

# High hopes not enough for Ags

## Texas too tough again for A&M

By Charean Williams  
Assistant Sports Editor

What began as a dream season for the Texas A&M volleyball team turned into an eight-month nightmare.

The Aggies had high hopes when they began preseason practice back in August.

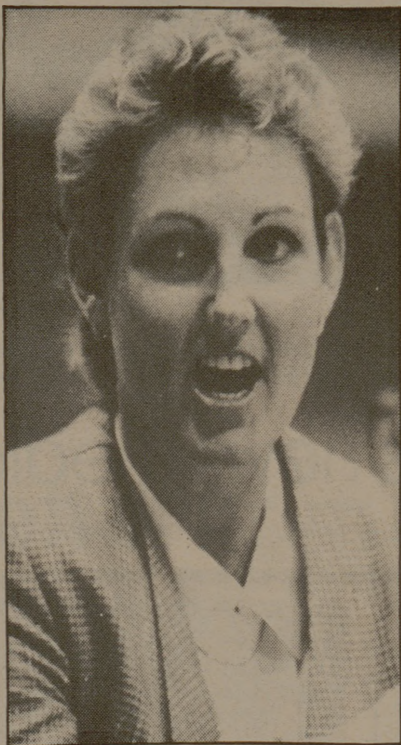
A&M had finished the '84 campaign with a 33-4 record and ranked 15th nationally and was

### Volleyball

returning All-America middle blocker Sherri Brinkman, All-Southwest Conference outside hitter Margaret Spence, three other starters and four of the most highly-touted recruits around.

A&M Coach Terry Condon expected the SWC championship, something the Texas Longhorns had refused to share since the league was formed in 1975, and a Top 10 finish.

"This year we have the opportunity to play Top 10 volleyball," Condon pro-



Ex-A&M Coach Terry Condon

claimed before the season began. "We have everything going for us. This is going to be our year to shine."

So everything appeared to be in working order, oiled and ready to go.

But the first match was a premonition of things to come. The Aggies traveled to Huntsville to play Sam Houston State — a "weakling" accustomed to playing in Division 2.

It was an embarrassing 18-16, 17-15, 11-12 loss for A&M.

"It was so humiliating to go down there and play a lower division school and lose in three games," senior setter Lesha Beakley said. "Out of all of the losses we've had while I've been here, I'm embarrassed to have that one in the loss column."

A trip to San Diego seemed to heal some of the wounds as the then-No. 15 Aggies went 3-2, good for third place in the Michelob Light/Aztec Classic. How-

ever, hindsight says A&M should have beaten both San Diego State and Arizona State for first place in the tourney.

In any event, the Ags put together a 10-game win streak, including the highlight match of the season — an exciting "miracle" five-game win against No. 9 Purdue.

"This is a turning point for us," said Condon after the win over the Boiler-makers.

Indeed, A&M finally had all of the wheels rolling in the same direction.

Brinkman was returning to her dominating form, Stacey Smith was showing signs of becoming an All-SWC performer, the other four starters were beginning to gell, and sophomore Michelle Whitwell and freshman Cheri Steensma were providing much-needed support off the bench.

The goal of a Top 10 ranking was finally achieved and the Aggies were beginning to live up to the great expectations.

But one play and one match later, the Aggies' grave was being dug.

On a chilly October night in a match against Texas Southern, Smith went down with a knee injury that would end her season.

The next match was an important SWC encounter with Texas Tech in Lubbock.

With Spence moving to the middle to take over Smith's position and Whitwell moving into the starting role on the outside, the Ags bent and broke.

The upset loss to the Red Raiders put the Aggies snugly in their coffin.

"We don't know how to play when we're the front-runner — just when we're the underdog," said a disappointed and teary-eyed Condon.

While the Aggie wheels were falling off, the Longhorns were enjoying their easiest jaunt to the SWC title.

Texas made sure it closed, nailed and chained shut A&M's casket door on Oct. 30 when it dashed past the Ags in three straight games.

After a lot of soul searching by the whole team, added with a dash of experience and a pinch of confidence for Spence and Steensma in their new positions, the Aggies won six in a row.

A SWC-volleyball record crowd of 3,500 was on hand in G. Rollie White Coliseum to see a thrilling five-game match against Texas.

After winning the first two games of the match, the Aggies came ever so close to upsetting the Longhorns, but were left disappointed again.

