Top-Ranked A&M Defense Better?

By Mike Bevans

The defensive statistics wracked up by Texas A&M a year ago bordered on the unreal. The only logical explanation has the Aggies' legendary 12th Man climbing out of the stands whenever the opposition had the ball.

"The defense gets a lot of ink," explained Aggie middle linebacker Robert Jackson, "and everything they say is mostly true."

Official statistics left A&M the No. 1 defense in the nation against the rush and against total offense. The Aggies allowed just 80.3 yards per game on the ground (2.0 yards per carry) and only 183.8 yards per game total (3.1 yards per play).

"We'll be strong on defense again," promised Jackson, a 6-2, 220-pound senior from Houston. "We'll be just as good, but we could be better, because we've got some guys who haven't played that much and are waiting for a chance to show what they can do."

They'll get their chance Saturday afternoon at Kyle Field in College Station, when Texas A&M opens its season as host to Virginia Tech. It is the first meeting between the schools and the Hokies' second test of the season, following a 23-6 win over Wake Forest.

A&M won its first 10 games a year ago, then settled for a three-way tie for first in the Southwest Conference when Arkansas whipped the Aggies, 31-6, in the season finale. Southern Cal followed with a 20-0 lacing in the Liberty Bowl.

Three Aggies gained All-America honors, 13 made somebody's All-SWC list and Emory Bellard was named Coach of the Year by The Sporting News. Ten Aggies were selected in the National Football League draft, including linebackers Garth Ten Napel and Ed Simonini.

Playing between those two were Jackson, a transfer from Henderson County Junior College, and Grady Wilkerson, a junior. They alternated at middle linebacker until the eighth game with Southern Methodist, when Jackson moved into the starting lineup for good.

"When I went to junior college, we did a lot of things different, so I had to adjust a lot," said Jackson, a two-time All-American at Henderson County. "Once I got everything down, I fit in. It took a little while and I'm glad I'm playing more than I was last year."

Despite his limited playing time a year ago, Jackson made Playboy Magazine's pre-season All-America squad. He is one of six returning starters on A&M's defense, which was No. 2 in the nation two years ago.

"We always have big guys up front and I like that myself," said Jackson. "It makes me feel real good that we didn't lose anything up the middle."

End Tank Marshall and tackle Edgar Fields and Jimmy Dean are returning starters along the line. Eugene Sanders, a transfer from the University of Washington, is the new starter at the other end and his 265 pounds give the Aggies an average weight of 258 for the front four.

"They keep guys off me, so I can pursue up and down the line," said Jackson, "They have real good quickness to go with..."