

Wilbert sets sights on SWC Championship

□ Local product matures into A&M's premiere player.

By Shelly Hall
THE BATTALION

It's not every day that you meet your future coach 20,000 feet in the air, but for Texas A&M senior forward, Joe Wilbert, that's exactly what happened.

As a Bryan High product and a top recruit in the state, Joe Wilbert first met A&M head coach Tony Barone on an airplane to Dallas after Barone had interviewed for the A&M coaching position.

Wilbert, who was on a recruiting trip to Indiana, said Barone looked familiar so he decided to approach him.

"I looked at him and instantly thought that I knew him," Wilbert said. "I told him I was nervous about flying because I had never flown before and he talked to me the entire flight."

Upon arriving in Dallas, Barone wished Wilbert the best in his career and departed for home, while Wilbert continued on his recruiting trip.

Now, after that first encounter with his destiny, Wilbert has arrived back in town just down the street from where he grew up.



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— Joe Wilbert

While attending Bryan High School, Wilbert met a man who would influence him greatly. That man was Barry Davis.

Motivated by Davis, a former All-Southwest Conference Aggie player and Wilbert's Bryan High School coach, Wilbert found success on the court and off.

"I wanted to quit school in the tenth grade, but coach Davis turned my life around," Wilbert said. "He talked to me and encouraged me to be the best in all areas of my life, not just basketball."

After a stellar career with Tyler Junior College as a freshman, Wilbert opted to spend the remainder of his eligibility at A&M with the hope of starting.

"The coaching staff did not guarantee a start, but that I had a chance to play," Wilbert said.

Wilbert's parents, coaching staff and the kids in Bryan are the three main reasons he made the transfer from Tyler Junior College.

"My parents are my biggest fans," Wilbert said. "They come to every home game and sit in the same seats every game."

Wilbert's other strong motivation comes from the interaction that he has

with the kids in Bryan.

"I love kids, and if I can touch just one kid's life in the community, that will make my scholarship worth it," Wilbert said.

On the court, Wilbert has developed into the Aggies' top gun, averaging 21.8 points and 8.2 rebounds per game, leading the Aggies in both categories.

So far, the pinnacle of Wilbert's career came against Texas Tech on January 11, when he scored a career-high 38 points. This performance, Tech coach James Dickey said, was one of the best performances he had ever seen a player make since he had been coaching in the collegiate ranks.

Citing the beginning of SWC play as his main incentive for his scoring outburst against Tech, Wilbert said just seeing the Red Raiders step onto the court caused him to take it to another level.

"Opening up SWC play, you want to take it to another level and send the message out to other teams in the conference that the Aggies will be tough in College Station," Wilbert said.

Wilbert attributes his success in his new role as A&M's primary scorer to his acceptance as a leader in all phases of his game.

"It's not just scoring that shows you are a leader," Wilbert said. "It's stepping up to the challenge and hustling every day in practice."

Before suffering an eye injury last season against Texas Christian University, Wilbert was on pace to having one of the best seasons ever posted by an Aggie or any SWC player. This year, Wilbert said, that's all

behind him.

"I really don't think about it too much," Wilbert said. "All we have to do is just play our best and we will prove to all SWC teams who is the best."

Wilbert said his first priority for the season is to win the SWC championship.

"In the past, we've made it to the tournament," Wilbert said. "This year we want to get there and make some noise."

