

Aggie recruiting class boasts offensive stars

JEFF SCHMIDT
Staff writer

Nebraska and Michigan laid the groundwork for their co-national championships four years ago on the recruiting trail. Texas A&M laid the groundwork for future success by signing 16 football recruits on Wednesday.

Headlining the signees are the two highest rated quarterback recruits in Texas: Chip Ambres of Beaumont and Vance Smith of Grand Prairie. Ambres has been compared to former Texas star James Brown, who attended the same high school as Ambres. Ambres spurned Oklahoma to attend A&M.

"He's a mobile quarterback. He can run and throw," Head Coach R.C. Slocum said.

Smith committed to the Aggies in December. He turned down Phillip Fulmer and the Tennessee Volunteers to be an Aggie.

"Vance has a little different style; he's a prototypical NFL guy," Slocum said. "He can throw a ball from here to Navasota."

"These are the two guys we wanted from day one. We ended up backing off of everyone else," Slocum said. "I don't think you can have too many quarterbacks. If you're ever going to be any good, you better have yourself a big time quarterback."

After signing the two best quarterbacks, Slocum went even further to better the

passing game and signed Raphael "Choo" Freeman from Dallas, Bethel Johnson from Corsicana, Robert Ferguson from Houston and Dwayne Goynes from LaMarque, four players projected to play wide receiver.

Freeman earned all-state honors football, basketball and baseball. He reportedly will also play baseball for the Aggies.

After a sizzling showing in the state championship, Johnson became a hot commodity with even the mighty Florida State Seminoles recruiting him. Johnson had nearly 1,000 yards receiving despite missing the early part of the season with an injury.

Ferguson may be the most acclaimed receiver recruit in the state. Despite being on Dave Campbell's First-Team Super Team and being named the Houston Touchdown Club Defensive Player of the Year as a safety, Ferguson will probably line up as a receiver.

At LaMarque, Goynes helped his team to three consecutive Class 4A state titles at the running back position but will make the jump to wide receiver in college.

"We needed some help at the wide receiver position, particularly speed receivers," Slocum said.

The Aggies signed running backs Ja-Mar Toombs of Kilgore and Jesse Hunnicutt of Canyon.

Toombs is a big-time fullback prospect

who originally committed to Florida State. Toombs is also a state champion in the shot put. A&M's reputation for churning out excellent shot putters (the last two gold medal winners in the Summer Olympics were Aggies) no doubt had an effect on him. However, after visiting College Station, Toombs had a change of heart.

"I went to sleep and in the middle of the night it (being an Aggie) just hit me," Toombs said.

Hunnicutt was also set to go to Kansas, but decided to stay in state after his visit. At 6 feet 4 inches, Hunnicutt is unusually tall but is set to play tailback.

A&M loses tight ends Derrick Spiller and Daniel Campbell after next year so it was crucial to get some good prospects at this position. Coming into the season, Michael de la Torre was not highly-rated but he caught the eyes of scouts in the state championship game against Longview. Greg Porter of Keller was a third-team All-State selection after catching nearly 1,000 yards in passes.

The Aggies missed out on offensive line recruits Antwan Kirk-Hughes (signed with Texas), Eric Heitman (Stanford) and Tim Hodges (Tennessee), but still landed four solid recruits. Michael Mahan of Homer, La. Chris Montgomery of Euleess, Taylor Whitley of Sudan and Billy Yates of Corsicana were the four blue-chippers that

signed with A&M.

Both Mahan and Montgomery committed before the season even began. Montgomery continues the Euleess Trinity pipeline to A&M. The pipeline produced Semisi Heimuli and redshirt Moses Vakalahi.

Even though he played at a small school in West Texas, Whitley garnered lots of attention by being one of the strongest players in the state with a 500 pound bench press.

Yates was originally committed to Kansas State but Slocum made him an offer he could not refuse. Yates and Johnson were teammates at Corsicana and helped lead the team to the state title game.

