

# Pioneers help A&M break color barrier

By David Winder  
THE BATTALION

Sammy Williams had already been a trailblazer when he became the first African-American to join the Corps. But when he and his roommate J.T. Reynolds decided to go out for the Texas A&M football team in 1967, breaking the color barrier was the last thing on their minds.

"Being the first wasn't the plan," said Williams, an academic junior at the time. "We went out for the team because we thought we were good enough."

Williams and Reynolds went through conditioning drills with the team during spring training after then-head coach Gene Stallings let them walk on. The two later joined the team for summer workouts and were given athletic scholarships.

"There was quite a bit of racism," Reynolds said. "There were actions and statements made to me and Sammy by players and coaches. Stallings never did anything in our presence, but as far as I am concerned, whether he knew or not, as the head coach he was still responsible for what was going on. I don't think A&M was ready for us."

Neither Williams, a receiver, nor Reynolds, a linebacker, played during games at their positions. Reynolds, however, did see some time on the kick-off return team.

"I can't say it was all Stallings who had a problem with me playing," Williams said. "I think the times had a lot to do with it, the big money guys telling a young coach who to play."

Stallings, now the head coach at the University of Alabama, said it did not matter what color the players were, he just wanted the best ones out on the field.

"I really don't remember there being a reason for having them on the team, they were just football players," Stallings said. "As I remember, that was the first year any of them even came out for the team."

Williams and Reynolds said that they believed they were better than many of their teammates.

"Some coaches and players told us that we should be playing," Reynolds said. "It was pretty obvious."

Even though they did not play, both men received watches from the Aggies 20-16 upset victory over Alabama in the 1968 Cotton Bowl. Neither chose to return the next season.

"I didn't return the next year because I came to A&M to get an education," Williams said.

Reynolds said he did not think he would be welcomed back.

"I could see the writing on the wall," Reynolds said. "I didn't feel wanted so it didn't make much sense to go back there."

Reynolds felt that he and Williams were being exploited. "I felt I was being used as a football player to break the color barrier," Reynolds said. "I was given a scholarship though, so maybe we used each other. I treated it as a job and got my degree."

After graduating it took Williams and Reynolds a while to venture back to College Station.

"When I left, I really wasn't sure about the experience," said Williams, who is now on the Board of Directors of the A&M Letterman's Club. "It took me a while to even go back to campus. Then meeting the students on campus today and telling them what it was like back then, it lets me give something back."

Both players know their sacrifices have allowed numerous other players to follow in their footsteps.

"I get pride in that young African-Americans are getting recognition and getting a chance to play pro ball," Reynolds said.

Still Reynolds can not help but think what could have been.

"If Stallings and the others had opened their eyes a little earlier who knows what would have happened," Reynolds said. "Baylor and SMU were getting African-American players and playing them."

"Joe Levias from SMU beat us by himself, one man on a last second reception beat us. I think that a Sammy Williams or a J.T. Reynolds could have done that, we just never got the chance."

## Hugh McElroy

Receiver Hugh McElroy was the first African-American to get significant playing time at Texas A&M, but he will always be remembered for "The Catch."

