

Challenge

pressed how he's quietly gone about his business, gaining respect from the on to (n) the starting quarterback." — R.C. Slocum, A&M Head Coach

series a game and that was two years ago. There's a young guy who really hasn't played much football so he's not going to put there and look like some polished veteran guy. He's going to make the mistakes other young quarterbacks make."

Stewart succeeds Pullig, who was A&M's winningest quarterback. Stewart said he will not try to fill Pullig's shoes but create his own.

"I'm not really trying to live up to that," Stewart said. "He has big shoes to fill but I did a good job, but I'm not trying to do better than him. I just want to win."

Stewart said. "At the same time, I know the pressure of living up to Pullig along with the pressure to live up to his senior year reputation."

Stewart has a lot of pressure on him seeing that he is filling the shoes of the winningest quarterback in A&M history," Parker said. "I think he'll put aside the pressure and the dreams of others and perform the best that he can."

Slocum said Stewart and Pullig are two completely different players in terms of size and talent and to compare them would be unfair.

"Physically, he's got more mobility than Corey did and throws quicker and has a stronger arm," Slocum said. "But it still remains to be seen whether he can be successful on the field."

Stewart got the chance to show the country his skills and ability against BYU in the Bigskin Classic. He put up impressive first outing numbers, completing 20-of-37 passes for 232 yards and two touchdown passes with no interceptions, despite the 41-37 defeat.

"Hopefully, Brannndon did a good job for his first college start and his first game is a better understanding of A&M," Slocum said.

With Stewart running the offense, Ensminger said A&M will have more of an opportunity to diversify the attack.

"He completes the passes, I'll give it to him," Ensminger said. "I feel better about our receivers, (running) backs and hope to diversify the offense more."

Stewart said he will be given the opportunity to use his most lethal weapon — his arm.

The offense will be more balanced and I will have the opportunity to throw more," he said. "We have some really good running backs and we will design plays to our strengths."

Slocum has been impressed with Stewart's efforts in practice.

"Brannndon's been a solid player since he's been here," Slocum said. "It is just a

maturity that comes from playing as much football as he has. He's a strong player and playing as much football as he's played, he'll be one of the premier players playing inside or outside."

Last season, three freshman running backs had to wait in line behind All-American Leeland McElroy, but Stewart said he is glad that players such as Parker and D'Andre Hardeman got a chance to play last year and gain experience.

"Being here last spring helped," Stewart said. "A chemistry has developed between all of us and has carried over to two-a-days. They depend on me and believe I can get the job done."

Stewart said that although he is confident he will hold the starting position, the three freshman quarterbacks waiting in the wings have been giving him a run for his money.

"I don't have any trouble staying focused," Stewart said. "We have three freshman quarterbacks who are good competition. It is nice to have that competition because it keeps you honest."

Because Stewart has not had a large amount of game experience, Slocum said it is hard to say how Stewart will do in the future, but said he is impressed with what he has seen so far.

"You have to wait and see as a coach because here is a guy who has only started one college game, so I don't want to write the checks, I want to see him do it on the field then I'll brag on him when he does it," Slocum said. "I've been pleased with him and he has come in and done everything you've expected him to do."

"He came in and I was really impressed about how he's quietly gone about his business, gaining respect from the players. I think he's now in position to (remain) the starting quarterback."

UP CLOSE

Name: Brannndon Stewart
Year: Junior
Position: Quarterback
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 214
Born: Sept. 23, 1975
Major: Marketing
Hometown: Stephenville
Honors: Named preseason Big 12 Newcomer of the Year, rated nation's ninth-best signal caller

Under the Pack

and cocky Mitchell is taking his possession record in stride

teammates weren't going to let that go unnoticed."

Mitchell's stellar junior campaign did not go unnoticed by the national media either. He is a preseason All-American candidate, a Sporting News Award candidate and The Sporting News has him rated as the country's second best outside linebacker behind Nebraska's Buckelley Farley.

How does Mitchell feel about receiving second-billing to Farley? "It's nice to get the recognition, but I know what I can do and I'm confident that the positioning will be reversed at the end of the season," he said. "I'll just leave it at that."

Mitchell will not exactly have to be a one-man band. Top to bottom, Mitchell believes he's a part of one of the best linebacker units in the country — and he's well justified in his thinking.

