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About the cover: Texas A&M junior Isaiah Spiller has established himself as one of the top running backs in the country after only two seasons of collegiate football. Photo by Abbey Santoro — The Battalion

Abbey Santoro — THE BATTALION

**EDITORIAL STAFF**

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Casey Stavenhagen, Co-Sports Editor

Jennifer Streeter, Co-Sports Editor

Ryan Faulkner, Asst. Sports Editor

Julia Potts, News Editor

Michaela Rush, Life & Arts Editor

Abbey Santoro, Photo Chief

Cori Eckert, Head Page Designer
Howdy 12th Man,

Our names are Casey Stavenhagen and Jennifer Streeter, and we are the co-sports editors for The Battalion. Before we get into this magazine, we would like to give a special thank you to our predecessor, Hannah Underwood, for all of the incredible work she produced as a member of the staff. This is the first magazine in four semesters she is not a part of creating and we hope to make her proud. We also want to express our gratitude to you for picking up this edition of The Battalion’s Maroon Life Fall Sports Preview.

This semester of fall sports promises to be exhilarating, with fans returning to venues in full capacity. Additionally, this semester will be exciting for us as we begin our tenures as sports editors. Jennifer joined The Battalion as a sports writer in fall of 2018 and served as assistant sports editor in fall of 2020. Casey joined The Battalion as a sports writer in spring of 2019 and advanced to assistant sports editor in fall of 2020. Casey joined The Battalion as a sports writer in spring of 2019 and advanced to assistant sports editor in spring of 2020. We are honored to serve this sensational staff of writers, but also each other as co-sports editors and we hope you enjoy the sports stories shared in this magazine.

Getting into the reason we are here — the current sports atmosphere in Aggieland. Expectations are high all around, with football coming off of its highest finish since 1939 and soccer going all the way to the Elite Eight. Teams who didn’t have as high of a finish, such as volleyball and cross country, are looking to uphold promises to themselves and bounce back.

With that being said, we have some really exciting previews and features contained within the next 21 pages.

Beginning in the center of the huddle in Kyle Field, two young quarterbacks are dueling it out for the starting position following the graduation of former three-year starter Kellen Mond. Redshirt sophomore Zach Calzada and redshirt freshman Haynes King both have the ability to bring unique talents under center. So far the battle is up in the air, with Texas A&M coach Jimbo Fisher looking to find his next right-hand man.

Last year marked the first season in A&M program history in which the Aggies placed in the country’s top four without winning the national championship. A&M saw seven other significant losses to its starting lineup, yet returned multiple offensive powerhouses. One of the nation’s top three offensive lines, nicknamed ‘The Maroon Goons,’ saw four losses to the NFL Draft and will need to adjust in order to assist in the transition of the new starting quarterback. Lastly, A&M’s defense holds promise with returning players and numerous four and five star recruits.

Also to be seen on Kyle Field is junior Isaiah Spiller, who made a name for himself with a stellar 2020 season. The running back has hopes of being a Heisman candidate, acompañied with a father who has instilled in him the importance of defying the odds.

The soccer program which made it to the Elite Eight holds a lot of promise in its line up. However, the 2020 starting roster was composed of a majority of underclassmen. With a tradition of excellence being upheld in younger players, the 2021 lineup will see a lot of returning talent.

According to most 2022 NFL mock drafts, A&M junior defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal is heading towards a top 10 pick. The San Antonio native has always held himself to a high standard, and after a breakout 2020 season, he is in control of his own fate.

As a result of a recent ruling by the NCAA, college athletes are allowed to profit off of their names, images and likeness, or NIL. After the ruling made on July 1, two Aggies were paid $10,000 for interviews and A&M has created a program to help its athletes capitalize on NIL to their fullest extent.

We also have a section previewing the remaining seasons of fall sports — soccer, volleyball and cross country. Many of these sports saw changes in the format of their schedules as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, these sports will see a return to their regular season, going back to only competing in the fall.

Sprinkled in between these previews, we have a feature on A&M volleyball’s star opposite hitter Treauna Rush. The junior is hoping to take on her new role as an upperclassman with an optimistic style of leadership and has dreams of becoming a coach following the conclusion of her NCAA eligibility.

With the return of sporting events, there is sure to be a plethora of sporting news. Follow us on Twitter @battsports to stay up-to-date with our latest sports content and happenings.

