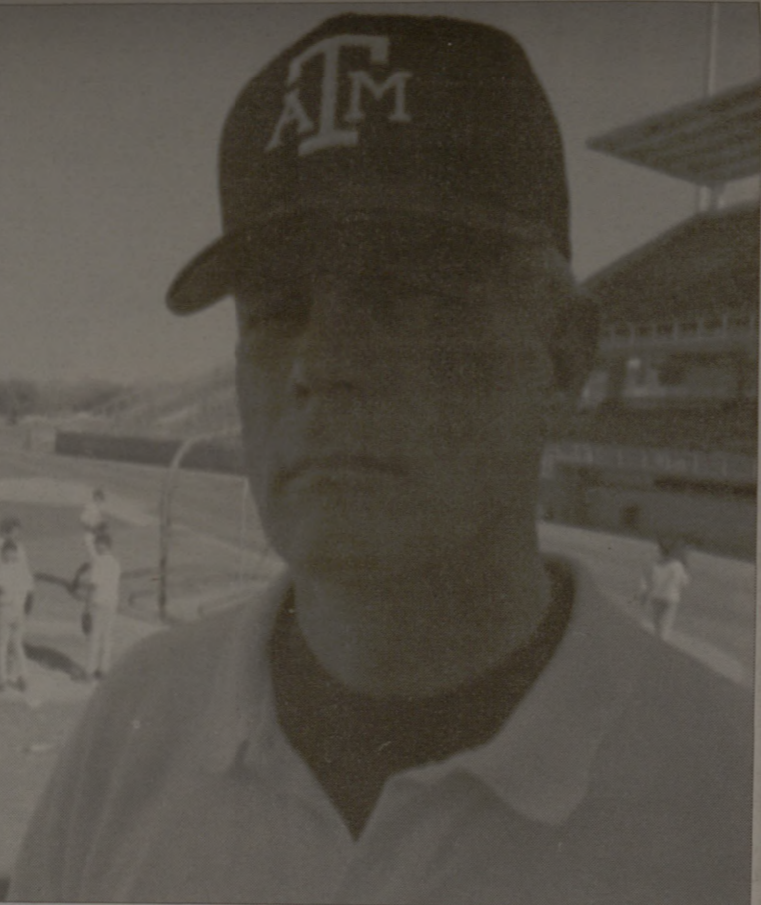


*"I've always felt this is something God wanted me to do, whether it be at Texas A&M, or wherever it may be. He's reinforced that in me and given me a platform to share the lessons in life that can be learned out on the field. But then the game itself, I have a great passion for the game of Baseball."*

—Mark Johnson



## TEACHER, MENTOR, FATHER, FRIEND — COACH

By JEREMY FURTICK  
Sports editor

Passion. It is a word people throw around pretty regularly, but few truly understand. Not because passion is hard to define, but because people are terrified of facing it. To face your passion would mean to confront your biggest emotions, collectively. Love, hate, joy, fear—passion is all of these. It is every emotion humanly possible to experience, all rolled up into one little shot of reality. We all claim to have passions, and I for one am not too sure if I am prepared to face them every day of my life. But Texas A&M Baseball Coach Mark Johnson does not have this choice, he squares off with his passions every single day. His passion is baseball. Johnson grew up in Las Vegas, New Mexico, a town of about 14,000 people which had three high schools. He participated in athletics, namely football and baseball, but does not put too much stock in his high school career. "If you could walk and chew gum pretty good you were going to get to play athletics and be on the high school teams," he said. Football was Johnson's favorite sport, but when offered an opportunity to play either football or baseball in college, he chose to attend the University of New Mexico and play baseball. Johnson began college with aspirations to continue working in the sports industry, either as a sports writer or a baseball coach. He did not wait long to decide. "I had written for the paper and won some writing contests so I had some reinforcement there," he said. "But I made a decision after a semester that I wanted to be a coach." Johnson went on to play in the New York Mets organization in 1967 after earning All-WAC and All-Region honors during his four years at New Mexico. But in 1970, Johnson hung up his spikes and answered his calling as an assistant coach at New Mexico. He spent the next 15 years coaching under some of college baseball's most acclaimed and respected coaches. He had tenures at the University of Arizona under Frank Sancet and

