

Aggies wear out UH in battle for SWC lead

Lewis rushes for 201 yards in 30-16 win

By Doug Walker
Assistant Sports Editor

HOUSTON — Texas A&M may not be able to go to the Cotton Bowl this year, but the Aggies are proving that they still want to be known as the SWC's best team.

Darren Lewis rushed for 201 yards on 40 carries to highlight a bruising performance by the A&M offense as the Aggies defeated the Houston Cougars 30-16 Saturday at the Astrodome.

A&M chewed up 310 of their 442 yards of total offense on the ground and wore down a tough Houston defense in handing the Cougars their first loss of the year.

A&M improved its record to 2-0 in SWC, 2-3 overall. The Cougars dropped to 1-1 in conference action and 3-1 overall.

A&M's defense kept the Cougars' Run-and-Shoot offense out of the end zone for most of the game and forced crucial turnovers which were converted into scores by the opportunistic Aggie offense.

A&M Head Coach Jackie Sherrill credited his coaching staff with holding off the Cougars.

"Once again our offensive and defensive coaches did a good job of preparing us for this game," Sherrill said. "Houston is about as dangerous a team as you'll find."

A&M scored two touchdowns in the third quarter following Houston fumbles to erase a 9-7 Houston halftime lead.

The first turnover came early in the second half after an Aggie drive halted at the Houston 37.

On first-and-10 at the Cougar 28 quarterback Andre Ware fumbled on his first play as a replacement for starter David Dacus. Alex Morris recovered for the Aggies at the Cougar 29.

On the next play, Lewis took a pitch from quarterback Bucky Richardson and raced around the right side and broke two tackles to score.

The Aggies went for two on the conversion after Lewis' score.

Richardson rolled right and looked like he would run in for the conversion. At the last instant he flipped a short pass to flanker Gary Oliver who made a one-handed catch in the end zone to give A&M a 15-9 advantage.

Lewis' 40 carries was the third most in A&M history and a career-high. His fourth career game of over 100 yards was also his first 200-yard performance as an Aggie.

His three-game total of 546 yards rushing (since the Oklahoma State game) is the best three-game total in A&M history.

Lewis expected the heavy workload.

"The coaches felt they needed to go to me

more," Lewis said. "They told me before the game they were going to. I really didn't notice that I was the first A&M back to run for this many yards in three games. I am very proud of that, but the offensive line has just been playing great."

Midway through the third quarter Houston's defense had A&M cornered near their own goal line after a punt. A&M's Sean Wilson punted the ball away from his own goal line to Houston's Mercurio Calloway.

Calloway fumbled the ball forward to the A&M 44 where John Cooper recovered the ball for the Aggies.

Richardson then engineered an eight-play drive covering 56 yards that was keyed by a personal foul against Houston and a third-down pass from Richardson to tight end Mike Jones.

The personal foul occurred on a first down run by Lewis. Lewis was stopped for no gain up the middle at the Houston 43. After the play, Houston linebacker Lamar Lathon kicked A&M's Matt McCall in the head.

"It happened so quick," Lathon said. "It was really a stupid mistake."

A&M graciously received the gift and wasted no time in taking advantage of it.

On third-and-three at the Houston 21, Richardson rolled right and hit Jones across the middle for 15 yards and a first down at the Cougar six yard line. After a Lewis run gained four yards, fullback Robert Wilson dove over for the touchdown to give A&M a 21-9 lead.

Feeling every point was vital, Sherrill elected to go for two again.

Chris Osgood came in at quarterback and passed to Larry Horton. Horton caught the pass after Houston's Johnny Jackson tipped it and trotted into the end zone for the conversion and a 23-9 Aggie lead.

Sherrill felt no lead was safe.

"You never feel comfortable even when you're ahead of them," he said.

The lead appeared safe with the "Wrecking Crew" defense shutting down the Houston offense. A&M racked up seven sacks for the game for losses of 48 yards and held the Houston running game to 50 yards. Houston managed 10 first downs and completed only 18 of 48 passes while converting five of 20 third down plays to first downs.

A&M held Houston to -10 yards total offense in the pivotal third quarter and sacked Dacus four times.