Lastly, on a more somber note, we would like to dedicate this edition to loved ones both of us have lost. Jennifer’s grandfather, Nolan ‘Pops’ Keller, passed away in January of this year. We would like to thank both of them for their endless sacrifices for their loved ones and their unwavering support and inspiration in all of our endeavors. Jennifer’s last moments with her grandfather were spent with him wishing her luck on this magazine and telling her how excited he was to read it. Casey’s grandfather was one of the most constant sources of joy and laughter in his life and was a continually encouraging man. We hope both of them are at peace and know they are loved and remembered.

Thanks and Gig ‘Em.

Casey Stavenhagen is an english senior and sports editor for The Battalion
Jennifer Streeter is a journalism senior and sports editor for The Battalion
Calzada, King vie for QB1 position

Following the departure of former A&M quarterback Kellen Mond, two athletes battle for starting position

By Casey Stavenhagen
@CStavenhagen

Kellen Mond left behind a pair of record-breaking shoes to fill for Texas A&M’s incoming QB1. Entering the 2021 football season with high expectations from a No. 4 finish in 2020, all eyes lie upon Mond’s potential replacements. Through spring camp, two frontrunners have emerged — redshirt sophomore Zach Calzada and redshirt freshman Haynes King.

Calzada and King demonstrated their respective talents in A&M’s annual spring Maroon & White game on Saturday, April 24. Since then, little has been made public about where the two stand in the running for who gets the starting position.

“Everybody is worried about the quarterback — that’s the last thing I’m worried about,” A&M coach Jimbo Fisher said following the spring game. “I’m worried about the pieces around them. I think [the quarterbacks are] making tremendous progress right now.”

There is an undoubted level of pressure associated with replacing Mond, the A&M all-time record holder in passing touchdowns, passing yards and completions, among other records.

Fisher said what great players do, with Mond standing as no exception, is set an example to those who will succeed them.

“Kellen basically started the whole three years I’d been [at A&M],” Fisher said. “Hopefully, Kellen, how he prepared, how he grew and what he did, is passed on to those guys. I think he’s educated those guys.”

While Fisher is confident in the talent level of both of the athletes in question, their styles as individual players may come into consideration when selecting one over the other.

In the spring game, King showcased his mobility by scrambling outside of collapsing pockets to complete passes while Calzada displayed a more traditional pocket-passer style.

“Zach is a very talented man, [he] can throw the football very well,” Fisher said. “But everybody gets caught in his arm — Zach is a really good athlete, he can run around. I think Haynes can really throw the football. He’s tough, he’s competitive, he’s smart, he can run. Those guys have great minds and I’m telling you, I was extremely pleased with both of those guys in spring ball.”

Both quarterbacks hovered around 50 percent of passes completed with over 200 yards accumulated and one touchdown each. King served as Mond’s backup through the 2020 season, in which the Longview native made

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Zach Calzada has a current career total of 133 passing yards, five rushing yards and two passing touchdowns.

TOUCHDOWNS — 1
INTERCEPTIONS — 1
PASSING YDS — 253

Stats compiled from Maroon & White game on April 24, 2021 via 12thman.com
two appearances. Against South Carolina, King threw for a 45-yard touchdown pass. Prior to King’s arrival, Calzada was the secondary shot-caller, accumulating 133 passing yards and two touchdowns in 2019.

The only indication of leaning toward one athlete over the other was King’s two appearances in 2020. With little public statistical separation, Fisher said another aspect that makes a quarterback great is the effect they have on teammates.

“When [great quarterbacks] get in the huddle, you know ‘that guy is on our team, we can win,’” Fisher said. “I think we’re in a really, really good situation. I love our room however that situation turns out. [I’m] very excited about those guys and their future.”

With the competitive nature of two young athletes vying for the starting job, neither has been made available to the media. All sentiments echoed from coaches to teammates alike paint a completely even battle.

Junior defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal said he has seen the quarterbacks compete for the position while simultaneously lending a helping hand to one another.

“I’ve seen them mess up and take all that yelling, all that adversity and not let it phase them,” Leal said. “I’ve seen them help each other. I’ve seen them become leaders of the offense like we needed them to be.”

In 2017, former A&M coach Kevin Sumlin’s final year with the program, both Mond and Nick Starkel started games.

The concept of splitting the starts between several quarterbacks has been practiced before, though it has led to differing levels of success. Notably, in 2020, the Georgia Bulldogs started two quarterbacks to an 8-2 season, while the Tennessee Volunteers undertook a similar approach midway through the campaign to a 3-7 season.

