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Sports Editor

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Aggs' Thomas comes in from rain

No. 13 A&M travels to face 2-3 Baylor

By ALAN LEHMANN
Of The Battalion Staff

Brian Thomas just wanted to come in from the rain.

Luckily for Texas A&M, the freshman outfielder from Portland, Ore. chose Olsen Field as his place in the sun.

"It rained a lot back home," Thomas said. "It's real disappointing to spend two weeks in a gym, taking ground balls. There's nothing for outfielders to do inside a gym."

"It's hard on the mental game, being inside for so long with nothing to do except hit off the whiffle ball machine."

How did Texas A&M persuade Thomas to move so far from home?

"A lot of it was the weather," Thomas said. "I wanted to get to a place where it was nice and you played a lot of baseball games."

"A&M has a great program, too. My family and I were really pleased with the coaching staff."

Although Oregon isn't thought of as a baseball-rich area, Thomas played well there. Last year, he hit .470 and was named the Oregon Gatorade Player of the Year.

This season, Thomas is living up to the honor. He's hitting .393 and has provided speed on the bases and in the outfield.

Coach Mark Johnson said that Thomas has been one of the biggest surprises on the Aggie squad this season. But Thomas almost didn't play this year.

Because of the Aggies' depth in the outfield, Thomas expected to be redshirted.

"I had accepted that I was going to be redshirted," Thomas said. "We had Dan (Robinson), Chad (Broussard) and Tim (Holt) in the outfield. They'd all had more experience than me, and had been swinging the bat real well."

Thomas said he saw his expected redshirt season as an opportunity to improve, but sitting on the bench was something new to him.

"My high school coach said that the players on the bench were as important as the players on the field, and I thought this would be a chance to see if he was right," he said.

So he resigned himself to work

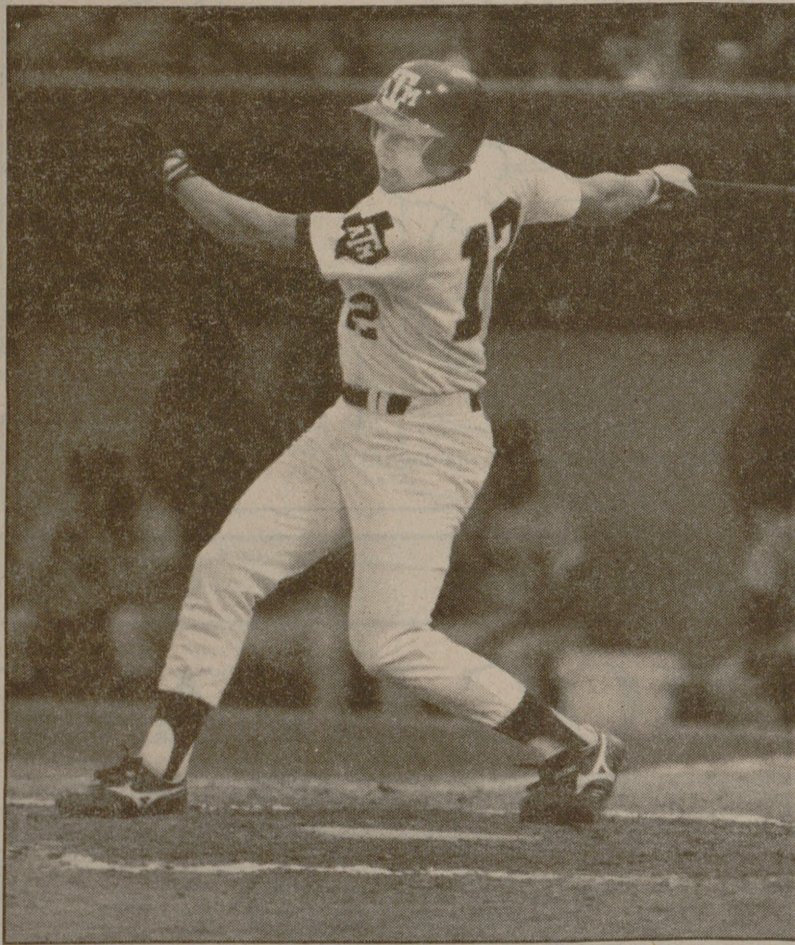


Photo by Jay Janner

Freshman outfielder Brian Thomas has stepped in for the injured Dan Robinson, and swings a hot bat for the Aggies.

hard and treat practice as a real game. Thomas worked on hitting the ball to the opposite field, because he was weak hitter on outside pitches.

Then, on March 3, Thomas saw the extra effort pay off when Johnson told Thomas he'd finally get a chance to play.

