

Aggies lose lead, game to Lamar, 5-4

By CHRIS FERRELL
THE BATTALION



Dave House, THE BATTALION

Senior shortstop **Rich Petru** bobbles a ground ball and has to chase it down against Lamar last night.

It was not the A&M batters, but the Lamar fielders who gave the Aggies opportunities early. In a game marred by nine errors, six by the Cardinals and three by the Aggies, A&M built a lead only to watch it evaporate for the third straight game.

"We're having trouble late in the ball game holding on to something," Johnson said. "Again, we took a lead and couldn't hold on to it."

The loss leaves A&M once again searching for a reason why a season which started with such high expectations has suddenly turned into a nightmare.

"There's nothing to point to," Petru said. "We need to step it up. I do too. Everybody does. We're not going to quit or back down or anything, but we definitely need to step it up."

A&M to face old SWC foe Houston tonight

When the Texas A&M Baseball Team travels to Houston today to take on the University of Houston, it will mark senior co-captain Rich Petru's final appearance in his hometown.

However, the Texas A&M shortstop and Houston Westbury High School graduate has bigger things on his mind, namely ending the Aggies three-game losing streak.

"I always like to go back home," Petru said. "But really, the main focus isn't on getting to go back home. We haven't been playing like we should be playing. We've got to step it up as a

team. There's no personal joy in tomorrow we've got to step it up and play like Aggies, and we haven't been doing that."

Weather will be a major factor in the game, which was originally scheduled to be played March 12 but was rained out. A heavy down pour postponed a Tuesday night meeting between Houston and Rice.

A&M and UH coaches discussed moving the game to College Station however, Houston declined.

"It'll be shaky," Head Coach Mark Johnson said. "We talked to them before the game (against Lamar University) to see if they wanted us to cover up here, because we didn't get the rain here that they got today, and they didn't want to do that, so we'll see if they can get it ready."

The Aggies will send freshman Chance Cagle to the mound. It will mark the first career start for the 6-foot-6 righthander out of Southlake Carroll High School. Cagle gave up three unearned runs in his only appearance this season.

"Obviously tomorrow will be some of the guys we're not going to use very much on the weekend," Johnson said. "So it will give some young guys chances to throw."

The Cougars come into the game with a 12-7 record. Houston's offense is paced by two .400 hitting outfielders in junior Geoffrey Tomlinson and senior Dustin Carr. Tomlinson leads the team with a .432 average and has hit four home runs and knocked in 24 RBIs for the Cougars this season. Carr, second on the team with a .420 average, has a team-high 10 doubles.

Aggies perform their own version of *A Comedy of Errors*

Twenty-five cents should have been the price of admission, not the price of an Oscar Meyer hot dog, for the error extravaganza Tuesday night between Texas A&M (16-11) and Lamar University (16-5-1) at Olsen Field.

A&M served the game to Lamar on a golden platter. Facing a team that committed six errors in the game, including three in the sixth inning, the Aggies were unable to close out, losing 5-4 in 10 innings.

Head Coach Mark Johnson said it is difficult to watch the Aggies lose a game when their opponent illustrates a need to work on its fundamentals.

"You look up at the scoreboard, they have six errors and we have three," Johnson said. "We outthit them and still lose the ball game. It was a tough one."

It has been not only a tough homestand but a tough season for the Aggies. After winning 11 of their first 15, A&M has lost all three of its series with Big 12 foes. With a 3-6 conference record, and postseason hopes fading fast, A&M is searching for any way to keep the sinking ship afloat.

Johnson and company contest the solution lies with finding a way to get it done. They claim the team is just failing to do the little things. But over the past four games, the Aggies have failed to do anything.

Walks, hit batters and errors have all become a way of life. The Aggies have spent much of

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the season creating new ways to dish out a free pass.

In the last four games, the Aggie pitching staff issued 21 base-on-balls and nailed seven batters. The porous Aggie infield committed nine errors.

