

POSITION PROFILES

Three times the talent at tailback

By David Winder

THE BATTALION

Three talented tailbacks, one football.

One tailback broken in the mold of Barry Sanders (Greg Hill), a darter-dasher type runner with the ability to elude defender after defender. Another, a Roger Craig clone (Rodney Thomas), who lives by the rule of never being taken down by one guy. The third a combination of the two (Leeland McElroy), who, like Emmitt Smith, never lets anyone get a solid shot at him.

Since only one tailback is usually used at a time, keeping these players on the side would be a drawback. But offensive coordinator Bob Toledo said there is a way to capitalize on the talent.

"It's hard for one of those guys to go through a whole game because we give (the ball) to them so much," Toledo said. "The tailback carries the ball a lot in our offense, so we try to spell (rest) them because they're all quality backs."

"We're trying to utilize them in different formations so we can get two or three of them in the game at the same time."

Getting enough carries for Hill and Thomas last year was not a problem as the two led the nation with 2,195 yards combined. Twice in 1992 both Hill and Thomas ran for over 100 yards in the same game.

"We had a lot of yardage on the ground because we have such a good rotation," Thomas said. "We were going in there, running the ball and doing the job. I think that's one of the things that allows us to win games."

McElroy will also help the Aggies win games this year but not always at running back.

"I'm working at several different positions to get into the game so I can get the ball," McElroy said. "I'm going to be playing receiver, running back and return kickoffs. I would rather be playing running back, but all these different positions I'm having to learn will help me as an athlete."

Quarterback Corey Pullig said he is just happy to see McElroy in the maroon and white.



Kyle Burnett/ THE BATTALION

Redshirt freshman running back Leeland McElroy high-steps his way through a rope drill. McElroy joins juniors Greg Hill and Rodney Thomas in the Texas A&M backfield this season.

"I played against him in high school so I know what he can do when you get the ball to him," Pullig said. "He's going to be tough on opposing defenses, I'm real anxious to see what he can do when I get the ball to him."

This year Pullig will be getting

the ball to the running backs even more as the A&M offense opens up.

"I think (Quarterback) coach (Gary) Kubiak has done a great job in developing their pass-catching skills," Toledo said. "I don't think we've caught the ball

real well out of the backfield in the past, we've worked hard on becoming better receivers."

"My feeling is that they're the best runners on the team so don't just hand it to them, throw it to them."

Playing behind an experienced front line will also contribute to success of the Aggie running game.

"Anytime you see running backs in the pros or in college and they're called great, they got the way because of their offensive line," Thomas said. "I think a running back that's one of the things that we've got to recognize is that we're not alone in this there's guys up front. I believe games are won in trenches and think the reason we have such great offense is on the success of our offensive line."

Hill, Thomas and McElroy will also have the blocking of fullback Detron Smith and Cliff Groce.

"Cliff and Detron are both solid backs," Thomas said. "They have a lot of common sense of the game, a lot of knowledge."

Hill said that learning from each other is another key to their three back success.

"The thing that makes us great is when we come in and we have great people to learn from," Hill said. "I lived around the corner from Darren Lewis for a long time so I followed in his footsteps to junior high, to high school then to A&M. So everything I learned from him I passed on to the others."

"Guys like Rodney and Leeland are always willing to learn from them and they learn from me," Hill said.

After all the great linebacks A&M has produced over the years, Hill said he feels that the Aggies should also be recognized for their backfield.

"Running Back University is something we should be known as for the next couple of years," Hill said. "We've had Darren Lewis, Greg Hill, Rodney Thomas and now Leeland McElroy. Whenever they bring in next year, I'm pretty sure is going to be a great running back."

Three talented running backs, one defensive nightmare.

Line brings plenty of experience to offense

By Nick Georgandis

THE BATTALION

Despite the loss of all-Southwest Conference guard John Ellisor, A&M's offensive line is one of the most experienced in recent history.

Of the five linemen, four are returning seniors, including guard Tyler Harrison, center Chris Dausin and tackles Dexter Wesley and Jason Mathews.

Offensive line coach Mike Sherman said the players' individuality helps contribute to their success as team leaders. "Each one has certain characteristics of leadership. Tyler Harrison does it in a quiet way, Chris Dausin does it in a very verbose way, Dexter Wesley and Jason Mathews, a combination of both ways, so I look at them all as leaders."

Stepping into the big hole created by Ellisor's graduation is Calvin Collins, a 6-foot-3, 285-pound red-shirt freshman.

Collins was originally recruited to play center for the Aggies, but A&M head coach R.C. Slocum said that Collins' talents made him an essential addition to the line.

"We decided Calvin was one of the five best linemen on the team," Slocum said, "so it was our best interest to move him to guard. He is a natural center, but we needed him on the field."

Another player the coaches are eager to see log some playing time is true freshman Chris Ruhman, a 6-foot-6, 282-pound lineman from Nimitz High School in Houston. Ruhman was considered the number one offensive lineman in Texas last season and was a consensus high school All-American.

Perhaps the greatest asset to the offensive line is the abundance of exceptional running backs.

Adding highly touted redshirt freshman Leeland McElroy to the duo of Greg Hill and Rodney Thomas makes the linemen's job that much easier.

"With backs like that, you can't miss a block and they will still make the play and make you look good," Collins said. "As a lineman, you can't ask for much more."

With the four senior starters, the coaches and players are expecting big things from the line and from the offensive unit as a whole.

Dausin said that with the talent they have this year, they're reaching for the top.

"Of course, our biggest goal is for a national championship," Dausin said.



Senior offensive guard Tyler Harrison (55) watches intently as junior guard John Richard (79) fires off the ball in a pass blocking drill.

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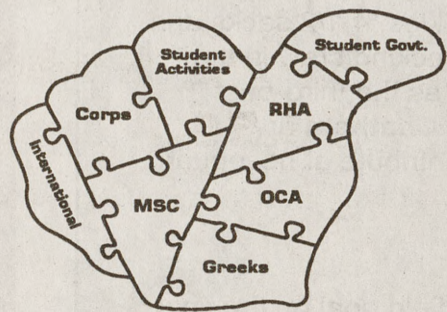
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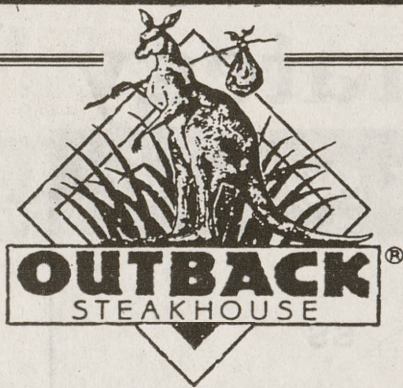


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