Linebacker John Roper and defensive back Brent Smith split the sacks between them and played a big part in Dacus' exit from the game early in the fourth quarter. Dacus failed to connect on his last eight passes.

Smith said the Aggies knew the blitz had to be effective for A&M to have any chance to stop the Houston offense.

"We worked on the blitz all week and were really prepared for this game," Smith said. "Our coaches did a good job of getting us ready."

The offense eased the pressure on the Aggie defense by keeping the ball for 98 plays — the most by an A&M team since the 74-10 massacre of Texas Christian in 1986.

Sherrill said the entire team was under pressure and was happy with the performance.

"There was probably more pressure on our team for this game than for any others," Sherrill said. "We came to life last week against Tech, and for us to be a viable candidate for the SWC championship we needed to win this one."

The Aggie offense exhibited its dominance in A&M's first scoring drive.

By covering 81 yards in 18 plays and consuming six minutes and 30 seconds, the Aggies gave their defense a valuable rest and took a 7-6 lead.

The key play of the drive occurred on a third-and-17 situation on the Aggie 41. Richardson ran around the left side and kept for a 10-yard gain. After he ran out of bounds he was hit by Houston defensive tackle Alfred Oglesby. The late hit added 15 yards to the gain and kept the drive going at the Houston 34.

Seven plays later, Richardson converted another tough third down try by keeping for 10 yards on a third-and-five play for a first down at the Houston 8. Richardson later scored on a keeper from one yard out and A&M led 7-6 with 9:01 to go in the first half.

Richardson said the team has kept a good attitude despite an 0-3 start and NCAA probation that will keep A&M out of bowl participation this year.

"We just came out and executed," Richardson said. "We had a couple of big plays. I think we are coming together. We have faced a lot of adversity this year, but we have talked about it and said we are not going to quit."

It was only fitting that the Aggie offense would be presented with the challenge of running out the clock late in the game after Houston moved to within 23-16 on a two-yard keeper by Ware with 4:28 remaining.

A&M responded by driving 83 yards in seven plays as Lewis wrapped up his big day with two long runs.

A 38-yarder around left end went to the Houston 28 and set the stage for a 26-yard scoring run that put the game out of reach.

"Our offense gave our defense help," Sherrill said. "When we're moving and scoring, our defense can play recklessly, blitzing and stunting."

