

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

Page 9A • Monday, September 2, 2002



Wrecking Crew rages through Cajuns

Defense forces 10 turnovers, saves struggling offense in 31-7 win

By Kevin Espenlaub
THE BATTALION

The Texas A&M Wrecking Crew defense forced 10 turnovers against the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, en route to a 31-7 victory for the team's season opener at Kyle Field Saturday. The 10 turnovers set a new Big 12 conference record for turnovers.

While the defense was setting records, the Aggie offense struggled to capitalize on the turnovers for much of the game. Despite the Wrecking Crew's six turnovers in the first half, the Aggies (1-0) entered the locker room at halftime with only a 3-0 lead.

"The main thing in the first half was that we were killing ourselves with penalties," said A&M senior starting quarterback Mark Farris. "I think in the second half we came out and concentrated better. Nothing against Louisiana-Lafayette, but we should have played a lot better than we did today."

The first drive of the game resulted in a 1st and 25 for the Aggies after two penalties in the first minute of the game. The Aggies would finish with 16 penalties on the game, costing them 102 yards.

Farris, who had missed practice for much of the past two weeks due to tendonitis in his shoulder, started the game for the Aggies but was benched with just under seven minutes remaining in the first half after throwing eight consecutive incomplete passes.

Sophomore Dustin Long, who had been taking snaps with the first string offense in Farris' absence from practice, took over and went 3 for 12 passing with two interceptions before the half.

"I had decided before the game that I wanted to get all of the quarterbacks in the game," said A&M head coach R.C. Slocum. "Dustin had been getting a lot of work in practice, so I thought he would be effective in the game today. In the second half, I wanted to let [Farris] get back out there for the third [quarter] and then bring in the other guys."

On the first play of the Ragin' Cajuns' (0-1)

opening drive in the second half, running back Jerome Coleman fumbled the ball on the 17 yard line and Aggie senior linebacker Brian Gamble recovered, leading to a two-yard touchdown run by senior Joe Weber, giving the Aggies the 10-0 lead. Gamble finished the game with two fumble recoveries and an interception.

Sophomore defensive back Byron Jones followed with an interception return for a touchdown off ULL quarterback Jon Van Cleave with 2:37 left in the third quarter, giving the Aggies a 17-0 lead.

The Aggie defense picked off Van Cleave six times, tying a Big 12 record for interceptions in a game, and added four fumble recoveries to top the previous conference record of seven total turnovers.

"Overall, the defense played well," Gamble said. "We had them outmanned, so we should have played well. It was a very weird game. It was very hard to get into the flow of the game. But, anytime you can get 10 turnovers, you're doing something right."

Though Farris returned to the game for much of the second half and led the Aggies to another touchdown on a Dwain Goynes four-yard run, the crowd erupted with 11 minutes left in the fourth quarter when freshman quarterback Reggie McNeal ended red-shirt speculation by guiding the offense to a touchdown drive to stretch the A&M lead to 31-0.

McNeal went 2-for-2 passing for 28 yards and rushed for 12 yards in the only series he took the snaps.

"I thought Reggie came in and showed that he was capable of being a student of the game," Slocum said. "We're looking at a situation a year from now when [Farris] will be gone and one of these guys will be the starter and one will be the backup. We've got three bright, young prospects here at quarterback and we want to try to bring them all along and let competition take care of what order they will play in."

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Senior Linebacker Brian Gamble celebrates after deflecting a pass intended for Louisiana-Lafayette fullback Wayne Stein in the first quarter.

"We had too many dropped balls and too many penalties, but I saw some very positive things out there tonight. I was especially pleased with our defense."

— A&M head football coach R.C. Slocum

"I thought we had the turnovers out of our system [at halftime]... I didn't get it done. I have to roll with the punches and move on."

—ULL Quarterback Jon Van Cleave

"I'm pleased with our performance — we're only going to get better."

—A&M linebacker Brian Gamble



Freshman Reggie McNeal rolls out of the pocket on the first play of his college career in the fourth quarter of Saturday's game at Kyle Field.

Reggie caps bizarre opener

By True Brown
THE BATTALION

The players on Kyle Field did their best impression of the Twilight Zone on Saturday during the Aggies' 31-7 win against the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

Twelve total turnovers, four missed field goals and six quarterbacks were just part of the game's bizarre nature.

The only constant was the Wrecking Crew's stifling performance. The Aggies limited the Ragin' Cajuns to 205 yards of offensive production, including just 11 yards rushing. The 10 turnovers forced by A&M was a Big 12 record.

"This was about the weirdest game I've ever played in," said A&M linebacker Brian Gamble. "We'd rotate linebackers and go out there and it would be one play and an interception. Then we'd come off and sit out for a couple drives and go back out and get a fumble. It was just a really weird game."

The big performance by A&M's defense came at the right time as A&M's offense struggled most

of the night. A&M held a slim 3-0 lead at halftime after failing to cash in on six Cajun turnovers.

"Our defense played solidly all night," said A&M head coach R.C. Slocum. "We pretty much controlled their offense and that gave us some opportunities."

The surprises kept rolling in after halftime when quarterback Reggie McNeal made his debut, entering the game as A&M's third quarterback. McNeal, one of the most touted recruits in A&M history, led the Aggies on their longest scoring drive of the game after covering 53 yards in eight plays.

After the game, however, Slocum was quick to say he had planned to play McNeal all along and that starting quarterback Mark Farris still had his job. Dustin Long and Jason Carter also saw action as quarterback for the Aggies.

"I think [Reggie] is going to be a good quarterback," Slocum said. "We are looking at a situation where a year from now, Mark will be gone. One of those young guys is going to have to be the starter."

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