

Opinion

Monday, October 15, 2001

THE BATTALION

Page 9

The eyes of ESPN are upon you...

Is "Sidelines" a damaging misrepresentation of A&M or positive publicity?

The latest episode of the ESPN television show, "Sidelines," had mothers cringing, former students gasping in disbelief and current students stunned and embarrassed by the image portrayed of Texas A&M. ESPN claims the show is a "no-holds-barred look at the Texas A&M football program and campus life," but it is turning out to be a terrible misrepresentation of the University. The image Aggies had hoped would be associated with their school was lost somewhere at The Salty Dog.



KELLN ZIMMER

A&M has an amazing opportunity to show the world the unimaginable, unattainable spirit that characterizes this campus. The spirit of A&M is not something that is easily understood, and it cannot be put into words. The sense of community here is something that must be seen first-hand to be fully understood. Ron Blatchley, who spent 14 years at A&M as the director of student affairs, understands this all too well.

"I thought this show was to portray the unique spirit of Aggieland," he said. "That's why ESPN chose us. What we have on this campus is not something you will find anywhere else, and others wish they could have it." But Blatchley does not see Sidelines as moving the A&M image in a positive direction.

"We have an incredible, unique University and a lot of it is not captured at all in this show, and I am not sure that it ever will be if they continue to show the kinds of things they are showing," Blatchley said.

The real Aggie spirit found at football games and Midnight Yell is overshadowed in "Sidelines" by the nightlife and the outrageous actions of some cast members. Mike Wood, Class of 1965, could not watch all of Thursday's episode.

"As a former student, I am not interested in the stuff on this show: the drinking and kissing and partying are not things that I use to characterize A&M," he said. "This is not a typical college and our students are not typical students. You can go to any college campus and see what you saw on Sidelines Thursday night."

Most universities would be excited to have the opportunity that Texas A&M has with this show. A national audience has an inside look at A&M, and Aggies have the opportunity to show what the Aggie spirit is about. Instead, Sidelines has taken on a look resembling "College Girls Gone Wild in College Station." This may be ESPN's attempt at reality TV, but this is not the reality of Aggieland.

Drinking until you lose count or kissing people of the same sex because you are drunk are not things many Aggies would use to characterize their college experience, and certainly not things they would want the world using to represent Texas A&M. Blatchley said that "the real A&M, the Aggie spirit, the real Aggie and what it really means to be an Aggie, should be done more justice. With this program we are doing the opposite of justice."

Aggies everywhere should be concerned with the image that is portrayed of A&M in Sidelines. The negative images seen on Sidelines do not cast A&M in a positive light, and will leave a negative impression on potential students and those not familiar with A&M.

Valerie Weynand, mother of two A&M students, said, "As someone with a 30-year association with A&M, I am appalled and disgusted with the program. It should showcase our traditions and let others see why A&M is such an amazing place. If someone kid in another state is watching this and knows nothing about A&M, I do not think it is a place they would decide to go to school."

It is a shame that the focus of the show does not concentrate on our traditions and the things that place Aggies in a class by themselves. The drunkenness and debauchery seen in the show make A&M appear like any other school in the nation. Our traditions, camaraderie and spirit are what set A&M apart. Unfortunately, such things are being overshadowed by the current focus of Sidelines.

ESPN's failure to capture the spirit of Aggieland may be the best proof of what all Aggies know — that you cannot understand A&M from the outside. Perhaps we were kidding ourselves to think ESPN could come in and try to capture the spirit that can never be told."

Kelln Zimmer is a junior English major.

One of the biggest problems Aggies have is explaining Texas A&M to the outside world. "From the outside looking in ..." is a phrase everyone has heard. But A&M has finally been given the chance to explain.



MELISSA BEDSOLE

ESPN is airing a new series, "Sidelines," and the premiere season is staged in glorious Bryan-College Station. They may show clips of muddy trucks and railroad tracks, and it may be at times frustrating to watch ESPN portray College Station as a hick town, but none of that matters.

What matters is that by the end of the series, viewers are given an in-depth look at different aspects of the University. This is a wonderful



ADRIAN CALCANEO • THE BATTALION

opportunity for A&M — not only for the Athletic Department, but for the entire campus.

Sidelines has chosen 12 students, some of whom are football players to follow with cameras in MTV "Real World" fashion, with cameras watching their every move and trying to capture some of their life on tape. The camera crews go to football practices, bars and parties. They travel in cars down the streets of College Station and show everything except class time for these students. Sometimes it captures them not doing much of anything, which is what students often do.

Sidelines is trying to show what makes A&M unique, and the potential benefits are countless. Like it or not, the image many people outside Texas have of A&M is what was plastered on the news in the aftermath of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse. Sadly, it was not the image of our school uniting during the tragedy that most people saw on the news; it was an image of fallen logs and the shattered hearts of grief-ridden students.

The A&M community will never forget Bonfire 1999, but we have recovered. The spirit of this campus is alive and there is a new image for the outside world to see. This is the chance.

A&M is unique in its traditions. Viewers will see Midnight Yell and the dedication of students getting pumped for a game. They will see Kyle Field doused in maroon out of love for the team, and they will see students standing relentlessly in the spirit of the 12th Man. Non-Aggies are not going to be the only ones influenced either.

