

# 1998 TEXAS AGGIE BASEBALL

## A glimpse of the Big 12 South, North divisions

Get your sunflower seeds and break out the leather from underneath the bed, it is baseball season once again.

No one knows that better than fans of the Big 12. With five teams ranked in the top 25, the Big 12 Conference is once again the premier arena for great college baseball.

"If you are a good team in the Big 12, then you are a good team anywhere," Pitching Coach Jim Lawler said. "Any of the top six teams in the conference have a chance to make it to Omaha."

Lawler is adamant about the top five teams in the conference being nearly equal in talent, so any team could end up winning the conference title.

Here is a quick rundown of the teams of the Big 12:

### BAYLOR

**Coach:** Steve Smith  
**1997 results:** 32-23  
**Preseason ranking:** No. 13 by Baseball America; No. 25 by Collegiate Baseball

After barely missing a regional bid in 1997, the Bears are set to make a run at national prominence in '98. Although they lost pitching ace Kris Lambert to the major league draft, they still have the top closer in the Big 12, Jason Jennings, and an All-American caliber player in Jeremy Dodson. Freshman left-handed pitcher Mark Outlaw is a good candidate to fill the spot left by Lambert. Baylor hit 61 home runs last year, and the players who hit 58 of them are back.

**Lawler's comment:** Baylor is a junior-laden ball club with very few losses and a team that nearly made the regional last year. They should definitely be in the hunt for the Big 12 title.

### OKLAHOMA

**Coach:** Larry Cochell  
**1997 results:** 39-20  
**Preseason ranking:** No. 22 by Baseball America; No. 12 by Collegiate Baseball; No. 13 by The Sporting News

Although the Sooners lost their captain and emotional leader when catcher Javier Lopez moved on, the rest of the team remains intact. The infield returns after setting a school-record in double plays last year. First baseman Casey Bookout and right fielder Brian Shackelford will lead the offensive charge. Left field and catcher are the only spots needing to be filled out of the starting eight positions.

The question mark is on the mound where the loss of Jeff Andra could be to much for the Sooners to overcome. Preseason All-Big 12 pick Geoff Geary will try to step up to the challenge.

**Lawler's comment:** With seven returning starters, including the entire infield, the Sooners will be a major factor in the Big 12. Their main problem will be on the mound, but if they get the pitching, lookout.

### OKLAHOMA STATE

**Coach:** Tom Holliday  
**1997 results:** 46-19  
**Preseason ranking:** No. 16 by Baseball America; No. 7 by Collegiate Baseball; No. 8 by The Sporting News

Oklahoma State is once again geared to make a trip to the NCAA tournament for the 18th consecutive time. Although the Cowboys lose 47 combined home runs in Rusty McNamara and Jeff Güel, they have more than enough firepower waiting in the wings. First baseman Tony Lucca and catcher Josh Holliday are two of the many offensive threats that fill the Cowboy lineup. With 22 new players (11 high school, 11 ju-co transfers), Holliday should have no problem finding a devastating lineup.

**Lawler's comment:** Oklahoma State will always be there in the end. They have so much talent offensively that they will be a tough team to beat. It is tough to compete with teams that get so many new recruits.

### TEXAS

**Coach:** Augie Garrido  
**1997 results:** 29-22  
**Preseason ranking:** No. 31 by Collegiate Baseball

To say that the Texas Longhorns are starting fresh is quite the understatement. With 30 new players on the Texas roster (15 freshman), they are just learning each others' names. The infield will be made up entirely of freshman, and the pitching staff does not have much more experience. Sophomore pitcher Scott Dunn will be expected to carry the load on the mound for the fresh-faced Longhorns. Outfielders Brett Loeffler and Mark Cridland will be expected to pave the road for a lineup with almost no Division 1 experience.

**Lawler's comment:** Texas has so many new players this year, it is hard to tell how they will come together as a team. They will be a talented team, just extremely young. I would not be surprised to see them still alive come tournament time.

### TEXAS TECH

**Coach:** Larry Cochell  
**1997 results:** 46-14  
**Preseason ranking:** No. 22 by Baseball America; No. 12 by Collegiate Baseball; No. 13

by The Sporting News

The Red Raiders are set to repeat as Big 12 champions even though they lost the ace of their staff (Jason Gooding) and the heart of their order (Joe Dillon). The Tech lineup has plenty of ammunition returning with preseason All-Big 12 players catcher Josh Bard and second baseman Keith Ginnter.

On the mound, Shane Wright will lead the charge for a staff that has the ability to lead the Big 12 in ERA once again. The Red Raiders will probably rely on speed a little more this year, instead of the long ball as in years past. Miles Durham is the top recruit who will make a difference for Tech in its already stellar outfield.

