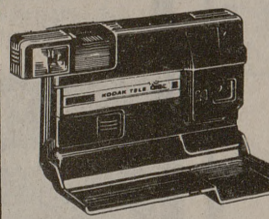
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