

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

Page 1B • Wednesday, August 27, 2003

As season nears, QB still up for grabs RBs seek to improve Indians



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN C. LIVAS • THE BATTALION

By True Brown
THE BATTALION

With the 2003 season opener four days away, Texas A&M football coach Dennis Franchione finally named the starter for Saturday's game against Arkansas State.

"Dustin McNeal," Franchione joked at Monday's media luncheon, referring to both candidates for the job, Dustin Long and Reggie McNeal.

OK, maybe not. In reality, Franchione is still keeping his quarterback cards close to his vest. He told media Monday that A&M's quarterback competition — not controversy, Franchione said — is an ongoing process.

"We are going to try and play (Long and McNeal) as balanced as we can," Franchione said. "Our first priority is to win a football game, but if one guy gets in a rhythm, we may lean more towards him. Who takes the first play is probably more of a topic for you all than it is for us as football coaches."



Franchione has said in past weeks that A&M's players will be equally comfortable with either Long or McNeal. Long started nine games in 2002, throwing for 19 touchdowns and more than 2,500 yards.

On just about any other Big 12 team, those numbers would have landed the junior from Port Neches the starting role. But McNeal proved in November during an upset win against then-No. 1 Oklahoma that he too possesses the tools to lead A&M's offense. While McNeal has only 24 completions to his name, he has become a fan favorite to take the opening snap Saturday night.

"I'm interested in how each one of those guys executes individually, and not whether a play broke down because the left guard

missed his blocking assignment," Franchione said. "I've talked to several of our players, and they believe in either one of them. I don't think they'll play any differently with either one out there."

Franchione said A&M's quarterback competition is a neck-in-neck race with neither player being a clear favorite.

"It's hard to separate the two guys. They're very close," Franchione said. "One day, one of them may have a little better practice than the other one, and then vice versa. A few key things I talk to Dustin about are making sure he's got the call completely right in the huddle and not throwing or forcing the ball into coverage."

"The key things I talk to Reggie about is not hanging in the pocket too long and pulling it down and going with it. But they both are good leaders in the huddle, they both know the offense well, they're both respected by their teammates."

Saturday's kickoff is at 7 p.m. at Kyle Field.

RBs seek to improve Indians

By Douglas Pils
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JONESBORO, Ark. — Danny Smith came out of nowhere last year to post Arkansas State's best rushing season in school history.

Smith, who entered 2002 with just 244 career yards, rushed for 1,390 to give the Indians a 1,000-yard rusher for the third straight season — the first such streak ever in Jonesboro.

If coach Steve Roberts' offense is going to make it four, someone out of a packed group of five will have to distinguish himself early.

"We have listed five starters at tailback at this particular time," Roberts said. "The starter will be who we feel like the first play call will be, more than it will be the starter."

Antonio Warren, Clint Roy, Shermar Bracey, Terrence Dunbar and Chris Easley enter this week's season opener at Texas A&M on Saturday with an equal chance of being on the field for that first play.

Smith, the Sun Belt Conference offensive player of the year, had just 83 yards after the first two games, so Warren took most of the carries in Arkansas State's first victory last year. He carried the ball 32 times for 193 yards in a 21-19 win over Tulsa and earned conference player of the week honors.

Warren had 318 yards in a three-game span before cracking his ribs against Tennessee-Martin, and the injury slowed him for the rest of the season.

"Anytime you get hurt, it's a downfall for you," said Warren, who finished with 554 yards and three touchdowns. "Danny helped me out and everything happened for a reason".

Volleyball looks to experience for success

By Jeff Allen
THE BATTALION

It has been a decade since Texas A&M volleyball missed postseason play, with five out of six starters returning from last year's team. The Aggies are looking to build that tradition.

The 2003 season marks the 11th campaign under coach Laurie Corbelli, who took over in 1993. Since that time the Aggies have pieced together an impressive streak of postseason appearances. Last season, the Aggies advanced to the second round of the NCAA Tournament before being ousted by the University of

Southern California.