There has been no sign of starts being split between Calzada and King, but the idea isn’t incomprehensible either as the two young quarterbacks have both only seen positive light in statements to the media.

Fisher said the duo is talented far beyond throwing the football, displayed by their motivation, knowledge and competitive fire improving the team as a whole.

“They have great knowledge of what we’re doing,” Fisher said. “They understand protections, they have escapability, they have creativity, but more importantly, they’re great decision makers. They have an unbelievable competitiveness to them and they affect the guys around them.”

Regardless of the uncertainty surrounding the battle and its eventual victor, Fisher has made his confidence in both prospects abundantly clear. With record-breaking shoes to fill and lofty parallels to Fisher’s national championship tenure at Florida State being drawn, there may be no closure until one athlete leads the Aggies out of the tunnel onto Kyle Field for a full crowd to see.
The expectations have never been higher.

Texas A&M football concluded the 2020 season ranked No. 4 nationally after winning its Orange Bowl matchup against North Carolina. Pair this with former starting quarterback Kellen Mond departing for the Minnesota Vikings, and there is a lot of anticipation to see the next leg of the Aggies’ journey.

Following the team’s 41-27 win over North Carolina, A&M coach Jimbo Fisher said there is still more to strive for.

“Let me tell you this, we ain’t done yet,” Fisher said.

However, the departure of 10 key athletes could make this somewhat difficult.

The Aggies lost several skilled players over the offseason as Mond, linebacker and two-time tackle leader Buddy Johnson, defensive tackle Bobby Brown III, wide receiver Jhamon Ausbon and offensive linemen Carson Green, Jared Hocker, Ryan McCollum and Dan Moore Jr. have moved on to the NFL.

Additionally, wide receiver Camron Buckley and defensive back Derrick Tucker left A&M in favor of the transfer portal.

While the successes of the previous season and players are important, junior offensive guard Kenyon Green said the team is focused on the future.

“We can’t worry about last season, that is in the past,” Green said. “We have got to worry about what we have now — this is a whole new team. We got new players, new people on the staff, so we just have to focus on what we have now and just build off of that.”

A&M has an abundance of talent in its returning players who are working to offset the losses on the roster.

The offensive duo of now-junior running backs Isaiah Spiller and Ainias Smith, who also doubles as a wide receiver, combined for 1,893 offensive yards and 19 total touchdowns during the 2020 season.

Additionally, on the defensive side of the ball, junior tight end Jalen Wydermyer accumulated six touchdowns with 506 receiving yards last season. He has since been named to the Athlon Sports 2021 Preseason All-American Team, the 2021 Biletnikoff Award Watch List and the 2021 Mackey Award Watch List.

With an accomplished roster on both sides of the ball, the Aggies are well-equipped for practices to resume. Fisher said the process of building a winning team is derived from focusing on execution.

“The results will come when we don’t worry about the results,” Fisher said. “The results will come when we really buy into the day-to-day process of how we have to do things to create those habits that allow us to really execute under process. I’m very pleased with the progress we’ve made and I’m all for the results, I’ll tell you that.”

A&M also shows its strength in returning players on the defensive side.

Senior defensive lineman Jayden Pevey chose to utilize his extra year of eligibility and...
will return for the 2021 season. The Bellaire native posted 34 total tackles and one sack last season, and has a career total of 64 tackles with 5.5 sacks.

Other defensive standouts include junior safety Demani Richardson, boasting a career total of 107 tackles and two interceptions, and junior defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal. Leal has been named to the Walter Camp Preseason All-American First Team and earned Athlon Sports Preseason All-America First Team honors. Leal posted 37 tackles and had one interception for 43 yards against Alabama in the most recent season.

Leal said the returning players bring an exceptional aspect of play to the defense.

“This [defensive] group can be very special,” Leal said. “Just having so much experience and just being able to know our standard as a whole and being able to teach the young guys what it’s like to play in the SEC before the games and the season starts. It’s going to be amazing.”

In 2020, the offensive line, also dubbed the “Maroon Goons,” had a dominant season where they only allowed seven sacks. Despite losing four starting offensive linemen to the draft, the unit will return Green, an All-American.

A&M has five core values: excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty, respect and selfless service. These values are represented in the culture of every sports program on campus, and football is no exception.

