

A New On

Stewart's arrival, experienced offensive line leads to more diversified offensive attack

By PHILIP LEONE
THE BATTALION

Corey Pullig and his A&M record 33 career wins as A&M's starting quarterback are gone.

Leeland McElroy took his 'lectricity to Phoenix. A rebuilding year for the Aggie offense? Not exactly.

In fact, word around the Aggie's camp is that the offense will actually be better this season — or at least more diversified.

Who's going to fill Pullig's shoes? Enter Brannndon Stewart. Ever since the junior transferred to Aggieland from the University of Tennessee, fans have been talking about his potential.

Depending on who you listen to, the Stephenville native is Bucky Richardson with an arm or Kevin Murray with wheels. Either way, he's supposed to be the savior for an Aggie attack that's been less than exhilarating the past few seasons.

Although Stewart was impressive in spring drills, two-a-days and in his first start against BYU Aug. 24, Head Coach R.C. Slocum is cautious about Brannndon-Mania.

"He's gotten better every week he's been here," Slocum said. "He's going to develop into a fine quarterback. He's got a strong arm and good mobility. But there's no way he could be as good as everyone has made him out to be. Not yet."

In order to utilize Stewart's talents, the Aggies are looking for a more diversified offense by switching from the ground-oriented I-formation to a more pro-style attack featuring split-backs.

Look for something very similar to how the Aggies handled the University of Michigan in the Alamo Bowl last December when McElroy was sidelined with a sprained ankle.

"We've added a lot, but the offense will basically be like what we did against Michigan," Offensive Coordinator Steve Ensminger said. "That'll force people to play us more honest because they won't be able to key so much on the run."

To take care of the backfield chores, A&M will rotate a trio of talented sophomore tailbacks — Eric Bernard, D'Andre "Tiki" Hardeman, and Sirr Parker. Speedy red-shirt freshman Michael Jennings will also be added into the mix.

"I'm very pleased with the progress all the backs have made and where they're all at right now," Ensminger said. "Having two guys on the field at the same time that can be either runners or blockers or receivers is a dangerous thing for a defense to have to deal with."

Another dangerous weapon in the Aggie arsenal will be the improved receiving corps that features big-play man Albert Connell at flanker. Last season the transfer from Trinity Community College came from virtually nowhere and developed into the school's first All-Southwest Conference receiver in 10 years. Sophomores Aaron Oliver and Donte Hawkins will be threats at split-end.

Sophomore tight end Derrick Spiller (6'3", 236) provides a sizable target for Stewart and will be a major part of the air attack.

Though Stewart says he does not have a "go-to guy" yet, he feels confident throwing to all his receivers going into the season.

"I couldn't say there's really one guy that I favor over the others, but I'm comfortable with all of them and their ability," Stewart said. "With the type of season he had last year, we're obviously going to try to get the ball to Albert. I also look forward to seeing what our backs can do catching balls out of the backfield."

Providing the ground cover this season will be a salty offensive line led by three-time All-SWC selection Calvin Collins. Collins will move over from his guard position to play center after returning starter Koby Hackradt injured a knee during two-a-days.

Stewart believes that Collins should have no problem filling in for Hackradt.

