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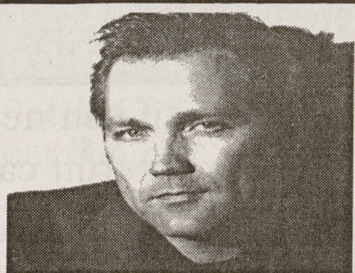
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Late-arriving UH made up for lost time

By Tom Day
THE BATTALION

It was the day running back Alois Blackwell had envisioned when the University of Houston football program had recruited him nearly four years earlier.

After years of waiting, the moment Houston Head Coach Bill Yeoman, Cougar fans and alumni and the entire University had anticipated for so long had finally arrived.

In just its first year as a member of the Southwest Conference, the Houston football program had fulfilled its fantasies and crushed all doubts by winning the league title and a trip to the 1977 Cotton Bowl.

"It was like a dream where everything goes according to plan and the ending was exactly how you dreamt it to be," Blackwell said. "I can remember walking out onto the field from the dressing room at the Cotton Bowl against Maryland. They were 11-0 and I could just remember thinking the dream had been perfect so far. Could we just finish it up? The game went perfectly."

Picture perfect.
Behind Blackwell's 149 rushing yards, the Cougars shocked the fifth-ranked Maryland Terrapins that day, 30-21. Carving up a Maryland defense ranked second

in the nation in rushing defense, Blackwell was named the game's Most Valuable Offensive Player.

"I was recruited in 1973, and my class was told we would be a part of SWC history and would be able to compete for the SWC championship for the first time in the University of Houston's history," Blackwell said. "I loved that aspect of being able to come into the conference and have the chance to start a tradition that I thought would continue for the rest of the duration."

Little did Blackwell and the faithful followers of the Southwest Conference know then that the prestigious league only had 20 years of life left in it.

Yeoman, who coached Houston for 25 years, 11 of those as a member of the SWC, said the league's disbanding will not be felt for several years.

"You'll never know if it's a change for the better or the worse until it's been done for four or five years," Yeoman said. "The tone of the state has been geared very closely to the Southwest Conference, and it's kind of an unfortunate situation."

Yeoman built a 160-108-8 record from 1962 to 1986 and won four SWC titles in 11 years.

Now working in the Athletic Marketing Development Department at UH, Yeoman is clearly against the conference disbanding — with the Cougars joining the newly-formed Conference USA.

"As far as SWC teams going to the Big 12, the WAC and Conference USA, I think they are going to find out it wasn't that bad to hop on a bus and go play a real good team," Yeoman said. "After you make the trip to Ames, Iowa and Stillwater, (Okla.), you realize there's just not much going on there."

For the University of Houston, the end of the SWC is hard to fathom. After all, it was only two decades ago that UH was scrambling just to be a part of the conference.

"(Getting into the conference) was extremely important to our situation," Yeoman said.

"We had gotten to the point as a football program where we could play pretty well, and many of the schools that we had been playing over the years up until then wouldn't answer the phone anymore. We had gotten a little too good."

Although UH has been an SWC member for only 20 years, the Cougars have left a huge mark on the history of the league.

Houston's conference title and No. 4 national ranking in its first SWC season in 1976 won much respect from its conference brethren.

But Yeoman said it was the Cougars' success in the following years that convinced the league and its followers that UH was for real.

"The initial year had a serious impact and was an enjoyable experience to go through," Yeoman said. "In essence, we had been in competition with the schools here in the state, but we were never allowed to get on the field with them."

The Cougars' 1978 SWC championship season was marred in the Cotton Bowl when Notre Dame, led by quarterback Joe Montana, beat Houston 35-34. Montana broke the hearts of the Cougar faithful by guiding the Irish to 23 points in the game's final 7:37.

The next year, Houston did what it could to wipe out that painful memory by defeating seventh-ranked Nebraska 17-14 in a return trip to the Cotton Bowl.

Yeoman said that Houston's success in 1984 was one of his most rewarding seasons. The Cougars used a 6-2 conference mark to qualify for the Cotton Bowl.



Battalion File Photo

University of Houston quarterback **David Klingler** yells an audible during a game against Texas A&M in 1991.

University of Houston

Entered league: 1976
All-Time SWC record: 78-70-5
Bowl Record: 3-4
Championships: 1976, 78, 79, 84
All-Time Coach: Bill Yeoman: 1962-86,
Overall 160-108-2, SWC:51-35-2

Top 5 Players:

1. Andre Ware, Quarterback
2. David Klingler, Quarterback
3. Manny Hazard, Wide Receiver
4. Wilson Whitley, Wide Receiver
5. Chuck Weatherspoon, Running Back

Top 5 Games:

1. Nov. 20, 1976: UH 27, Tech 19: UH wins first SWC title
2. Nov. 1, 1978: UH 10, UT 7: Unseating the SWC Champs
3. Nov. 7, 1987: UH 60, UT 40: The beginning of the run'n'shoot
4. Oct. 21, 1989: UH 95, SMU 21: Oh yeah
5. Nov. 17, 1990: UH 84, E.Washington 21: D. Klingler, NCAA record 11 TD passes



"I think our staff did its best job in 1984," Yeoman said. "We certainly had some players, but we had nothing to compare to SMU and Texas at the time."

Of all the Houston teams he coached, Yeoman said probably the most talented group was the one he left behind when he retired from coaching following the 1986 season.

Under new coach Jack Pardee and his then-innovative Run-n-Shoot offense, such name players as Andre Ware, Chuck Weatherspoon and David Klingler emerged to lead Houston to three Top 20 finishes from 1988 to 1990.

"Maybe the best players we had were the ones we left Pardee and his group," Yeoman said. "We left them nine NFL football players, and I was disappointed they couldn't win the conference with that bunch."

Yeoman, who recruited Ware in 1986, said the quarterback's Heisman Trophy winning season of 1989 was a key moment in the school's evolution as a national power.

"Any time you have who people consider the best football player in the United States, the conference, the school, the program, the town and everything else benefits," Yeoman said. "To have a kid as classy as he is, the whole sport benefits."

Both Yeoman and Blackwell believe Texas will miss the rivalries and traditions that take place between SWC schools.

"I enjoyed the conference rivalry and the conference relationship between schools very much," Yeoman said.

For Blackwell, the SWC was something he aspired to a part of from his childhood.

"I always wanted to play in the SWC," Blackwell said.

"It's like having a home and a family your whole life and coming back to find no home and your family has scattered. That's symbolic of what's happening to the SWC."

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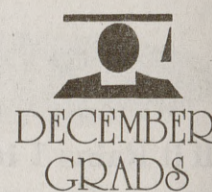


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