

Fullback duo of Hardeman, Toombs gives Aggies bruising running attack.

Earth Movers

BY AL LAZARUS
The Battalion

They stood together outside of Cain Hall last week, nearly 500 pounds of smiles, horseplay and typical college athlete jocular. But there is nothing even close to typical about the on-the-field antics of Texas A&M's fullback tandem of senior D'Andre "Tiki" Hardeman and sophomore Ja'Mar Toombs.

Imposing? Sure. Scary? You bet. But not typical, not these two. They are bruising, run-it-up-the-gut players, but each is impossibly fast for his size. They are the first guys looked to in goal-line situations, yet they both have a 70-yard plus run to their credit. And at any given time, either one of them can play tailback for the Aggies and look perfectly comfortable at the position.

Since he burst onto the scene in 1995 as a true freshman, Hardeman has given opponents all they can handle. But just as Aggie foes breathed a sigh of relief when he was declared academically ineligible two games into the 1998 season, the true freshman Toombs came in and picked up where Hardeman left off.

Now that the 5-foot-10, 232 pound Hardeman has regained his eligibility, and the 6-foot, 265 pound Toombs has a year under his belt, A&M's 1999 opponents may be tempted to run for cover.

"There should be an intimidation factor this year," Toombs said. "If I run the ball for five plays, and we're just pounding somebody, and then [Hardeman] comes in for five plays, and he pounds them, then we'll never back off."

"By the end of the game, they're not going to want to take all those licks no more."

Whether it is Toombs or Hardeman that actually starts is not a concern, Hardeman said.

"We don't really even care about who's going to start," he said. "We just know that the better we both run, the more we'll play."

That attitude carries over to practice, where Hardeman said the two are always very competitive.

"We really help each other in practice by pushing each other," he said. "It's real competitive between me and him because we just go out there everyday and try to make each other better."

After being declared ineligible last season, Hardeman still managed to contribute to the Aggies by taking the young Toombs under his wing.

"With him being a freshman last year, I took time out to talk to him," Hardeman said. "We went over personal things and other things that coaches can't really teach you."

Hardeman's tutelage helped progress Toombs' skills, as the freshman exhibited last season in a game that will be remembered for years to come as a breakthrough for A&M's program.

When the Aggies welcomed No. 2 Nebraska to Kyle Field, few figured Toombs, who had gained just 23 yards in limited action during A&M's first five games, would play a significant role in the outcome.

But with the game tied at seven late in the first half, Toombs took a handoff from Aggie quarterback Randy McCown and rumbled 71 yards to the Nebraska 1, setting up an A&M touchdown and giving the Aggies a lead they would never relinquish.

Toombs finished that game with 110 rushing yards on only 10 carries. He finished the season with 86 carries and 422 rushing yards, including a 111-yard performance against Oklahoma State.

Having an experienced fullback like Hardeman as a personal tutor and as a close friend has been beneficial, Toombs said.

"Since Tiki's been in the system for four years now, he can coach me on things like blocking schemes, the placement of plays, the timing and stuff like that," Toombs said. "Plus he just gives me that extra burst of wanting to play because we're really good friends."

McCown said he will look for Hardeman and Toombs to play an extra-large role in the Aggies' ground attack this season, especially in big games.

"It adds a different dimension to the backfield when you've got Ja'Mar and Tiki back there," McCown said. "Sometimes you play some big teams where you need to just pound people, and with Ja'Mar and Tiki you can do that."

"I'd like to see anybody that can stop those guys."



FILE PHOTO/TEXAS A&M SPORTS INFORMATION

Senior All-America punter **Shane Lechler** has seven 50-yard plus game averages to his credit.

Lechler's many talents prove valuable for Texas A&M

BY AL LAZARUS
The Battalion

Shane Lechler is proud of his versatility. But the Aggies' All-America punter, who also takes care of kickoffs, long-range field goals, and holding duties for the team, knows his limits.

So if Lechler never again finds himself in a situation similar to one he faced last year, when he stood poised to enter the Big 12 Championship game as the Aggies' emergency quarterback, the senior said that will be just fine with him.

"Hopefully that quarterback stuff is out of the picture," Lechler said. "But if something really bad happens, I guess I could take a snap or two and see what happens."

Such is the attitude of the Texas A&M Football team's do-everything guy. A lot of players are described as willing to do whatever it takes to help their team. But after watching him throughout his career at A&M, one gets the feeling that Lechler is not just willing, but also capable.

"The thing about Shane that's really impressive," A&M coach R.C. Slocum said, "is that over the years when we've really needed a big play, he's come through in the clutch for us in great fashion."

Slocum's confidence in Lechler was on full display in last season's game against Texas Tech. Although it had first been practiced by his team only two days earlier, Slocum called for a fake field goal. As the holder, Lechler took the snap, rolled out and threw a touchdown pass to tight end Daniel Campbell.

The fact that Lechler is successful at most everything he tries has prompted Slocum to call him the team's most valuable player over the past two seasons.

It's a label Lechler admits to liking, but he still tries to shrug it off.

"I really enjoy having that label, but I don't see how I could be the team's MVP," he said. "I only average about five punts a game, and how could somebody be an MVP if he's only out there five plays a game?"

