

The Road to Omaha



Dave House, THE BATTALION

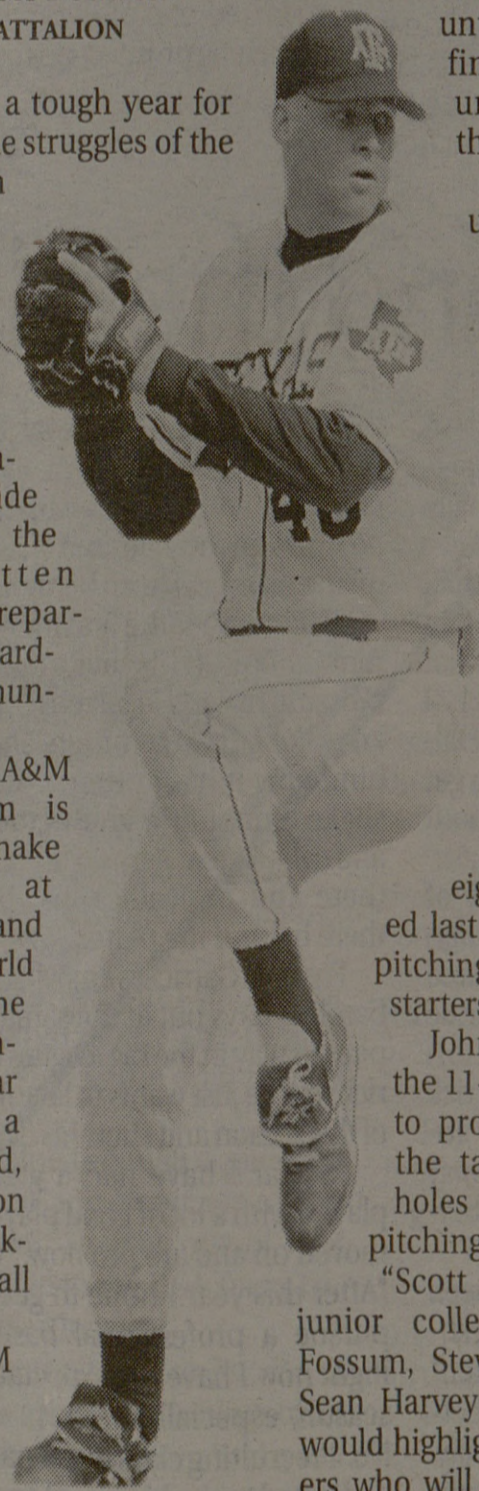
High rankings challenge Ags

By JEREMY FURTICK
THE BATTALION

It has been a tough year for Texas A&M. The struggles of the football team were just the kick-off to what has been a dismal year for A&M athletics. But stationed outside Olsen Field is the long-forgotten bandwagon preparing to be bombarded by victory-hungry Aggies.

The Texas A&M Baseball Team is poised to make another run at Omaha, Neb., and the College World Series. The Aggies, who finished last year unranked with a 37-21 record, open this season with a No. 8 ranking by Baseball America.

Texas A&M Head Baseball Coach



Mark Johnson said it is unusual for a team to finish a season unranked and start the next in the top 10.

"Preseason rankings usually come from your team's performance from the previous year," Johnson said. "Our ranking says something about what we've done in the off-season to help our team."

What the Aggies have done is bring Collegiate Baseball's No. 1 recruiting class to College Station.

They also return eight players who started last season and reload a pitching staff with two starters coming off injuries.

Johnson said he expects the 11-man recruiting class to provide the team with the talent needed to fill holes and strengthen the pitching staff.

"Scott Sandusky, our only junior college transfer, Casey Fossum, Steve Scarborough and Sean Harvey are the new guys I would highlight right now as players who will probably see significant playing time," Johnson said.

Sandusky will split time behind the plate with junior Matt Garrick, while Harvey is penciled in as third baseman. Scarborough's contribution will revolve around his ability to both pitch and play infield, while Fossum should step in as the No. 2 or No. 3 starting pitcher.

"We lost some key people last year," Johnson said. "But we've picked up some talented people to take their spots."

Returning to the field for the Aggies are sophomore outfielder Jason Tyner, senior short stop Rich Petru, senior outfielder Johnny Hunter, junior second baseman Brian Benefield, sophomore infielder Steve Leonard and senior infielder Jason Stephens.

Tyner said the Aggie offense should be strong again this year.

"We can hit one through nine in our lineup," Tyner said. "With so many guys returning to this team, we should just pick up where we left off offensively last year."

The Aggies hit .337 last year as a team, and Johnson said they are capable of putting up similar numbers again this year.

"I would be surprised if we didn't hit real well this season," Johnson said. "With the majority of our guys gaining a year of maturity, you would expect some of them to repeat or even improve on last year."

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Pitching is the name of the game in the Big 12

By MATT MITCHELL
THE BATTALION

To use a phrase that has become almost cliché in regard to Texas A&M athletics, the Texas A&M Baseball Team faces new challenges and, for the most part, new competition in its inaugural season as a member of the Big 12 Conference.

The Aggies' move to a larger conference offers exciting possibilities with the scheduling of fewer non-conference opponents to make room for the Big 12's talented core of teams. Some coaches, including A&M Head Coach Mark Johnson, are not sure what to expect, aside from good competition.

For the Aggies, picked by many to win the Big 12, the question is who that competition will consist of.

"Just history will tell you that Oklahoma State is going to be in the hunt," Johnson said. "Missouri had a great season last year and I think they have all nine starters back. I think Baylor's got a good team back."

"Texas Tech is a team that's interesting in that they have their pitchers back, but they have all new position players, so if they can come in and play, then they're going to be a good team."

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How the Big 12 ranks in the Top 25

Rank	Team	Points
1	Florida St.	489
2	UCLA	488
3	Florida	487
4	USC	484
5	Rice	480
6	Cal. St. Fullerton	478
7	Mississippi St.	478
8	Louisiana St.	475
9	Georgia Tech	472
10	Stanford	469
11	Arizona St.	468
12	Wichita St.	460
13	Miami, Fla.	459
14	Texas A&M	457
15	Alabama	454
16	Tennessee	452
17	Clemson	450
18	Auburn	448
19	Cal. St. Northridge	445
20	Tulane	442
21	South Florida	440
22	Oklahoma St.	439
23	Texas	437
24	Missouri	436
25	South Carolina	431

*Source: Collegiate Baseball
Bold denotes Big 12 schools
Records reflected through games of Feb. 16.