

CHAMPIONS!

Stewart, Parker jump from bench to lead Aggies to first Big 12 title

BY JEFF SCHMIDT
The Battalion

ST. LOUIS — For a while, Texas A&M players and coaches talked about getting one win to put the program over the hump and into national prominence. Top-ranked Kansas State University (according to the *USA Today/ESPN* Poll) proved to be more than a hump, but A&M was able to climb it anyway.

The Aggies stunned the Wildcats 36-33 in double overtime Saturday to claim their first Big 12 Championship. The victory was A&M's first ever against a No. 1-ranked team. The 36 points A&M scored were the most the team has scored all season.

With the win, A&M earned a berth in the Sugar Bowl against Ohio State University and a No. 8 ranking in *The Associated Press* poll.

"I've said all year that this team is a special team," A&M coach R. C. Slocum said. "Ever since early in the season, we have had lots of adversity. We lost some guys and we had trouble getting started."

"The players never wavered and they got closer together. This has been one of the easiest teams I have ever coached in terms of managing them and them managing themselves. It has been a very unselfish team."

A&M's victory hopes looked dim when KSU quarterback Michael Bishop scored on a five-yard run with 40 seconds left in the third quarter to give the Wildcats a 27-12 lead.

A&M rebounded quickly as senior quarterback Brannndon Stewart, replacing junior Randy McCown who was out with a broken collarbone, hit junior wide receiver Leroy Hodge for a 13-yard touchdown on third down and 10 yards to go with 9:20 left in the game.

Sophomore placekicker Russell Bynum tacked on the extra point to bring the score to 27-19.

K-State stopped another A&M possession and took the ball over on downs.

Trying to run out the clock, Bishop tried to keep the KSU drive alive by scrambling, but A&M senior line-

backer Warrick Holdman jarred the ball loose and sophomore linebacker Cornelius Anthony recovered it at the KSU 35-yard line.

A pass interference penalty on A&M moved the ball back to the 50, but on the next play junior wide receiver Matt Bumgardner made a diving 36-yard catch to the KSU 14-yard line.

Three plays later, Stewart fired a pass to senior running back SIRR PARKER for a nine-yard touchdown, pulling the score to 27-25.

On the two-point conversion attempt, Stewart rolled right and lofted a pass to Parker for the score as the unlikely heroes hooked up again.

"I couldn't be more proud of them and proud of this team," Slocum said. "I said before the game that we wanted to play every play, we wanted to play the next play, and that we would never, never give up regardless of what happened."

The 12th Man was in full effect for A&M, but it almost cost the Aggies the game.

A 15-yard illegal participation penalty (12 men on the field) put KSU within field goal range, but the penalty was switched to a five-yarder because the extra player was attempting to leave the field.

A false start pushed KSU back farther, and Bishop threw a Hail Mary that bounced around and ended up being caught by wide receiver Everett Burnett on the A&M two-yard line.

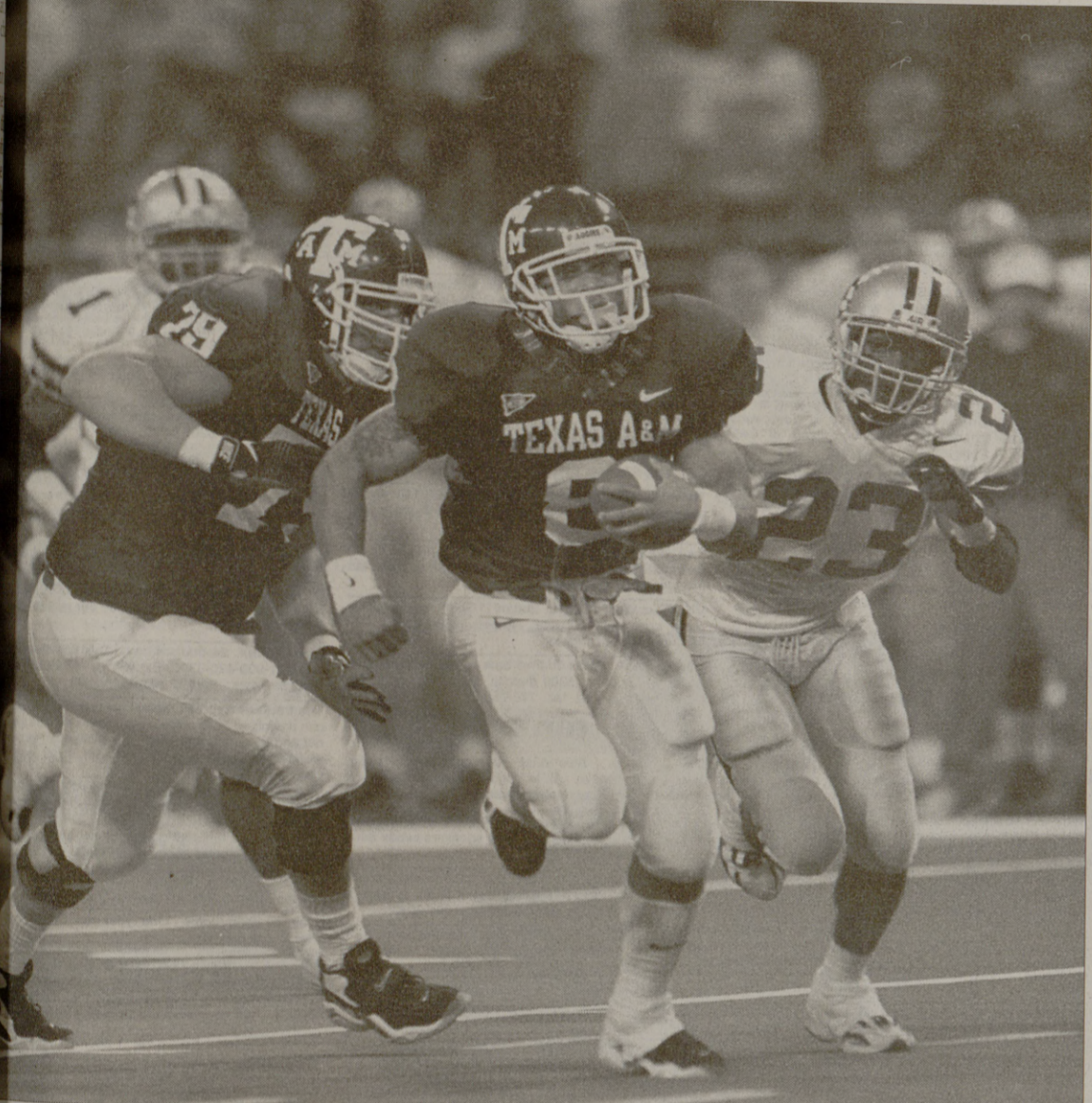
A&M senior safety Toya Jones made a game-saving hit to keep Burnett out of the end zone and the win column.