Sidelines has the ability to reach past, present and future Aggies nationwide. Alumni will see the show and remember their days on campus. They will see that the heart of this campus has not changed.

The show will also have an affect on current students. A certain amount of pride is felt when people see their everyday sights on television.

A&M and College Station are not things that people pay much attention to, and now, for 30 minutes every Thursday night, Aggies can see their own school and town on the screen and feel that each person on this campus is a part of that.

This series also has great potential to influence new football recruits who can get an inside look at the football program, coaches and other players and realize how special and unique Texas Aggie football is.

The advertisement for Sidelines on ESPN says that at A&M football is "a way of life." Football is a way of life here, and so is being an Aggie.

The show, despite the negative things people may say about it, inspired an *Orlando Sentinel* columnist to write an article that has spread among Aggies worldwide via e-mail.

Many will have some complaints about the show, whether it does not show enough of the Corps or does not adequately represent some part of the student body.

But whatever the complaint is, Aggies should realize that what comes out of this opportunity is much greater than who the cameras follow. Some things about A&M will never make sense to those outside Aggieland, but maybe in the future, from the outside looking in, they will have a better chance to understand.

Melissa Bedsole is a senior psychology major.

A&M vs. Harvard: Who shares your values?

This is a tale of two college campuses and a Rorschach test for Americans to decide where they fit along the nation's cultural divide.

It's corny vs. cool, instinctive patriotism vs. deeply ingrained political correctness. It's Texas A&M vs. Harvard. Despite my Harvard background, I come down squarely with the Aggies.

My guess is that most Americans will, too, even those who might be embarrassed to admit it, until they think about the two schools and themselves.

Harvard ended funding for, and kicked off campus, the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, which provides financial aid to students who receive training and become military officers. It did so in 1995 because the Pentagon prohibits homosexuals from openly serving in the military.

Harvard, whose students can take ROTC at nearby schools, apparently believes that promoting gay rights takes precedence over the national defense.

At A&M, the military is part of a culture that reveres family, football and, in times past, making fun of New Yorkers.

But after the Sept. 11 attack, students at the working-class university devised a uniquely Aggie way to raise more than \$150,000 for the victims, most of whom are from New York. Harvard students, with presumably greater financial resources, did nothing comparable.

A&M students sold 70,000-plus T-shirts proclaiming "Standing For America," in patriotic colors. The school's triple-decker, 82,000-seat football stadium was color-coded, the top in red, middle in white and the bottom in blue for the next game. It was one patriotic television picture.

Admittedly, these are not exact comparisons, but the anecdotes illustrate the cultural

differences between Harvard and A&M, and, to an uncomfortable degree, between Ivy League elites and most of America.

Harvard is, well, Harvard, the nation's most prestigious university. But it's a snooty place where many, although by no means all, look down on the rest of America as intellectually inferior and unsophisticated.

I spent two semesters there as a Neiman Fellow, taking advantage of a generous university program that allows mid-career journalists to sample its rich academic offerings.

At the time, shortly after Ronald Reagan's election as president, the campus consensus was that he had duped the country. Americans, the Harvard group-think

Despite my Harvard background, I come down squarely with the Aggies.

argued, would return to traditional liberalism soon. That view was out of touch then, as now.

Fast-forward to today, when Harvard is among elite colleges where the view that U.S. foreign policy gave Osama bin Laden reason for his terrorism appears to be more than a fringe opinion. The Associated Press reports that "a recent peace rally [on campus] drew several times more students than a patriotism rally."

At A&M, this year rated the nation's 15th best public university by U.S. News & World Report, the T-shirts symbolize an instinctive belief in America and its values. Students and faculty there have the common sense to distinguish between foreign policy and murder.

The reality is that the comparison

between Harvard and Texas A&M illustrates the hierarchy of institutional values.

At Harvard — and I'm being generous to the school's students and faculty — there is an underlying skepticism about the virtues of the U.S. military and unabashed patriotism. Some argue that hostility is a more accurate term.

Many at Harvard and similar institutions say that most Americans don't understand the complex nature of the issue. But they're wrong. Sometimes things are as simple as they seem.

The Harvard detachment from the military, symbolized by its looney ROTC policy, is one reason that students, faculty and administrators take an academic view of the situation. Many see flag-waving patriotism as wrongly judgmental about the superiority of the American way of life.

And Harvard is not alone. Other elite educational institutions, such as Yale and Cal-Berkeley, display similar attitudes, especially when compared with most of the nation's campuses and communities.

At A&M, as in most of America, the students and faculty believe national defense takes priority over pushing gay rights. And despite, what some of my liberal friends will argue, this view has nothing to do with anti-gay bigotry.

It has to do with common sense. When the nation is attacked, internal squabbles about policy nuances pale in comparison.

Times like these make me wish Harvard played serious football so I could root against them on TV. You can be sure that I will be pulling for the Aggies.

Reprinted with permission from Peter A. Brown, a columnist for the *Orlando Sentinel*. It appeared in the Oct. 11 issue.

CARTOON OF THE DAY



THE UNCARTOONIST ©