

Winter of discontent

Men's basketball faces tough conference play

BY SANTOSH VENKATARAMAN
The Battalion

While many on the A&M campus spent their break in an enjoyable fashion, the A&M Men's Basketball Team, who ended the fall semester with a glittering 7-1 record and a label as the surprise team of the Big 12, have dropped seven straight games to fall to 7-8 overall and an 0-5 mark in conference play.

The genesis for the losing streak might have come in the first game of the streak on December 19. The Aggies led highly-regarded Arizona State University for much of the contest only to see ASU guard Eddie House hit three-point shots to force overtime and triple overtime in succession and the result was a devastating 96-91 loss in three overtimes.

A&M's next two games both resulted in blow-out losses on the road at Southern and at Kansas. The latter was the Big 12 opener for the Aggies.

A&M returned home for a hard-fought contest against 22nd-ranked Oklahoma State University. The Aggies were down 58-57 with a minute and a half left but the Cowboys made all the plays the rest of the way for a 64-59 victory.

A&M dropped another close one three days later at home against the University of Missouri as A&M held a 91-89 lead with 2:37 left only to be outscored 7-0 the rest of the way. These back-to-back defeats left A&M frustrated and confused and the effects lingered in successive losses to Texas Tech and Iowa State in their last two games.

The Aggies have shot 27 percent from three-point range and are one of only two Big 12 teams shooting under 30 percent for the year. A&M has connected on only five out of its last 32 three-point attempts.

A&M also has been outrebounded in five out of their last seven contests and now rank last in the conference in rebounding margin. While A&M demonstrated the mental toughness needed to win close games in the non-conference portion of the schedule, they have shown a lack of poise in their last seven games.

In the Arizona State contest, the Aggies missed several key free throws that could have clinched a victory. A&M was unable to make shots against Oklahoma State that could have won or tied that game with a minute left and had several poor shots and turnovers against Missouri.

The A&M team has had few easy breaks in this recent stretch. Arizona State forward Michael Batiste was declared eligible the morning of the Dec. 19 game and arrived in College Station only a couple of hours before the tip-off, just in time to score 23 points and gather 18 rebounds.

Southern (10-4) and Kansas (13-4) were both coming off rare blow-out losses before hosting A&M. Missouri shot a season-high 56.7 percent in the Jan. 9 game, including 69 percent from three-point range in the first half.

Two days later, the Tigers shot 16 percent in the first half and 34 percent for the game in a loss to Kansas. Iowa State Coach Larry Eustachy said after his team's win against A&M on Jan. 16: "There is no way we could have won this game a couple of weeks ago. We played our best game by far today."

Coach Melvin Watkins said the Aggies' problems are more psychological than physical.

"It's mental. It's mental with these guys. They see that it is a Big 12 game and they play differently," he said. "They have it in their heads that they can't win a Big 12 game."

Amidst the losing streak, it has been hard to find positives for the Aggies. One has been the play of junior guard Clifton Cook, who has emerged as a candidate for Big 12 Newcomer of the Year. Cook is second in the league in assists, eighth in scoring, and ranks as the top rebounding guard in the league.

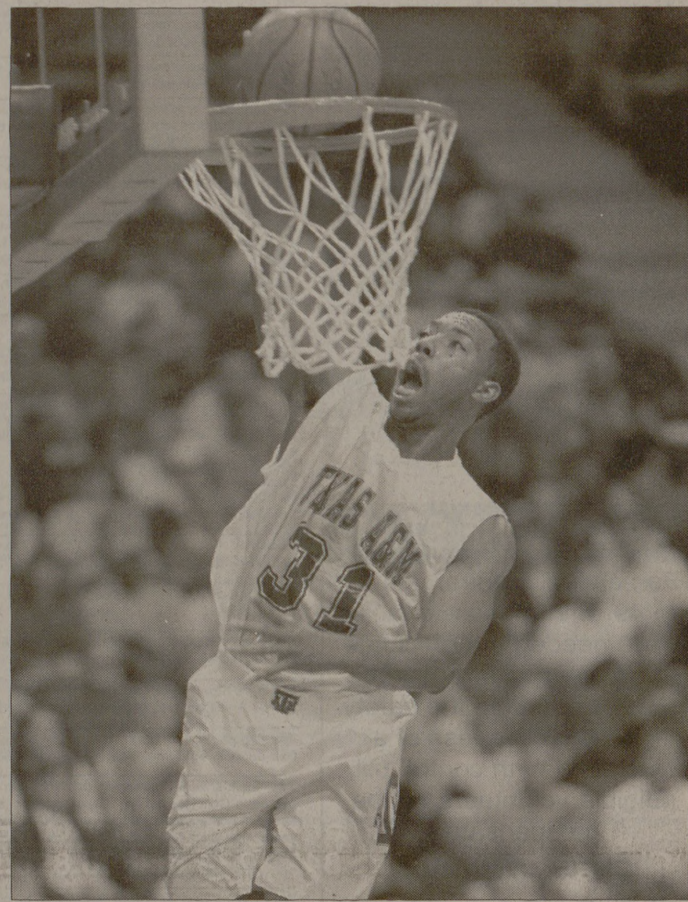
Senior forward Shanne Jones also has competed well. Jones is seventh in scoring in the conference and is the Big 12 leader in field-goal percentage. Another bright spot has been the play of freshman center Joe White. White has started six of the last seven games and is sixth among conference freshmen in both scoring and rebounding.

What is in store for the Aggies for the rest of the season? With 11 games left, there is still time for A&M to engineer a turnaround. Watkins knows that it is up to the team to write a successful final chapter for the season.

