

Cowboys still hurting

Aikman's back requires more injections; Lett out

IRVING (AP) — Dallas quarterback Troy Aikman practiced for the first time in nearly two weeks Wednesday, and was optimistic he can start this week against Cincinnati. The practice came two days after Aikman received a second round of injections in the lower left side of his thigh back.

"I haven't gotten the relief I got two weeks ago, but got enough to get out and do what needed to be done," Aikman said after the two-hour workout at an indoor facility. "I'm optimistic that if it doesn't regress, it'll be okay."

After Aikman got the first series shots before the Oct. 29 game against Jacksonville, he said his back was feeling better than it had in years. But he was knocked out of the 23-17 overtime loss with back spasms after being slammed to the turf by Tony Brackens in the first quarter.

Aikman did not even travel for last week's 16-13 overtime loss at Philly. With Randall Cunningham sitting out practice with fluid on his knee, Aikman got a full workout with the first team Wednesday. Third-stringer Clint Stoerner also took some snaps.

"He looked fine," running back Emmitt Smith said of Aikman. "I thought he moved around and didn't really grimace, nothing like that. I'm assuming that he's fine. But there's

the physical aspect of it in terms of the pounding that remains to be seen."

Coach Dave Campo said no decision has been made on Aikman's status for Sunday.

"Troy looked good, he felt good and threw the ball well," Campo said. "He practiced a full practice and looked pretty good, but I have to see how he reacts overnight. That will be the determining factor."

On the same day that Aikman returned to practice, the Cowboys lost defensive tackle Leon Lett for the season. Lett sprained his left knee during a drill on the artificial turf at the Coppell High School facility.

"We're disappointed for Leon. He was a solid contributor in our defensive front this year, and this is a difficult setback," said Cowboys owner Jerry Jones.

The Cowboys had placed defensive tackle Chad Hennings on the injured reserved list earlier in the day. Hennings is out with a possibly career-ending neck injury.

"The loss of Leon and Chad is a blow in terms of experience, production and leadership on the line," Campo said. "We will probably go with Michael Myers at Leon's spot this Sunday, and then we will determine our defensive line rotation as this week progresses."

As for Aikman, who turns 34 lat-

er this month, Jones expressed concern earlier this week about whether the quarterback will return after this season.

In addition to being sidelined because of his back the past two games, Aikman missed two games after a concussion suffered in the first half of the season opener.

"About four or five years ago, I realized that I'd have a tough decision to make someday. I don't know if the time is now," Aikman said. "I'm not ready to say anything is inevitable. My primary concern is to get ready for Cincinnati."

Aikman said he will do as he does every year when evaluating his future. But he also knows how tough it was for him last weekend, when, for the first time in his 12-year career, he watched the Cowboys play from his living room.

"It was very difficult to do. I stood up most of the second half," Aikman said. "I'm hopeful that the carpet in my living room was softer than the turf in Philly."

Also Wednesday, the Cowboys placed receiver Raghieb Ismail (torn right ACL) on the injured reserve list. They signed defensive end Aaron Fields, who was with the Cowboys in training camp this year, and safety Greg Myers, who had been with the Bengals.

Houston approves arena bill

HOUSTON (AP) — The Rockets will not be jettisoning to New Orleans, after all. Houston voters approved the proposed arena referendum on Tuesday to prevent the second major sports franchise from leaving their city.

With all precincts reporting, the arena issue passed 65 percent to 35 percent, ensuring Houston will keep its pro basketball team and boosting efforts to draw major-league hockey.

The referendum asked voters to apply existing hotel and rental car taxes to construct a \$256 million home for the Houston Rockets, who say their existing home, 25-year-old Compaq Center, lacks the luxury boxes and other amenities needed to compete financially with other National Basketball Association teams.

Last November, voters rejected a similar deal by 10 percentage points after months of hot debate. After the referendum failed, Rockets owner Les Alexander explored moving the team but never found a suitable alternative. The Florida businessman's lease at Compaq Center expires in 2003. The new building would open later that year.

Unlike the previous election, no well-organized anti-arena campaign surfaced, and some former leaders of the opposition backed the new proposal.

"What a difference a year makes," said Harris County-Houston Sports Authority chairman Billy Burge. "I think this thing came together at the right time for all of Houston. The people of Houston wanted the right deal, and I think they got it."

The main difference is the revised deal does not include a ticket surcharge, which was allowed in last year's referendum. Arena backers pushed the "no new taxes" theme in broadcasting ads that blanketed local television and radio stations.

