

A&M survives rollercoaster season

Ags ride into 3-way tie for '86 SWC title

By Charean Williams
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In the amusement park of Southwest Conference basketball during '85-86, Texas A&M got on board a rollercoaster and took it for a long ride.

With four starters returning, the pre-season polls foresaw the Aggies finishing no lower than third in the SWC along with Arkansas and Houston.

But before the conference's first tip-off, A&M had its top rebounder, forward Winston Crite, sidelined with an ankle injury.

Although Crite was back in the lineup by the second game, the ankle slowed him, and the Aggies, for the first few weeks of the season.

A&M began its season, without Crite, in the inaugural NIT Big Apple Tournament against Alabama-Birmingham, then ranked No. 16 in the nation.

Even though the Ags lost 71-68, the consolation prize was promise.

However, the Aggies went 2-2 in their next four games, losing forward David Thompson and guard Gary Lewis to broken hands, forward Mike Clifford to a pinched nerve, forward Al Pulliam to strained knee ligaments and having Crite reinjure his ankle.

It wasn't a pretty sight.

"The injuries came at an inopportune time," A&M Coach Shelby Metcalf said. "We're struggling."

Then came Pan American.

The Aggies won, 74-67, but Clifford lost two front teeth to an errant elbow, and starting center Jimmie Gilbert got teeth cuts on the top of his head. A&M was fighting "tooth and nail" just to stay healthy.

In the following game, an 88-60 win over Prairie View, Metcalf used three walk-ons.

One game later, sophomore forward Fred Burton and junior guard Steve Vandiver quit the team.

In the next four games, the Aggies sputtered even more and almost stalled, going 1-3 to close out the non-conference schedule at .500 (6-6) — a disappointment to say the least.

But a new A&M team took the floor when it came time to play the "real" games.

The Aggies won their first five SWC games, including miracle upsets of Texas and Texas Tech.

The play that perhaps best exemplified the entire conference schedule came in Lubbock on Jan. 18.

Holding a 57-55 advantage in the closing seconds, Tech's Dewayne Chism stole the ball from A&M guard Todd Holloway and raced toward his goal ready to put the game out of the Aggies' reach.

But Chism missed a wide-open dunk, and Gilbert converted a three-point play on the other end for a 58-57 A&M win.

However, the string of last-second victories came to a close for A&M the next week when it lost to Houston 76-69.

Men's Basketball



Photo by Dean Saito

A&M's Don Marbury, who was the Southwest Conference's leading scorer in '85-86, guards Texas' Patrick

Fairs during the SWC Post-Season Classic. Marbury's 22-point average helped carry A&M to a 20-12 record.

Everything seemed to be tumbling down on top of Metcalf when it was reported that leading scorer Don Marbury and assist leader Holloway had been arrested for possession of marijuana.

But Metcalf stuck by his players saying, "They told me they were innocent and I believe them."

The Ags played over, beyond and around the shadows cast on their team, winning the next three games for what appeared to be a solid lock on first place.

But when it rains, it pours.

A&M fell to SMU, TCU and Texas in its next three games and out of the SWC title chase — or so it seemed.

"Sure it's possible (to tie for the title)," Metcalf said, "but you're talking about applying logic to a conference that doesn't subscribe to it."

Somewhere along the way, the SWC bought a subscription.

The Aggies won their last four games, while TCU lost its final two and Texas fell in two of its last three. That resulted in a tri-championship between

the three schools.

That sent A&M confidently to Dallas for the SWC Post-Season Classic.

Crite put on a show, leading the Aggies to a 67-51 first-round win over Arkansas and a 55-47 semi-final victory over Texas.

But it was Tech which sent A&M screaming for the ride to stop.

The Red Raiders, who finished fifth in the SWC during the regular season,

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