

## A&M poised to make run at Big 12 Indoor Championships

By Jon Gilbert  
THE BATTALION

The Big 12 Indoor Track and Field Championships are set for this weekend and there seems to be one common theme: These days, the Big 12 boasts exceptional talent, arguably the best in the nation. Yet, the entire league is chasing Nebraska and Texas.

Somewhere amidst the tough competition lies Texas A&M, a talented team on the men's and women's sides with a legitimate chance to get some individual victories as well as a high point total for a team.

"It's going to be a great tournament," said A&M head coach Ted Nelson. "This is a great opportunity for us. On the men's side, the top contenders will be Nebraska, Texas, Kansas State and Oklahoma. With the women, we'll be in the middle of the pack with a chance to knock off some teams."

Nebraska and Texas have clearly dominated the competition since the Big 12 was formed in 1996. The Nebraska men have won the indoor championship six out of seven times, including the last three years. In the one year Nebraska failed to capture the title, Texas took home the trophy. The Longhorns have come in second to Nebraska the other six years.

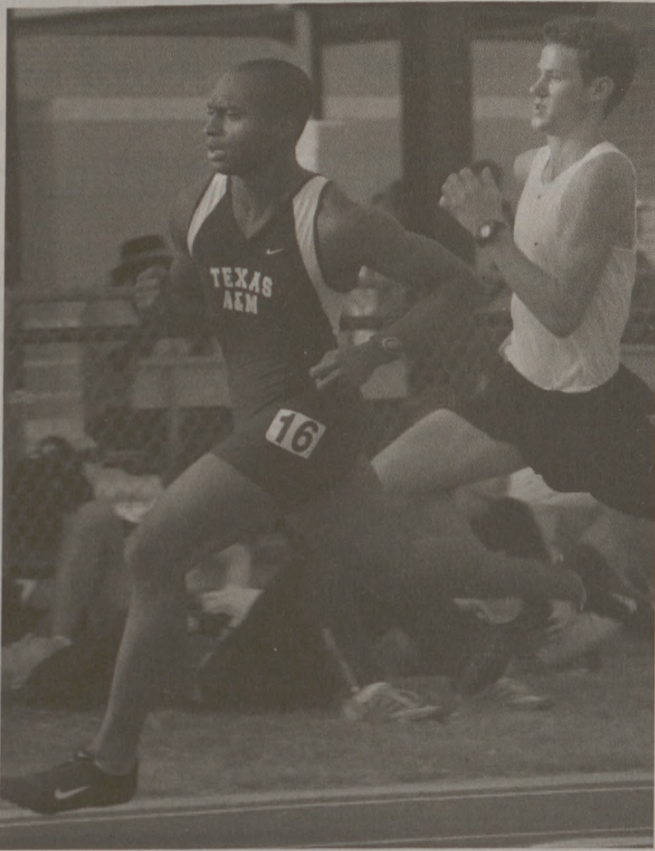
"It's going to be a great championship, and I just hope we come out on top," said Texas men's head coach Bubba Thornton. "This conference is loaded, and that's what makes us stand out across the nation."

The Texas women have won the title four times and will be shooting for their third straight title this weekend. The Husker women won the championship the three years the Longhorns failed to.

The Texas women's team easily won the tournament last year and has an Olympic-caliber runner in sophomore Sanya Richards. Richards won the 400-meters last Friday at the Tyson Foods Invitational, breaking her own junior world record with a time of 1:15.45. Her time is currently best in the NCAA and the third-fastest in the world.

Nebraska is a Big 12 dynasty in progress. Head coach Gary Pepin has collected 57 indoor/outdoor conference titles and three national championships in 22 seasons at the school. Pepin, though, said he insists on focusing on overall strengths of the conference.

"The Big 12 is improved since the early years,"



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A&M junior runner Brandon Caballero runs the 800-meter race at the A&M All-Comers meet in May 2003.

Pepin said. "There are a lot of outstanding track and field programs in the conference. There is a lot of really great, high-level performers, and they are some of the best in the nation. It will be a terrific meet. This is a championship meet for us."

The Aggies come into the meet looking to improve on last year's finishes in the championships. The men came in fifth, and the women finished 10th.

A&M picked up momentum last weekend with some impressive performances. Senior Melissa Gulli broke the school record for the 5,000-meter run in 16:03 and qualified for the NCAA championships in the process. Also, freshman Monique Lee broke the school record for the 200 meters as she finished third in the race with a time of 24.18.

On the men's side, Nelson expects the Aggies to compete for the championship. Yet, he said he knows it will be tough battling the best in Nebraska's home facility, the Devaney Complex.

"Unfortunately, we don't have an indoor facility, so this will be a challenge for us," Nelson said. "We're looking forward to it, though."

### Watkins

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cases kept coming, but the season vanished. In six seasons at A&M, Watkins is 60-108.

Last two seasons ago, Watkins left coaches all across the country scratching their heads as he signed NBA prospect guard/forward Antoine Wright to a letter of intent.

After winning Big 12 Freshman of the Year honors for the 2002-03 season, Wright didn't lived up to the hype his sophomore year.

In fact, the whole team hasn't come close to its postseason dreams of making the NCAA tournament.

This team should at least be in the bubble of a tournament with the players are just too talented to be 7-17 with no conference wins.

But the same mistakes have plagued them all season, mistakes Watkins hasn't been able to address.

And then there is the matter of Texas talent.

A&M is the sleeping giant of college basketball. The campus is located just north of Austin and a three-hour drive south of Dallas — the two biggest hotbeds for basketball in the nation today — yet only four Texans dot the Aggie roster. One of those players is a walk-on, and the other is sophomore Marcus Watkins, coach Watkins' son.

The location factor and the fact that Byrne wants an elite basketball program might be only two selling points for a coach to come to A&M.

According to sources in the Athletic Department, names have already been echoing off the department's walls, but who exactly would want to come to A&M is anybody's guess.

The bottom line, though, is Watkins just hasn't gotten the job he's proving the old adage that the guys do indeed finish last.

"Watkins' job status" is something we talk about every time we walk in practice because we know that's a reality in sports today when you're losing," Watkins said on Feb. 16.

### Basketball

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seemed poised to break the game open, Baylor would hit a shot to keep the game close.

Down 49-43 with 8:29 left to play, Baylor made its move.

**"You try trick shots in practice but nothing like that."**

— Terrance Thomas  
Baylor senior forward

Bear junior forward Harvey Thomas, who led Baylor with 17 points, hit a shot that sparked a Baylor 7-0 run to give Baylor a 50-49 lead.

Neither team could get a lead of more than one until A&M senior forward Jesse

King slammed home a pass from Wright to put the Aggies up 57-54 with 47 seconds left.

And then, just when it seemed that the Aggies were going to break through to the win column, the roof caved in.

With 26.2 seconds left, Thomas hit a free throw to bring the Bears within two. Then, after Wright missed a free throw Baylor senior forward Terrance Thomas drove the lane and threw up a shot with his back facing the basket.

It banked in to bring the game to a 57-57 tie.

"You try trick shots in practice but nothing like that," Thomas said.

While the Aggies left the floor hanging their heads again, the Bears went to the locker room hollering as if they had just won a championship.

At the end, it was hard to believe that Baylor was supposed to be the team without a win.

"We haven't been in many close games," Drew said. "So when we get in them we have to make the most of it."

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