

Texas A&M returns majority of key players

■ **Coach R.C. Slocum** says this year's Aggie squad is as good as he has seen in a 'long time.'

BY SAMUEL MCKEWON
Senior staff writer

Editor's note: This is the sixth story of an 11-part series exploring Nebraska's opposing football teams in the Big 12 Conference.

The 1999 outlook for Texas A&M University looks fairly similar to other seasons the Aggies have had in the Big 12 Conference, with one fundamental difference.

"In the past we were the hunter," A&M linebacker Cornelius Anthony said. "Now we're the hunted."

The seventh- and eighth-ranked Aggies open their season this Saturday against Louisiana Tech University. But A&M reached its respect last year playing teams far better than Tech — and beating them.

The Aggies beat a No. 2 team last season in Nebraska and No. 1 team Kansas State at the Big 12 Championship game. Since the Aggies have most of their key players back, most expect the team to contend for a conference and national title.

A national title would seem to be the next logical step for Coach R.C. Slocum's program, which went 11-3 in 1998 and posted an 86-24-2 record in the 1990s. Slocum is the winningest coach in Aggie history.

A&M will open the season with almost all of its offensive skill players returning. Randy McCown is the quarterback, Dante Hall is the "A" back,

while big Ja'Mar Toombs plays the "B" back position.

The wide receivers are among the best in the Big 12 and are probably the best corps Slocum's ever coached. Chris Cole, Leroy Hodge and Chris Taylor all return, though the biggest hype surrounds sophomore Bethel Johnson, whom Slocum calls "the fastest player I've coached."

Johnson has been slowed in practice with a foot injury and may not be ready for the first game.

"It's as good a group that's been at Texas A&M in a long time," Slocum said. "I don't know how long, but I'll say, 'Long time.' You get two or three guys, and all the sudden you can throw the ball pretty well."

The defense, one of the few left in the country that holds steadfastly to a 3-4 alignment, returns all three defensive linemen — all of them juniors.

The "Wrecking Crew," as the Aggies defense is coined, also returns three of four linebackers. But the one that doesn't return was last year's Lombardi Award winner, Dat Nguyen.

Anthony said Nguyen is an irreplaceable player. But the Aggie defense will still be as good as always, he said.

"We're working on being the best defense we can be," Anthony said. "It might almost be faster than last year. Dat was a great guy and a great player, but we still have great players here."

On top of that, A&M returns both its placekicker, Russell Bynum, and its All-Big 12 punter, Shane Lechler. All of its punt returners and kickoff returners are back as well.

The schedule is more favorable with Florida State on the schedule. A&M's toughest trip is to Nebraska, probably, although the Aggies must visit Texas Tech, a place A&M hasn't won at since 1993.

Warrick back to help FSU

BY DARREN IVY
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After coming within one game of winning the national championship last year, Florida State players are hungry to get the 1999 season started.

One player, Peter Warrick, opted to pass on the NFL Draft and return for his senior season with that one goal in mind.

"If we would have won, I would have been out," said Warrick, an All-American last year.

But Warrick is back and ready to keep the Florida State dynasty going.

The Seminoles have won at least 10 games and finished no lower than fourth in the Associated Press poll for 12 straight seasons, an NCAA record. That includes their lone title in 1993.

When it comes to the Atlantic Coast Conference for football, no team has been successful in dethroning Coach Bobby Bowden's squads. The team that may come closest this year is Georgia Tech.

But Warrick said the conference championship is Florida State's to lose.

"Georgia Tech is going to be a great game, but we are the team to beat," Warrick said. "They have to come to Tallahassee (Sept. 11), and we haven't lost to Doak Campbell in a long time. We plan on keeping it that way."

Heisman Trophy candidate Joe Hamilton leads the Yellow Jacket offense. He'll be out for revenge against the Seminoles, who knocked him out of the 1998 contest in Atlanta with a hip pointer.

"I don't want to put this out there about Florida State, but yeah, he hit me after I threw the ball," Hamilton said.

The loss to Florida State marked the only conference loss for Georgia Tech, which finished 10-2 and ranked ninth in the final poll last year. Coach George O'Leary has a lot of confidence in his senior play caller.

"If there was a bomb in this room, he would be the one to say, 'I can defuse it,'" O'Leary said. "If it's fourth-and-

three, he wants to go for it. He's a good kid."

While Hamilton means everything to the Yellow Jacket offense, Warrick may be the final piece of the puzzle to the Seminoles' national-title run.

Warrick is a player the FSU coaches weren't counting on this season.

"I was shocked," said Assistant Coach Chuck Amato at the ACC media day. "I liken it to years and years ago when David Thompson at N.C. State turned down a chance to go to the 76ers because he wanted to maybe win another national championship."