Quarterback Randy McCown, who not surprisingly is one of Lechler's biggest fans, will gladly answer that question.

"At any given time, he can bang it 70 yards," McCown said. "He's a big weapon for us."

McCown understands what a great punter can do for a team, which explains why even during a spring scrimmage, he made sure Lechler was on his side.

"We were choosing teams, and before my fourth pick I asked coach if we were punting in the game," McCown said. "He said, 'yeah,' so I said, 'alright, I'll take Shane.'"

It's no accident that Lechler commands so much respect from his teammates. In his three years with the Aggies, he has punted 208 times for a total of 9,190 yards, putting his average gross yards per punt right above 44 yards, an A&M record.

He has had seven games in which he has averaged over 50 yards a punt, including a 1997 game against Iowa State in which he averaged 54.7, another school record.

The impressive numbers have brought Lechler his share of accolades. He earned first-team All-America honors in 1998 and was named first team All-Big 12 the last two seasons.

Lechler is also the only preseason All-American on a team ranked seventh and eighth in the nation's two major polls, a situation that will likely raise the bar even higher for him during the Aggies' 1999 campaign.

Lechler said any added expectations will not bother him, since they cannot surpass the ones he has set for himself.

"Right now I don't feel any pressure at all," he said. "If I just go out there and do my job, I feel that I'll meet my expectations, and I've set them pretty high this year."

"I'd like to average 50 yards a punt this year, so I don't think anybody else can put any more pressure on me than I can put on myself."



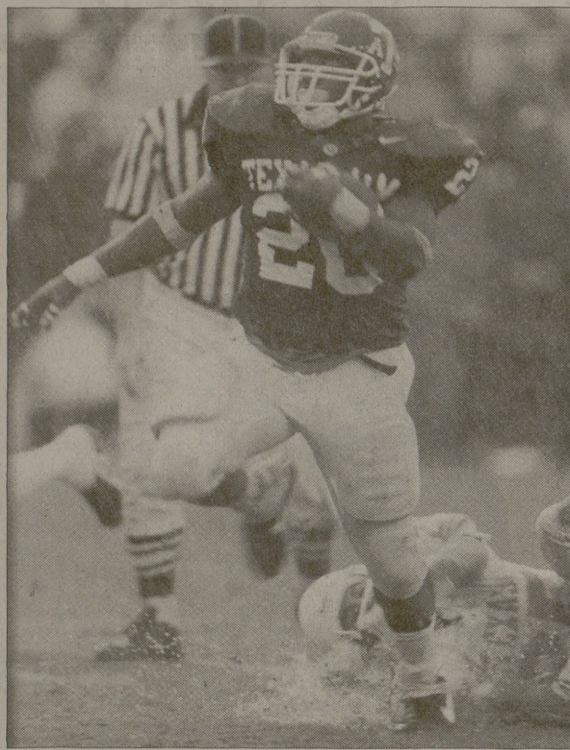
FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION

▲ In the Zone

Sophomore **Ja'Mar Toombs** celebrates after scoring a touchdown against Nebraska. **Toombs** burst onto the scene last year with 110 yards against the Cornhuskers.

► On the Run

Senior **D'Andre "Tiki" Hardeman** avoids a tackle during A&M's game against UT two years ago. **Hardeman** returns this year after being academically ineligible last year.



FILE PHOTO/TEXAS A&M SPORTS INFORMATION

Defensive players Anthony, Bradley step up to fill shoes of lost Wrecking Crew members

BY DOUG SHILLING
The Battalion

For most defensive teams, losing players such as Warrick Holdman, Rich Coady and Dat Nguyen would be crippling — especially considering those three players combined for almost 30 percent of the team's tackles and 40 percent of its sacks last season.

Even more important than the production lost is the leadership the three brought to the team as a whole.

But as is the case in years past, the Wrecking Crew doesn't rebuild, it reloads.

Waiting in the wings to step up and take over the place of the "Big Three" are two players who started and played along side of the departed players last year, junior inside linebacker Cornelius Anthony and junior outside linebacker Roylin Bradley.

In their first season as starters, both started all 14 games the Aggies played with Anthony finishing second to Nguyen on the team in tackles with 100 while Bradley led the team in sacks with nine.

Although overshadowed somewhat by their counterparts last year, the two saw last year as a learning experience.

"Last year was very vital for me," Anthony said. "It was my first year starting and I really didn't know what to expect and how to go about tackling each game. But now that I've got that experience

underneath my belt, there's a lot less thinking and more playing off instinct."

In addition to playing alongside great senior leaders, Anthony and Bradley both had the privilege of playing on the first A&M team to ever defeat an opponent ranked second or higher in the polls — a feat accomplished twice by last year's team.

In those wins, the duo did more than get their

SEE DEFENSE ON PAGE 6.



FILE PHOTO/TEXAS A&M SPORTS INFORMATION



FILE PHOTO/TEXAS A&M SPORTS INFORMATION

Junior linebackers **Cornelius Anthony** (top) and **Roylin Bradley** (left) will attempt to fill the void on defense left by the departed Dat Nguyen, Warrick Holdman and Rich Coady.