

Thornton speaks out on future, A&M basketball



Richard Tijerina
Sports Editor

Thornton hoping Aggies have fun, fun, fun

Trust me. Texas A&M Coach John Thornton knows what he's doing out there on the sidelines of G. Rollie White Coliseum. Since taking over for Shelby Metcalf on Jan. 22, Thornton has led the Aggies to a 2-1 record.

And though their overall SWC record is 4-4, which puts them somewhere in the middle of the pack, Thornton should be applauded.

He's taken control of an awkward situation at best and responded in the best way he could.

And it's paying off big dividends for Aggie basketball.

But what is most surprising is how well the two-week old coach handles pressure.

Thornton's got his stuff together. His days may seem to be numbered, as Athletic Director John David Crow has indicated he'll conduct a nationwide search at the end of the year for the permanent head coaching position.

And although that list included Thornton, he's not quite ready to start waiting for his phone to ring.

He knows only one thing will save his job.

Results. "I would think it would (matter how I did)," Thornton said. "I try not to dwell on it because it would take away from what I need to be focused on right now. But it's hard because you just don't know."

Right. What Thornton needs most of all is some kind of A&M basketball miracle — something that hasn't happened since 1987, when a struggling Aggie team limped into the post-season SWC Tournament as the No. 8 seed and won it all.

The Aggies have the talent to do it. All they need is to mesh together where they can play on the same, high level every game.

For Thornton, the most important thing is sales.

He's got to sell his basketball team to an A&M student body that hasn't been used to a winning basketball program.

That's where the Sixth Man comes in. Thornton knows he's got to start packing a G. Rollie White Coliseum that mostly has remained dormant all season. To do that, the Aggies need to start winning.

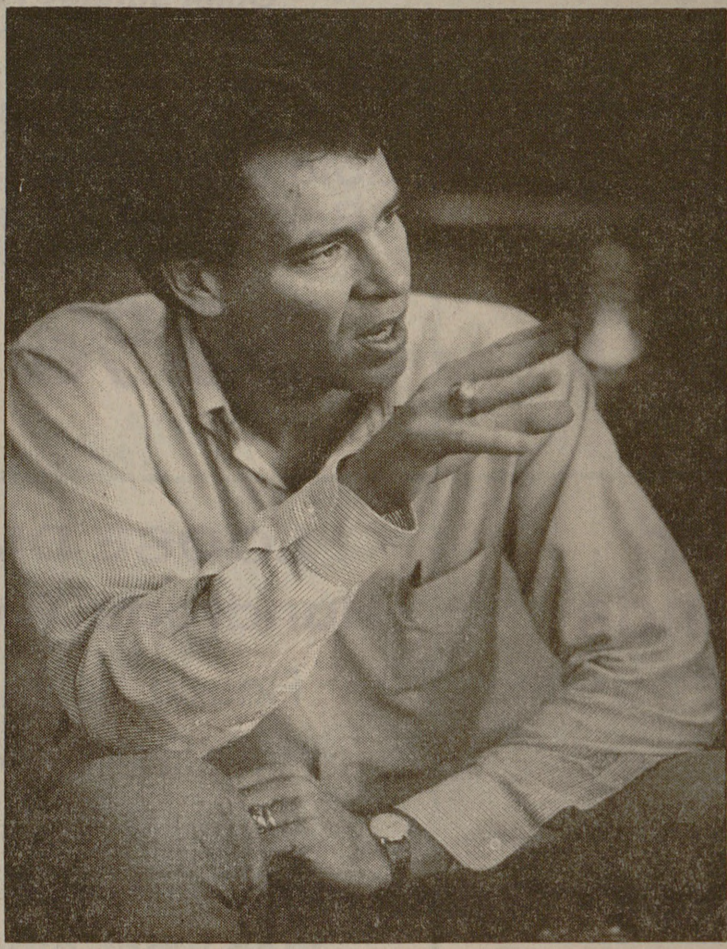
But Thornton's got a trick or two up his sleeve. He's let the team loose, urging them to have fun and utilize the transition game more. And now he's wanting the students to go to the games and have fun.

