

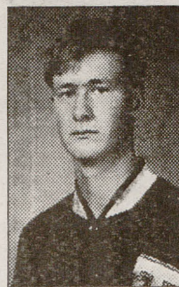
Multi-talented Kessel grows to fill big shoes

□ Versatile freshman guard shows he has what it takes to take over the point.

By Robert Rodriguez
THE BATTALION

Replacing one of the best players to ever don an Aggie basketball jersey is not an easy task for anyone, especially for a freshman. However, Kyle Kessel is not your average freshman.

Kessel, a product out of Mundelein High School in Mundelein, Illinois, holds the inevitable task of replacing David Edwards at the point guard position. Not only does he have some big shoes to fill by replacing Edwards, but also *Playboy Magazine* believes Kessel is A&M coach Tony Barone's star of the future. Kessel feels confident that he can handle these pressures placed upon him.



Kessel

"I just try to take it one game at a time," Kessel said, "and do the best I can."
Kessel is only the second freshman point guard in A&M history to start the first 15 games of his career. At the beginning of this season, Kessel struggled to adjust to the collegiate level. However, with each passing game, Kessel has shown improvement, including scoring a career-high 19 points in a win over Holy Cross, and then dishing out 11 assists in a win over Loyola Marymount.

Kessel's 4.8 assist average ranks him sixth in the conference and he is fourth on the team in scoring.

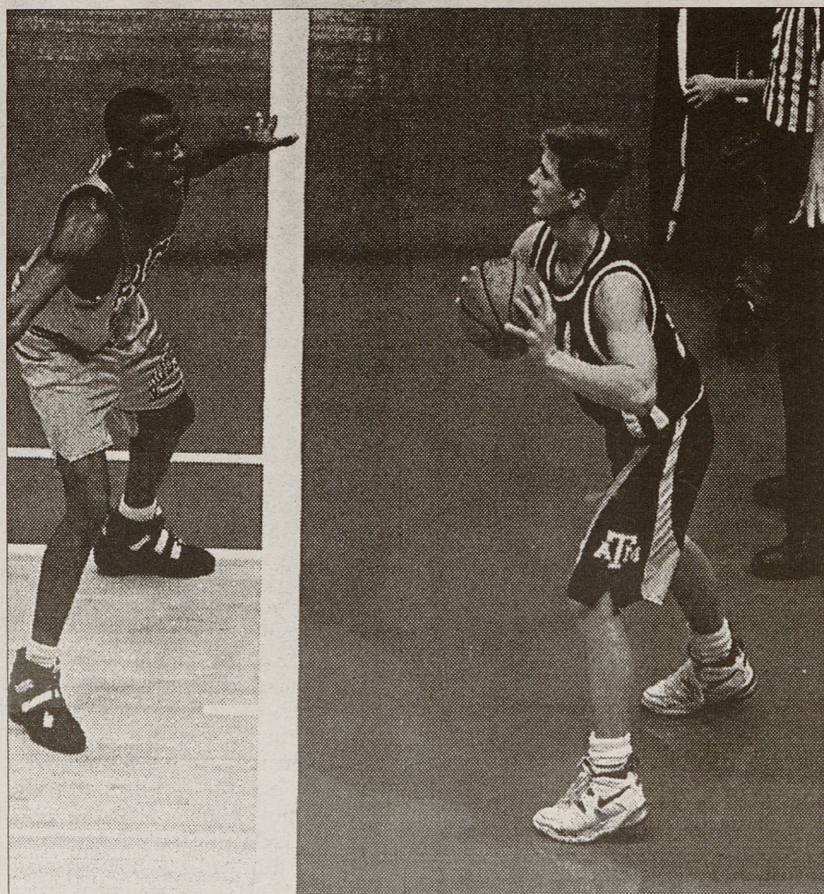
He feels the progress he's made can be attributed to one thing.

"Experience is the reason for this improvement," explains Kessel. "My first college game, I was kind of excited and nervous. I just had to get into a couple of games and my game got better."

Not only has Kessel improved with each game, but he also has been calm under pressure. He made six straight free throws in the final two minutes to seal a victory over Southwestern Louisiana on December 5. Barone knows it will take some time for Kessel to adjust to the pressures placed upon him, but he believes Kessel has what it takes to perform well.

"Kyle has done well this season with all the attention," Barone said. "He's still learning but he's been playing well."

The coaching staff is not the only group who seems to have confidence in Kessel. Kessel feels he has the respect of his teammates and is looking for more from other



Stew Milne/THE BATTALION

Kyle Kessel attempts to inbound a pass against the Rice Owl press. Kessel scored 6 points against the Owls in last night's action.

teams. "There have been times when my teammates have looked to give me the ball, which shows me I have their respect," Kessel said. "As each game passes, I think I will get more and more respect from other people."

Kessel was a two time all-state pick in Illinois and was named area player of the year by the *Chicago Daily Herald* in his senior year. Kessel finished his high school career with the second highest career assists total in Illinois prep history and is 10th on the all-time state list in points scored.

However, basketball was not the only sport in which Kessel excels. He was drafted by the New York Mets in the 50th round of last year's amateur baseball draft as a pitcher. Kessel signed with the Mets and will be assigned to their Port St. Lucie farm team in Florida this summer.

Because of his professional contract, the NCAA forbids Kessel from playing baseball for the Aggie baseball team. However, a clause in his contract stated the Mets will provide for his college education at any school he would like to attend.

This basketball-baseball trial Kessel is performing was popularized by Duke freshman guard Trajan Langdon, who plays for the San Diego Padres organization during the summer. Kessel could have chosen other prominent basketball schools such as Georgetown or New Orleans, but said he could not pass up at the opportunity to play for A&M.

"I could have gone to those other schools, but I saw a good opportunity to come and play here at Texas A&M," Kessel said. "I like Coach Barone and the style of play here."

The real test for Kessel will come when conference play kicks into full gear. In order for the team to contend for the Southwest Conference title, Kessel believes attitude, motivation, and execution must be present in A&M's arsenal.

"As a team, we have to just play with enthusiasm and play hard," Kessel said. "Personally, I have to run this team. My job is to hit the open shot, find the open man, and play good defense."

"I'm not into stats, but if you keep on winning, that's a reflection of the point guard," he later said. "That is my personal goal this year, to just keep the team winning."

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