

Aaron Jack-F
Begins senior year
in 1999

Jerald Brown-G/F
Begins senior year
in 1999

Michael Schmidt-G
Transferring to Niagra
University in 1999

Chris Richards-C
Quit team at start
of 1998 season

Calvin Davis-F
Herniated back disk
ended career in 1998

Dario Quesada-C
Bulging back disk
ended career in '98

Larry Thompson-C/F
Completed eligibility
in 1998

Chris Clayton-G
Completed eligibility
in 1999

T.J. Brown-G
Not medically cleared
to play in 1999

Brian Barone-G
Transferred to Marquette
University in 1998

Steve Houston-G
Dismissed for violating
team rules in 1998

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY GUY ROGERS/THE BATTALION

Since his arrival at Texas A&M University, coach Melvin Watkins has molded the Men's Basketball Team into his own through recruiting. Only two of the 12 players from the 1997-98 squad remain on the team today.

BUILDING A WINNING TEAM

Aggie coach Melvin Watkins makes most of his first-full recruiting class at Texas A&M

BY JEFF WEBB
The Battalion

The most amazing sight outside the Coleman High School gymnasium in Gibsland, La., was not the few maroon-clad basketball fans, some standing on their toes and craning their necks for a better view inside the place on an atypical, frosty March evening in North Louisiana. The person they came to see, this real-life Jesus Shuttlesworth of Gibsland, La., was the main attraction in a hotly contested state playoff game against Pitkin High School.

The window beside the door of the sold-out, ramshackle gym was the only way to see the Division I phenom for the many who couldn't get tickets and were left on the outside.

Bernard King was ranked among the top 40 recruits in most college basketball publications, and he had committed to Texas A&M in November at the request of Melvin Watkins, a coach who had just completed his first year at the helm of a traditionally pitiful program.

Watkins pulled a minor coup during the off-season, filling all 13 scholarships by stealing top-ranked recruits out from under the whistles of other college coaches.

Nine players mark the first full recruiting class from the long-time University of North Carolina-Charlotte (UNC-C) coach. Watkins was wooed on April 1, 1998, by Texas A&M Athletics Director Wally Groff and a rich contract that makes him one of the highest paid college basketball coaches in the state.

Although the news conference announcing his hiring was conducted on April Fools' Day, the joke is now on Watkins' critics. The new class is expected to come in right away and improve a team that posted a mere 12-15 record last year. "They (the recruits) are still going to be

freshman," Watkins said. "We try to think we can ease them into it, but the Big 12 Conference is a major adjustment. Bernard has the confidence, but physically he's not strong enough. But right now, Bernard will have the easiest time adjusting."

The Aggies need King to contribute minutes right away, possibly at point guard.

Former starting point guard Clifton Cook, named Big 12 Conference Newcomer of the Year in 1999, was ruled academically ineligible on June 30, signifying the end of his A&M career.

Cook led the team in assists (5.8), steals (2.5) and scoring (15.6) and was named third team All-Big 12 by league coaches.

"When I got to the state of Texas, I found that a lot of kids were excited about A&M"

— MELVIN WATKINS
BASKETBALL COACH



"It was a major setback for us, but more importantly for the kid," Watkins said of Cook's situation. "We don't know what will become of him. We got him a tryout with the (Houston) Rockets, and he might play across the water. He was our man, but now we have to face the hardest period of replacing him."

His replacement will be King or 1999 recruit Jamaal Gilchrist of Middleburg, Va. Other guards in the signing class include Damon Escoffery, a community college transfer from Brooklyn, N.Y., and Jesse King, an athletic 6' 6" swingman from Detroit, Mich.

But the prize of the class is King, who was recruited by more than 30 coaches before he signed. He said the opportunity to play during his first season was the reason he chose A&M.

"Before I came in, [Watkins] said it was going to be a young team," King said. "It feels good because I wanted to go somewhere where I was going to get a chance to play early. Not until this year did people get a chance to see me play. I knew I could be a top prospect."

"I committed early because I wanted to concentrate on my season and try to win the championship."

Watkins offered the possibility of playing time to most of the new recruits because high-school players want the promise of early playing time once they enroll. The large roster turnover for the Aggies in the last two years created a need for new contributors.

"It happens that in the world we live in today, there is no delayed gratification," Watkins said. "Freshmen are not happy when they're not playing, and kids don't want to waste their time."

"But we're on solid ground. The bonus is we have a lot of open spots."

Andy Slocum is another freshman who will fight for playing time next season. Recruiting analyst Bob Gibbons ranks him as the 88th best high-school player in the country. Slocum, from West Monroe, La., was persistently pursued by Utah, Auburn and Florida State University, among others, before signing with the Aggies.

