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SPORTS

Page 10 • Wednesday, April 14, 1999

Dream season
Sophomore Amy Vining
excels in role as Aggie ace

BY JASON LINCOLN
The Battalion

It was a childhood dream of Aggie softball pitcher Amy Vining to become part of the traditions of Texas A&M, but those hopes were just a glimpse of what the future held for Vining and for the Aggies.

"It's been my dream since I was little," Vining said. "I have always wanted to be an Aggie. But I didn't expect I would be as successful [in softball] as I've been."

In her second season at A&M, the righthander has taken over the top pitching position for the Aggies with a bang. Now the young pitcher has become a cornerstone of the 1999 softball team by means of a consistent and effective performance on the mound that keeps the Aggies in every game.

Vining's first season as an Aggie in 1998 was spent in the shadow of three-time high-school All-American Ashley Lewis. But even then, Vining, from Deer Park, one of the top softball regions in the state, took every opportunity to prove her capabilities and help the Aggies win.

"I just hoped that I could help the team and be consistent," she said.

Consistency, along with hard work and dedication, turned Vining into one of the Big 12's top pitchers.

The freshman racked up a .647 winning percentage with an 11-6 record, becoming the fourth-best pitcher in the conference with a 1.14 ERA. In addition to pitching 12 com-

plete games and two shutouts, she held batters to a .218 batting average for the season.

But 1998 would just be a preview to Vining's true contributions to A&M softball. With Lewis returning to her hometown, Baton Rouge, to play for Louisiana State University, Vining stepped into the top spot in the Aggie rotation.

Vining has answered the pressures of the mound with finesse this season as she takes her position and makes the most of it in every game. Not only has she been named Big 12 Pitcher of the Week three times this season, but she also has become the most effective pitcher in the Big 12 with a 0.75 ERA.

Vining has 18 wins, eight losses and one save this season for a .692 win percentage. She has also held opposing batters to a .195 hitting percentage while getting 171 strikeouts in 177 innings.

Among the improvements Vining has made in college, according to Evans, is a finesse in her pitching, her change-up, keeping her ball down and improving all aspects of her game through hard work.

The rise ball and change-up were mainstays for Vining when she came to A&M. Since then, she has added a curve and screw ball among her best pitches.

"My catchers set my pitches up really well," Vining said. "I try not to ever put anything over the center of the plate, and I mix up the pitches pretty well."



TERRY ROBERTSON

Vining's ability to keep the Aggies in the game by staying ahead of the batters provides a confidence in the field for all of A&M's players who know that they will be able to stay in every game through the end.

"She's given the team confidence, knowing she's always going to be ahead of batters," junior Jamie Smith said. "It gives a lot of confi-

dence for the offense because not a lot of runners are on and all we have to do is hit the ball."

With Vining leading the conference in only her second NCAA softball and a team senior, A&M's future looks as they try to fulfill Vining's dream of a postseason and Aggies to a Collegiate World Series.

SOFTBALL

Continued from Page 7

sophomore is 18-8 on the year with a Big 12-leading 0.75 ERA. Vining also has earned three Big 12 Player of the Week awards this season.

Leading the Aggies offensively is freshman catcher/third baseman Lisa Klam. Klam is leading the team in several offensive categories, including batting average (.387), home runs (10) and stolen bases (20).

Klam said she is ready to get back on the field after the close losses to the Longhorns.

"It's frustrating knowing we can beat Texas," Klam said. "We're ready to bounce back."

The Aggies as a team are outpitching opponents, .291 to .213, with two players besides Klam hitting over .340, while the Aggie pitching staff has combined to post a 1.14 ERA.

The Aggies lead the all-time series with Southwest Texas 47-5 and currently are riding a four-game winning streak over the Bobcats.

A&M will return to conference play Saturday with a doubleheader against No. 11 University of Oklahoma.

Aikman signs extension

IRVING, Texas (AP) — Troy Aikman signed a six-year contract extension that will keep him with the Dallas Cowboys through 2007.

Team owner Jerry Jones disclosed the deal for his quarterback Tuesday during a news conference to announce the return of center Mark Stepnoski. Stepnoski was given a five-year, \$10.5 million contract plus million signing bonus.

Jones released details of Aikman's deal, other than the \$10.5 million salary-cap friendly. "We have entered into a contract with Troy Aikman at the point where he has chosen to have him for the rest of his career," Jones said.

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