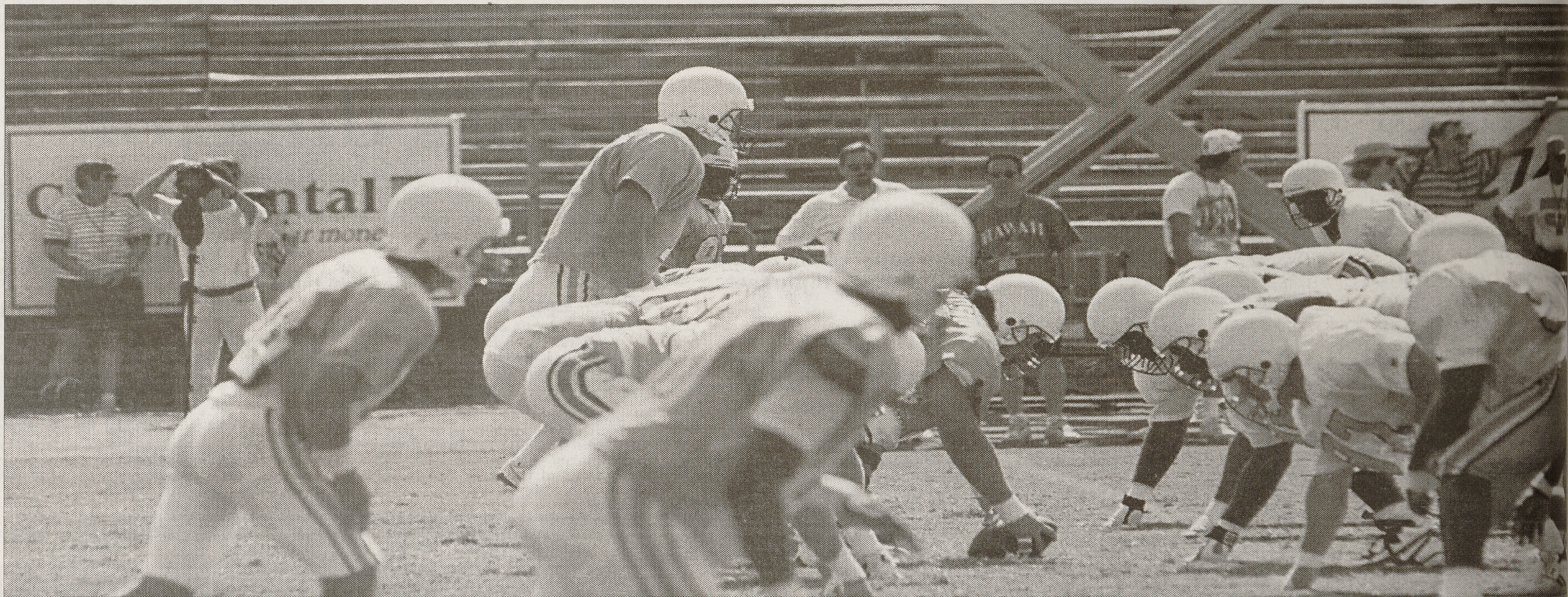




Training Camp '95



Nick Georgandis

Former Texas A&M standout and current Houston Oilers quarterback **Bucky Richardson** looks over the defense in a drill at training camp on Saturday in San Antonio. The Oilers are coming off a 2-14 season, their worst record since 1983. Richardson is locked in a battle with William Furrer for the backup quarterback job, with Chris Chandler getting the strating nod.

Oilers out to prove '94 a fluke Third week of camp filled with illness, injuries for Cowboys

Free-agent signings and a talented rookie class have Houston looking to rebound from a 2-14 year.

By Nick Georgandis
THE BATTALION

SAN ANTONIO — Until the remnants of tropical storm Dean passed through the area Monday, the city of San Antonio had seen 100-degree temperatures every day for the past two weeks.

Maybe the only place hotter than in the heart of the city was Trinity University, where the Houston Oilers have been burning with the desire to forget about last season and build a winning team.

Last year, the Oilers suffered through their worst season since 1983, winning just twice while losing 14 times. This came just one year after Houston strung together 11 consecutive wins while winning a club-record 12 games.