Since Fisher joined the Aggies as head coach in 2018, he has been working hard to utilize those values to shape a winning culture.

“We have a very good team,” Fisher said. “We are making a lot of progress with the culture of our organization. We’re getting to where we need to be and starting to be able to compete for championships and compete at the highest levels which is why we’re there and what we’re there for.”

A&M and the University of Alabama were the two SEC schools that finished with the highest national ranking, with Alabama coming out of the 2020 season as National Champions. Although the Crimson Tide is coming to Kyle Field this year, Leal said it is imperative to remain focused on every game on the slate.

“Personally, I’m looking forward to every team coming to Kyle Field,” Leal said. “Just being able to play at the highest level, playing against the best, that’s what I love to do. Being able to knock down the defending national champions, that would be good, but I’m looking forward to every single game.”

Redshirt sophomore Zach Calzada and redshirt freshman Haynes King are battling it out for the starting quarterback position following Mond’s departure. A&M’s new QB1 will hold weight beyond simply winning the job.

After an Orange Bowl win in the previous season, Fisher led his former team, Florida State, to become National Champions with a new quarterback in 2013, a season that clearly parallels the Aggies’ upcoming season.

Green said it is clear that expectations are high for A&M.

“We raise the bar, we raised the standard last year so we have to lock in and get everything ready for this upcoming season,” Green said.

Fisher said from now on, everything the Aggies do is for a national championship.

“Everyday is a championship,” Fisher said. “Each and every play is for a championship. Each and every practice is for a championship. Each and every individual thing you do and detail, every meeting, is for a championship. We’re looking forward to taking those next steps, [we’re] excited about our football team, offense, defense, special teams.”
Texas A&M football running back Isaiah Spiller’s father instills a strong work ethic, teaches him the sky is the limit

By Jennifer Streeter
@jennystreeter3

Isaiah Spiller, along with his father Fred, former Texas A&M tight end and Class of 2004, lay out a list of goals for Isaiah to attempt to accomplish every season.

Running back Isaiah Spiller has already achieved many of those goals as an underclassman, one of them being reaching over 1,000 rushing yards in his sophomore season alone. However, Isaiah is now entering his junior year with a few new accolades in mind. Being a candidate for the most prestigious award in college football, the Heisman Trophy, is at the top of that list.

“I’m gonna tell you this, I told you we make goals every year, that is one of his goals this year,” Fred said. “To be that type of player, that Heisman candidate, the player to put his team on his back and make the plays necessary to take A&M to that national championship.”

During the 2020 football season and the 2021 Orange Bowl, Isaiah notched a 1,036 rushing yard season in addition to scoring nine of the 21 rushing touchdowns in the 2020 campaign.

A&M head coach Jimbo Fisher said Isaiah is an amazing running back, but added fans should not discredit his 20 catches for 193 receiving yards from the 2020 season.

“I mean, he is huge. He’s the guy that everyone knows is going to get it and we’re going to give it to him and he carries it. He’s a big part of what we do and also catching the ball out of the backfield,” Fisher said.

However, hitting the 1,000 rushing yard mark was not an easy accomplishment. Going into the Orange Bowl, Isaiah only needed 14 yards to meet this mark, but during practice the week of the bowl game, Isaiah injured his foot.

“Coming into [the Orange Bowl], he was already hurt,” Fred said. “I didn’t even think he was going to play. But he kept telling me he was going to play because he wanted to hit that 1,000 yards.”
and I saw his foot, I was like, ‘Man, you don’t need to play on a swollen foot,’ but he said, ‘Dad, I’m playing.’ So they wrapped it up and he went out there and got his 1,000 yards.”

While his foot wasn’t broken in the 2021 Orange Bowl, Isaiah did play with a fractured toe. In addition, the running back managed to garner 50 rushing yards and was responsible for two touchdowns, surpassing his 1,000 yard mark.

Isaiah not only attributes his own perseverance and talent to hitting the benchmark, but also to his teammates, past and present.

“I’m very grateful to my [offensive] line,” Isaiah said. “They have been amazing this year. In fact, they’re going to be amazing this year. I’m grateful for those guys. Kellen [Mond], Ainias [Smith] and Chase [Lane] and all of them were blocking for me so [reaching 1,000 rushing yards] was a team effort. I’m ready to do it again this year.”

But Isaiah’s talent is something the Spiller family has been refining for decades.

The Spring native started playing football at a very young age, demonstrating immense talent when he was just in youth football.