To make sure he is financially safe, Warrick took out a \$3 million insurance policy in case he would get injured.

In addition to wanting to win a national title, Warrick said the chemistry with quarterback Chris Weinke was another reason for his return.

Weinke appears to be full strength after suffering a season-ending neck injury against Virginia last season, Warrick said.

"He looks sharp, but there is no heat coming," Warrick said.

Weinke and Warrick aren't the only starting players FSU returns.

"Last year at this time, we had 10 seniors on scholarship on our team," Amato said. "This year, we have 20. There is no question that it's always good to have 20 returning seniors, because they are the leaders of your team."

But even with experience, the coaches are drilling into their players' heads that they can't be overconfident.

"Right now, we are 0-1 in 1999," Amato said.

Special teams struggle

Big 12 coaches learn from Kansas' and Texas' woes

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND
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The opening weekend of college football caused some concern for many of the coaches in the Big 12 Conference.

The special teams play of Texas and the turnovers suffered by Kansas on Saturday may serve as a wake-up call for the rest of the conference.

"The Texas and Kansas games should grab the attention of the players," Oklahoma State Coach Bob Simmons said. "It gives us as coaches a chance to point out examples to our own players."

Texas had three punts blocked against North Carolina State, which led directly to 16 points. On Monday, UT Coach Mack Brown blamed himself.

"It was a breakdown in one specific area, and it was a younger situation," Brown said. "It was my fault for asking them to do more than what they were ready to do in an opening ballgame."

The situation at Texas has brought

to light the importance of stressing special teams play and the affect it can have on a game throughout the conference.

"We were relieved because on Saturday, we were able to see some of the same mistakes happen in game situations," Oklahoma Coach Bob Stoops said. "We put a great emphasis on the kicking game, and it is important to have live simulation of the kicking game in practice."

Missouri Coach Larry Smith called special teams "the glue that holds everything together."

"It is hard to get a lot of teaching involved because there is not a lot of full repetitions, and we only work on them about 10-15 minutes a day," Smith said.

Every team seems to have a different philosophy when it comes to special teams. Some like to play younger players and others opt for older, more experienced players.

Colorado Coach Gary Barnett knows all too well how special teams can affect the outcome of a game.

"When I was at Northwestern, we lost a game to Miami (Ohio) as a direct result of a bad snap," Barnett said. "Most people do not have an appreciation for a deep snapper, but he is very important to the team."

The games on Saturday also gave the coaches time to reflect on their decisions and maybe iron out some strategies going into their openers.

"After what happened to Texas, there were 300 paranoid coaches — me included," Barnett said. "Special teams, in my philosophy are the indicator of the character of a team."

Difficulty often comes as coaches must decide if their decision to not play a player on special teams will benefit the team.

Kansas State Coach Bill Snyder, for example, must decide whether or not to risk injury to running back David Allen on special teams.

"David is our No. 1 running back, but he has made his mark on returns on a national spotlight," Snyder said. "We will make a decision soon based on what is best for the football team."

Huskers implement 6-2 offensive attack

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weekend, Pettit said it could make the difference in NU's run at a second national championship in December.

The 6-2 implements two setters as opposed to the 5-1 offense, which uses one setter, that most top teams use. Even though Pettit said it is "10 times more complicated" than the 5-1, the 6-2 allows a team to use three hitters, which in volleyball means a more explosive offensive attack.

For Pettit, that meant getting as many of his best athletes, who are at the hitter position, on the court.

One of those athletes is freshman Greichaly Cepero, a versatile Puerto Rican national junior team member he has heavily touted as one of his

best freshmen ever. Cepero was recruited as a setter, but Pettit said she will be used mainly as an attacker in the 6-2 this season.

"She's one of the most beautiful athletes I've ever coached and does so many things well," Pettit said.

"But she played the same position (All-American junior hitter) Nancy Meendering. I think it would've been a mistake as a coach to not have Meendering and Cepero out there, and the 6-2 offense allowed us to do that."

The other reason Pettit decided to go the 6-2 was his confidence in one of his other true freshmen — Lindsey Wischmeier, a 5-9 setter from Class D-2 Lewiston (Neb.) High School who will play a valuable role in the offense backing up starter setter Jill McWilliams.

Wischmeier will receive a lot of playing time because the 6-2 must use a lot of substitutions.

The 6-2, Pettit said, is considered to be waters that hardly any coach in the country dare cross because of its complexity and the extremely high caliber of athletes required to run it.

He said although his team will have difficulty adjusting to the offense early on, like they did last weekend in losses to Pacific and Penn State, the long-term results will be well worth it.

"It will take another five or six weeks for it to become polished," Pettit said.

"We'll have to win some matches when we're not as patterned. But in the end, if we can do it right, it will be very difficult (for other teams) to prepare for."

