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1996 results bittersweet for Aggies

A&M left out of Regionals for the second time in three years

By Colby Gaines
THE BATTALION

Just when it looked like the Aggie Baseball Team was primed for a long run through the post-season, the season ended just as quickly as it began.

Having won four consecutive games, including a season-ending sweep over Baylor, the Aggies were prepared to make some noise in the final South-west Conference Tournament.

The team recorded the third-best batting average in school history (.337), the second highest total of stolen bases with 122 and a .962 fielding percentage.

But after their uplifting finish, the Aggies met disappointment in Lubbock, dropping two of three tournament games. Following an opening-game 9-7 loss to eventual tournament champion Rice, A&M fought off elimination, rebounding with a 12-10 victory over the University of Houston.

However, an anti-climactic 8-1 loss to Baylor ended the Aggies' season. Despite a respectable 37-21 record and third-place finish in conference play, A&M failed to garner an at-large berth into an NCAA Regional for the second time in three years.

A&M Head Coach Mark Johnson said despite his team's solid finish behind Texas and Texas Tech in the conference race, he respected the Regional Selection Committee's exclusion of A&M.

"I think a lot of folks were surprised when the dust cleared at the end, and we finished third in the SWC behind two highly-ranked teams," Johnson said.

"I'm happy that we (had) three quality teams representing our conference (in Regionals)."



"I think a lot of folks were surprised when the dust cleared at the end, and we finished third in the SWC behind two highly-ranked teams."

—MARK JOHNSON
A&M Head Baseball Coach

The Aggies shot out of the blocks in February and early March, romping to victory in 19 of their first 24 games.

From that point, the team's play in conference games can best be described as a roller coaster ride.

After going 2-2 at the SWC



Evan Zimmerman, THE BATTALION

A&M third baseman J.J. Matzke stretches out for the catch, during a game against TCU on April 13, Olsen Field.

First Pitch Tournament in Houston, the Aggies seemed ready to get over the hump when they took three of four games from Houston at Olsen Field.

However, a demoralizing four-game sweep at the hands of Texas Tech the following weekend seemed to take the wind out of the Aggie's sails.

"The worst development of the season was getting swept by Tech," senior pitcher Dean Mitchell said. "That hurt us mentally and we couldn't completely get our confidence back."

A&M did rebound, however, and was able to pick up some momentum, winning seven consecu-

tive contests and eight of ten before suffering a sweep at Rice.

After salvaging a series split with Texas on April 26-28, the Aggies displayed sparks of hope with a regular-season ending sweep of Baylor two weeks later.

"Although we finished the season on a good note by sweeping Baylor, we weren't able to maintain the consistency you need to be a championship ball club," Johnson said.

After enduring some rocky times, Mitchell felt content with A&M's third-place conference finish.

"It was definitely satisfying considering how many people had written us off after the first half of the season," Mitchell said.

Many of A&M's problems on the diamond stemmed from inconsistent pitching, a problem Johnson said will be corrected next season.

He believes the return pitchers Ryan Rupe and Job Codrington after sitting out 1996 with injuries will provide a solid foundation.

The Aggies will also play their hopes next season on Jason Tyner.

Voted the SWC Freshman of the Year by the league sports information directors, Tyner led the team with a .407 batting average and set a school record with 41 stolen bases.

Shane King, winner of the Olsen Outstanding Pitcher Award, had a 7-4 record while throwing for five complete games.

Jason Stephens, named the All-SWC team as a designated hitter, will return for his senior year.

Though nostalgic about the end of the Southwest Conference, Johnson anticipates A&M rebound next year in its inaugural season of the Big Conference.

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