Slocum was looking to recruit bigger linemen and the ones he got average 288 pounds. "The NFL teams are much larger than they've been in the past," Slocum said. "The kids we are seeing in high school are getting larger. The trend, across the board, in football is the big physical lines."

The lone defensive player signed was linebacker Brian Gamble of Alto. Gamble, who played for his father Lucky, was the Class 2A Defensive Player of the Year and was a four-time all-state selection.

A name that should be familiar to Aggie fans rounds out the Class of '98. Derek Lechler of Sealy was brought in to be the punter of the future and he has the bloodlines. His older brother is star punter Shane Lechler.



BRANDON BOLLOM/THE BATTALION
Football Coach R.C. Slocum hauled in a group of offensive recruits for 1998.

Texas exodus cause for concern among college football coaches



CHRIS FERRELL
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Every year the Florida-Florida State football game is labeled as the game of the century. National championships are determined with rosters chocked full of Florida talent and a couple of Texas players in a few key areas.

And if it's not a Florida team, maybe it's Nebraska, with all those home-grown linemen and some Texas players of their own.

The list goes on and on. Michigan, Notre Dame, Tennessee, Ohio State, UCLA — all have been among the nation's top teams and all have as players to thank for that.

This season 29 teams around the country have piled into, with all apologies to the oil industry, Texas' most valuable resource — blue chip football recruits. This season the exodus has reached the highest number in this decade as 58 of the state's top 100 football players are leaving the Lone Star state for other

schools. This mass departure comes one year after 60 of the top 100 stayed home.

Can you imagine what Texas college football would be like if these guys stayed home? If your Ty and Koy Detmers, your Bobby Taylors and Jesse Armisteads had stayed in state, the balance of power in college football over the past 20 years would not have shifted to Florida but rather returned to Texas.

With the amount of talent in Texas there is no reason why A&M and Texas should not be able to put together top-five programs each year with Texas Tech and Baylor competing for spots in the top 25, even if they played by the NCAA's rules.

Even then, there would still be enough good players for TCU, Houston, Rice, SMU and UTEP, all Division I schools in the state, to compete at a much higher level than they currently are.

A major problem that most in-state coaches face while recruiting is that it is much easier for a coach from Tennessee or Ohio to come in and tell players things which are not necessarily true. Everyone knows how big the crowds are on an average Satur-

day in Lubbock or what goes on each weekend in College Station. I've been to Manhattan, Kansas. There is nothing there. It's in the middle of nowhere. It even had a funny smell. But if I'm a state top-100 recruit who has never left Texas, and a Kansas State coach comes in and tells me about the great facilities and atmosphere, I may believe him.

Then there is the "glamour" of the out-of-state school. If you are a good player, people don't see any reason why A&M and Texas shouldn't recruit you. But if Notre Dame or Alabama comes to Podunk, Texas, that's something special. In many regions especially throughout the South, opposing coaches are seen as the enemy, there to rob good ol' State U of the area's top offensive lineman. But in Texas our communities greet these coaches as dignitaries and offer up our beloved blue-chippers to the ghosts of the Four Horsemen without thinking twice.

But something these coaches will never tell the players is that their friends and families may never see them play again. For many families which have neither the time or money to take a trip outside of Texas every weekend during the fall, they may only get to see their

son on the sports highlights on the Saturday evening news. People in the community will be left only with their high school stories of Johnny Football Hero's four touchdowns against Old Dime Box High. After all, it's a long bus ride from Podunk to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Hey, maybe Chris Fowler will call out his name for a nice run on ESPN's College Football Gameday.

But that's not what Colorado or USC is going to tell the impressionable 18-year-old. He's not going to tell him he may never see the field and the NFL is a one-in-a-million shot. So the topic of quality education is not going to come up nearly as often as the fan support and game-day atmosphere. They won't tell him that he can get a better education and play at a better stadium in College Station than he can in Madison, Wisconsin.

So really it's the people of Texas who miss out, the fans who sit back and watch A&M and Texas play for the right to be offered up to Nebraska in the Big 12 Championship game instead of playing for the title. And the worst part of it is that in many cases, we have ourselves to blame for letting these players leave.

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