Tech will have to play this season with the cloud of the NCAA investigation hanging over their head. How that turns out may determine the ultimate outcome of the Big 12.

**Lawler's comment:** They are the favorites to win the Big 12 title going into the season. They have a lot of returning guys who contributed last year, as well as some top-notch newcomers who will make an impact.

### IOWA STATE

**Coach:** Iyle Smith  
**1997 results:** 21-31

The Iowa State Cyclones, like some other Big 12 North schools, are forced to play their first 22 games away from home. They have proven themselves as fast finishers the last three years, however. The '98 team has some talent on their squad with 3B Bill Uelmen returning after hitting nine homers in Big 12 games last year.

**Lawler's comment:** Iowa State will be a tough team to play at their house, and if we are not careful, they definitely will give us some problems.

### KANSAS

**Coach:** Bobby Randall  
**1997 results:** 31-26

The Jayhawks of Kansas are one of those teams that could easily find themselves battling for a spot in the NCAA tournament at the end of the year. The talent is not as high as some of the other teams, but they have some players that will make an impact this year. Second baseman Andy Juday and third baseman Sparky Wilhelm will provide the offensive spark, while returning righty Rusty Philbrick will attempt to solidify a suspect pitching corps.

**Lawler's comment:** They have some top talent in some areas, especially in the infield. We were lucky to play them at our place last year, and it will be a tough chore to go up there this

season. A definite dark horse.

### KANSAS STATE

**Coach:** Mike Clark  
**1997 results:** 32-24

Kansas State has to deal with the loss of a talented team, and are going to be forced to fill some spots in the field and on the mound. If the Wildcats can get some big performances from pitchers Chris Traylor and Mickey Blount, they could be battling it out for one of the six spots in the Big 12 tournament. It all comes down to how well their newcomers can step up.

**Lawler's comment:** They have lost a lot of good players this year, but they have a chance to be pretty good. It will be an added plus that we get them at home. They gave us a good battle up in Manhattan last season.

### MISSOURI

**Coach:** Tim Jamieson  
**1997 results:** 31-27

The Tigers have a ton of senior leadership coming back to help their club get back to postseason play for the third consecutive year. All-American Ryan Fry joins All-Big 12 shortstop Griffin Moore to give the Tigers a devastating one-two punch. The pitching staff is a total mystery and will be the key to a good season.

**Lawler's comment:** The Missouri club will be a veteran group, and teams that have good leadership are always scary. The fact that they have been there in postseason play the last few years makes them a team that could make a run in the end.

### NEBRASKA

**Coach:** Dave Van Horn  
**1997 results:** 27-35

Nebraska will begin a new era this year with the hiring of head coach Dave Van Horn. The Cornhuskers are probably the least talented team in the Big 12, and are more content on improvement than anything else. The Huskers do have designated hitter Ken Harvey and shortstop Bryan Schmidt who will provide some offensive excitement.

**Lawler's comment:** With a new coach coming in the middle of January, it will be tough for them to stay focused with all of the turmoil. We still have to play them there, so by no means will they be an easy sweep. They do have some players that can hurt you offensively.

—Compiled by Colby Martin  
Staff writer

## Aggies' first pitch today against UT Pan-American

By COLBY MARTIN  
Staff writer

The Texas A&M Baseball Team is ready to strap on the gloves for the first time in 1998 today at 2 p.m. when UT Pan-American comes to town. Opening day always creates an unbelievable amount of excitement, but this year there is also a higher level of uncertainty.

With the loss of several key players in the field and on the mound, it will be important for some new guys to step up soon and often.

"I am more worried about ourselves than our opponents at this point," Texas A&M Coach Mark Johnson said. "Who we are playing becomes more of a concern when Big 12

play starts."

Johnson said his team is ready to get the season underway, but warns that Pan-Am will be also.

"I expect Pan-American to be ready to go, just like us," Johnson said. "Practice has almost become detrimental in some ways, and I think the guys are ready for the games to start."

Pan-Am has always played the Aggies tough, and this year should be no different. Teams such as Pan-American live for the opportunity to beat a prominent team like A&M.

"We just need to play some games in order to build our confidence as a team," catcher Scott Sandusky said. "We can't really worry

about who the opponent is right now."

The story-within-the-story is the return of fifth-year senior Ryan Rupe, who is set to return two months ahead of schedule from last year's surgery to remove a rib. After two consecutive years of major medical setbacks, Rupe is ready to just have fun.

"I think that I have worked really hard this year in rehab in order to make it back for opening day, and I am proud of the fact that I was able to do so," Rupe said.

