



JOHN C. LIVAS • THE BATTALION

McNeal passes the ball during the 2003 game against Pittsburgh.

Few questions over quarterbacks in year two

By Kyle Davoust
THE BATTALION

The time is now for Texas A&M junior quarterback Reggie McNeal's promise to become reality. At least that is what McNeal and his coach, Dennis Franchione, are hoping after two seasons mixed with injuries, flashes of brilliance and the occasional inconsistency.

"Reggie is stronger and more prepared for this season than ever before," Franchione said. "I will be disappointed if he doesn't take some major steps this season."

Rarely can a conversation center around Aggie football without mention of McNeal and the offense. How is the shoulder? Will he do better in the second year of Coach Franchione's system? How will Dustin Long's departure affect him?

McNeal's right shoulder, which required off-season surgery after being injured last season, seems to have fully recovered. McNeal said he feels great, and his coaches have no reason to doubt him.

"I haven't seen any problems at all. These are the first two-a-days, so it's hard for me to come out and say that

he's not sore or anything, but he hasn't complained about it," said offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Les Koenning. "He's making all the throws, and he hasn't labored at all."

In fact, the team actually sees a positive side to McNeal's injury, which kept him from throwing spring drills, as they believe it accelerated the maturation process of the other quarterbacks on the team.

"I think both (Ty Branyon and Stephen McGee) benefited," said senior receiver Terrence Murphy. "But I feel like it was good for Reggie to sit back and watch them and for them to step up and get some reps."

Besides avoiding injury, McNeal also has to prove to his critics that he can be a good decision-maker and throw consistently. He said he believes that a second year in the same system will go a long way in solving those problems.

"It's a lot more comfortable knowing you have a year under your belt," McNeal said. "I know my reads better, the o-line knows its blocking schemes better, and everyone out there is just more comfortable having that year under their belt."

The biggest question entering the

season, however, is how McNeal and the rest of the team will respond to the departure of senior Dustin Long, who transferred to Sam Houston State University last spring. For much

of last year, Long and McNeal were engulfed in a quarterback battle, which left many guessing who would be the starter from week to week.

"He looks like more of a leader because he knows he has to be. He's the quarterback, and he knows he has to step up in those instances," Murphy said. "Dustin is gone, and now Reggie knows he has it all in his hands and on his shoulders, so he just has to step up and make plays."

McNeal said he feels more comfortable than he ever has entering this

season, yet he said he will not

comfort become complacent.

"It's always more comfortable when you don't have to be looking over your shoulder, but I still have to go out there and play the game. McNeal's biggest goal is to go out there every week and give 110 percent that and just my game, to feel like I've come out on top this season."

While there might be no competition for the job on the depth chart, there is still a quarterback battle at College Station. This time, however, it will come in backup position, where sophomore Ty Branyon and freshman Stephen McGee have coaches questioning who No. 2 is.

POSITION REPORT

QUARTERBACKS



McNeal



McGee

RETURNING

Reggie McNeal (JR)
Ty Branyon (SO)

LOST

Dustin Long

NEWCOMERS

Stephen McGee
T.J. Sanders
Jordan Chambless

See QB on page 2B

1,000-yard rusher returns to A&M backfield

By Ryan Irby
THE BATTALION

Some Aggie fans found a new hero wrapped in the woeful 2003 season in the swift sprints of a young unknown wearing the number 25 on his back. But they may not have expected to find this hero in an unlikely freshman leader who carried the load of the offensive assault. After being redshirted his freshman season, Courtney Lewis burst into the Aggies' backfield in 2003 to claim the bulk of the ball-carrying duties en route to becoming the leading freshman rusher in the Big 12 and setting a school record for yards gained by a freshman rusher at 1,024.

Even with such a young captain at the helm of the running back corps, Franchione said he feels comfortable with his athletes.

"I feel like the young guys have elevated the play of our older guys, and that has made us better," he said.

Lewis recently made headlines because

after a substantial number of carries per game, he claims he is poised to break 1,500 yards rushing this season.

"If they give me the ball that number of times," Lewis said, referring to the 25 to 30 per game predicted by Franchione, "(I'll break) 1,500 yards."

The 5-foot-11-inch, 194-pound explosive runner has added 20 pounds of power since arriving in Aggieland in the fall of 2002. With last year's 1,024-yard effort, Lewis became the first Aggie rusher since current NFL star Dante Hall in 1998 to reach the mark.

However, behind Lewis, the Aggies encounter depth problems. Derrick Brown, a redshirt freshman faces personal and academic problems and has yet to report to fall workouts. Beyond Brown is junior Will Adams, sophomore David Anderson and two high school recruits, Samson Taylor and Jay Lucas. Another member of the 2004 signing class, freshman Keondra Smith, is absent from workouts for academic eligibil-

ity reasons. Chris Alexander, also a redshirt freshman, will join senior Keith Joseph in the fullback duties and will bring a stocky 5-foot-11-inch, 238-pound frame to the lineup that will make him tough to handle.

Joseph, at 6-foot-2-inches and 256 pounds, will undoubtedly strike fear in opponents' defenses and is expected to make a giant impact in running and blocking.

"The great ones aren't satisfied with just being a good runner," Franchione said. "They take pride in becoming an all-around back."

A&M assistant coach Lee Fobbs has been pressing the running back corps throughout fall workouts to concentrate on various aspects of the running game such as precision handoffs and ball security.

Franchione and Fobbs expressed confidence in the ground game as one of the main strengths of this year's team. With leadership emerging from young players, the offensive scheme will be able to utilize the rushing game to develop a more balanced attack.



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Running back Courtney Lewis led the Aggies in rushing in 2003 with 1,024 yards, which was the first time since 1998 that an Aggie rushed for more than 1,000 yards.

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