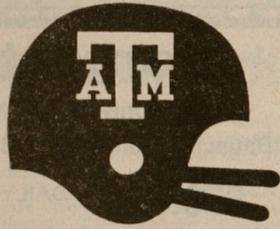


Sports

A&M's Roper a "silent assassin" to quarterbacks Personal effort satisfying for linebacker, hopes team can pull together

By Anthony Wilson
Sports Writer



Aggie linebacker John Roper appears to be extremely laid back as he sits and talks. One large Adidas is propped up on the table in front of him. A St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap rests on the back of his head. A large pair of sunglasses sits on his nose.

Underneath the glasses is hidden a large bandage. Underneath the bandage are five stitches, which Roper acquired while engaging in his favorite pastime: hitting quarterbacks. A hobby that is anything but laid back.

"I like hitting quarterbacks," said Roper, a 6-foot-2, 215 pound junior. That's my goal — hitting him, making him nervous and letting him know we're here to play.

"I try to hit with pain. When I hit somebody, I try to let him know that, if you come around this corner again, you're gonna get hit the same way."

"That's how you get quarterbacks nervous," Roper said, explaining the art of intimidation. "You hit him the first time. He'll remember that. Then the second time he fumbles the ball before he gets the snap. If he sees a blur coming from the blind side, he'll remember getting hit and get nervous."

"That's part of football," Roper adds. "He knows that if he sees a blur he's going to get hit and it might not be his own man. If we can keep the quarterbacks and running backs nervous, then that changes the tempo of the game."

Roper, who calls himself "the silent assassin", appeared in the highlight films of newscasts for several nights after the Louisiana State game with a bone-jarring sack of LSU quarterback Tom Hodson. The impact was so hard in fact, that Roper injured himself on the play. When Roper hit Hodson, his helmet slid down and split the skin on the ridge of his nose. Roper went to the locker room for a quick stitching and was back in the game within five minutes.

again, we lost. So evidently what I did wasn't enough. What it says on paper and what it says in reality doesn't mix."

"I expected John to play well," A&M linebackers coach Bob Davie said. "He didn't play well last year over at LSU, and this was a chance right off the bat for John to showcase his talent. I think he's one of the premier players in the country — I really believe that."

"The test for him is gonna come next week. He played well enough in that first game that it would put him in the next level with any kid in the country, but he's gotta do it all season."

Roper said A&M will stick with its usual defensive game plan when they play the University of Washington on September 19.

"It's still going to be the same game plan," he said. "We don't switch up for other teams. No team's

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so important that we have to do this for this team or this for that team. We're just playing our regular football and whatever happens, happens."

Roper, who has started in parts of his freshman and sophomore years, is the most experienced of this year's young pack of Aggie linebackers. However, he insists no one person is the leader of the group.

"I'm not the leader of the linebacker corps," Roper said. "I'm just one of the fellas. We're all leaders when we're out there on the field. We all have to lean on each other to keep us playing right."

For the third consecutive year,

A&M has opened the season against a nationally ranked opponent and failed to make an impressive showing. The result has been an 0-3 record in opening games. But Roper would rather play a tough team than Podunk U. any day.

"It lets us know how well we can really play," Roper said about playing a formidable opponent. "If you play a sorry team and you go out there and beat them, you get too high and you think 'We can whip anybody.'"

"But if we go out there and play a hard team and lose, then it lets us know we have to work harder. If we beat a hard team, it lets us know we still have to practice a little bit harder because there's somebody else out there that's harder than they are."

"We need to play somebody hard at the beginning of the season to see who really wants to play," he added. "Because if you're weak, it'll show on the field. If we go out there and play a hard game, we know who we're going to start."

Roper said the team had had aspirations for a national championship, so the loss to LSU is disappointing.

"We had hoped for it," Roper said about winning a national championship. "Everybody's thinking about a national championship. But there's really no hype. It was in the back of our minds. But we can win it if we put our minds to it."

"It (the loss) is a little more disappointing but more for the fact that we've lost to them (LSU) two years in a row. That's the most disappointing thing. National rankings will take care of themselves."

Even though dreams for a national championship at A&M this year are probably hopeless, Roper's other goals for himself and the team are still well within reach.

"My goals for myself are just to come out and play hard and be an All-Southwest Conference player," said Roper. "As far as the team goes — just to win and go back to the Cotton Bowl. One of my long-term goals is to go into the (National Football League) draft and go high in the draft."

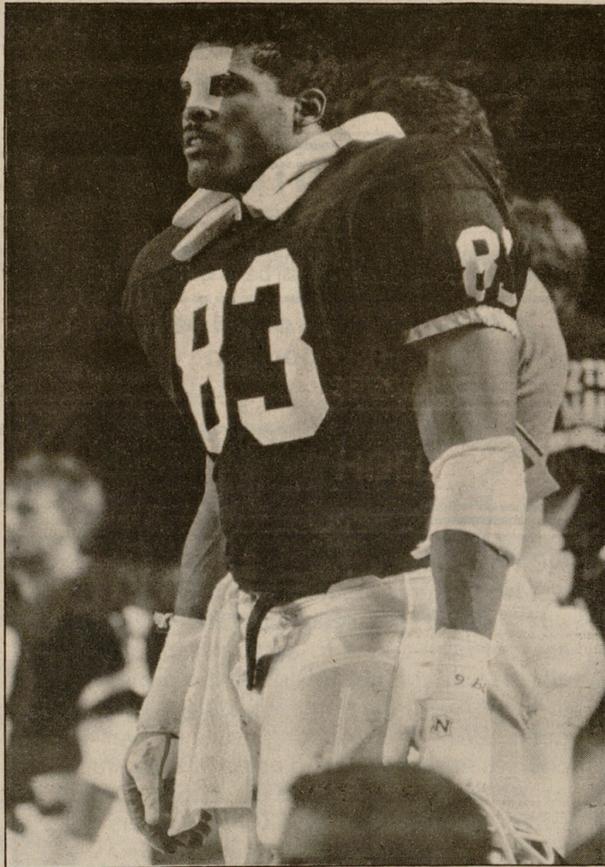


Photo by Robert Rizzo

Texas A&M linebacker John Roper looks on from the sidelines during last week's game against Louisiana State at Kyle Field. Roper had 12 total tackles in the game and suffered a cut to the head early in the game. A&M has a week off to prepare for Washington.

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