"He is definitely the sentimental favorite, and I am very excited to see Ryan be able to start on opening day," Johnson said.

Johnson said his plans are to start sophomore Casey Fossum and freshman Matt Ward

in Saturday's doubleheader. All of the pitchers will be on a pitch count, with Rupe's being watched closely.

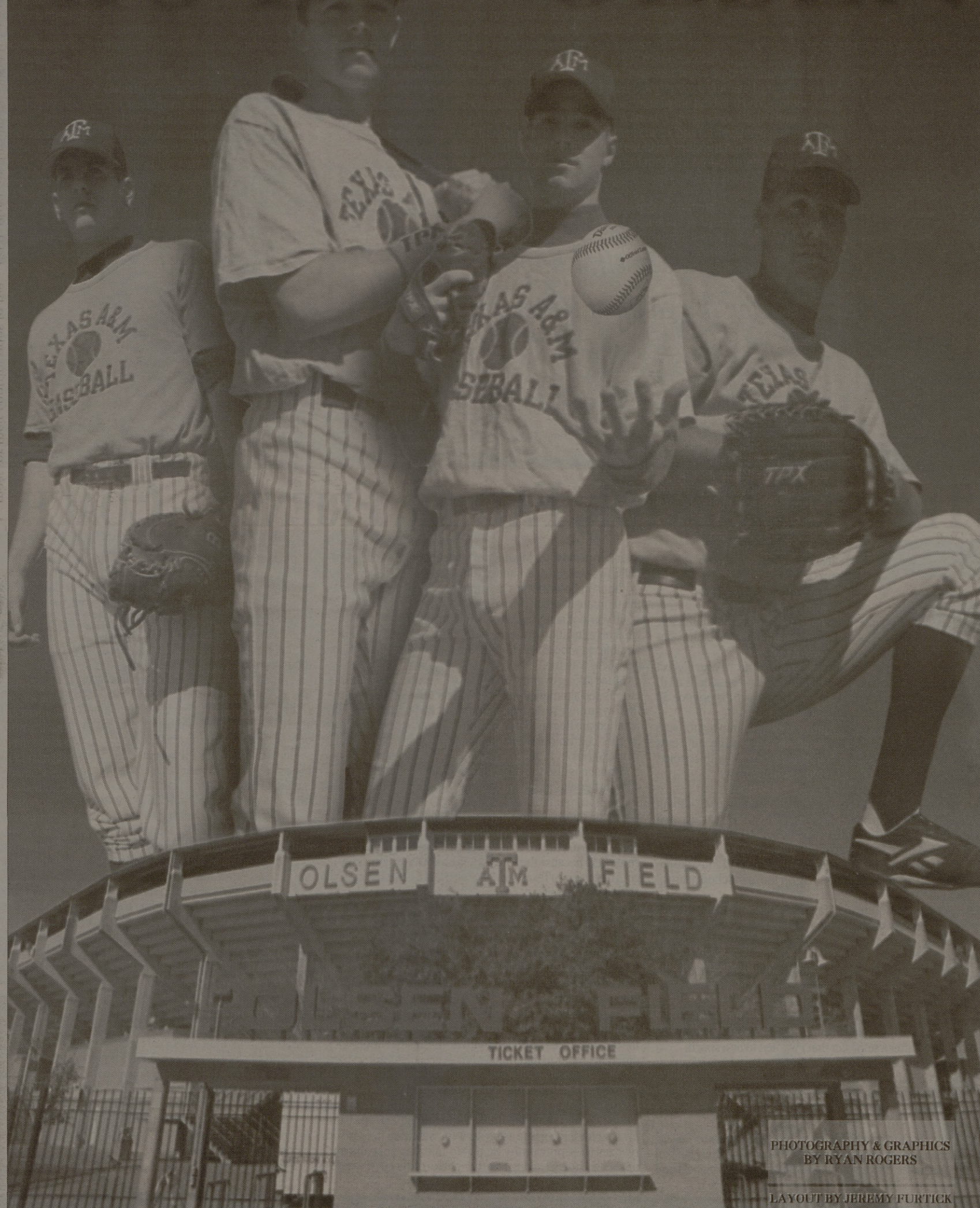
Winning is a priority in this series, but confidence and chemistry are the most important things to establish this early in the season.

"We definitely want to try get the season off to a good start and sweep the first series of the year," senior utility player Steve Leonard said.

With baseball season being so long, it is hard to keep each game in perspective, but opening day is always special for players and fans alike.

Saturday's first game will begin at 1 p.m. followed by the second game of the doubleheader.

# BOYS OF OLSEN



PHOTOGRAPHY & GRAPHICS  
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