And once the bleeding starts, neither Johnson nor Pitching Coach Jim Lawler can seem to

apply a tourniquet to end the misery. The result is big innings for opponents.

After having loaded the bases in the sixth inning against OSU on Sunday, freshman southpaw Casey Fossum was relieved by freshman pitcher Chris Fulbright.

The skipper's attempt to avoid a multi-run inning failed. Fulbright allowed a sac-fly and then issued another base-jamming walk. The next goat, freshman Colby Martin, gave up a two-run double to cap off the five-run inning.

This was just one of many putrid instances.

Over the weekend, the Cowboys chalked up three innings of four-plus runs. Tuesday night, the meek and generous Cardinals squeaked out just enough runs to outlast the mindboggling Aggie offense.

Just some food for thought.

Instead of worrying about ways to produce more runs, maybe the Aggie offense should take a page from the defensive playbook. To 'get it done,' the Aggie bats should observe and take notes. As of late, A&M defense has been brilliant when it comes to creating runs. The problem is they're doing for the opponent.

The Aggies have spent much of the season creating new ways to dish out a free pass.

It may have been quarter hot dog night, but the concession stands could have been serving Pappy Joe's Tuesday night at Olsen Field as the Lamar University Cardinals (16-5-1) defeated the Texas A&M Baseball Team (16-11), 5-4 in ten innings, before 2,989 fans at Olsen Field. Lamar sophomore Bryan Spell, who came to the game 0-for-7 on the year, drove in the game-winning run in the top of the eleventh inning for the Cardinals.

The Aggies could have prevented the extra-inning play in the bottom of the ninth. After Lamar pitcher Eric Cammack, the team's No. 1 starter, who came in for relief, struck out A&M junior left fielder Scott Sandusky and freshman third baseman Sean Heaney, sophomore center fielder Jason Tyner blooped a single into center field to start an Aggie rally.

Freshman Steven Truitt followed with a single of his own to set the stage for senior first baseman Jason Stephens. Stephens battled to a full count, fouling off two 2-2 pitches and a 3-2 pitch before Cammack recorded his third strikeout of the inning. The Aggies had been held hitless in the previous three innings.

"They end up bringing their ace in," Head Coach Mark Johnson said. "He's got great numbers and I thought he pitched well. He really shut the door on us from an offensive standpoint."

But it was not the Aggies' only chance to put the game away. Tied at four in the eighth inning senior shortstop Rich Petru at the plate with an 0-2 count and junior second baseman Brian Benefield on third base and one out, Johnson called for a squeeze.

The pitch was high and Benefield was caught between home and third base.

"The guy's (Cammack) got 43 strikeouts in 22 innings," Johnson said. "He got two quick strikes on Rich and I was thinking squeeze earlier and he threw his worst pitch. He threw a hanging slider over his head and we had a squeeze on, and of course got caught on it."

"It was a gamble, I thought he had a good chance to do some strikeout damage, his stats indicated it. He put us in a strikeout spot and I wanted to give ourselves a chance."

After recent lapses by the offense, Johnson shifted the lineup prior to the game in an attempt to create more opportunities to score runs. The experiment failed as the Aggie's three-four-five hitters went three-for-13 from the plate.

"I tried to shake up the lineup a bit and I thought Truitt did fine in the two hole," Johnson said. "We don't have a hot hitter to put in the three hole right now and we're trying to find that person, so I'm trying to shake the lineup a little bit to see if we can get something going."

Offbeat Hunter keeps locker room relaxed, offense lit up

By JAMIE BURCH
THE BATTALION

Hunter said playing baseball was second nature because of his family's history.

"It kind of runs in the family," Hunter said. "Since I've grown up with it, I never really considered playing any other sport."

Spending most of his time as an Aggie in right field, Hunter is tied for the team lead in RBIs (20), while hitting .322 with five home runs, five doubles and one triple. In just two seasons at A&M, Hunter has pelted 44 home runs, averaging one home run every 4.4 at-bats.