Nguyen, the Aggie's leading tackler last season, and Larry Walker with his 4.39-second 40-yard dash time, will take care of business inside for the Aggies. Warrick Holdman, who saw action as a freshman before being slowed by an ankle injury, will fill in for Brown's old spot opposite Mitchell on the outside.

Irby, who Mitchell says "could start for almost any team," will serve as Mitchell's backup and get playing time during losing games.

"I got a motor that just won't stop — he's crazy," Mitchell said. "Larry Walker has to be the fastest linebacker in the country, Warrick is going to be one of the best before he leaves here. Not hurting at linebacker."

Slocum said. "The only senior in the bunch, Mitchell will be counted on to lead the leadership. No problem."

"I've got to lead by example, that's the best way to take care of the team," Mitchell said. "I try to be laid back, and I just want this team to have some fun. Last season I think we got tight because of the pressure. That won't happen to us this year."

Will Mitchell take care of the problem? A little vocal leadership when the time is right.

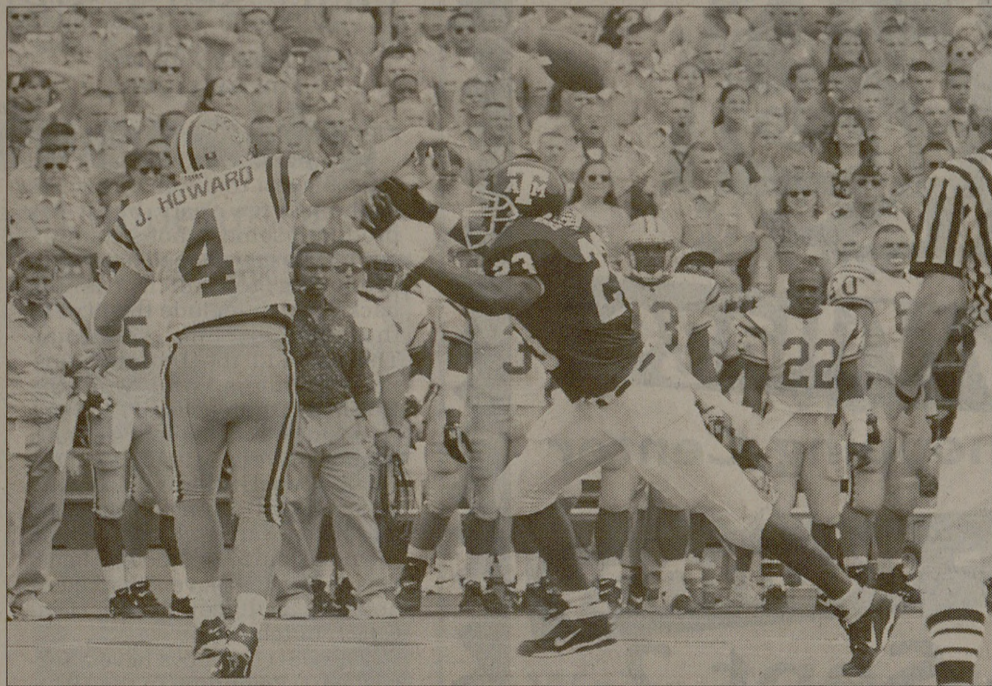
"I'll talk a lot," Mitchell said. "We've got some great leaders on this defense like Brandon (Mitchell) and Eddie Jasper, but I hear from the media that those guys are kinda shy. Somebody's gotta do the talking."

The only thing in question with Mitchell is the A&M career quarterback sack record. As it stands, Mitchell has 19.5 sacks. His idol, Aaron Wallace, is number one on the list with 42 career sacks.

Mitchell isn't worried. "It's within reach."

Does he know that he'll have to collect 22.5 sacks just to tie Wallace? "Hey, I just said it was within reach."

Quarterbacks beware.



Senior outside linebacker Keith Mitchell puts pressure on LSU senior quarterback Jamie Howard last September at Kyle Field.



Senior wide receiver Albert Connell returns to anchor the Aggie receiving corps.

UP CLOSE

Name: Keith Mitchell
Year: Senior
Position: Outside linebacker
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 235
Born: July 24, 1974
Major: Agribusiness
Hometown: Garland
Honors: Defensive MVP in 1995, All-American Bowl, 1995 First-team All-American, 1995 All-American & Sporting News Award candidate

Inexperienced secondary is the lone question mark in '96 Wrecking Crew

By TOM DAY
THE BATTALION

"We are thoroughly embarrassed right now."