The dropoff from 1994 to 1995 was the largest in NFL history.

"This is not a 2-14 team," offensive lineman Brad Hopkins said. "Everybody here is very optimistic for this season."

This year's team is vastly different from the squad that reported to San Antonio a year ago. Gone are former coach Jack Pardee and his run-and-shoot offense. Also gone is quarterback Cody Carlson, who could never stay healthy during the regular season and was waived two months ago.

This year's team is coached by Jeff Fisher, the Oilers' former defensive coordinator who was promoted to the head coaching job when Pardee was fired during last season. Fisher has installed a more traditional offensive set, utilizing two backs and a tight end, instead of the run-and-shoot's single back and four receivers format.

"We have added a lot of talent and changed our offense to where we can compete in this league," Hopkins said.

The additional talent has come largely via the free-agent market. During the off-season, the Oilers' signed former Detroit Lion All-Pro kick returner Mel Gray, who returned four kickoffs for touchdowns

last year.

Gray will return punts and kickoffs and is also expected to be used some at wide receiver. He said he chose to sign with the Oilers over other teams because he sees a bright future for the team.

"I had plenty of offers after my performance last year, but Houston's was generous," Gray said. "We are not that far off from being a good team."

The other big free-agent signing by the Oilers was All-Pro center Mark Stepnoski, formerly of the Dallas Cowboys. Stepnoski will start at center for the Oilers while All-Pro Bruce Matthews, who is expected to sign a four-year, \$10.3 million contract today, will move to guard.

Two draft picks are expected to have immediate impacts on the Oilers' offensive attack. The first is Chris Sanders, a wide receiver from Auburn drafted in the third round. During the off-season, Ernest Givins, the Oilers' all-time leading receiver, signed a free-agent contract with the expansion Jacksonville Jaguars.

As training camp began, the Oilers cut starting wide receiver Webster Slaughter to free up money to sign key players who are still holding out.



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Offensive lineman, Houston Oilers

These circumstances have quickly moved Sanders up the Oilers' depth chart at wide receiver. Haywood Jeffires and Reggie Brown are listed as the Oilers' first-string receivers with Sanders and Gary Wellman on the second string of the depth chart.

The other rookie, who reported to training camp on Monday, is former Texas A&M running back Rodney Thomas. Thomas held out until Friday when he signed a three-year contract worth \$832,500.

Thomas is expected to get substantial playing time as the backup to running back Gary Brown. Thomas is the Aggies' all-



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(L-R) Oiler quarterbacks **William Furrer**, **Bucky Richardson** and **Steve McNair** gather at camp.

time leader in touchdowns scored and is fourth on A&M's career list for yards rushing. Fisher said Thomas would also see action on special teams.

Most of the Oilers' defense is already used to working under Fisher, who came to the team before the 1994 season to replace Buddy Ryan, who left the Oilers to coach the Arizona Cardinals after the 1993 season.

Last year, despite their poor record, the Oilers ranked in the top 10 in the AFC in nearly every defensive category. Michael Barrow, one of the Oilers' returning starting linebackers, said the team is trying to forget last year and that Fisher's influence is already taking effect.

"Last season ... a lot of guys are still trying to figure out what happened last season," Barrow said. "But this is a different team. Coach Fisher has changed a lot of things for us, and we'll be better."

The defensive unit returns most of its starters from last season, except for linebacker Lamar Lathon, who signed with the Carolina Panthers and Bubba McDowell, who left for a bigger contract with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

The Oilers' defensive line was a major area of weakness for the Oilers last season when first-round draft pick Henry Ford did not pan out into the player he was expected to be and starting defensive linemen William Fuller and Sean Jones left via free agency.

In an attempt to remedy the situation, the Oilers used their second-round pick to sign Anthony Cook, a standout defensive lineman from the University of South Carolina. Cook is expected to see a lot of playing time on the line, along with second-year player Jeremy Nunley and former Aggie All-American and All-Pro Ray Childress.