As one of three seniors in the starting lineup on a day-to-day basis, Hunter said he does not feel pressure to carry the team even though he has posted large offensive numbers.

"I try to lead by example for the younger players," Hunter said. "But I don't feel any pressure. I just try to go out, have fun and play hard. I just want to play to the best of my ability."

Head Coach Mark Johnson said while he does not look for Hunter to lead the team in every category, he does expect him to produce offensively.

"As a senior, he needs to be an everyday player," Johnson said. "Someone who hits with consistency and does not fall into a lot of slumps. He's a key offensive player. He does have the chance to break open games and has before."

"His history says that he'll hit around .350. Now whether he'll do that or not, I don't know, because he's off to a slow start. But I do

expect him to get hot. He's starting to show signs of getting back on top of his game."

One of Hunter's game-breaking hits came against the University of Nevada-Reno Feb. 17. Hunter's grand slam in the bottom of the ninth inning lifted the Aggies over the Wolfpack, 9-5.

Hunter said the game-winning shot boosted his confidence.

"It was a big lift," Hunter said. "I was struggling at that point and it got me going."

Struggling to hit with consistency has been a problem for Hunter all season long. Plagued by slumps in his senior year, Hunter has been an all-or-nothing hitter.

Johnson said Hunter's droughts have come from his distinctive style of hitting.

"He's an instant hitter because he's unique," Johnson said. "He has his own little swing. It's not one that you would take to a clinic and say this is what everybody should do, but it works for him."

"He has strong, quick hands that he gets through the zone pretty well when he is hitting. But he has a little loop in his swing that causes him some problems."

Hunter played at Navarro Junior College before transferring to A&M. In his two seasons at the junior college level, the two-time All-America selection hit .439, leading the team to two conference championships.

Hunter said the biggest difference be-

tween junior college and Division I baseball is pitching.

"In junior college the pitchers threw harder," Hunter said. "In Division I they have more control. It's been an adjustment going from pitchers who just throw 93- to 94-miles per hour fastballs to seeing off-speed pitches."

Prior to his two-year stint with JUCO baseball, Hunter was drafted by the Colorado Rockies in 1994. Though it has been his life dream to play pro ball, Hunter said he opted to play at the collegiate level after he was advised by a scout for the Rockies.

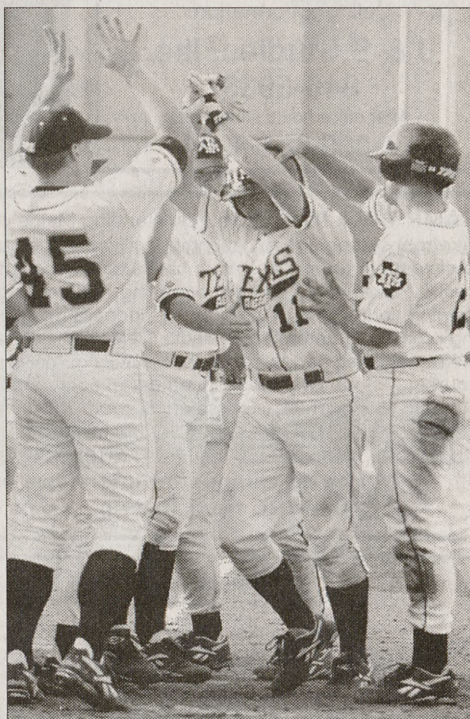
"It wasn't my decision," Hunter said. "I was told to go back to school."

Now that the senior has all but completed his four years of eligibility, Hunter said he once again has aspirations to play professional ball.

Johnson said Hunter has an outside shot at making the cut.

"He's got to show them (the pro scouts) that he can hit," Johnson said. "If you're going to play on the corners of the outfield, you have to flat bring a bat. I hope he gets a chance to play."

Whether his lifelong dream comes to fruition, one thing is for certain — wherever the power hitter ends up, you can bet it will not be your conventional white-collar, nine-to-five desk job.