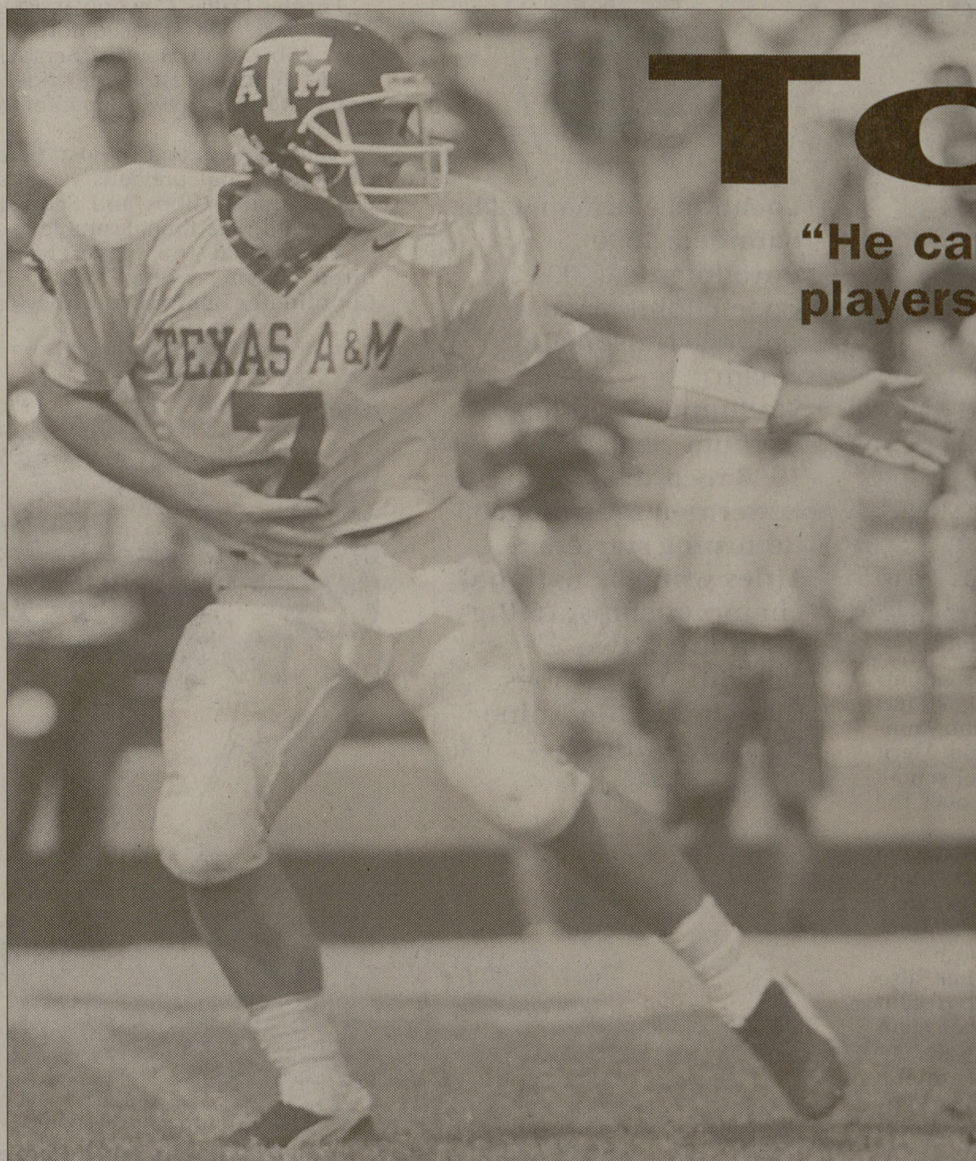
"You hate to lose a quality guy like Koby," Stewart said. "But Calvin played some center in high school, and I've taken some snaps from him before in the spring. Things will work out for us there."

Junior Steve McKinney and junior tackle Chris Ruhman return to anchor the left side of the line, while newcomers Semisi Heimuli and Cameron Spikes take care of the right side. Heimuli is a 300-pound red-shirt freshman, and Spikes (6'5", 303), a sophomore from Bryan, set a school record in the off-season with a 600-pound lift in the squat.

Junior place-kicker Kyle Bryant returns to handle the kicking duties. After a roller coaster season a year ago, the Aggies hope for more consistency akin to Bryant's five field goal, offensive MVP performance in the Alamo Bowl.

Offensive Roster

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| FL Albert Connell, Sr. | RT Cameron Spikes, So. |
| TE Derrick Spiller, So. | SE Aaron Oliver, So. |
| LT Chris Ruhman, Jr. | QB Brannndon Stewart, Jr. |
| LG Steve McKinney, Jr. | RB Eric Bernard, So. |
| C Calvin Collins, Sr. | RB Sirr Parker, So. |
| RG Semisi Heimuli, Fr. | K Kyle Bryant, Jr. |
| #HACKRADT IS INJURED | Boldface — Returning Starter |



Stew Milne, THE BATTALION

Junior quarterback Brannndon Stewart lost a year of eligibility when he transferred from the University of Tennessee in 1994 but is ready to make his impact on A&M.

Top Gun

"He came in and I was really impressed how he handled the situation. I think he's now in position to be the savior of the offense."

By KRISTINA BUFFIN
THE BATTALION

Patience is a virtue, and as junior A&M quarterback Brannndon Stewart attests, he has had to learn to be patient the hard way.