Seniors Carol Price and Tara Pulaski, juniors Melissa Munsch and Lexi Beers and sophomore Laura Jones return as starters this year for A&M.

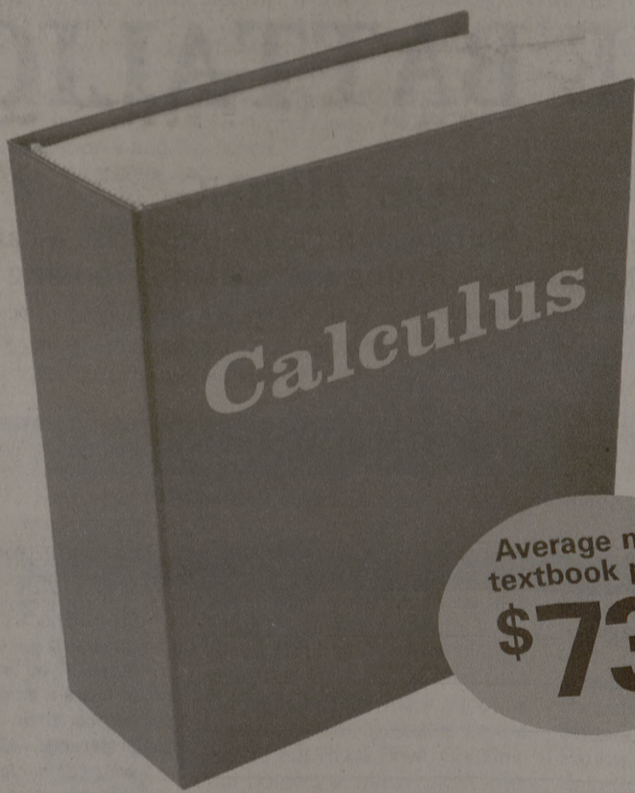
The tournament run, coupled with a fifth-place Big 12 finish, was adequate, but the Aggies are looking for more in 2003.

"Our team goal has been to win a Big 12 Championship and to make it to the Final Four," Beers said. "We had a meeting at the beginning of spring and that's what we are going to go for."

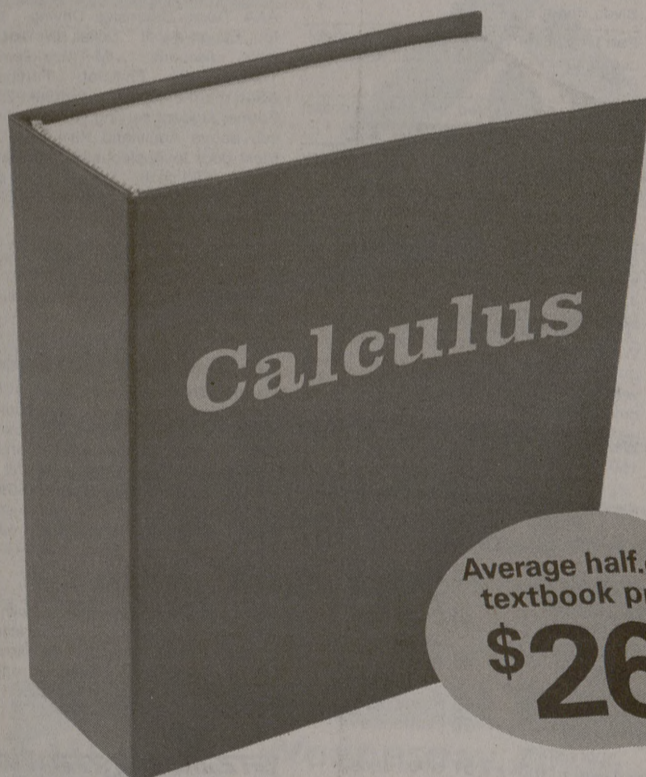
Preseason polls have the Aggies unranked and picked to finish fourth in the conference.

"We were two matches away from finishing third in the toughest conference in the nation (last year) and we're picked to finish fourth and not even in the Top 25," Corbelli said. "It's funny to me. Those early polls don't mean anything."

See Aggies on page 2B



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