

THE BATTALION

Aggies in NFL prepare for upcoming season

Former members of the Texas A&M football team plan to make a run at 2001 Super Bowl

MARK PASSWATERS
The Battalion

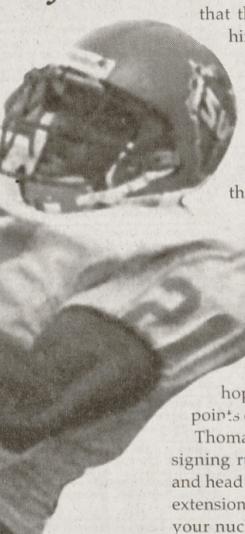
Every NFL player dreams of winning the Super Bowl. This season, at least three former Texas A&M players have a legitimate chance at realizing that dream. Albert Connell of the Washington Redskins, Rodney Thomas of the defending AFC Champion Tennessee Titans and Rich Coady of the defending Super Bowl Champion St. Louis Rams all hope to come out of Tampa's Raymond James Stadium as winner of football's biggest prize.

Connell's Redskins made more noise than any NFL team in the off-season, adding prominent free agents such as cornerback Deion Sanders, defensive end Bruce Smith, safety Mark Carrier and quarterback Jeff George. Add in rookies LaVar Arrington and Chris Samuels—the second and third picks in this year's draft—and the Redskins are a popular pick to break their 10-year Super Bowl drought. Connell is impressed by the changes the team has made.

"It's like a fantasy-league team," Connell said. "It's tough to believe."

Last year, Connell and new teammate Sanders had a highly publicized run-in when Sanders played for the hated rival Dallas Cowboys.

Connell made unflattering comments about Sanders, who responded by subtly elbowing Connell in the mouth in the first series of the game. Now that Sanders is wearing bur-



that the Super Bowl loss is behind them.

"Thinking about the past can shackle you," he said. "It's behind us. We're just trying to get back to the Super Bowl."

The Titans have changed their offensive scheme with the addition of wideout Carl Pickens and new offensive coordinator Mike Heimerdinger.

"It's a bit of a different philosophy," Thomas said. "Things look good so far and hopefully we can put some points on the board."

Thomas praised the Titans for signing running back Eddie George and head coach Jeff Fisher to contract extensions, saying, "You have to keep your nucleus. ... Just to know

that they're going to be there gives us confidence."

Rich Coady and the St. Louis Rams are not lacking confidence, and with good reason. The Rams are returning last year's championship team almost completely intact. Even though the Rams are everyone's target this year, Coady feels he and his teammates are ready.

"Every team we play is going to give us their best shot. We know we can make or break a team's season," he said.

The Rams were mostly silent in the off-season, allowing teams like Washington and Tampa Bay to steal the headlines with big signings. Coady said his teammates could not care less.

"They stole the spotlight, but they're still shooting for us. ... Until you get on the field, it's all irrelevant."

One major member from last year's championship team who will not be back is head coach Dick Vermeil, who retired. Former offensive coordinator Mike Martz has taken over for Vermeil, and Coady said the team has not missed a beat.

"There's a lot of the same feeling," he said. "The players are all excited with Coach Martz."

All three players said they think about their days at A&M often, including when they are on the field. Connell said that he and former University of Colorado star Westbrook already are jawing about this year's game between the Aggies and Buffalos at Kyle Field, and defensive end N.D. (Ndukwe) Kalu from Rice is also the target of some of his barbs. Connell also had a message for Aggie and current Dallas Cowboy cornerback Kevin Smith.

"You tell him I'm going to get him back for last year," Connell said jokingly. "He played me a little dirty, so I'm going to get him back."

"[Talking trash] goes back and forth all the time. It's all in good fun."

— Rich Coady
St. Louis Rams' defensive back

"Thinking about the past can shackle you. It's behind us. We're just trying to get back to the Super Bowl."

— Rodney Thomas
Tennessee Titans' running back

gundy and gold, Connell sees him in a different light.

"Deion is making me and the team better," Connell said. "I get better every time I go up against him."

Connell had a breakout year last season, catching 62 passes for 1,132 yards and seven touchdowns. This year, he knows that defenses will be watching him, and he relishes the challenge.

"It feels good to know that they're preparing for me, and not just Mike (Michael Westbrook, the Redskins other starting wideout)," Connell said. "It makes me work that much harder."

Connell's statistics will be "better than last year's," he said, laughing.