Thomas didn't respond well in that first game against Louisiana State. He was 0-for-3 — all grounders to the shortstop.

He was surprised when Johnson

put him in the lineup three days later. Not that Thomas doubted his ability to hit — the surprise was that he'd be playing first base.

"I'd only played first base a couple of times when I was about 13," Thomas said.

Still, he handled it well. He went 2-for-3 with a solid double off the centerfield wall. He made the most of his next chance, too — going 3-for-4 against Iowa State in the Aggie-Continental tournament.

From that point, he went on a

tear, hitting .500 in his next 20 at-bats and .400 in his next 40.

"I was real confident going up to the plate," Thomas said. "I was swinging the bat well, and expecting to get a hit."

Not that Thomas is cocky or overconfident, he's actually soft-spoken. It's just that he's never learned to lose. His high school and summer league squads had been winning teams.

Thomas was an outfielder and second baseman in high school, but pitched a little in short relief.

Although the scorecards at Olsen Field list Thomas as a righthanded hitter, he's always been a lefty.

"When I was eight years old, my dad tried to get me to bat righthanded," Thomas said. "He told me that since I threw righthanded, I should bat that way, too. I said, 'No dad, I hit lefthanded.'"

Brian didn't back down, and he's hit lefthanded ever since — a fact that helped him break into the Aggie starting lineup.

Since the Aggies have only two other experienced lefthanded hitters — junior Blake Pyle and backup outfielder Steve Medina — Thomas had an added advantage.

"We were short of lefthanded hitters," Johnson said. "Brian was hitting the ball real well in practice and I thought he'd give us some speed from the left side."

"And he has. He's beaten out a lot of infield hits, and stolen some bases for us. He has responded extremely well for a freshman."

Thomas just keeps responding to the challenge of college baseball. Tuesday he knocked in the winning run in the last inning to give A&M a win over Hardin-Simmons.

He's also shown a good eye at the plate, walking 10 times in 19 games.

"I don't mind getting a walk and stealing second," Thomas said. "It was easy in high school, but the catchers have better arms in college."

Opposing teams are beginning to realize Thomas' talent. As a result, he has seen a lot of breaking pitches lately.

"I'd say college breaking pitches are a lot better than the ones I faced

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It's time for the No. 13 Texas A&M baseball team to hit the road.

The Aggies will travel to Waco Saturday to face the Baylor Bears in a noon doubleheader.

The teams will finish the three-game series with a 2 p.m. game Sunday.

The first game originally was scheduled for Friday at 2 p.m., but it has been postponed until Sunday because of bad weather.

A&M finished a 16-game home-stand Tuesday with a twinbill sweep of Hardin-Simmons 8-7 and 5-2.

The Aggies will take a 12-game winning streak and a 3-0 conference record into the weekend.

Baylor is 2-4 in conference play after being swept by Texas over the weekend.

Still, Aggie coach Mark Johnson knows it won't be easy for his team to beat Baylor.

"Baylor is a whole lot better than a lot of people think," Johnson said. "They could have won four out of six of the (SWC) ballgames. They should have, but crazy things have happened."

Baylor might call it bad luck. The Bears lost to Texas Friday on a late error, but appeared to have the final game in hand.

They led Texas by five runs until the Longhorns scored six runs in the bottom of the eighth inning.

"Baylor was highlighted as being one of the top teams (in the SWC) coming in, and they've got a better ballclub than they've shown," Johnson said. "They've got good pitching."

"They're gonna be scrapping hard, because their backs are against the wall. They can't afford to have another bad weekend."

The Aggies had a good night Tuesday. They came from behind in the first game and won on a Brian Thomas single.

In the nightcap, three A&M pitchers combined for a Southwest Conference-record 21 strikeouts.

Reliever Bo Siberz was almost un-



Photo by Jay Janner

A&M coach Mark Johnson (right) makes a pitching change for reliever Steve Hughes (left) in Tuesday's doubleheader.

touchable, striking out nine batters in three innings.

Third baseman Travis Williams, who was 3-for-6 Tuesday, said the Aggies' winning streak should be helpful.

"These wins give us a lot of momentum going into the Baylor series," Williams said. "They were both tight games, and they should help our confidence a lot, even though they weren't conference games."

The Aggies swept the Bears last season at Olsen Field, 10-3, 9-8 and 12-2.

Ronnie Allen (5-1, 1.30 ERA), Rich Robertson (6-0, 1.24 ERA) and Pat Sweet (4-2, 3.96 ERA) are the probable Aggie starting pitchers for the weekend.



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