Stewart, a highly touted high school prospect from Stephenville, Texas, arrived there in 1994. But when fellow freshman Peyton Manning got the job, Stewart began to analyze his future with the team and weigh his options.

"I knew the consequences of having to sit out a year," Stewart said. "At Tennessee, I was not comfortable with the situation and I was not enjoying my stay."

Stewart said when he was looking at colleges during his senior year of high school, his dream was to go to either Tennessee or A&M. Later, when he was asked to transfer, he said A&M was an automatic choice.

Because of his decision to leave Tennessee during the middle of a scholarship year, Stewart had to sit out the 1995 season due to NCAA transfer rules and the fact that he had to sit out the 1995 season. But he said he used the time to learn the offense and to improve himself physically.

"I went through spring drills and in the fall ran the scout team, worked on the defense and went to the meetings to learn the offense," Stewart said. "I've gotten much more of the offensive feel and I am now comfortable, but just need the experience. I am confident with what few plays I have under my belt."

Offensive Coordinator Steve Ensminger said Stewart has done well, but needs to get more game time.

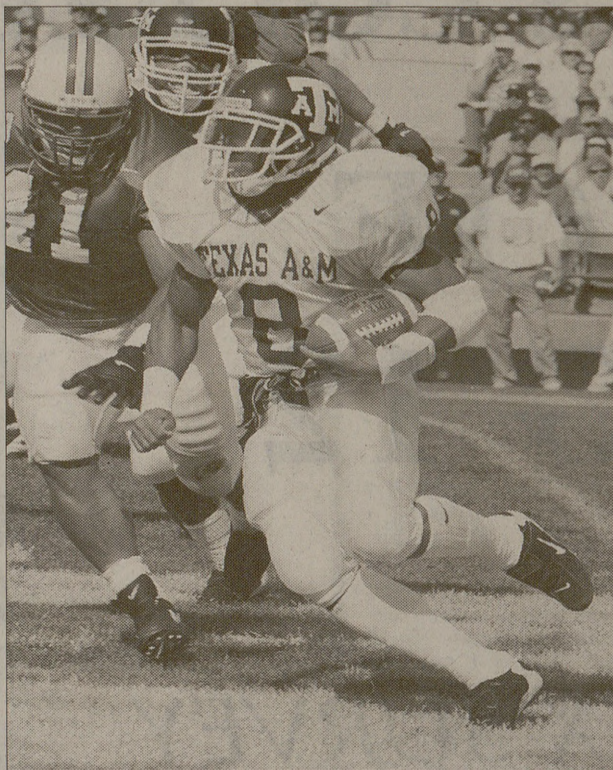
"He is learning and still making mistakes," Ensminger said. "Hopefully, he'll be successful in the future. He has worked hard all summer and definitely has a better understanding of the offense."

Whereas most quarterbacks have the chance to play at least three years in college, maybe four, Stewart said he does not really think about his lost year of eligibility. Instead he is excited to have the opportunity to play Division I football.

Since the news of his signing last year, both the fans and the media have been forward to Stewart coming on board. Aggie fans often chanted Stewart's name when former quarterback Corey Pullig was playing poorly.

