

Sports

The WILL to TRIUMPH

Knacker Christian Rodriguez discovers salvation in football

BY JEFF SCHMIDT
The Battalion

"Whenever I needed a fatherly figure or someone to talk to of that nature, Coach Elam is pretty much where I go.

"At first people saw it as one of those weird things like, 'hey man, you're a football player living with your coach. Does he make you watch film all the time? Does he make you work out all the time?' We're regular people. The only time we'd ever talk about football at home was when I brought it up, not necessarily when he brought it up."

Rodriguez could have given up. It would have been so easy. But Elam would not let Rodriguez quit.

"I really didn't have any direction or anywhere to go," Rodriguez said. "He told me, 'son, I see something in you. You can develop this god-given ability that you have and if you just listen to what I say and take the coaching that I have to give you, you can be a great player.' I did what he said and I'm here right now."

Rodriguez became a star player at North Mesquite High School and was a hot commodity on his No. 1 nationally-ranked team. But it was not his 118 tackles and 11 sacks grabbing all the attention. It was academics that sent recruiters on whistle-stops to his high school. Rodriguez served as class president for three years and graduated in the top five percent of his high-school class. He was heavily coveted by Stanford, Syracuse, UCLA, Notre Dame and Texas A&M, among others.

But A&M won out, mainly because of the recruiting job of former A&M running backs coach Ken Rucker (now an assistant at North Carolina).

"Coach Rucker really made me feel at home," Rodriguez said. "He made me feel like this was the place to be.

Seeing him leave hurt, but it's college sports. You see a lot of guys come and go. I really appreciated what he did for me."

Rucker's leaving bothered Rodriguez enough that he began to doubt if A&M was the place for him.

"I really thought I made the wrong choice for a while," Rodriguez said.

Redshirting his first year did not help matters.

"I really did feel I was going to come in and play as a true freshman," Rodriguez said. "I was really discouraged about being redshirted."

But Rodriguez is not discouraged anymore. Not after making three tackles and causing a fumble with a blind-side sack of Florida State quarterback Chris Weinke.

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but I wasn't really surprised, because I knew I was physically and mentally prepared for the challenge at hand and I knew I was going to be able to perform to the best of my ability," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said he knows how he rose above his problems.

"First of all, my faith in God," Rodriguez said. "Second of all, I just have this mentality where I want to be the best at whatever I'm doing. The word 'average' and just being like everybody else, I just can't incorporate that in my mind."

Texas A&M Football coach R. C. Slocum said he is amazed at Rodriguez's resiliency.

"I don't think any of us can really appreciate [what Rodriguez has gone through]," Slocum said. "He's someone your heart goes out to."

Texas A&M takes positives from Kickoff Classic loss

BY JASON LINCOLN
The Battalion

powerful Florida State. Playing in front of a crowd of over 59,000, the Kickoff Classic marked a strong start for A&M's 1998 season.

The A&M defense gave up only 23 points against a team that scored 31 points in the Sugar Bowl over top-ranked

Ohio State University. Yet it was not enough, as the Seminoles limited the Aggies to only 14 points.

"We went and played one of the top teams in the country," A&M coach R.C. Slocum said. "We volunteered to do it, and went up there and played a very competitive game, had some chances to win the game in the second half and didn't get it done. But we played with great effort against a good team. It made it a positive thing."

The Aggies stumbled early in the game, giving up 10 points in the first quarter.

They recovered in the second to take the lead by four going into the half.

But the FSU defense proved why they were ranked No. 2 last season, taking advantage of their depth to use seven defensive linemen, six line backers and nine defensive backs.

SEE FOOTBALL ON PAGE 10.



FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION

Junior running back Dante Hall (pictured, diving) runs against Sam Houston State.

Big 12 teams dominate national polls

Our weekly glance at the Big 12 Conference neighborhood uncovers a few new faces and teams moving up some places (in the polls, that is).

Half dozen one way

And six the other. Six Big 12 schools are ranked in the top 25 of the USA Today/ESPN Coaches' Poll.

Nebraska (No. 3), Kansas State (No. 5), Colorado (No. 16), Texas A&M (No. 19), Texas (No. 22) and Missouri (No. 25) are dispelling the early notion that the Big 12 was an all hype and no substance football conference.

Nebraska, Kansas State and Texas A&M are all ranked in the top 15 of the Associated Press College Football Poll.

OSU is No. 1 ... in the Big 12?

That's right. Oklahoma State is the other OSU to have a top ranking attached to its name, joining the national No. 1 Ohio State Buckeyes.

The Cowboys are 1-0 in Big 12 competition, beating Kansas 38-28 Saturday. The Jayhawks squandered away offensive opportunities with three turnovers.



Moschetti Happens

Colorado mascot Ralphie III died last January and his replacement, Ralphie IV, took the field before the Colorado-Colorado State game Saturday.

SEE MOSCHETTI ON PAGE 10.

Win a trip for four to New York to see the Dallas Cowboys on Monday, September 21st.

Drawing to be held September 11th.

See details at the Pepsi display.



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