Slocum and King are just the latest names added to a long list of blue-chip recruits from Louisiana who Watkins has recruited.

While at UNC-C, he signed Kelvin Price (New Iberia), Kedric Smith (Alexandria) and Charles Heyward (Alexandria). Each player went on to become significant factors in UNC-C's last three NCAA Tourna-

Current players ones most affected by arrival of new recruits on campus

BY JEFF WEBB
The Battalion

Texas A&M Men's Basketball coach Melvin Watkins signed one of the nation's top 15 recruiting classes, but it might have come at the expense of some Aggie players.

Guard T.J. Brown will not play basketball for the Aggies during the 1999-2000 season because he was not cleared medically to play by team trainer Mike Ricke. Brown tore his anterior cruciate ligament during his freshman season and suffered another injury last year.

However, Brown's personal doctor said he was healthy enough to continue his career.

"The doctor that performed my surgery said that my bone would heal 100 percent," Brown said. "Mike Ricke examined me and wouldn't clear me to play. At the end of the year, we had our individual meetings with Coach Watkins, and he told me that I could stay on medical or transfer and play, but I couldn't play next year. I thought that was kind of bizarre."

Watkins said Brown could not pass his physical, but he will remain on scholarship until he graduates. Watkins offered

Brown his scholarship release to transfer, but Brown said he would not leave A&M at the moment.

"I considered it for a while, but [A&M is] like my home now," Brown said. "I don't adapt to change well."

Change has been the one constant for the men's basketball program since Tony Barone was reassigned during the spring of 1998.

Of the 12 players on the Aggies' roster at the start of the 1997, only two remain on this year's roster.

Three completed their basketball eligibility and left with a degree and another two, Dario Quesada and Calvin Davis, quit the team after back injuries made it impossible for them to play.

However, a large number of the players transferred were dismissed or quit the team.

John McFall, Brown's high-school coach in Olathe, Kan., had many players who went on to Division I college programs. McFall's son, Brett, plays basketball at the University of Wyoming.

He said the exodus of players from the A&M program is a sign of the times of college basketball.

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ment appearances, although Heyward lost time after being diagnosed with leukemia two years ago.

"I don't know that I have connections," Watkins said, "but I have worked that state in the past. When I got to the state of Texas,

I found that a lot of kids were excited about A&M."

Assistant coach Bobby Kummer played for Watkins for four years at UNC-C before

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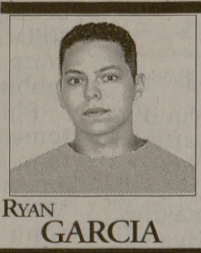
Lawrence Phillips' return to NFL shows people need only money, athletic ability to succeed

Everything anyone needs to know about life can be learned from the National Football League.

If life manages to sack you, dust yourself off and get back up again. Opportunities are created — they are not just the result of dumb luck. Finally, always take advantage of whatever you can when dealing with a guy the size of Randy Moss.

Even now in the preseason, as the scramble to begin NFL training camps ensues, football fans are still being educated. This month's lesson: No matter how bad a person you are, athletic ability ensures you millions of dollars.

This valuable lesson was provided by the San Francisco 49ers and its general manager



RYAN GARCIA

Bill Walsh, who signed troubled running back Lawrence Phillips to a two-year deal this month, worth an undesired \$1.75 million, including a \$425,000 signing bonus. Phillips could earn even more through incentives.

Phillips, who Aggies may remember as the explosive Nebraska running back who made headlines with his suspension for assaulting a former girlfriend, became even more notorious in the NFL after being drafted by the St. Louis Rams with the sixth overall pick in 1996.

As a Ram, Phillips was arrested three times in a period of 19 months before being released by coach Dick Vermeil who cited Phillips' excessive tardiness to numerous practices and overall lack of discipline as the main reasons.

In addition, Phillips' lackluster on-the-field performance wasn't exactly setting the NFL on fire.

Despite an already horrid track record, Miami Dolphins' coach Jimmy Johnson gave Phillips a second chance only to release him four weeks later after an incident in which he allegedly struck a woman who refused to dance with him in a nightclub.

With a hitting streak like his, Phillips should have pursued a baseball career rather than toil away in the NFL.

Finally, with no options left, Phillips was relegated to NFL Europe, an overseas developmental and last-chance league for the NFL.

Amid talent that couldn't compete in the Big 12 Conference, Phillips finally managed to compile decent numbers, setting single-season records with 1,021 rushing yards and 14 touchdowns.

With an overrated NFL Europe performance, Phillips' big break came when San



MARK MCPHERSON/THE BATTALION

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