A&M started its first possession in the overtime period with a Bynum field goal, giving A&M a 30-27 lead, its first of the game.

KSU countered with back-to-back Martin Gramatica field goals, but led by a Herculean effort by Parker, A&M scored the winning touchdown.

On a third and 17 from the KSU 32-yard line, the Aggies were just trying to get into position to kick a field goal.

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JAKE SCHRICKLING/THE BATTALION

A&M senior running back SIRR PARKER runs for the game-winning touchdown in overtime against KSU Saturday.

A&M players put on unmatched show of heart in win

ST. LOUIS — The Houston Rockets had a saying when they marched to the NBA Finals and won their second straight title: "Never underestimate the heart of a champion."



JEFF SCHMIDT

This motto can now apply to the Texas A&M Football Team, because that's what the Aggies are: champions.

"I told some of the young guys after the game to remember what this feels like and what it took to win all the games we played this year," senior tight end Dan Campbell said. "I think this year was a pretty good start towards a dynasty. I think this

was a really special team and a really special group."

A&M came from 15 points down to tie the game, take it to overtime and unlike last week, the Aggies sealed the deal.

"When we were in overtime, I said to the other guys, don't let this one slip away," senior linebacker Dat Nguyen said. "We let the game against Texas slip away, but we did not let it happen."

A&M has had a never-say-die attitude all season, senior safety Rich Coady said.

He said the Aggies somehow always find a way to win.

This will to survive is what has made this A&M team great. And to do so through the attrition that the Aggies faced is truly remarkable.

A&M lost senior fullback Marc Broyles, junior running back Eric Bernard and junior fullback Jason Bragg to injuries. Then there was the "Tiki" Case. The ineligibility of A&M's toughest runner, D'Andre "Tiki" Harde-man, cost the Aggies a win.

So what makes this team better than previous teams that had more going for them?

Two words: chemistry and character. Coach R. C. Slocum said this team does not have any one superstar, aside from Nguyen, but the team plays well as a group and feeds off of Nguyen's intensity. Slocum also said this team has some of the most character of any team he has ever coached.

He talked about players who kept their egos in check for the good of the team.

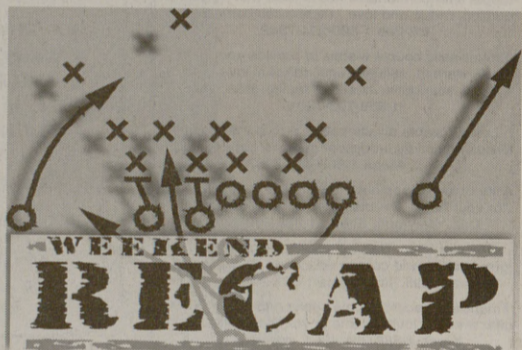
"We have had two quarterbacks

who have competed for the starting job all year, but both have had a very unselfish attitude," he said. "They have been in the background of this team's success all year, but they have definitely contributed to the success."

"This is a team that could have been a 6-5 team, if it wasn't for their character," Slocum said at a weekly media luncheon. "Just playing on ability, this team isn't going to win 10 games. But the team really played together."

"We've had as solid of chemistry on this team as we've had on any team here in a long time. I think that's a tribute to the coaches and I really think it's a tribute to the caliber of the young men that we have."

Jeff Schmidt is a senior journalism major.



