

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Run down by Texas' new coach, former Longhorn closer Eric French finds new life and chance for redemption with Aggies

BY CHRIS FERRELL
Staff writer

Eric French's story is one that runs deep through the state of Texas. It is a story of a rivalry, two schools and two ways of life. In the state of Texas there are Aggies and there are Longhorns — there is a thin-between.

Growing up in Austin, Eric French was a Longhorn. A kid he went to University of Texas baseball games with his father and brother and dreamed of one day pitching for the Longhorns.

After earning All-State honors as a senior at Austin's Bowie High School, his dream came true when he was offered a scholarship to play baseball for Texas.

"It was probably my dream to pitch at Texas," French said. "I didn't think I would accomplish that, but going there was a great achievement on my part. I was very happy."

French made an immediate impact for the Longhorns and by his sophomore year he had solidified his place as one of college baseball's top closers. He earned Southwest Conference honors as a relief pitcher, striking nine saves and leading the nation in strikeouts with nine innings pitched.

He followed that with an equally impressive junior campaign in which he recorded 10 saves while posting the staff's lowest ERA.

But as French prepared for his senior season, a season which would have seen him make a run to become UT's all-time saves leader, everything changed. Coach Augie Garrido, who took over for Cliff Stastson prior to the 1996 season, made the decision to renew the scholarships of several Texas players, including French, so that he could go out and recruit players who fit his style of play.

"We had our meetings after the year and it was expressed to me that they really didn't want me," French said. "There was a chance that I could have come back and walked on, but that was kind of a blow to me. A lot of guys got the ax as well and there are some guys doing well for other teams too."

"Maybe it wasn't the players, maybe he just wanted the scholarships. But that's his job. His job is on the line. He's going to do what he has to do to win, and that's what he thought was going to happen. I can't have time to be bitter towards him. I'm just going to do my own thing."

French was left in an unusual position. He had the

desire and talent to be one of college baseball's best closers — he just did not have a team.

Then in August, Jamie Smith, who was slated to be the closer for Texas A&M, signed a pro contract with the Chicago White Sox, leaving the Aggies with a void at the closer position. When French got word of this he contacted A&M Coach Mark Johnson about the possibility of pitching for the Aggies.

"I never even thought about it (bringing French to A&M)," Johnson said. "I knew that he was one of the guys that was not invited back at the University of Texas. But I never really gave it much thought."

"We had Jamie Smith with us and then he signed a pro contract in August. Eric found out about it and called me and said, 'Are you interested? I'd like to play ball.' We talked at length because it's a little bit different transferring from the University of New Mexico to Texas A&M than it is coming from the University of Texas to Texas A&M. We talked about the feeling of disloyalty that Texas and Austin would have towards him. He said, 'I don't have a lot of teammates. They cut just about everybody. It's not like I have a bunch of teammates who are going to hate me.'"

So French did what was once unthinkable and traded in his burnt orange uniform for a maroon and white one.

However, the transfer was not that simple. French wanted to transfer to College Station for good so that he could finish out his degree plan and graduate from A&M. But while going through the process he was told that he would lose several hours of credit because they were not going to be accepted from Texas.

"I wanted to come over and stay over here," he said. "We struggled with everything from admissions to getting into the right college. When I found out I was going to lose a lot of hours I was disappointed, but the coaches brought it up that I could just come over here for a year and then transfer back to finish up my degree at Texas. I want to stay here but the situation doesn't allow it. I'm just happy to have the time I have here with the team."

There was also a matter of the NCAA. Athletes who transfer from one school to another to play football or basketball are required to sit out a year before they can compete for their new school. However, athletes in all other sports can play the next season provided that they are in good academic standing at the school they came from, their former school clears them to play and the conference clears them to play. French

met each of these requirements and was granted permission to play for A&M this season.

All of the paperwork was out of the way but there was still the matter of emotions to be dealt with. Despite all of his talent and willingness to play for A&M, there would be some who would still view French as a Longhorn, as an outsider.

French wondered how people would react to him and if he would be welcomed with open arms.

That question was quickly answered once French arrived at A&M and was taken in by his new teammates.

"He's one of the biggest additions we have this year," senior pitcher Ryan Rupe said. "I thank the Lord that Augie got rid of him because for us to win games in the Big 12, we need an eighth-ninth inning guy who can come in and strike people out and get the job done."