Have fun: The Thornton Catchphrase. If his Aggies keep it up, keep improving, keep molding together and start some kind of winning streak, good things might be around the corner for John Thornton and A&M basketball.

That's what Thornton's banking on. Trust me.



A&M interim Coach John Thornton reflects on the future of Aggie basketball.



Photos by Phelan M. Ebenhack

By **RICHARD TIJERINA**
Of The Battalion Staff

Texas A&M interim coach John Thornton faces the midway point of the Southwest Conference season Saturday against Baylor. The Aggies are 4-4 in SWC play, and Thornton said Thursday the team is at a crossroads in the conference race.

Thornton, now in his second week as head coach since taking over for Shelby Metcalf, reflected Thursday on the situation he finds himself in, the remainder of the SWC season and the future of the A&M basketball program.

How hard has it been for you to maintain your coaching concentration with all the distractions this season?

"That has been tough because so many things go through your mind. The majority of it pertains to basketball, but not coaching basketball. That's what I enjoy the most, and that's the way I've tried to keep myself sane during this period — to just really throw myself into what's best for this basketball team, and just look at it in the short term, game by game."

Has it been hard for the team to remain positive and upbeat? Are they looking at it as a new start of some kind?

"I think a fresh start is a good term to use for them. After the original distractions and circumstances of Coach Metcalf leaving, it shocked and hurt them. But I think now they realize that things must go on, and they want to be competitive. I think they've rededicated themselves to going back and going to work. They've given all indications that they have."

When you say you want the team to 'have fun,' what do you mean exactly?

"We're going to try and keep it simple. We're going to do the things that we can do to be successful, which are to play aggressively, whether that be half-court or full-court."

We're going to try and run on every opportunity we have because we need to score that way. It's the way they like to play, but it also behooves this team to get transition baskets, and that's the way I want to keep it.

But the thing that it all starts with, whether it's running full speed or we're playing defense full speed, it starts with effort. That's the thing I want to keep harping on the rest of the way. I don't know how many games we're going to win.

All I know is that I'm going to demand that kind of effort, and for all intent and purposes, they want to play that way."

Has this new aggressiveness something that Coach Metcalf ever thought of doing, or is it just your coaching style?

"I really can't say. I just think it's right for this team. I think the transition game is going to be that way in most programs now, and my whole premise from the very beginning is that I just want these guys to have fun the rest of the way, and I want the crowd to be able to enjoy their type of intensity."

Have you noticed that the team has elevated their play in some way?

"It seems like they're having fun, and it looks like a real team effort to me. We've had great individual performances, but scoring's been spread."

We've had guys come through in different situations, and I think for a team to be really successful, it's got to be a team. I

of the toughest situations to be put in.

"Exactly. But the thing is, I've always been a hard worker. I don't want to say that because I'll sound conceited, but I've always believed in working. And when times are tough, let's go to work."

To make this atmosphere the way I want it to be, and just knowing how much I want this job, I don't mind going out and speaking and being as upbeat as possible — doing interviews, being on the radio, going to talk to classes — because I really believe it.

I want the students to have fun. I'm going to have fun. I want the team to have fun.

So you're going to get as involved as you can with the student body?

"Yeah. I think the basketball program is something that they can get something out of. We've got outstanding individual players that are fun to watch, and I want them to come out if they want to."

Is 11 games fair-enough of a time frame

Just a friendly reminder.

Texas A&M students, alumni and supporters of the Aggie basketball program are reminded to wear black arm-bands or black clothing at Saturday's game against Baylor in recognition of former head basketball coach Shelby Metcalf's commitment and devotion not only to the basketball program, but also to the University.

After coaching A&M basketball for 27 years and taking the Aggies to six Southwest Conference titles and five NCAA Tournament appearances, Metcalf was removed as the Aggies head coach. Although the University was divided on

the issue of whether Athletic Director John David Crow should have removed Metcalf, some said that Crow could have handled the situation with a little more finesse.

