

Tailback tandem is 'lethal'

McElroy, Thomas give A&M strong running game

By Nick Georgandis
THE BATTALION

One is the battle-worn veteran, the guy who wears three Cotton Bowl rings on his hand and is a candidate for the illustrious Doak Walker award. The other is last year's wonder boy, who is a legitimate threat to score every time he touches the ball.

Put the two together, and Rodney Thomas and Leeland McElroy combine to form one of the most lethal running attacks in the country.

Thomas, a senior from Groveton who rushed for 996 yards and scored 13 touchdowns last season, says he is not worried about which of the two players garners the job of starting tailback.

"My philosophy is that the starter is the guy who starts the game, but that doesn't say a lot," Thomas said. "If you can play every quarter in every game, and contribute to the team, that's the most important thing."

McElroy, who starred last year as a red-shirt freshman, shares Thomas' philosophy on playing time, and says the two backs' relationship is making both of them better players.

"We're very good friends, and we're always pushing each other out there," McElroy said.

"There's no jealousy even though we're competing for the same position. If I need help with something, I'll ask Rodney for help and vice versa."

The Aggies' probation this season has done little to dampen the spirits of either player, even though Thomas' draft position could be hurt by the Aggies' absence from television this season.

"I look at (the punishment) as something I can't change," Thomas said. "But there is one thing I can change, and that's the



Stew Milne/THE BATTALION

A&M running back Rodney Thomas (20) goes through a drill during fall practice.

fact that Rodney Thomas can go out and make himself the best football player that he can possibly be."

Despite his success last season at tailback, McElroy is being lauded as an all-around threat, due largely to his stunning special teams performances last season. McElroy began fielding punts in spring practice in an effort by the coaching staff to get him on the field as much as possible.

"Anyway I can get on the field, I'm honored to do that," McElroy said. "Punts are a little harder for me to catch than kickoffs, but as soon as I'm doing well enough, I'm sure I'll be out there."

Because of McElroy's explosiveness, he has been touted by more than one football expert as a top five NFL draft pick, should he decide to come out early after this season. McElroy refuses to be distracted by such talk.

"I'm in college right now, and I just want to enjoy my college career," McElroy said. "I have no control over what people are going to say. Right now, I'm just focused on playing here at A&M."

Hunter Goodwin, a junior transfer from Texas A&I who is slated to start at right tackle this year, said just watching the tailbacks run is a thrill.

"We have great running backs, and it's a big opportunity for me to block for them," Goodwin said. "They can make it very exciting."

New offensive coordinator Steve Ensminger says the presence of McElroy and Thomas in the same backfield is not just a luxury, but a necessity if the Aggies' new offense is to be a success.

"You can't expect one man to run 40 yards downfield on a route and then come back and carry the ball 40 times a game," Ensminger said. "We need two backs, and we're just lucky to have two great ones."

Aggie coach R.C. Slocum sums up how much the two tailbacks mean to the team. "I wouldn't trade the two of them for any other two backs in the country," Slocum said. "Both of them are classy and unselfish. They not only help the team, they are the strength of the team."



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A&M running back Leeland McElroy (34) tunes up for the Aggie opener against LSU.

AGGIE FACTS

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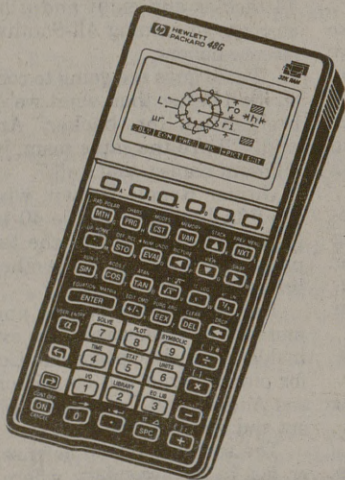
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