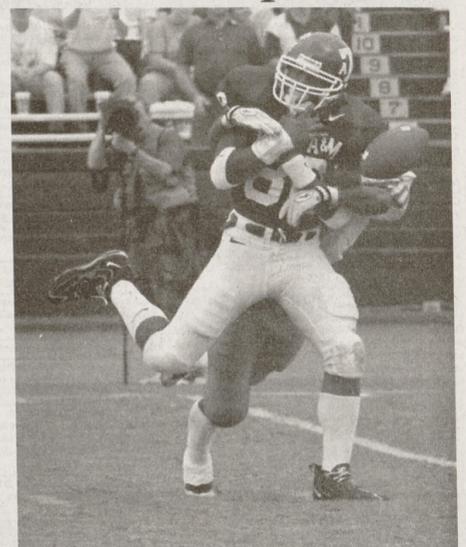
Rodney Thomas and the Titans will settle for just one more yard. Tennessee came within one yard of sending Super Bowl XXXV into overtime. In spite of the heartbreaking outcome, Thomas insists



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"It's like a fantasy-league team. It's tough to believe."

— Albert Connell
Washington Redskins' wide receiver



"It (talking trash) goes back and forth all the time," Coady said, noting that most of the talking goes on between him and former University of Texas Longhorn Taje Allen and University of Nebraska Grant Wistrom. "It's all in good fun."

The Rams open their season against the Denver Broncos and former A&M wide receiver Chris Cole, a fact that did not escape Coady's notice.

"There'll be a lot of trash talking going on," Coady said. "He knows better than to come over the middle if I'm back there."

Thomas says that while he leaves the jawing to others, he does keep close tabs on the Aggie football program.

"I call sometimes and try to find out what's up. ... I like to brag on 'em."

Without a doubt, all three former students would like to give their fellow Aggies something to brag about by winning a Super Bowl ring this season.

(Center) Rich Coady; (Bottom left) Rodney Thomas; (Top right) Albert Connell

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JP BEATO/THE BATTALION

Pitcher wins 200 games

ATLANTA (AP) — Tom Glavine became the third active pitcher to win 200 games, pitching into the ninth inning as the Atlanta Braves beat the Houston Astros 6-3 on Sunday.

Glavine (13-5) allowed three runs and seven hits in eight-plus innings to join teammate Greg Maddux and Roger Clemens with 200 wins. He is the 96th pitcher overall to reach 200.

Only Hall of Famer Phil Niekro (226) has more victories with Atlanta. Glavine, who won his sixth straight start, was given a standing ovation as he came out to start the ninth.

The left-hander was replaced after allowing an RBI single to Moises Alou that made it 6-2. With runners on first and second, manager Bobby Cox brought in Mike Remlinger, who struck out Lance Berkman and gave up a run-scoring single to Tony Eusebio.

Remlinger finished his ninth save in 11 opportunities.

The Braves put the game away with three runs in the fifth. Rafael Furcal singled, stole second and advanced to third on catcher Mitch Meluskey's throwing error.

Chipper Jones' RBI single scored Furcal to make it 4-0. Following a double by Wally Joyner, Javy Lopez hit a two-run double that put Atlanta up 6-0. Lopez improved to .405 (30-for-74) with 22 RBIs in July.

An RBI single by Jeff Bagwell cut the lead to 6-1 in the sixth and was all Houston would get until the ninth inning.

The Braves scored twice in the second inning off Chris Holt (4-12). Joyner, who reached on an error by Bagwell at first, moved to second Lopez's single. After both runners advanced on a passed ball, Joyner scored on Keith Lockhart's ground-out. George Lombard's RBI single made it 2-0.

Lockhart hit an RBI double in the fourth to make it 3-0. Lockhart was thrown out on the play in an attempt to get a triple.

Sports in Brief

Former A&M player Sykora heads to Sydney Olympics

Former Texas A&M volleyball player Stacy Sykora will travel to Australia as a member of the 2000 U.S. Olympic women's volleyball team.



SYKORA

Sykora will play the newly created position called Libero. The Libero is a defensive specialist who is allowed to dig and pass but cannot hit, serve or block, or set in

front of the 10-foot line. Wearing a different color jersey, the Libero stands out from her six teammates on the court.

The two-time All-American will be the first Aggie to play on an Olympic volleyball team. Sykora played for A&M from 1995-'98, starting three of those years as an outside hitter.

In her last season with the Aggies, Sykora led the Big 12 Conference and was ninth in the country in digs per game (4.37). After four years of playing for the Aggies, she ranked second in the A&M career records in both kills (1,586) and digs (1,471) and set 23

A&M single match, Big 12 season and Big 12 career marks.

All-Star game features Aggie football signees

Several recently graduated high school football players from across the state will converge on Houston Tuesday night for the annual Texas High School Coaches Association All-Star Game at Rice University before reporting to their respective colleges in the coming weeks.

Texas A&M football fans will be interested in watching the

game, which features seven players who have signed with the 2000 Aggie football team. Defensive backs Keelan Jackson and Dawon Gentry and linebacker Lebrandon Shepard will represent the North team on defense.

On the offensive side of the ball for the North will be lineman Kasey Cheshier and center Geoffrey Hangartner.

They will face two future Aggies on the South team — quarterback Dustin Long and defensive lineman Eddie Brown.

The game will be televised on FOX Sports Southwest at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

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