

Sports

Harris undaunted by lack of catches Aggie receiver says winning is the main issue

By Anthony Wilson
Sports Writer

To hear people talk, you would think Rod Harris has died.

The 5-foot-11, 183-pound junior flanker, who caught 21 passes last year and averaged 15.5 yards per catch, was named to the 1987 pre-season All-Southwest Conference second team and was expected to be one of the big guns in the A&M offensive artillery.

But through the first two games of this season he has caught only one pass for six yards. And that seems to upset everyone.

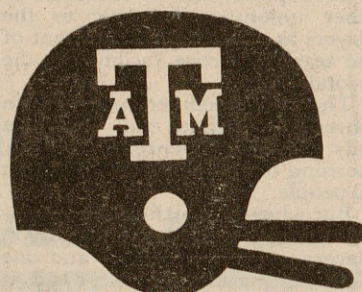
Everyone, that is, except for Rod Harris.

"It's not that I'm not contributing to the team, it's just that it's not noticeable right now," Harris said. "I feel like I'm contributing to the team by blocking and other things. Better receivers contribute not only by catching the ball and making big plays by catching the ball, but by blocking also. You can make a key block to spring running backs or things like that."

A&M coaches have said that Harris has a chance of being one of the best receivers to ever play at A&M. Harris believes that, too, but he would prefer to win rather than rack up some flashy stats.

"I don't look at it as just because I've only had one pass, I can't be (the best)," Harris said. "Even if I don't catch the ball, I just want to win and play on a winning squad. That's the way I look at it."

And Harris believes he will be seeing more action soon.



"It takes time," he said. "We're working on putting people in the right place right now. We're working on the offense. That'll come — me catching the ball more. And if it doesn't and we win, who cares?"

Because of his 4.4 speed and the success he enjoyed last year, teams would seem to be more apt to double team Harris this year, resulting in a lack of production. But that's not the case, Harris said.

"We're just trying to get things together," he said. "It's not that I'm seeing any double coverage or anything like that. They're trying to figure out how other people play, like Percy Waddle."

Neither is it the quarterbacks' faults that he's only caught one pass, he said.

"I have been open sometimes, but the quarterbacks have a certain read," he said. "We (the receivers) have a certain read. If a play is called, it might not be to me or he just has to read between two other receivers. Even if I am open, it probably wouldn't be right for him to throw me the ball way across the

field when he has someone closer who's open."

Although Harris is not catching passes, he is chipping in to the offense with his kickoff and punt return work. And when the subject of returns arises, Harris' eyes grow wide with excitement and his face lights up with a big grin.

"I like them both, but I love punt returns," he said. "I guess because it's more exciting, you know? It's more exciting to the fans. People are looking down and you're the only one back there. And you have a chance to make something happen. It's just a little more exciting to me. I don't know why I like it."

"It's not really difficult until our team goes for a block and they go to block the punt and don't block it, so I don't have anyone back there to help me," he continued. "You know what I'm saying? I catch the ball and the opposite team is down on me."

Contrary to what a lot of people believe, the game Saturday against the University of Southern Mississippi in Jackson, Miss., won't be an easy one, Harris said.

"I think people misunderstand Southern Miss," he said. "Southern Miss may be on a different level, but they're really good. We almost got beat by Southern Miss last year."

"Of course we made some mistakes, but every team is going to make mistakes. Southern Miss is really good. This is a chance for us to get better. Playing against a team like Southern Miss, it's no pushover."

"We can't look at it like they're less than Washington or LSU. Every body we play, we put them on a level

as if they're the best. There's no let-down at all."

Harris was pleased to see the offense improve against Washington. But to do well against Southern Mississippi, Harris said he knows the offense will have to perk up and play even better.

"I was pleased to a certain extent, but the way I see it, everybody on the team knows we've got to get better. We've got to equal the defense. The defense is one a roll right now. We're getting better. We're just finding who can play and who can help us right now."

Despite playing a position whose success depends upon the success of the quarterback, Harris said he has not taken a side in the Great Aggie Quarterback Controversy.

