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A&M quarterback Kevin Murray tosses the football to an Aggie back as Ohio State defenders close in. Murray had trouble

throughout the second half as he threw five interceptions in A&M's 28-12 loss to the Buckeyes in the Cotton Bowl.

A&M discovers Cotton Bowl less favorable on return trip

By Ken Sury
Sports Editor
Perhaps you can't go home again. For Texas A&M, intent on making the Cotton Bowl its home away from home in postseason play, it was a rude return.

Analysis
And for Dallas native Kevin Murray, the man responsible for A&M's repeat performance as Southwest Conference champions, it was his worst outing as an Aggie quarterback.

In A&M's 36-16 thrashing of Auburn last year, Murray set a Cotton Bowl record with 292 passing yards. This year he set another record — five interceptions.

Had instant replay been used, it would have shown Murray only three four interceptions. A&M, behind 14-6 after Ohio State linebacker Chris Spielman returned an interception 24 yards for a touchdown, was at Ohio State's 46 when Murray tied to hit tight end Rod Bernstine on a first-and-10 play. The ball was thrown slightly behind Bernstine and apparently wrestled from his grasp by OSU's Sonny Gordon as they fell down. Replays showed the ball hit the turf before bouncing into Gordon's arms. But the officials' views of the action were blocked by nearby Ohio State players and the play was ruled an interception.

Had that play been ruled incomplete, A&M may have been able to drive downfield and get back in the game. But probably not.

The Buckeyes, using three different defenses, simply confused and abused Murray all afternoon in wrapping up a 28-12 victory in the first appearance for a Big Ten school in the Cotton Bowl. Murray may have been hampered by a bout with the flu earlier in the week, but he didn't make excuses for his performance.

"It wasn't what they were doing, it's what we weren't doing," Murray said. "Five interceptions. That's enough turnovers to lose to the Little Sisters of the Poor. They didn't whip us. We just didn't move the ball."

Ohio State only outgained A&M 303 yards to 296 offensively, and had three interceptions of its own, but it was the big plays on defense that made the difference. OSU linebacker Michael Kee delivered the final blow when he picked off Murray for the fifth time with just under three minutes left in the game and returned it 49 yards for the score.

Ohio State Coach Earle Bruce, whose Buckeyes finished the season 10-3 and seventh in the country, praised his squad's defensive play.

"The thing I couldn't imagine is that we could return two of those interceptions for touchdowns," Bruce said. "You know when two linebackers intercept two passes and run them back for touchdowns, that's something."

"The challenge was to our defense. The defense faced adversity at times, but fought back and put points on the scoreboard. That was

the difference today — a great defensive job.

"I thought the strength of A&M's team was its offense. We took that away."

A&M Coach Jackie Sherrill agreed with Bruce that the lack of

Carter outleaped James Flowers and Kip Corrington and pulled down a big catch that kept the drive alive — a drive which led to Ohio State's first touchdown and a 7-3 lead.

Before Kee's interception sealed the game, A&M was just a Jeff Hol-

trip to Dallas.

"It wasn't what they were doing, it's what we weren't doing. Five interceptions. That's enough turnovers to lose to the Little Sisters of the Poor. They didn't whip us. We just didn't move the ball."

— A&M quarterback Kevin Murray

A&M offense led to the Aggies' downfall, but credited the play of the Ohio State offense.

"Offensively, we just couldn't get it going," Sherrill said. "There's no question we moved the ball very, very well in the first quarter, but they kept making the big play. It was third and 17 one time, second and 11, third and 7."

"They made the big plays offensively and we gave up the big plays defensively."

Among the biggest plays was a crucial and spectacular 34-yard reception by Ohio State's All-America wide receiver Cris Carter on a third-and-17 play late in the first quarter.

ley steal away from being back in the game. At the OSU 17, Buckeye quarterback Jim Karsatos tried to hit All-America wide receiver Cris Carter but threw the ball behind Carter. A streaking Holley grabbed the ball for a split-second, saw clear sailing to the end zone and then dropped the football.

The only bright spot for A&M offensively was the play of senior fullback Roger Vick, who was named the Cotton Bowl's most valuable offensive player with 113 yards on 23 carries and one touchdown. With the passing game going nowhere but in the other direction, Vick became the Aggies' big-play man, accounting

for nine of A&M's 10 rushing first downs with his high-stepping, high-powered running.

But it was Murray's rough outing that killed A&M's hopes of tallying back-to-back Cotton Bowl championships. Murray threw 13 interceptions on the season, but nine of those came in his first and last games of the season. He was intercepted four times in the Aggies' 35-17 loss to Louisiana State.

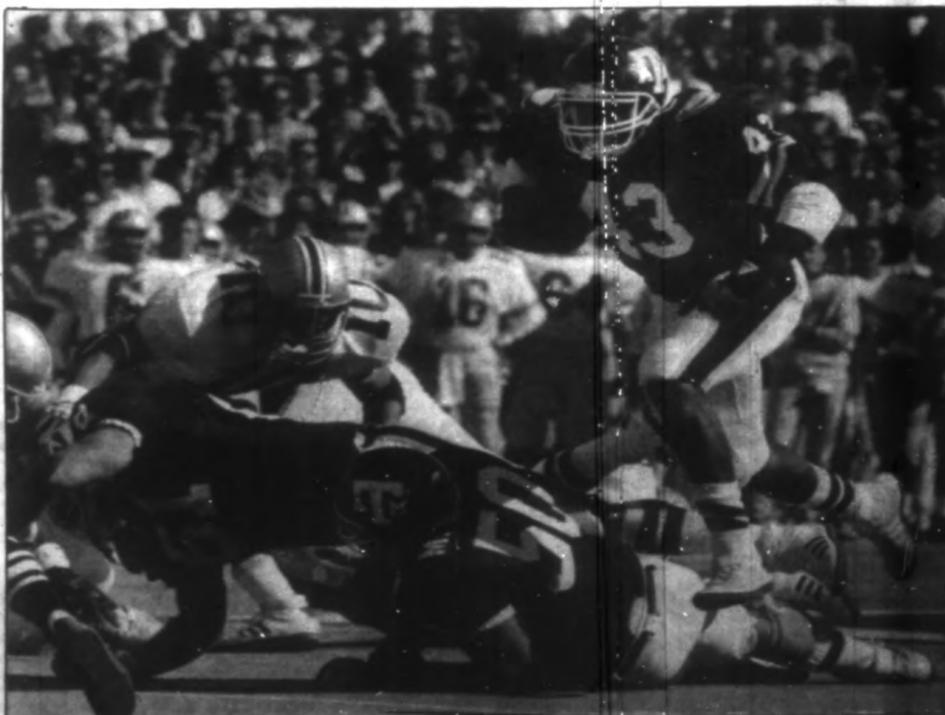
Murray's interception-plagued day may be a blessing in disguise for the Aggies. Murray, who is considering entering the NFL draft, may decide to play his senior year with A&M to bolster his SWC passing statistics and inflate his worth to the professional scouts.

Heisman Trophy winner Vinny Testaverde probably wishes he had that chance after ending his collegiate career with an equally dismal five-interception game in Miami's loss to Penn State.

But for this year's 9-5 Aggies, who started the season ranked seventh in the country and finished No. 13, the defeat closed the season on a bitter note for the senior-laden team.

"We won the conference," Murray said. "Other than that we didn't accomplish anything."

Perhaps you can't go home again.



A&M fullback Roger Vick goes airborne as he eyes an opening upfield. Vick, named the

Cotton Bowl's most valuable offensive player, grinded out 113 yards on 24 carries.