"He's our closer, and he's a good closer — he has been his whole college career. We kind of knew French before. He's a good guy, he was a Longhorn, but he was laid back. He's an Aggie now."

French said he was amazed at how easy the transition from Longhorn to Aggie actually was.

"It was no problem coming over here and combining with this group," French said. "It's a great group of people and they're very friendly. It doesn't take long after you talk to people to see how they are. A&M's supposed to be the friendliest campus in the world and that's how they were to me. I'd walk around campus and people would say 'howdy' to me. They get on your side from the get-go."

The fact that French has continued to come up big on the pitching mound since arriving has not hurt his relationship with his teammates either. A&M's pitching staff combined to post only seven saves last season. French has already earned three. He has also picked up a win and has not allowed an earned run in six appearances this season.

But the fact remains that Eric French has some unfinished business. He has something to prove to a school and most of all to a coach who did not feel he was good enough to play for him.

French is already looking ahead to the weekend of April 17-19, when Texas A&M and Texas meet on the baseball field. That is when French would like to make his statement about the way he was treated at the University of Texas.

"If I get in there and it's a close game and I do my job, it will be one of the biggest thrills of my life," French said. "Especially if it was at Disch-Falk Field in front of a coach that let me go, to show him that I'm not as horrible as he thought I was."



Disappointing Big 12 season for the Aggies finally put to a close

I hate to say I told you so, but I did. In my last notebook I predicted that A&M would upset the Baylor Bears in last home game in G. Rollie Coliseum. The Aggies edged out G. Rollie with an 80-70 win to give them their first Big 12 victory. However, they could double-up the Bears with a win in the first round of the Big 12 tournament. The Bears hit free throws down the stretch on the way to a 66-63 victory over the Aggies.



JEFF SCHMIDT
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Reason In Review

Okay, so this was not the best A&M basketball season in history and contrary to popular belief, this was not the worst either. This was the what-could-have-been season. Imagine what the Aggies could

have accomplished if Calvin Davis, Dario Quesada and Chris Clayton had been healthy all season and Gerald Brown had a better season. Also, imagine the enthusiasm if the Aggies had played in Reed Arena like they were supposed to.

Offensive Player Of The Year

This is really a no-brainer. Shanne Jones was the most consistently brilliant player this year. He led the team in scoring by a wide margin at nearly 19 points a game. He scored double-figures in 30 straight games. He is an All-Conference player on a team that should have played in the SWAC.

Defensive Player Of The Year

Steve Houston was named to the Big 12 All-Defense team and led the team in steals, averaging 2.6 a game. Houston is also ranked 21st nationally in that category. His superior strength allows him to match up against taller opponents.

Newcomer Of The Year

Despite the contributions of Chris Clayton and Aaron Jack, there is really only one player to consider for the award — Michael Schmidt. The true freshman from Toronto came on strong in the second half of conference play and ended the regular season with a career-high 26 points against Baylor. Schmidt provided a fresh face for the fans to rally around, and his enthusiasm was excellent.

The Unsung Hero

Brian Barone's hustle and tough play has made him a fan favorite. Barone's will to win must have come from his father. He dives after loose balls and pressures defenses like it is his last game on Earth. If the Aggies are lucky, Barone will stay at A&M even after his father's departure.

Most Annoying Player

This award goes to Texas forward Nnadubem Muoneke. After squeaking by the Aggies in College Station, Muoneke proceeded to rip into the Aggie fans with a tirade of obscenities. Runner-up to the "I'll never-

play-in-the-NBA-but-I-think-I-will," is the Colorado's Ronnie DeGray, who punted a basketball into the stands and kicked Reveille.

Most Annoying Inanimate Object

Texas guard Luke Axtell's hair. Who does this guy think he is, the fifth Beate?

A Look At The Future

The Aggies lose inside player Larry Thompson but gain Joe White next year. White is a 6-foot-10-inch center from San Antonio Taft High School. He is ranked as the best center in Texas and one of the top 20 in the country.

White will team with returnees Jones, Davis, Jack and Chris Richards to form an impressive frontcourt for the Aggies.

Assuming Brian Barone does not leave, he teams with Houston, Schmidt, Clayton and Brown for a solid backcourt.

Also, Reed Arena hopefully will bring in the fans and generate enthusiasm for the program.

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