

Aggies prepared for busy weekend

By Blake Kimzey
THE BATTALION

The Texas A&M women's tennis team could get used to playing at home. After facing the best teams in the nation and going 2-3 on the road the past few weeks, the No. 32 Aggies own a 1-0 record at the Texas A&M Tennis Center.

This weekend the Aggies will have the opportunity to win three more matches on their home turf as The University of Texas-San Antonio (1-3) and University of Houston (2-4) roll into College Station for a Friday double-header. On Sunday the Aggies will square off against the Nebraska Cornhuskers (5-1).

With a record of 3-3, the Aggies are looking beyond the win-loss column to the young talent that is starting to consistently contribute each week.

"We aren't focusing on us being 3-3," said A&M Assistant Coach Alison Ojeda. "Once we get to conference play, we'll be where we want to be. Our biggest focus now is trying to teach our players some things about themselves, and seeing the girls improve with each match."

To be one year out of high school and making an impact on a Division I athletic team is a rarity. Yet there are always exceptions to the rule, and A&M may have found one of those diamonds in the rough in freshman Nicki Mechem. After a stellar outing against Louisiana State University last weekend, and solid match play in the first six matches of the season, Mechem is starting to surface as a viable team leader.

"Nicki is improving each day, she is one of our best competitors on the team and is going to go out and compete every single day," Ojeda said.

"She is becoming a leader because she shows so much outward emotion, and (the team is) following her lead."

Sophomore Lauren Walker is also emerging from a strong weekend in which she shared in a late doubles victory with Ashley Hedberg that catapulted the Aggies into singles play and resulted in eventual victory against LSU.

A&M Head Coach Bobby Kleinecke is also starting to see the kind of play from junior Jessica Roland that merits a No. 108 national ranking among collegiate singles.

"Jess has really picked up her game lately," Kleinecke said. "She struggled some earlier in the year, but she has turned the corner. She showed a lot of poise out there."

The UTSA Roadrunners are led by senior Svenja Fuhrig and sophomore Nicole Bouffler, who have both received Southland Conference Player of the Week honors this season. UTSA Head Coach Brenda Niemeyer said she expects a challenging weekend of play.

"A&M always has a good team," she said. "I like my players to see how good the top nationally-ranked teams are. It is a great experience for us."

Nebraska presents a strong team, whose focus in the off-season was on weight training and building endurance. Cornhuskers' Head Coach Scott Jacobson, said he looks forward to challenging a strong A&M team.

"(The Aggies) have consistently been one of the best programs in the country," Jacobson said. "This year is no exception. It should be a



ROLAND

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Fortunately for the Aggies, the city of Bryan has an indoor tennis center that has given the team an opportunity to get some time on the indoor courts before heading to Kentucky. The men practiced on Tuesday and Wednesday in Bryan to prepare for the upcoming match against the Ole Miss (4-0) team.

"I think the guys will enjoy it. Our style of play is more aggressive and makes things happen," Cass said. "Our guys are capable and can take advantage of what we have."

As far as competition goes, Ole Miss is the best match for the Aggies in the brackets, Cass said. The Rebels also have little experience playing indoors. A general principle across collegiate tennis, much like in collegiate track and field, is that teams from the South lack indoor tennis facilities because they aren't necessary. The climate is more favorable to Southern teams to practice and play outdoors year-round.

The Rebels left early Tuesday for Kentucky to get some extra practice before the tournament started, said Kim Ling, sports information director for Ole Miss tennis.

The USTA/ITA is the longest-running event for the ITA. California has dominated the tournament in recent history, as a school from the state has won each year since 1983.

Seven quarterfinalists from last season have returned for the USTA/ITA this year. Southern California, Georgia, Illinois and Stanford reached the semifinals a season ago, and Stanford defeated Illinois to win the tournament.

The Aggies take the court against the Rebels tonight at 6:30. The winner will face the winner of the match between No. 32 Harvard and No. 2 Illinois; the loser of the matches will face each other in a consolation match. Each team is guaranteed three matches.

Smith, Jones begin contract talks

By Jaime Aron
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

IRVING, Texas — Negotiations between Emmitt Smith and Jerry Jones are off to a cordial start.

A long-anticipated meeting to discuss whether the leading rusher in NFL history will remain with the Dallas Cowboys was finally held this week. The only thing settled was that they'll meet again next week.

The early indications are that everyone is cooperating.

"The conversation was productive and open. It was a two-way discussion," Smith's agent, Werner Scott, said Wednesday. "We'll have more communications."

Jones called their Monday meeting "very thorough and extensive."

"We will meet again, near the end of next week, at which time we will address the future — in a manner that we believe will serve the best interests of the Dallas Cowboys and Emmitt Smith," Jones said in a statement released Tuesday.

Scott said he "echoed every sentiment" Jones made.

Although Smith is under contract for three more

seasons, that deal calls for Smith getting \$7 million this season, with a salary cap figure of \$9.8 million. That's illogical for someone who will be 34 and is coming off one of his worst seasons.

If he's re-signed for the veteran minimum of \$755,000, Smith would count \$3.5 million against the cap.

If Smith is released before June 1, he would still count \$4.9 million against the upcoming season's cap. That would drop to \$2.8 million now and \$2.1 million the following season if he's released on or after June 1.

To Smith, the best deal probably has more to do with playing time than a big paycheck.

Problem is, teams are reluctant to hand a starting job to someone his age who last season gained 975 yards, his lowest total since he was a rookie.

After playing on three straight 5-11 teams in Dallas, Smith isn't likely to go to another bad team just to become a starter.

That could leave Smith facing the option of where he wants to be a backup or fighting for playing time.

Retirement also is an option, but Smith remains in great shape — he's missed only four games in 13 years because of injury — and has said he wants to keep rushing past 20,000 career yards. His record total is 17,162.



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