Metcalf, considered the "Dean of SWC Coaches," was relieved of his coaching position Jan. 21 by Crow after he accused Crow of publicly criticizing him at the NCAA Convention in Dallas. Crow denied ever publicly criticizing Metcalf, replaced him with assistant coach John Thornton.

Under Thornton, the Aggies are 2-1. Saturday night, A&M will host Baylor at G. Rollie White Coliseum at 7:30 p.m.

think we have that cohesiveness. At least, it's beginning to come around a little bit."

Do you think much about next year? Is your performance the rest of this season going to determine whether you're head coach here at A&M in 1991?

"I would think it would. I try not to dwell on it because it would take away from what I need to be focused on right now. But it's hard because you just don't know."

However, I made a promise to these guys as well as myself that we're not going to let anything stand in the way of us finishing up as strong as we can and have as much fun doing it.

But being an interim coach has to be one

complicated. But I've been involved in the program, so it's not like I'm coming into a place where I don't have any clue as to what's happening.

I feel comfortable with the people I work with. I've gotten great help from (assistant coach) Larry Cockrum. When you don't have that kind of support, you're in trouble, but he's a great coach. We've hung together through this, and we're enjoying it."

Have you gotten much support from the student body?

"I think the team has been well received. As far as I'm concerned, all I know is that I'm going to do the best I can and I think people will appreciate it. That's all you can do."

I want to stress that Sixth Man idea. I'd like to see a Sixth Man that can participate in the game, and also have fun participating. They can help the team through rough spots of the game, and they can also actually determine sometimes what's happening through the course of it."

Do you feel the team has rallied around you in any way?

"No. I think they've really rallied around themselves. I think they've realized they're a good basketball team, and are capable of accomplishing more than what they've done. That's all I'm asking for. I want them to achieve at the highest level they can."

How would you describe your relationship with the Athletic Department?

"It's good. Right now, I'm not really involved except for coaching. That's the job I'm here to do. I don't read any more into it other than the way it is. I'm the head coach in this period, and I do my job day in and day out."

Do you talk to Coach Metcalf often?

"I've talked to him four or five times since he left. He's the kind of guy that does not want to interfere with a situation as difficult as that. He's going to be as supportive as he can, he's behind the players 100 percent, he's behind me 100 percent. He's going to do what he can, but he doesn't want to cause any distractions."

Have you sat down with John David Crow and discussed the entire situation?

"No, not really. I think I know that he's got things that he's got to look after. Of course, myself, I think I'm doing the thing I need to be doing. The things we talked about were pretty general. He told me he knew it was a tough situation, and that he hoped I would take the job and carry on the rest of the season. He said he was behind me. It was very cordial."

What can be done to A&M basketball to make it more exciting to the fans?

"I think enthusiasm is the main thing — enthusiasm toward the entire program as far as basketball is concerned. We're getting the players every year that are excited to play with and watch."

Once you get that, you have to let everybody on campus know that it's a viable, exciting product that they can partake. I think just getting that message across is going to help, big time.

You'd like to do a lot of things with promotion and so on, and you can, but it starts out with just getting out, being upbeat, starting honest and showing a product that the people will enjoy coming out to watch. I think we're working toward that."

At the Rice game, there was a high student attendance but the reserved section wasn't even half-filled. What can be done to attract more community members, faculty and staff to attend Aggie games?

"I think there was a cloud hanging over our program because of all the things that had happened, and that has hurt us to a certain extent."

But that's all in the past. The type of basketball these guys are playing has more to do with getting them excited than anything. A lot of people are enjoying the game more now. And that makes me feel good.

I'd like to win every game, but as long as people are enjoying the competition and are seeing things they'd like to see, there's half the battle right there."

What has the problem been with A&M attendance in the past?

"We haven't been battling for the championship or anything like that, and you need to do that to get that interest. See Thornton/Page 8

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