However, A&M's inspirational play against UT won the Ags more than just a few fans' hearts — it meant an at-large NCAA Tournament bid. The first-round match for the Ags was a surprisingly tough battle against Texas-Arling-

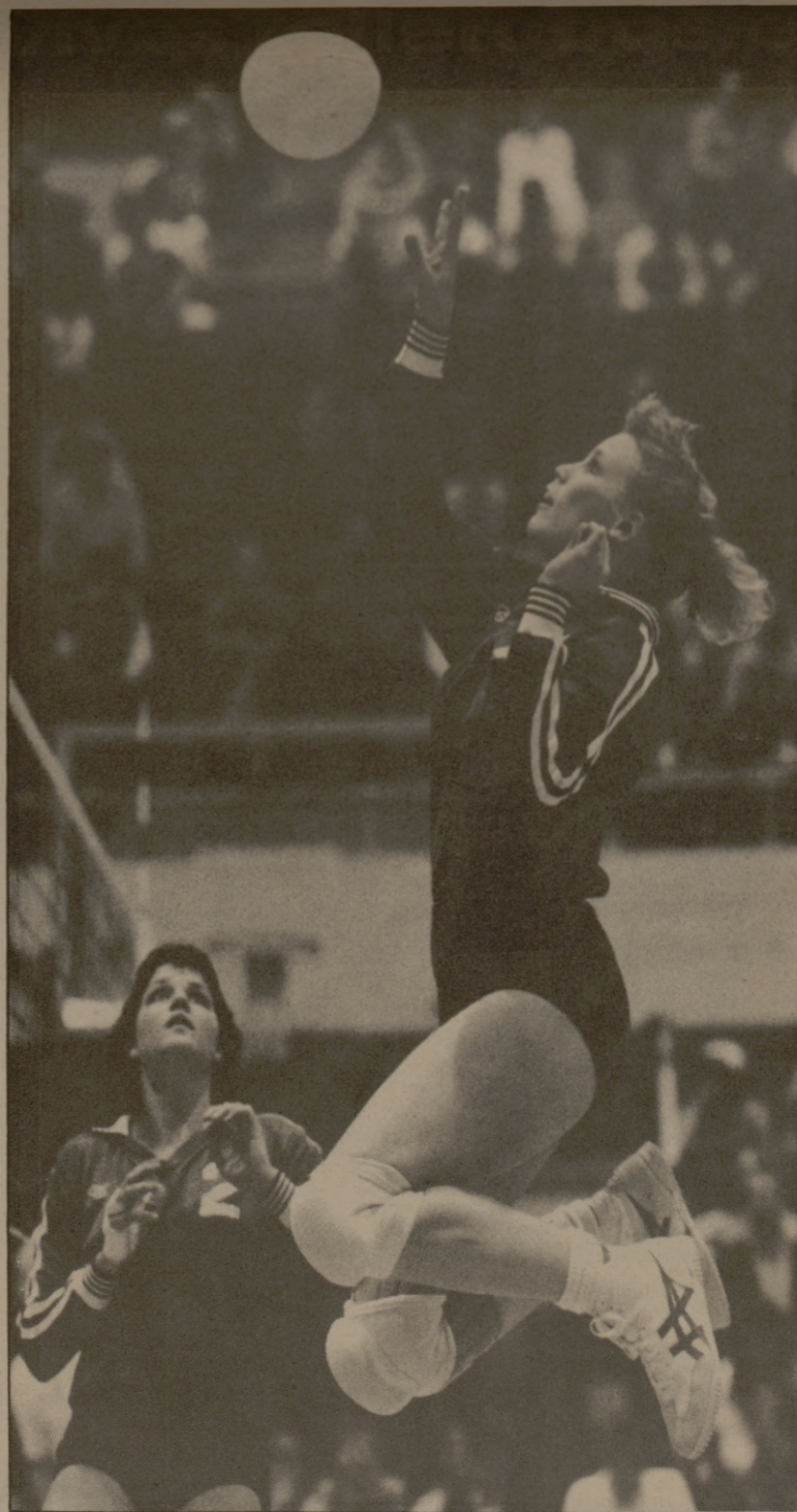


Photo by John Makely

A&M freshman Cheri Steensma taps the ball over the net. Steensma is one of several players that will return to play under new head coach Al Givens.

ton, but a win nonetheless.

In regional play, Texas was given "A&M slaying honors" for the final time. The sight was not a pretty one.

Not only was it the Ags' third loss of the season to the 'Horns but it was A&M's worst loss ever to UT.

The Aggies could almost be heard giving a sigh of relief when the painful season had ended.

But little did they know that only the matches had ended, not the agony.

In January, Condon resigned to return to her alma mater, UCLA, to become assistant athletic director. Assistant Coach Mardi Alexander was offered the head job, but turned it down to pursue other professional interests. And team hypnotist, Dr. Warren "Spider" Simpson, left the cupboard completely bare by also resigning.

That sent the A&M Athletic Department searching for a coach. Things looked good when more than 70 appli-

cations were received and two interviews were granted.

But Gov. Mark White's budget cuts, which forced the A&M Board of Regents to impose a hiring freeze, sent the Athletic Department to a bone-crunching, screeching halt in their search.

The Aggies went without a coach for 2½ months.

Finally, the long awaited day came, and the nightmare ended.

Mississippi Coach Al Givens was awarded the job on April 12.

But a few questions still remain unanswered: What does the future hold for a team that will have five seniors, a walk-on junior, two sophomores, two redshirt freshmen and two incoming freshmen? Can the Aggies fill the huge holes left by Beakley and Brinkman? And now that the only two players and only coach who had ever beaten Texas are gone, will the Aggies ever defeat the Longhorns again?

Only time will tell.