then Jerry Kindall, at Mississippi State under Ron Polk and finally, two years at A&M under Tom Chandler. Johnson describes his assistant coaching experiences as the ultimate baseball classroom. "If you look at my background you would have to say, 'wow, what an education that guy had,'" he said. "It was an unbelievable classroom and I brought a little bit of each of those guys here with me." Since taking over for Chandler in 1985, Johnson has accumulated a remarkable 570-241-2 record to make him the fifth-winningest active Division I head coach. He has reached the Regional playoffs eight times, won three conference championships and took the Aggies to the College World Series in 1993. Johnson is also the only coach in A&M history to average 40 wins per season, with just under 44 over his 13 years here. Johnson credits his success not only to his 15-year tutelage, but to the university and his assistant coaches. "Texas A&M draws a lot of incredible athletes that don't just come here to play for Mark Johnson," he said. "I think they come here because they are excited about the opportunity to get a degree from Texas A&M. I've also had Jim Lawler and Bill Hickey as my assistant coaches since I started here. They've given us consistency and have a lot to do with my success." While high winning percentages and conference championships are nice and also essential to having a first-class program, there is more to Mark Johnson than the stat sheet. The 52-year-old still gets a sparkle in his eye and a grin on his face when he talks about his passion, not his success, but his love of baseball. "I've seen so many games and so many plays, that I can really see the beauty of the game," he said. "So many things that the fans don't see—the bases loaded, moving the runner over, different counts to different batters—all of those things I just have a passion for and it's built over along period of time. I just really enjoy the sport and enjoy watching the sport." While Johnson's love for baseball is evident in casual conversation, it is still his job, and he has the same passion for coaching the game as he does for watching it. Johnson realizes the opportunity he has to influence players and takes pleasure in giving another person a piece of what is

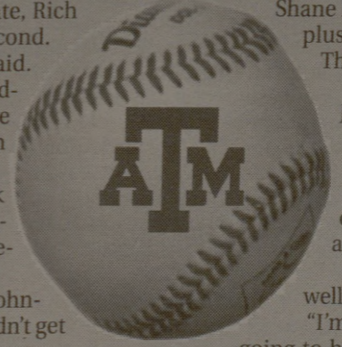
important to him. "It was exciting to see that I had an effect and that I could motivate young people, and that what I had to say could be of some importance to them; that the lessons we teach out here can carry over to their lives," he said. A coach gives of himself every day on the baseball field and, in turn, expects the same of his players. But coaches also have their own desires and ambitions. "Materialistically we all have selfish goals that we would like to achieve," Johnson said. "I would like to win a national championship; a national championship would be fun, Big 12 championships would be fun, but the problem is, everyone else has those same dreams and can get in your way." No one can be the big winner every season in the standings, it just does not work that way. Johnson knows this and has made sure even if his players leave Texas A&M with no trophies, they leave with some things more important. "All I really want to look back and say is that we got the most out of our athletes, they got their degrees and we made them better ballplayers than they were when they got here," he said. "I would like for them to never be intimidated in any situation because they have had to handle the pressure of being out here. If tragedy strikes on their road to their goal, I would like for them to jump back up realizing the lessons they learned in baseball." College is so fleeting, we have only a short time to make an impact on the people we come in contact with. Everyone wants to leave a lasting impression, and Johnson is no exception. "I would like to be somebody who is more than just a third base coach or the guy who makes (the players) run sprints," he said. "I would like for them to be able to come and talk to me about more than baseball. I want them to look at me as a guy who's a pretty good person, a class person." To a lot of people Mark Johnson's job may seem like more trouble, pressure and heartache than it could possibly be worth. But not to him—it is his passion. "Baseball is a cruel game, it's made to break your heart," Johnson said. "If you take the game to real heights in your emotions, it can kill you. "This is where I like to be."

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

After falling victim to injury-plagued '97, Aggies ready to stake claim to the Big 12

By TRAVIS HARSCH  
Staff writer

After going 39-22 and ending its season in the West Regional of the NCAA Tournament, the Texas A&M Baseball Team is making big plans for 1998 under coach Mark Johnson, who is starting his 14th season as the head coach of the Aggies. Johnson said one of the biggest obstacles his team will have to overcome is the loss of some key players. "We lost Matt Garrick behind the plate, Rich Petru at short, and Brian Benefield at second. Those guys are key people," Johnson said. "You throw in some sophomores in the middle at second and short, and you have question marks. But I think there's reason to believe we may be all right." Taking over behind the plate for Garrick will be senior Scott Sandusky, who has experience catching, although an injury sidelined him for part of last season. "Sandusky played some (last season)," Johnson said. "He had a stress fracture and didn't get to play as much as we wanted." At shortstop and second, sophomores Steve Scarborough and Sean Haney are probable starters, as they try to fill the void left by Petru and Benefield. At first, juniors John Scheschuk and transfer Eric Sobeck will see playing time. Rounding out the infield at third base is junior transfer Craig Kuzmic.