"We have seven wins, the same as last year," Watkins says. "If we are satisfied with that, then that's all we will have. If not, we'll go back to practice and work on ways to improve."



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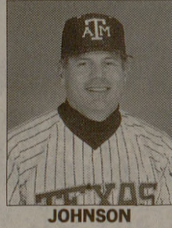
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TOP: The Aggies' Clifton Cook is averaging 15.3 points per game on .573 shooting this season.
TOP RIGHT: Guard Michael Schmidt has put up 7.5 points and a .733 free-throw percentage this year.
BOTTOM RIGHT: A&M's Shanne Jones is contributing 15.8 and 4.8 rebounds per contest this season.

Johnson named as USA coach

BY MICHAEL TAGLIANTI
The Battalion

Throughout history, when Uncle Sam has asked, Aggies have answered the call. A&M baseball coach Mark Johnson will continue the tradition when he coaches the 1999 USA National Baseball Team.



JOHNSON

The USA Baseball Organization Tuesday named Johnson the head coach of this summer's team. This marks Johnson's second coaching stint with the national team; he served as an assistant coach on the 1991 squad.

"I was certainly honored that they would ask me to coach the team," Johnson said.

"To be asked to be the head coach of the USA National Team is a great honor. I'm very excited about it."

Johnson will begin his 15th season as the head coach at A&M when the team opens the season Feb. 5th against University of Texas-Pan American. In 15 seasons at A&M Johnson has won over 70 percent of his games, fifth in winning percentage among active NCAA coaches.

He led the Aggies to three Southwestern Conference titles and the 1998 Big 12 title. Johnson was named 1993 National Coach of the Year.

During Johnson's 15 years at A&M, the baseball team has had an 82-percent graduation rate for players who completed their eligibility.

Johnson said coaching the team would make him miss time with his family this summer, but he decided to accept the position anyway.

"It is tough on the family," Johnson said. "It is a nine-week deal during the summer. Normally, I would spend that time with my family, but not a lot of guys get a chance to do this, so I accepted the offer."



ERIC NEWNAM/THE BATTALION

Iowa State forward Marcus Fizer (5) posts up against the Aggies at Reed Arena Saturday. Fizer is one of several Big 12 players who put up big numbers over the holiday break, averaging 17.7 points and 7.8 rebounds this season. Kansas and Oklahoma top the Big 12 rankings, both unbeaten at 5-0 and 4-0, respectively.

KU leads Big 12 hoopsters

BY MICHAEL TAGLIANTI
The Battalion

Conference play has begun and all the teams in the Big 12 are fighting it out to earn the top two seeds for the conference tournament. Some teams have been a surprise, and some have disappointed since Big 12 play began.

SOUTH

• Texas Longhorns:

After starting the season 0-4 the Longhorns have played much better ball in conference and have busted out of the gate with a 5-1 record. Despite having zero depth and no true point guard the Texas players have been playing as good as anyone in the Big 12. If Gabe Muoneke is able to keep his head Texas could find itself in the NCAA tournament.

• Oklahoma Sooners

OU has ridden the inside presence of Ryan Humphrey and Eduardo Najera to a 4-0 record. Kelvin Sampson is one of the best coaches in the Big 12 and OU should be competitive as long as Najera and Humphrey remain healthy.

• Oklahoma State Cowboys

The Cowboys get the schizophrenia award for the Big 12. Picked by many to win the conference outright OSU has struggled at times, losing to Florida Atlantic at home, and played well at times while going 4-1 in the conference and 12-4 overall. The Cowboys have the best inside-outside duo in the conference in Adrien Peterson and Desmond Mason. Peterson leads the league in scoring at 18.1 points per game and Mason is third at 17.8 points per game.

• Texas Tech Red Raiders

The Red Raiders have struggled a little bit this year going 2-3 in conference and 10-8 overall. After losing Cory Carr off last year's team Tech has struggled to find a go to guy. Rayford Young has been great when healthy averaging 14.7 points per game but has struggled with injuries all year.

• Texas A&M Aggies

The Aggies have been one of the biggest disappointments in the conference. After starting out the season 7-1 A&M has lost seven games in a row including five conference games. If A&M starts shooting the ball better and stops turning the ball over they have the talent to win a few conference games. If they continue to play basketball like they have the past couple of weeks the two games against Baylor might be the only two games A&M will win in the Big 12.

• Baylor Bears

If there is one thing that Aggies can be thankful of it is that they are not as bad as Baylor. Baylor is 0-5 in

BiG XII standings

TEAM	RECORD	BIG 12
Kansas	13 - 4	5 - 0
Oklahoma	13 - 4	4 - 0
Texas	9 - 9	5 - 1
Okla. St.	12 - 4	4 - 1
Missouri	12 - 4	3 - 2
Nebraska	10 - 7	2 - 2
Iowa St.	11 - 7	2 - 3
Texas Tech	10 - 8	2 - 3
Colorado	10 - 7	1 - 3
Kansas St.	12 - 6	1 - 4
Texas A&M	7 - 8	0 - 5
Baylor	6 - 12	0 - 5

conference and 6-12 overall. The Bear's leading scorer Tevis Stukes recently quit the team. Last year the Bears were Brian Skinner and not much else. This year Skinner is in the NBA and the Bears are struggling. The Bears and the Aggies will fight it out to avoid the cellar in the Big 12.

NORTH

• Kansas Jayhawks

The Jayhawks have traditionally dominated the conference losing only two conference games in two seasons. KU is the only undefeated team in the conference at 5-0 and 13-4 overall but are not as dominant as they have been the past couple of years. Kenny Gregory and Eric Chenoweth have failed to fill the shoes of Paul Pierce and Raef LaFrenz, but it might not matter this year.

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