Dave House, THE BATTALION

Senior outfielder **Johnny Hunter** high-fives his teammates after a home run against Baylor.

Junior pitcher 'Blanks' teams with potent arsenal

By MATT MITCHELL
THE BATTALION

Matt Blank has seen it before. Amid all the hubbub surrounding the Texas A&M Baseball Team's exciting crop of freshman pitchers, Blank may be one hurler who appears to fall through the cracks. The 6-foot-2 lefthander was a highly touted recruit this time last year, and once again finds himself an important part of a talented pitching rotation.

The junior has posted a 3-2 record and 5.12 ERA this season, but has been victimized in several starts by poor run support.

His 41 innings pitched ranks second on the team, which indicates that Blank is a workhorse for the Aggies, and he is pitching well enough to stay in games to the later innings.

"This year, I've been fortunate to be able to throw eight or nine innings every time out," Blank said. "When you can give eight

good innings every time out, you're going to win most of your games. We've got a good bullpen, too, so if your starting pitcher can go eight innings, we should be in position to win the game."

One person not surprised with Blank's presence as a starter is assistant head coach and pitching guru Jim Lawler.

"You've got to remember he came in here 13-0 out of (Galveston) junior college," Lawler said. "Last year, I thought he struggled a little bit with his first year against Division I (competition), but I expected him to be one of the guys in the hunt, either as a starter or a first reliever."

Blank has not disappointed the team; he has become the Aggies' third starter. Considering the Aggies' caliber of pitching this season, that is no small feat. Blank said good pitching is a luxury he and the Aggies are happy to have.

"We've got a lot of good pitchers, and

every time you go out there you've got to do a good job if you want to keep your spot in the rotation," Blank said. "It puts a little added pressure on you, knowing our whole pitching staff consists of good pitchers. You go out there and you try to work hard, knowing that if you aren't successful every time, someone else can come out and take your place."

Blank has matured since last season, which he started with a bang, including a no-hitter and 12 strikeouts in just his second start against the University of Texas-Pan America. But Blank has lost four of his past five decisions.

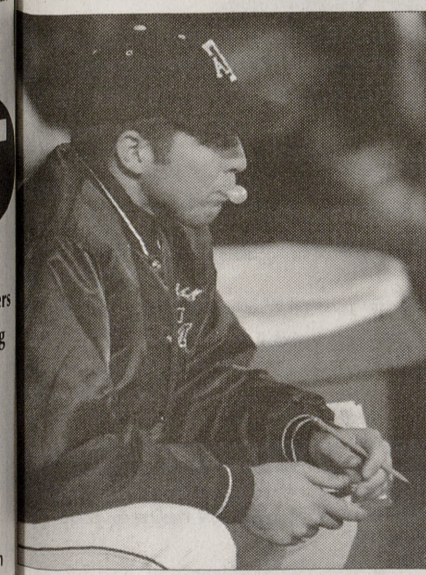
"I think after starting so well last year (5-1), I may have gotten a little complacent with what I was doing," Blank said. "When you can go out and get into a rhythm, get your pitches established, and get things working, it helps you maintain consistency."

Blank has indeed been more consistent with his pitches, which has helped him avoid jams that lead to big innings.

"Matt's done a better job of throwing four pitches this year," Lawler said. "Two of the first three conference weekends he has thrown really well and been a plus for us, and I just feel like he's throwing more pitches with better command and given us a chance to win, which is what it's all about."

Coaches and players alike expect Blank to be a big part not only of the Aggies' starting rotation, but of their chances for postseason play as well.

"Blank's one of those guys who's got a great head on his shoulders," said second baseman Brian Benefield, his teammate since junior college. "He's a high-confidence guy who trusts his stuff. Once he gets going, there's no stopping him."



Dave House, THE BATTALION

Junior pitcher **Matt Blank** watches the Aggies against Lamar Tuesday night.