

Corbelli, Aggies headed to NCAA Once known for offense, A&M now uses solid defense, blocking

By True Brown
THE BATTALION

When Laurie Corbelli signed with Texas A&M in 1993, she inherited a team that was top-heavy with power players. That year, the Aggies rode their power game en route to a 27-8 record and the team's first berth in the NCAA Championships since 1986.

Corbelli, now in her 10th year, has kept that winning tradition alive by advancing to the NCAA tournament in each of her nine previous seasons.

The 2002 season was no different. Despite some early struggles, A&M (20-9, 12-8 Big 12) rallied to win its last two matches of the season and qualify for the Championships. The Aggies play tonight at 7 p.m. in California against Utah in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

During her tenure here, Corbelli has diversified A&M's team. The Aggies now have a well respected defense and boast a solid blocking game.

"The ball-handling, the defense, the passing — that really wasn't there," Corbelli said of her 1993 squad. "To have a power game, we spent most of our first year here working on the passing, ball control and defense. And it's still our emphasis."

The hard work has paid off. This season, the Aggie defense finished third in the Big 12 in digs with 16.88 per game. A&M's defense held opponents to a .193 hitting percentage, fourth best in the conference.

"Defense really is what runs the show," Corbelli said. "The team that

plays the best on defense is the team that is going to win. We've really improved on our defense."

During her building process, Corbelli also made recruiting California players a big priority.

Corbelli said California has a much more developed youth system than Texas does, so it is often the case that athletes from there have more years of experience by the time they are ready to commit to a college.

Former players Kristie Smedsrud and Jenna Moscovic, both California products, were All-Americans during their stay at A&M. Currently, four of Corbelli's players hail from California,

including setter Lexy Beers and middle blocker Tara Pulaski.

Beers, in her first season as a starter, posted almost 13 assists per game, good enough for third in the conference. Pulaski, at 6-foot 2-inches, has become a dominant blocker for the Aggies and leads the team in the category.

"Some of the West coast players we have brought in have been able to make big contributions," Corbelli said. "We've brought in some who have played at a very high level for while. That experience helps right away. There are some Texas players that have played a long time, just sometimes not at the same level for as long."

Under the leadership of Corbelli, who's husband John is the associate head coach, A&M volleyball has flourished.

The Aggies have won at least 19 matches every season and advanced to

the Elite Eight twice. As a result, A&M found itself in the top 11 in the final polls for the first times in school history, including a record high of No. 9 in 1999 after the Aggies stunned No. 3 Hawaii in Honolulu.

"I don't know if there's a secret," Corbelli said. "Our training, I think is

very hard and very specific as to how we do things. We do a ton of repetitions with a certain disciplined technique. The repetition and commitment we show is really reciprocated by our players. They all give a lot of hard work, a lot of sweat in the gym and in the weight room."



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Sophomore setter Lexy Beers sets the ball for outside hitter A.D. Achiefalu in the Aggies match against the University of Texas. The Aggies will play their first-round match on Friday.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Ventura signs with New York Yankees

NEW YORK (AP) — Robin Ventura took a \$3.25 million payout to stay with the New York Yankees.

"I kind of figured there would be a little bit of a cut," he said Thursday after passing a physical and finalizing a \$5 million, one-year contract. "Obviously, with the labor deal that was reached, it's a different year for the Yankees."

New York, preparing for the luxury tax in the major leagues next year, is looking to cut its \$135 million payroll and the third baseman did his part.

"I'm with a great group of people that I enjoy playing with," Ventura said. "I'm with a great team. I really enjoyed it last year."

Cardinals pitcher Benes retires

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Andy Benes is ready to begin the next phase of his sports career.


"He told me he's moving on to his next career — as assistant coach for his daughter's third-grade basketball team," St. Louis Cardinals spokesman Brian Bartow joked.

Benes made his retirement official Thursday. He told general manager Walt Jocketty during an hour-long meeting.

Benes, whose scheduled meeting Wednesday with Jocketty was pushed back a day because of an area snowstorm, declined to publicly talk about the retirement.

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— Laurie Corbelli
A&M head coach



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