Perhaps the most interesting player at camp for the Oilers is the one who is not expected to play at all this season. The Oilers used the No. 3 pick in this year's draft to take quarterback Steve McNair from Alcorn State. Despite playing in Division II, McNair drew rave reviews from most pro scouts and graced the cover of Sports Illustrated during his final season. McNair finished his career as the NCAA's all-time leader in total yards.

Although McNair saw some action in the Oilers' scrimmage with the Dallas Cowboys

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Running back Sherman Williams continues to impress coaches.

AUSTIN (AP) — Shane Hannah, the Cowboys' second-round draft pick from Michigan State, will be out for eight weeks because of a knee injury suffered in Saturday's exhibition game against Buffalo.

Dallas coach Barry Switzer said Hannah suffered a cartilage injury.

"He will be out about eight weeks, and we will probably operate on it Friday," he said.

The Cowboys tried rookie tight end Eric Bjornson at wide receiver Monday, and Switzer said the fourth-round draft choice from Washington may play at that position Saturday against the Oakland Raiders.

The Cowboys are looking for quality players at the wide receiver position. They have been searching for a suitable replacement since former starter Alvin Harper left the team after the 1994 season

and signed a free-agent contract with the Tampa Buccaneers.

"Eric is a big receiver who can run fast, and we take the option of releasing him against the Buffalo Switzer said.

Several observers said that the Cowboys have found a suitable backup Pro running back Emmitt in rookie Sherman Williams, selected in the round by Dallas from the University of Alabama, has

tries for 40 yards in the 21-15 win over the Buffalo Saturday at Stadium.

Last year, the Cowboys were led by the San Francisco 49ers 38-28 in the Championship game.

Smith admitted to being out physically from a season of wear and tear.

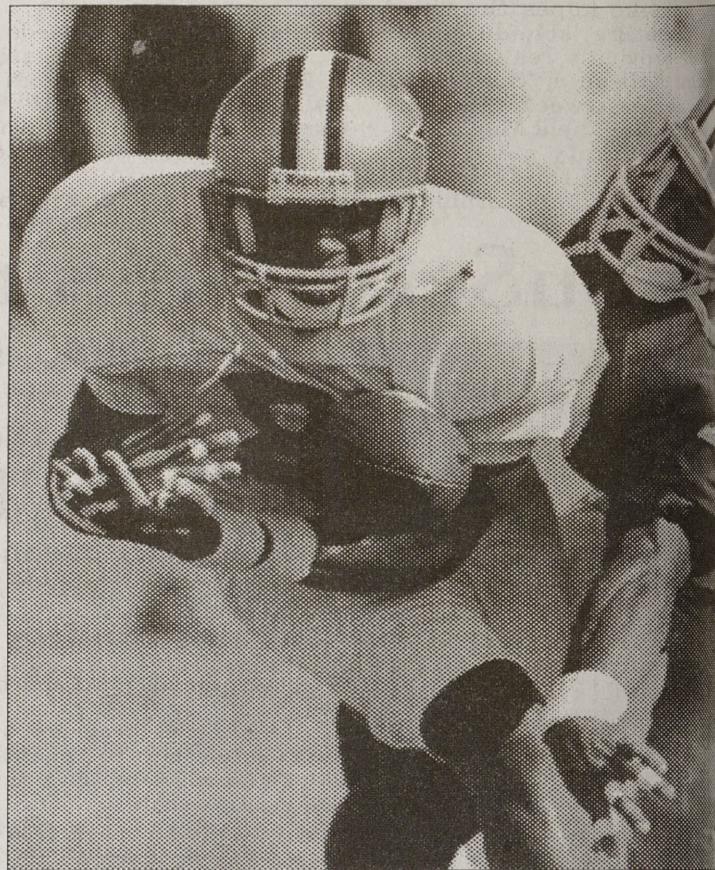
Although the Cowboys has been hard on the Cowboys, it has bothered Aikman another way.

The All-Pro quarterback through the Monday workout at St. Edward's University despite a bad cold.



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Rookie wide receiver **Chris Sanders** from Auburn stretches during special teams' practice at Houston Oilers training camp Saturday. Sanders is listed as second-string on the Oilers' depth chart.



Cowboys wide receiver **Corey Fleming**, left, snatches the ball from safety **Charles Williams** during a team workout in Austin.