Junior Jason Tyner will start in center after playing on Team USA team this summer. He will be trying to improve on his Big 12-best 37 steals of a year ago. Flanking him in the outfield will likely be sophomore Steven Truitt in left field and freshman Daylan Holt in right field. And on the mound, A&M should have a solid pitching staff after fighting injuries for most of last year, Johnson said. "We've had some pitching guys that were injured last year that are returning: Ryan Rupe, Chris Fulbright and Shane King," Johnson said. "They could be a big plus for us if they're healthy and can throw. They're guys that haven't thrown for a while." Although the pitchers are recovering, Johnson said there is no hurry to rush anyone back to playing. "The pitchers haven't been able to throw as much, and we're really being cautious with them. We're not pushing at all on them," Johnson said. Rupe said he believes he is recovering well from his surgery. "I'm about 90 percent; no telling where I'm going to be," Rupe said. "They didn't expect this surgery to be an easy surgery to overcome, I've been doing really well with it, so I'm pleased with my comeback. I'm three or four months ahead of schedule." One of the aces of the staff will be sophomore Casey Fossom, who played on Team USA team this summer with Tyner.

"Fossom will be a key part of our pitching staff, as will Ryan Rupe, if he's healthy, and Chris Fulbright, if he's healthy," Johnson said. Fossom said hard work has sparked the team's desire for success this year. "The whole team wants to win so bad. If we have that motivation to win, and we put ourselves to it, we're going to win a lot of ball games," Fossom said. "We're going to do everything possible to win, and I think we've got a lot of great talent, and if we get on a roll, we could win a lot of games." Tyner said he hopes those wins will add up to a conference championship, and maybe something more. "I'd really love to win the Big 12, and go to the College World Series," Tyner said. "I want to host the regional, and give A&M and the Bryan-College Station area something to get excited about." Oklahoma State, ranked No. 7 nationally, could be a barrier to those goals, Fossom said. "OSU finished pretty high last year, and they've got a lot of good hitters on their team, we're playing up there, too, so I think they're going to give us a pretty good run." Fossom said. The Aggies believe they will have a successful year because of their work ethic, according to Tyner. "This is the hardest working team that I've been on since I've been here," Tyner said. "No one really gripes. We've got a couple of guys who were ju-co national champions, I think that has a lot to do with it, I don't think this team's going to tolerate losing, and I'm excited."

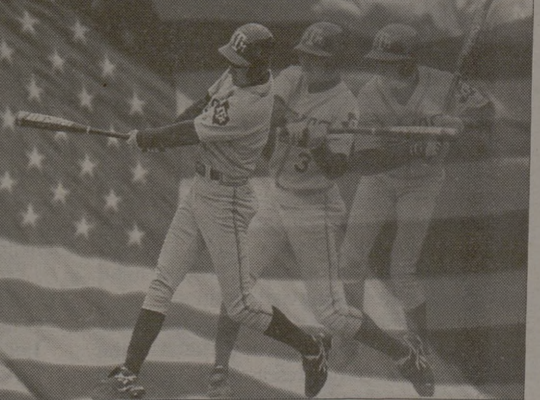
## Ask not what your country can do for you...

Team USA members Tyner, Fossom gain valuable experience playing around the world

By CHRIS FERRELL  
Staff writer

Looking at Casey Fossom and Jason Tyner, you would not think you were in the presence of two of America's good-will ambassadors. They look like a typical pair of college students and act like typical college students. But through their not-so-typical abilities on the baseball field they were able to represent their country as members of the USA Baseball Team which competed around the world this past summer. "It was an unbelievable experience to have played with and against such great players," said Tyner, a junior right fielder and team co-captain. "When I came back in the fall I could tell that I was a lot better both mentally and physically." The team, which plays all-star teams from

other countries, is made up of the nation's top collegiate players. "International experience is great experience," Texas A&M Baseball Coach Mark Johnson said. "Anytime you get the chance to compete at that level, your confidence has to grow. For Tyner to lead the USA baseball team in hitting, he has to feel like he can play." The chance to play with some of the best players in the U.S. was also a good opportunity for Tyner and Fossom to improve themselves as players. "I got to play with some great coaches and some guys that will be first-round picks," Fossom, a sophomore pitcher, said. "And they gave me some really good advice. "I got a lot of experience pitching to different types of hitters. I worked on letting people hit ground balls because I knew there were guys back there who could always make the plays."



Johnson said the experience of international competition along with the time both players have put in at A&M is a major positive. "The year of experience is definitely going to help him (Fossom)," Johnson said. "We put him in some tough spots last season. We brought him in some relief ap-

pearances and had him out there as our Friday night starter against some good pitchers." He added that Tyner, who was selected as a team captain, can build on his experiences from Team USA as he becomes a more vocal team leader. "Jason can handle that. He wants that," he said. "Consistency could be his middle name. He comes to the table with a great temperament. He's excited about being a captain." But the team is not just about baseball, it is also a chance to develop relations between countries through sports. Which was a major reason a player's attitude was examined as closely as his playing ability before he was selected for the team. "I thought it was a real compliment to the program (having two players from one school)," Johnson said. "They carried the A&M banner all over the country. It was a real compliment to those guys as well because they don't just take the best baseball players. When you get out on the road for that period of time you need guys who are going to be able to get along and not cause trouble." The diplomatic side of the games was felt by both players who said everyone was always gunning to beat America.