There was no other way A&M Defensive Coordinator Phil Bennett could describe the recent mood surrounding the Aggie defense.

The numbers don't lie: 575 total yards allowed, six touchdowns, 41 points — one game.

Although the shellacking the Wrecking Crew suffered at the hands of Brigham Young University Aug. 24 has dampened the team's spirits, optimism is still high that the defensive unit will bounce back.

"We are a good defense and we'll prove it," Bennett said. "We played poorly and made mistakes that basically kept ourselves from getting a win."

"But, we've had some really good workouts (since then) and I know we're going to get back to the point where we want to be."

Although some people might question the logic behind scheduling the pass-oriented BYU Cougars so early in the season against an inexperienced A&M secondary, Bennett said there are no excuses for the team's poor showing.

"Going in and playing BYU with an established quarterback in the opening game of the year at Provo was not your ideal breaking ground for a young secondary," he said. "But anything we say other than that would be excuses, and I'm not into excuses."

Senior cornerback Donovan Greer blamed A&M's breakdowns in coverage more on inexperience and nerves rather than on a lack of talent.

"Our talent level is there and no one should question that," Greer said. "I think some of the guys were nervous and just had some wrong reactions."

"We've got to go back to the beginning and go over our fundamentals and technique."

"We're young and it's a learning process. Now the young guys have a big game under their belt."

Greer returns in 1996 to anchor the youthful Aggie secondary. With the summer release of former starting safety Typail McMullen for violating team rules, Greer has been thrust into the spotlight.

Hobbled last season with an ailing knee he later had surgery on, Greer still managed to post 36 tackles while breaking up eight passes.

Replacing McMullen at strong safety is former walk-on Rich Coady. The sophomore provided one of the few bright spots for A&M against BYU with his third quarter interception and 56-yard return.

A&M track standout Toya Jones returns to fill out the starting free safety position while senior Andre Williams and sophomore Shun Horn will split time at the other cornerback slot.

"Rich Coady is a smart guy and I think he can be another Dennis Allen, being at the right place at the right time," Greer said. "Toya Jones is fast, athletic and a hard hitter and I think he can pick up where Typail McMullen left off. Andre and Shun Horn are great players and they'll be just fine."

Senior outside linebacker Keith Mitchell said neither he, nor the rest of the team has lost faith in the secondary despite its poor showing against BYU. He also said the secondary wasn't entirely at fault in Provo.

"(The front seven) didn't put enough pressure on them," Mitchell said. "It was a mixture of that and a little bit of other things."

Mitchell returns as the featured player on an A&M linebacker corps that once again ranks as one of the nation's best. Last season, Mitchell made 55 tackles, 11 quarterback pressures and ranked second in the nation with 13 sacks.

Senior Larry Walker II (57 tackles in 1995), and sophomores Dat Nguyen (94 tackles) and Warrick Holdman (44 tackles) round out the unit.

"We have a bunch of good athletes and each one has a definite role that he plays that we just build on top of each other," Mitchell said. "Larry Walker is a fast guy who covers ground really well. Dat is a sideline to sideline player and a hard hitter."

"Warrick is a good athlete who can also run well and I'm more of a pass-rush type of player. We've got a little bit of everything and we really work well together."

The Aggie front line has also gained national attention. All-American defensive end Brandon Mitchell returns for his senior year to lead the rush alongside seniors Eddie Jasper and Pat Williams. The trio combined for 143 tackles and 11 sacks in 1995.

In wake of the worst defensive performance in A&M history, Keith Mitchell said the team must give its younger players a crash course in Wrecking Crew ethics.

"We've got new guys and we're going to have to let them know what it's all about to play on the Wrecking Crew," he said. "It is about pride and maybe those guys haven't learned yet."

"It's not something you can coach. It's an attitude — a mentality, and maybe some of our guys have to get that."

Defensive Roster

LE	Brandon Mitchell, Sr.	OLB	Keith Mitchell, Sr.
NG	Edward Jasper, Sr.	CB	Andre Williams, Sr.
RE	Pat Williams, Sr.	FS	Toya Jones, So.
OLB	Warrick Holdman, So.	SS	Rich Coady, So.
ILB	Larry Walker II, Sr.	CB	Donovan Greer, Sr.
ILB	Dat Nguyen, So.	P	Shane Lechler, Fr.

Boldface — Returning Starter