



JOHN C. LIVAS • THE BATTALION

Texas A&M quarterback Reggie McNeal breaks a tackle during last season's 30-26 win over No. 1 Oklahoma.

Upset

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showed his potential by torching the Sooners for 191 yards and four touchdowns in the air and 89 yards on 16 carries, to lead the Aggies to their first ever victory over a No. 1-ranked opponent.

"I wasn't surprised (about McNeal)," said A&M coach Dennis Franchione, who caught the last minute of the game at his home in Tuscaloosa, Ala., last year. "When you have an outstanding athlete like Reggie, you're not surprised by him having a nice day early in his career."

Now, after gaining almost a full year of experience, McNeal is ready to try to duplicate his feat of a year ago and lead the Aggies to what could be the biggest upset of the college football season.

This isn't the same Oklahoma team, though, that McNeal and the Aggies faced a year ago. These Sooners are firing on all cylinders, and observers are hard pressed to find a chink in their armor.

"Any time you make a game plan you try to do what hurts that defense," Franchione said. "I've

been watching tapes since 6:30 Sunday night and I haven't found much they're susceptible to yet. They deserve that (ranking); they're darn good."

On paper it looks as if this game shouldn't even be a contest, and from the looks of all the other Oklahoma games this season, it won't be, but the Aggies have confidence in knowing they've played the best before and won.

Oklahoma knows that too, and the loss from a year ago that dropped the Sooners from national title contention still stings.

"(A&M) will definitely have our attention," Stoops said. "They beat us a year ago when we were ranked No. 1 in the country and undefeated, so that should be warning enough that you should be on top of your game if you want to win."

And, McNeal won't shy away either as he hopes to create the same magic on the field that he created a year ago.

"That comes with the position," McNeal said. "You can't go out there scared, you have to go out there with your head up. I know that they're going to be coming after me. That's just something that you've got to deal with."

Big East

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Florida joined the Big East just months after the 25-year-old league lost Miami, Virginia Tech and Boston College to the ACC. The new members will begin competing in the 2005-06 academic year.

Cincinnati, Louisville and South Florida replace those three in football to keep the Big East at eight members for that sport. DePaul and Marquette join for all other sports, giving the Big East 16 members, several of which are the country's premier basketball programs.

But in the current financial climate of college sports, it's football that matters, and the Bowl Championship Series bids that come with it.

"We're going to have to step up in football," Syracuse athletic director Jake Crouthamel said. "Maybe we relied a little too much on Miami in recent years. We're all going to have to step up."

The remaining football schools in the Big East are Syracuse, Pittsburgh, Rutgers and West Virginia, with Connecticut becoming a full-time member next season. The other members are St. John's, Villanova, Providence,

Georgetown, Notre Dame and Seton Hall.

"In 1990, when Miami joined the league and Big East football was created, we were measured on potential," Tranghese said. "These presidents are looking past today, to five, 10, 15 years down the road to what this league can be."

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— Jake Crouthamel
Syracuse AD

Conference USA moved quickly to replace the schools it lost, adding Marshall, Rice, SMU, Tulsa and Central Florida.

"While we clearly would have preferred that no Big East expansion occur, that expectation was unrealistic given the actions of the ACC," Conference USA commissioner Britton Banowsky said.

Tranghese was forthright in his criticism of the ACC during

its expansion for the way it went about it.

"We had no choice," Tranghese said of taking another league's members. "The ACC had a choice and they made it."

Big East officials hope the new league will be attractive enough to keep its automatic berth in the BCS. The current BCS contract expires after the 2006 bowls, and negotiations for the new contract will begin in a few months.

"We're still one of the six strongest football leagues in the country and we will fulfill our contractual obligations, and I'm very confident we'll be there in the next go-around," he said.

Tranghese said there is no timetable for deciding if divisions will be formed and how the postseason basketball tournament will be held, except that it will be in Madison Square Garden, which last season completed the second year of an 11-year deal with the Big East.

Going on recent past performances, the new Big East could send half of its teams — or more — to the NCAA tournament.

"If we were all together this year, we would have seven of the top 25 teams in the country," Cincinnati coach Bob Huggins said. "I can't remember the last time that happened."

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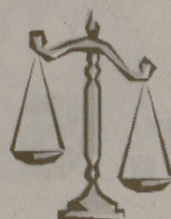


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