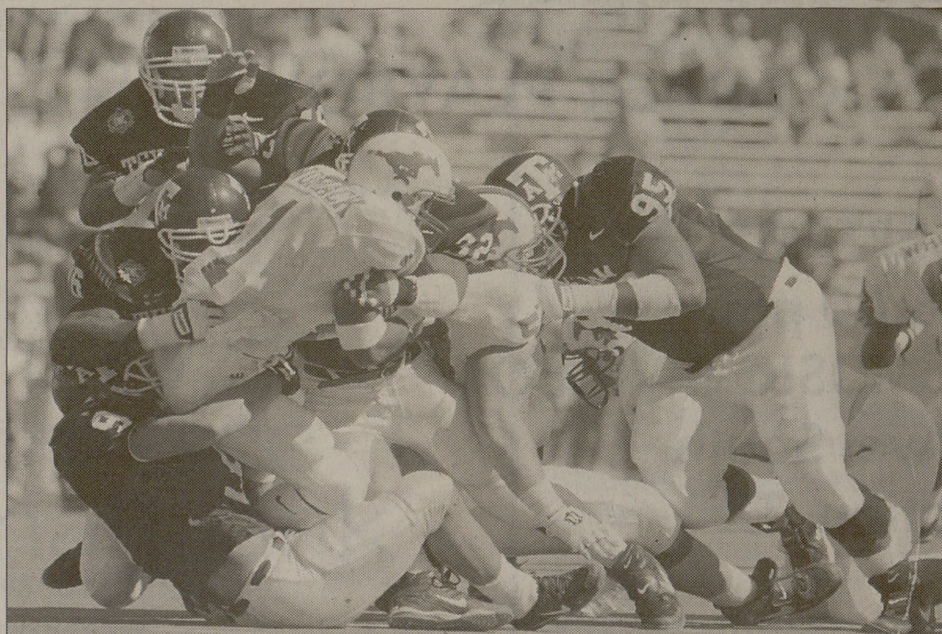
A&M Head Coach R.C. Slocum said Stewart's arrival was not supposed to be a surprise. "He is learning and still making mistakes," Ensminger said. "Hopefully, he'll be successful in the future. He has worked hard all summer and definitely has a better understanding of the offense."

"One of my big concerns is the expectation level of people," Slocum said. "I'm still a young guy who just played sparingly. Like at Tennessee, he had only one start."



Stew Milne, THE BATTALION

Sophomore running back Sirr Parker slips past two BYU defenders in the Pigskin Classic.



Stew Milne, THE BATTALION

Members of 1995's Wrecking Crew steamroll over SMU junior running back Donte Womack in the Aggies' 20-17 win at Kyle Field.

Leader of the Pack

Cool, confident and cocky Mitchell leads the Aggie defense in his senior season and possibly records a career-high 10 sacks.

By PHILIP LEONE
THE BATTALION

It happens every season here at Aggieland. Last year it was Reggie Brown. The year before it was Antonio Armstrong. In seasons past, guys like Marcus Buckley, Coryatt and Aaron Wallace took their turns in the spotlight heading to the NFL.

So what about this season? Keith Mitchell is going to be the standard-bearer for the "Wrecking Crew" defense — the guy who will step up and carries on the hard-hitting, lightning-fast, quarterback-terrorizing A&M linebacker tradition?

If Keith Mitchell has his way, he'll be the marquee Aggie linebacker in '96. "I want to be that guy," Mitchell said. "That's why I came to A&M. That's what I've been working toward. I've dreamed of being 'the man' here since I was in high school and watched Aaron Wallace and those guys on TV."

But it is safe to add in Mitchell's name to the All-American likes of Wallace & Co. "I think he's very similar to those other guys," Head Coach R.C. Slocum said. "He's the only senior on the team who's got the speed and the quickness to get off the ball. He attacks the quarterback."

"He really came on for us at the end of last season, but it's best to wait and see how things develop this season before we mention the greats."

Mitchell took big strides toward his goal of being the Wrecking Crew's heaviest-hitter last season — a surprise to many who viewed him as inconsistent in his first two years in Aggieland.

In his first season as a starter, the Garland Lakeview product led the Southwest Conference with 13 quarterback sacks, finishing second in the nation behind Brady Smith of Colorado State.

The first-team All-SWC performer also registered 55 tackles and had 11 quarterback pressures and was named the defensive MVP of the Alamo Bowl after wrecking havoc on Michigan's offense for the better part of four quarters.

"I had some growing up to do before last season," Mitchell said. "I think some people felt I wasn't living up to my potential. I wanted to put all that to rest."

Mitchell's position coach, Shawn Slocum, said that is exactly what the rush linebacker did.

"He matured a whole lot last season and developed better habits and a better focus on what we wanted him to do," Slocum said. "And he really started getting after the quarterback. You have to be excited about that."

So relentless was Mitchell in his pursuit of opposing quarterbacks last season that he soon acquired the unofficial nickname "Captain Sack" among media types; unfortunately, the name came with a heavy price.

"There was a big spread in the local newspaper near the end of last season with 'Captain Sack' in the headline," Mitchell said. "Man, I nearly got laughed right out of the locker room."

"I've dreamed of being 'the man' here since I was in high school and watched Aaron Wallace and all those guys on TV."
Keith Mitchell
Senior linebacker

UP CLOSE

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