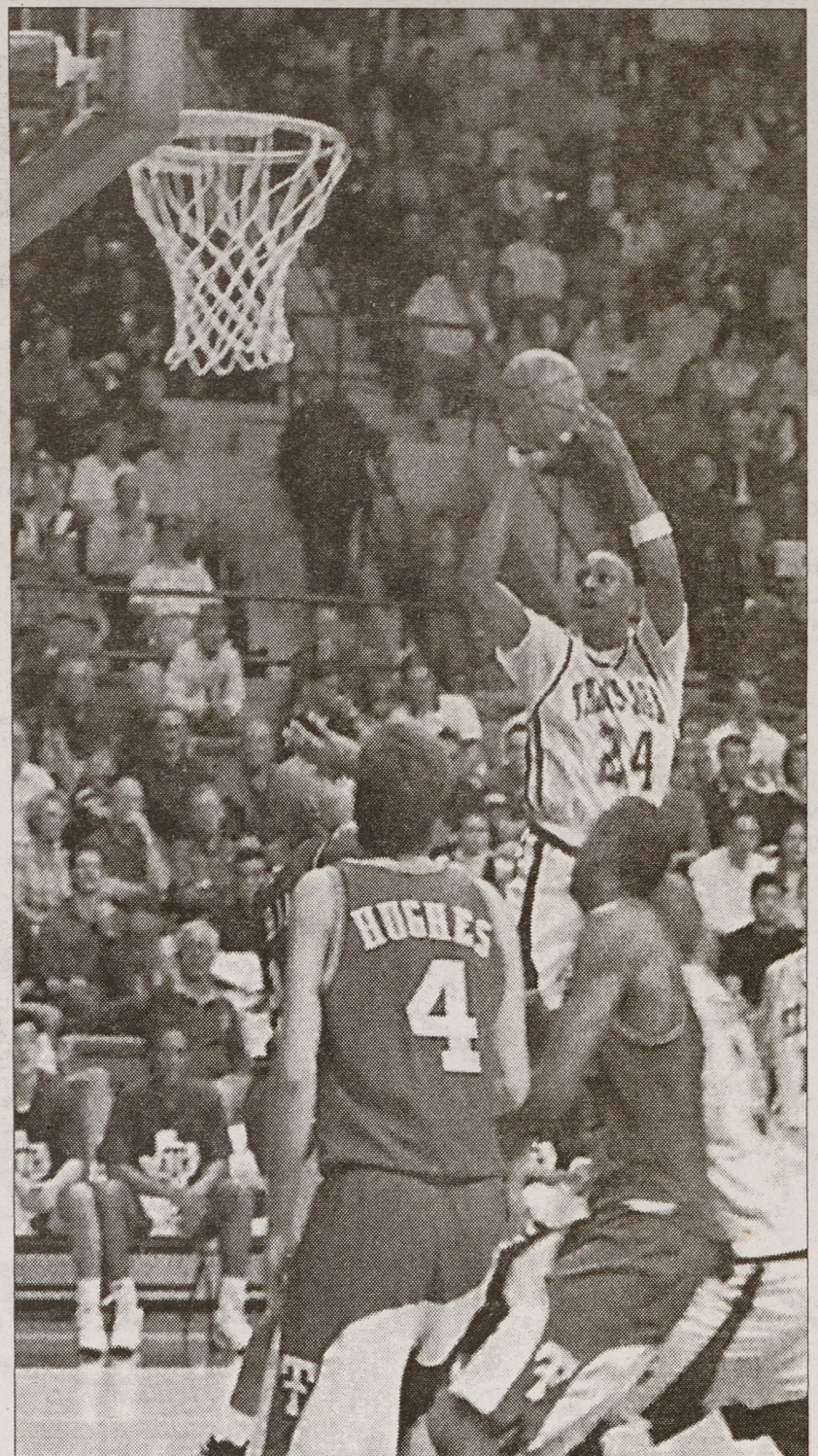
Before he thinks about the post-season, though, Wilbert said he still has some unfinished business to do in his personal game.

"In order to advance to the next level, personally, I've got to work on my outside game and my defensive game," Wilbert said.

Wilbert's ultimate goal for the season is to make it to the NCAA tournament.

"Some people might think I'm crazy for having such high goals," Wilbert said. "But I'm not letting down until we make it."

If that happens, Wilbert will find himself in a familiar place, on an airplane with Barone. The only difference will be that this time Wilbert will know his destination.



Amy Browning/THE BATTALION

Joe Wilbert (24) zeroes in on the basket for two points during the Aggies' win against Texas Tech at G. Rollie White Coliseum.

WILBERT'S 1993-94 HIGHLIGHTS

- Led A&M in scoring with 14.5 points a game and was second in rebounding with 5.9 per game.
- Voted SWC Newcomer of the Year by The Houston Post.
- Named to SWC All-Newcomer Team.
- Had back-to-back 20-point games in the Dr. Pepper SWC Classic.
- Pulled down a career high 15 rebounds in tournament semifinals against Texas Tech.
- Scored 33 points with 14 rebounds against Baylor and 30 points against Texas.
- Two-time selection as SWC newcomer of the week.
- Ranked second in SWC in field goal percentage.