Down 18-13 to No. 12 Louisiana State, McElroy hauled

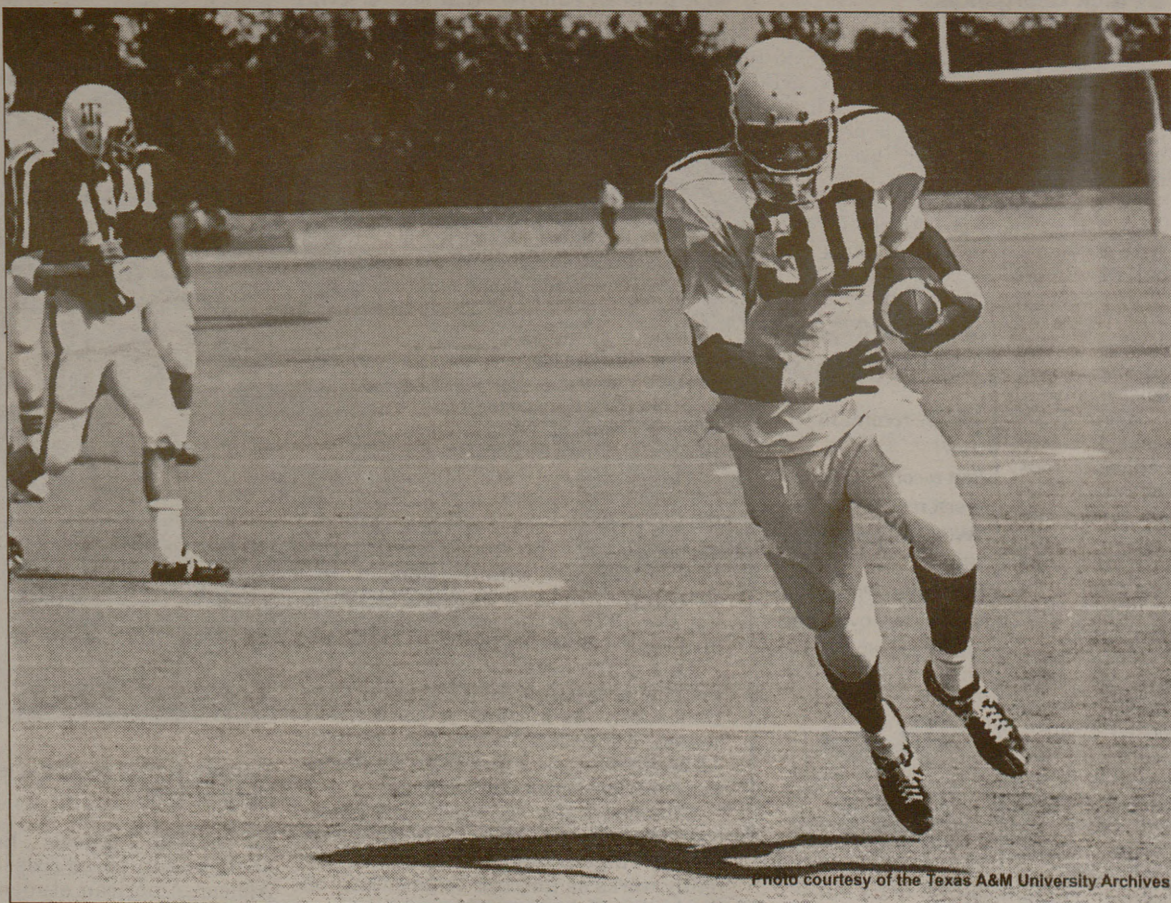


Photo courtesy of the Texas A&M University Archives

Running back **Jerry Honore** practices his moves during spring training 1974. Honore was the first African-American to accept a scholarship after being recruited by Texas A&M.

in a 79-yard touchdown pass from Lex James with 18 seconds left to give the Aggies a 20-18 upset victory in 1970.

"We didn't call that play in the huddle, it was supposed to be a pass to our tight end Homer May," McElroy said. "I just ran down the field and Lex just happened to throw it to me."

"I just put my hands out and he threw it so hard that it just stuck there. Then I ran for the touchdown because of the fear of eleven Cajuns chasing me."

Like Williams and Reynolds, McElroy just wanted to play football, not be a pioneer.

"I was playing around the quad with my friends and decided to go out," McElroy said. "I went out in the spring of '68, but that didn't work out so I went back out in the spring of '69."

"Being one of the first wasn't my intent. I think that would have been a selfish motive. I just went out and had a good time."

McElroy said watching Stallings on the sidelines at Alabama is quite a change from his Texas A&M days.

"I think it was a learning process for Stallings, it could have been handled a lot better," said McElroy, who played receiver from 1969-1971. "He's grown a lot from then to today when I see him walking the field at Alabama. I think he realizes people are now individuals, and they all don't fit into a cookie cutter mold."

Overall, the experience was good, McElroy said. "The Catch" did change his life.

"I can't imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't made that catch," McElroy said. "There's people who have told me that they remember exactly where they were on two events. The day I made the catch against LSU and the day that JFK was shot. That was close to thirty years ago, it's very humbling."

## Jerry Honore

Jerry Honore had heard that the coach was coming to see him, but he just figured it was the same one that always did. Then he opened the door and changed his life forever.

"Coach (Lance) Van Zandt and another A&M recruiter Fred Nasr were the guys who were always talk-

ing to me," Honore said. "One day Nasr told me that the coach was coming by to see me, so I just figured it was coach Van Zandt."

"Then coach Gene Stallings showed up at my door to recruit me. This man had coached Joe Namath, Edd Hargett, Maurice Moorman and now he wanted me to play for him. There he was, sitting in my living room with my momma talking in his slow Texas drawl."

After Stallings' visit, Honore became the first African-American to accept a scholarship after being recruited by Texas A&M. Honore is still honored that Stallings chose him.

"It means a lot to me because a lot of schools were under pressure to recruit African-Americans," said Honore, who played running back from 1973-1974. "Coach Stallings went out and said he was going to recruit the best players, not the best African-American for Texas A&M."

Honore said Stallings was a giving man.

"One year this guy came to take portraits of us in our uniforms," Honore said. "He said we could have a personal copy for ourselves for \$75."

"A lot of the guys didn't have that much money. Coach Stallings told us to go ahead and fill out the forms for the portraits and that we could pay him back when he needed it. Coach Stallings was that type of person."

As Williams, Reynolds and McElroy did, Honore also helped to recruit other African-Americans to play at Texas A&M.

"One day I was back at my dorm after the Christmas holidays and Coach (R.C.) Slocum, Coach Melvin Robertson and Coach Ben Hurt came into my room and told me to grab some clean underwear and a toothbrush," Honore said. "We went on a recruiting trip and got Bubba Bear Pat Thomas, Ed Simonini and Jackie Williams. I spent the night on Bubba Bear's couch. I'm really proud I had an effect on the 1975 SWC champions."

Honore said that Texas A&M has not changed much since the day he graduated.

"People at A&M don't change," Honore said. "When you're an Aggie you don't have to worry because people will make you feel at home. People still talk to you on campus is the major thing."