• Texas A&M's 36-33 victory over Kansas State University Saturday was the first time A&M had beaten a No. 1-ranked team (KSU was ranked No. 1 in the *USA Today/ESPN* Coaches' Poll and No. 2 in *The Associated Press* poll). A&M's previous highest-ranked victim was then-No. 2 University of Nebraska earlier this season.

• A&M's win gave the Aggies their first conference crown since 1993 when they won the Southwest Conference title.

• A&M rallied from 15 points down, 27-12, to tie and eventually win the game. It ties the school record for largest comeback victory, set last year against Oklahoma State University (28-25 Aggie victory at Kyle Field). Ironically, A&M scored a late touchdown against the Cowboys and made a two-point conversion on virtually the same play to SIRR PARKER that the Aggies used on KSU Saturday to tie the game.

• With 113 yards rushing, junior running back Dante Hall went over the 1,000-yard plateau for the first time in his career. He is A&M's first 1,000-yard rusher since Leeland McElroy rushed for 1,122 yards in 1995. For the season, Hall has 1,090 yards.

SOUND BITES

"This may be the most difficult thing to happen in their young lives."

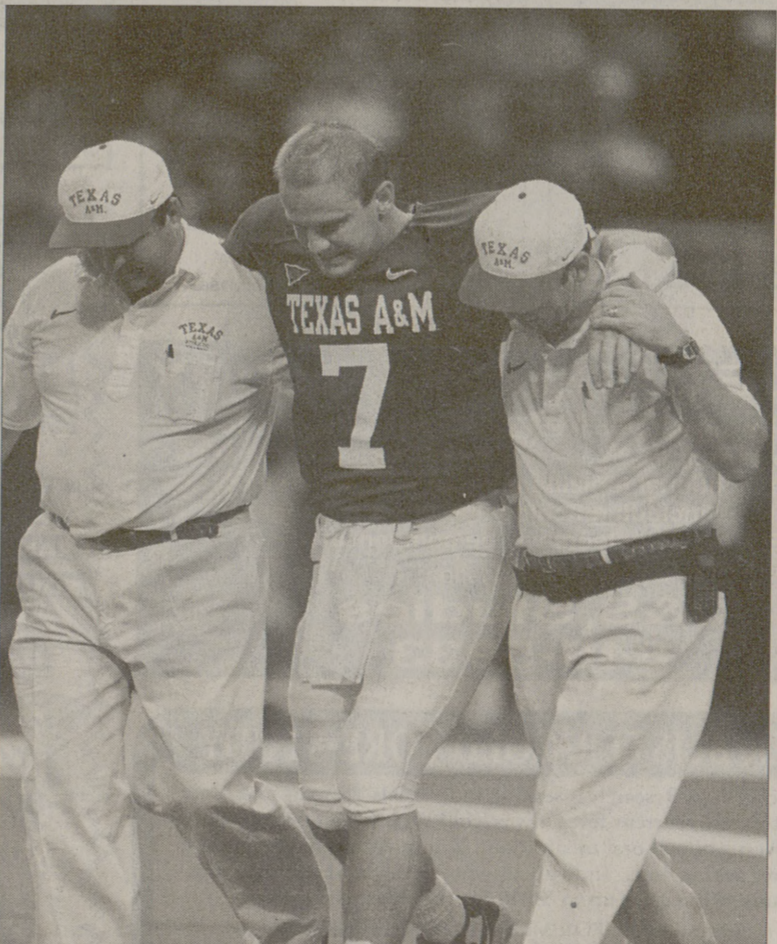
— KSU coach Bill Snyder on the loss to Texas A&M.

"We let the game against Texas slip away, but we did not let it happen to us again."

— A&M senior linebacker Dat Nguyen.

"I think this year was a pretty good start towards a dynasty."

— A&M senior tight end Dan Campbell.



JAKE SCHRICKLING/THE BATTALION

Senior quarterback Brannndon Stewart is helped off the field in the first quarter after a knee injury. He returned and directed A&M to the win.

Stewart shines in victory

BY JEFF SCHMIDT
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ST. LOUIS — Another chapter in senior quarterback Brannndon Stewart's up-and-down career at Texas A&M came to a close Saturday — in a way most fans probably would not have believed.

Stewart, starting for the injured junior quarterback Randy McCown, passed for 324 yards, the third-highest total in A&M history, and three touchdowns, leading the Aggies to a 36-33 upset over top-ranked Kansas State University.

"For some reason, I thought Brannndon was going to have a good game tonight," A&M coach R. C. Slocum said. "He had confidence this week and had been relaxed in practice."

"I am extremely pleased with his performance. He had some ups and downs in his career, but he has never been selfish and he has always showed class."

At the beginning however, it did not look like Stewart's day. Stewart did not complete his first pass until A&M's second possession of the second quarter.

He finished two-of-seven for 39 yards in the first half. Stewart also hyperextended his knee in the first quarter, forcing junior punter Shane Lechler, a former quarterback at East Bernard High School, to begin warming up. Stewart returned and played through the pain.

"I wasn't going to come out of the game, regardless," Stewart said.

His third quarter was not so impressive as he completed only two more passes to finish the first three periods four of 11 for 89 yards.