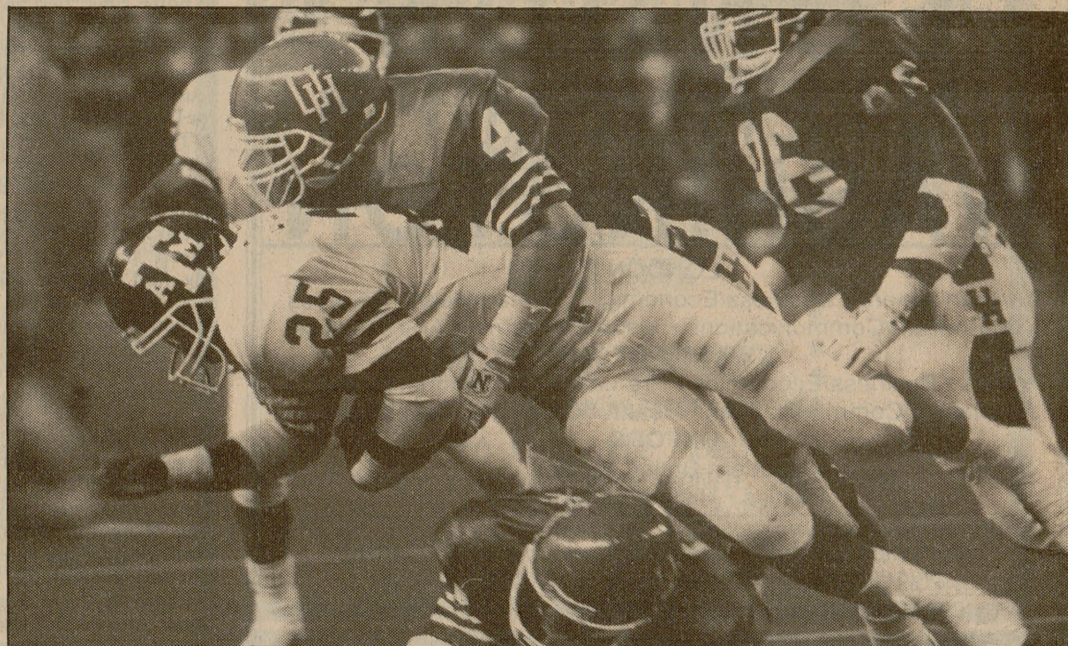


Photo by Mike C. Mulvey

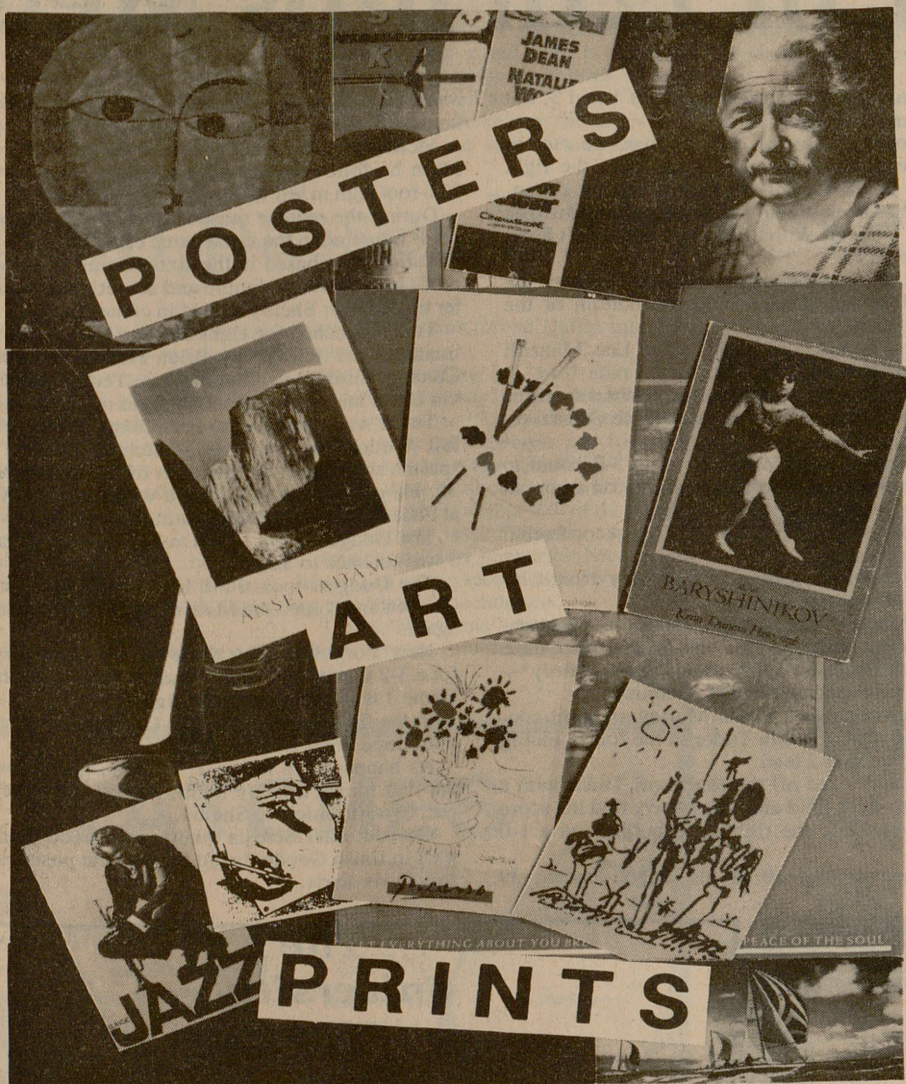
(above) Darren Lewis rambled for a career-high 201 yards against the Cougars. His 40 carries was a team record.

(below) Larry Horton, left, celebrates with Gary Oliver and Jerry Fontenot after Horton carried for a touchdown in the third quarter.



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