

FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION

Junior running back Sirr Parker cuts through a hole against the University of North Texas last year.

Back to fundamentals

A more experienced offensive unit looks to explode

By TRAVIS V. DABNEY
Staff writer

Turnovers, turnovers and more turnovers spelled doom for the 1996 version of the talented but young Texas A&M offense last year.

This year, however, the Aggies hope to considerably cut down the 28 turnovers from last season and give themselves a better chance to prove what a truly explosive offensive power they can be.

Heading the offense this year will be new offensive coordinator Steve Marshall, who came from UCLA where he was the offensive line coach.

Marshall plans to bring a powerful running attack to the Aggie offense but said he will not hesitate to implement the passing game as well.

"It is hard to be an unbalanced team in college football today and win on a consistent basis," he said.

The Aggies lost three offensive starters from 1996 team including receiver Albert

Connell now with the Washington Redskins, Donte Hawkins and last years starting center, Calvin Collins, who is with the Atlanta Falcons.

Ready to step in and bring stability to the receiver corps is sophomore Leroy Hodge, who is 6-foot, 3-inch and 207 pounds.

Hodge saw limited action in the 1996 because of he backed up senior Connell, but had an impressive 14 yard average per catch.

"We want to have a much better season this year, the offense wants to play well and we are all mentally tougher after last season," Hodge said.

Along with Hodge will be a group of receivers that have all shown the ability to be good college players but need playing time to prove it.

Aaron Oliver leads this list because he

has struggled with injury problems throughout his three years at A&M.

With an injury-free year the duo of Hodge and Oliver could prove to be an excellent combination.

Backing up the starters will be Chris Taylor, Cole, Matt Bumgardner and Darren Brinkley.

All of the receivers have taken their share of criticism the past few years but the attitude with this group seems to be one of confidence, but not cockiness.

"Things have happened in the past here with the receivers that have been hurt and Albert (Connell) was the only one who seemed to make plays in the past, but we will assert ourselves this year and prove that we are a talented group," Hodge said.

The tight end position should also mean strength for the Aggies this season as they return their top three tight ends of Derrick Spiller, Dan Campbell and Matt Mahone.



Hodge

PLEASE SEE OFFENSE ON PAGE 11.

A little older and wiser

The offensive line has become a well-oiled machine for 1997

By CHRIS FERRELL
Sports editor

They are a machine. A 1,466 pound, five man machine. Pulling, driving, firing out. All accomplishing individual assignments so the parts can function as a whole.

There are no magazine covers. There are no individual statistics, either. They are seldom noticed unless there is a mistake and under appreciated by the people in the stands.

But there is hard work and dedication. There are countless hours spent in the weight room. There is the constant barrage of ice packs and tape. And the many broken fingers and toes. The trenches where they battle are violent places.

They are offensive linemen. And they are among the nation's best.

"I think we're going to have a really good offensive line this year," said senior All-Conference guard candidate Steve McKinney. "We're good players. We're not just guys that fell into starting

rolls last season."

Four members from last season's line return. Along with McKinney, tackles senior Chris Ruhman and junior Cameron Spikes and sophomore guard Semisi Heimuli return to the line up.

They will be joined by senior center Koby Hackradt, who missed most of last season with injuries after starting as a sophomore.

The five starting members of the Texas A&M Football Team's offensive line have combined to start 76 games over their careers.

"They've been through the battles," offensive coordinator Steve Marshall said. "They know a little bit more about what's going on, they understand about protections and things. When things break down, they know how to fix them.

"We're still not old, but we have guys who have played in games and have learned to be successful."

Spikes said the line gained valuable experience last season.



FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION

Junior right guard Semisi Heimuli fends off University of Oklahoma linebacker Tyrell Peters last year at Kyle Field.

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ON THE LINE

				
Ruhman Senior who has made 24 consecutive starts	McKinney Made smooth transition from defensive line	Hackradt Returning after an injury in 1996 season	Heimuli Led the Aggies with 435 pound bench press	Spikes Posted a school record 610-pound lift in squat

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