"Hey, if Pavlas plays, Pavlas plays," he said. "If Stump plays, Stump plays. We've all got one goal and that's to win. Whoever the coaches feel should be in, that's the coaches' decision. It's not up to me. I can play with both of them. Both of them are good in my eyes. I don't have any preference."

Harris said he continues to improve everyday and he gives a lot of the credit for his improvement to defensive back Chet Brooks.

"Me and Chet, we want to make each other better," Harris said. "We get after each other. That's the way we are. I feel like he's one of the best defensive backs in the nation, that's the way I look at him. I go against the best everyday. I don't think I go against anybody better than him — in the conference or whoever we play."



Battalion File Photo

Texas A&M flanker Rod Harris goes high for a touchdown reception during last year's 16-7 victory over Southern Mississippi.

Astros' won't resign 12-year veteran Cruz

HOUSTON (AP) — Jose Cruz, one of the Houston Astros' most popular and successful players, will not be offered a contract for 1988, the club said.

Cruz has racked up several records since he started playing for the Astros in 1975, but his performance slipped earlier this year and he has mainly been used as a pinch hitter since the All-Star break.

The 40-year-old Cruz said he is leaving the team with no hard feelings and hopes of playing for another club.

"I thought they would offer me something," Cruz said Tuesday night in Atlanta where the Astros lost to the Braves 6-2.

"They offered me nothing. Maybe the reason is the money I make. But

I thought they might offer me something at a little less money.

"I just hope to play for somebody next year. I know I can still play," he said. "I just hope I get a chance. I always thought I'd finish my career here. I guess they don't like me anymore."

Cruz is in the final year of a contract that pays \$733,333 per year. He will be a free agent at the end of the season.

General Manager Dick Wagner told Cruz of the team's decision during a meeting Monday before the Astros left on their final road trip of the season.

"With his age, we unfortunately do not see him in the picture," Wagner said. "He took it like a gentleman, and I appreciate that. He's a good guy, but good things come to an end."

NFL negotiators continue talks despite strike

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Full-scale talks aimed at quickly ending the NFL strike began Wednesday as players stayed on picket lines and, at three camps, tried to stop busloads of substitutes from going to work.

Among those reporting were two union defectors — Randy White of the Dallas Cowboys and Mark Gastineau of the New York Jets.

The NFL, meantime, said Sunday's games still had not been officially canceled.

Negotiators sat down at 3 p.m. EDT, midway through the second full day of the strike. By 7 p.m., they were just starting to discuss what was expected to be the most critical item of business — free agency.

"The two sides are continuing to meet. There is no indication how long the meeting will last," John Jones, a spokesman for the NFL Management Council, said at a press briefing. "Free agency is the key issue. There is dialogue and dis-

ussion but no sense that a settlement is at hand."

From 3 p.m. until 7 p.m., the two chief negotiators, union boss Gene Upshaw and management head Jack Donlan, had met twice face-to-face and twice reported back to their respective executive committees.

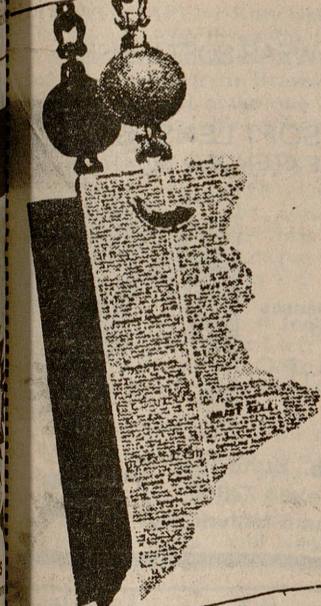
"I'm hoping we can get it done. That's why we're here," Upshaw said before the bargaining session started. "There is no time-frame. Our agenda is to reach an

agreement, however long it takes."

Said Donlan: "The next two days are critical. If there's no movement after two days, we're looking at a long one."

The union is demanding free agency for players with four years' experience. Owners, so far, have refused to modify the current system under which teams are compensated if a player signs with another team. Only one player in 10 years has changed teams under that system.

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