"Eleven big corporations and the Rockets spent a lot of money promoting special interests downtown," said conservative activist and anti-arena leader Bruce Hotze.

Under the proposal, the city will supply land near the George R. Brown Convention Center and the sports authority will use bonds supported by the hotel and rental car taxes to build the arena.

Alexander will pay about 30 percent of the total bill, according to figures from Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector Paul Bettencourt, who fought the 1999 proposal but was publicly neutral this time.

Chuck Watson, chairman of natural gas trading giant Dynegy Inc. and Alexander's leaseholder at Compaq Center, gave \$100,000 to the anti-arena campaign last year. But he endorsed the 2000 ballot issue after receiving assurances he might be able to bring in a National Hockey League franchise.

Watson, owner of the minor-league Houston Aeros hockey club, complained last year the deal structure gave Alexander carte blanche to establish his own NHL franchise.

Horned Frogs coping with loss

FORT WORTH (AP) — One unexpected loss answered the questions for Texas Christian. No undefeated season. No BCS bowl.

Now comes what may be an even tougher challenge for the Horned Frogs than their attempt to reach those lofty goals. They have to bounce back from the bitter disappointment of losing to try to salvage a conference title and other goals.

"The problem that everybody has had to deal with is that the things they lost were rare and hard to get," said TCU coach Dennis Franchione. "There's still a lot on the table. The difficult thing is they seem pale compared to what you lost."

TCU had a 12-game winning streak, the nation's longest, and had moved to ninth in the BCS standings. While a long-shot for a national title shot, the Horned Frogs were getting closer to a possible BCS bowl.

Until a 27-24 loss at San Jose State late Saturday night. "If we go 11-1 and go to a bowl game, that game will be with me for the rest of my life. That's how devastating it was to me," said line-backer Shannon Brazzell.

After the loss, the Frogs (7-1, 4-1 WAC) fell out of the top 15 of the BCS standings, and tumbled nine spots in the AP poll just one week after ending a 41-year hiatus from the top 10. No. 1 Oklahoma is now the nation's only undefeated team.

"Not really believing that we had lost, that's what it felt like," said LaDainian Tomlinson, the nation's leading rusher (181 ypg). "It felt like a dream, and I'm thinking I'm okay, I'm going to wake up."

"The key is to realize you still have a lot to play for. But it's so hard to think about it actually when you had it right there in front of you."

The stakes are not as high, but still important. The Frogs are trying to claim a share of the Western Athletic Conference title in their last season in the league before moving to Conference USA. They are tied for second in the WAC with San Jose and Fresno State (5-3, 4-1), their opponent Saturday, and play league-leading Texas-El Paso (7-2, 6-0) the next week.

They can still be the first TCU team to go to three straight bowl games, though the postseason trip most likely will be back to Mobile, Ala., against a C-USA team. The Frogs beat East Carolina last year in the inaugural Mobile Bowl.

Franchione, who possibly took the loss harder than any of his players, is reminding them not to give up on the goals that are still in reach.

"We can still finish ranked, we can still win a piece of the conference championship, we can still go to postseason play ... We can be the first team ever to go to three bowl games in a row," Franchione said. "So there's a lot of specialness left to achieve in the season. That's part of the challenge."

The irony is that no matter what the Frogs now accomplish, this season will be considered by some as a disappointment.

Forget that this team was just 1-10 and lost 10 straight games in 1997, the year before Franchione arrived. Expectations were high, and talk of an undefeated record had been prominent since months before the season even began.

"People have got to realize, and I'm not making excuses, but in a couple of years, we've come a long way," Tomlinson said. "There's still things you learn along the way while you are climbing. This team is still learning how to deal with things like what happened Saturday night on the road."

Even with TCU's loss, Tomlinson remains a legitimate Heisman Trophy candidate.

After leading the nation with 1,850 yards rushing last season, including an NCAA I-A single-game record 406 against UTEP, he leads the nation in rushing and scoring (12.8 ppg) this year. He has rushed for at least 119 yards in every game, including 155 at San Jose.

Still, Franchione expresses some concerns about the loss on Tomlinson's chance to win the Heisman.

"I don't think it helped," Franchione said. "I think some of it will deal with how we finish. There's still some time yet and he didn't have a bad game. We've always had some odds to fight in that. Maybe they're a little bigger than they were."

"People have got to realize, and I'm not making excuses, but in a couple of years, we've come a long way."

— LaDainian Tomlinson
TCU running back



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