“In little league, he had a game where he had six touchdowns in the first half,” Fred said. “Everybody had been telling me he was going to be a special player, but when I saw that, I was like, ‘Okay, this kid has a chance to be something special.’”

As a result of his success leading into the 2021 season, Isaiah has been given three pre-season accolades: he was named to the Doak Walker Award preseason candidate list for the second consecutive season and was also named to the 85th Maxwell Award Preseason Watch List.

Lastly, Isaiah was one of three Aggies named to the All-SEC Preseason Offensive team and was one of the only two running backs chosen.

However, Isaiah said this recognition is somewhat new to him, as his talent often went unnoticed as his career progressed.

In fact, Isaiah said he was not always a starter.

“I really faced adversity in high school,” Isaiah said. “When I was a sophomore, I was on varsity, and I wasn’t used to sitting on the bench. I had to adjust — that was a [big] adversary [for me]. I wanted to quit. It really molded me into the player I am today.”

Fred added that Isaiah’s challenges in high school taught him to take advantage of his opportunities.

“[Isaiah is great at] making the most of his opportunities,” Fred said. “In football, you’re going to face adversity. And I think him facing that adversity early on helped him to deal with it and really made him a stronger player.”

Through the trials and tribulations of becoming one of the NCAA’s most talented running backs, the father and son’s bond has strengthened, Isaiah said.

“All throughout my life, [my dad] has taught me to work and to believe in myself when nobody else is,” Isaiah said. “Everybody doubted me. He really instilled a lot into me that a lot of people are seeing in me today. I’m really grateful for him, I love him as my dad; he’s like my role model, my mentor, he taught me how to run, he taught me how to catch, he taught me how to read holes.”

Fred himself played tight end prior to ending his career early due to a leg injury.

Isaiah has the opportunity to finish what his
Along with his father, Fred, Isaiah Spiller is also supported by his mother and two sisters.

### SPILLER CONTINUED

father began with his own collegiate football career — continuing into a professional one. Fred said his son choosing to attend his alma mater on his own was just another piece of the puzzle.

“I was elated [when Isaiah chose to attend A&M],” Fred said. “I really let it be his choice. I gave him my insight and input on what I thought... It was the right decision.”

Fred is not the only one who praised Isaiah on his skill. Fisher also recognizes the tremendous talent of the starting running back.

“Spiller is just a worker,” Fisher said. “He’s been a 1,000-yard back. One of the best [running backs] in all of the SEC. He [was] only a sophomore, I mean just a tremendous future [lined up for him] and [he’s] just a tremendous player. He’s a part of our backbone.”

Isaiah has already established himself as the Aggies’ go-to running back on the field, having 188 carries during the 2020 campaign, with the number only expected to increase during the upcoming season.

Isaiah is going into the upcoming year with something to prove. As of pretime, none of the pre-season collegiate football magazines list the running back as a Heisman candidate. Athlon Sports College Football Preview lists Isaiah as a third team All-American running back and also ranks the Aggies’ running back unit as third in the country.

 “[Getting a Heisman nomination] would be crazy,” Isaiah said. “That would be a crazy moment in my life. Just to watch all of those guys do that, I got a lot of work to do, but that would be a crazy moment.”

For Isaiah, the sky’s the limit, whether the world knows it or not.
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- Don’t sell parking in a residential neighborhood.
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- Don’t park in bike lanes or loading zones.
- Don’t block driveways.
Texas A&M soccer coach G Guerrieri says sophomores Laney Carroll (left) and Barbara Olivieri (right) are two of the fastest athletes on the team.
Freshmen flagbearers

By Ryan Faulkner
@ryanfaulk03

The moment a player is recruited, the team’s development initiative begins, and incoming freshmen push their limits as they look to make an influence in the world of collegiate athletics, before doing the same for others as the cycle repeats itself.

The maroon and white recently recorded one of its most successful seasons to date, notching both the SEC Co-Regular Season Championship as well as a spot in the NCAA Elite Eight. Across the team’s 17 games, freshmen scored 18 of A&M’s 33 goals. To put this statistic into perspective, the Aggies’ opponents combined to record only 15 against them during this time.

Sophomore midfielder Barbara Olivieri said she believes the entire season would have looked different for A&M if it weren’t for the Class of 2024’s contributions.

“All the freshmen seriously made an impact on our first year,” Olivieri said. “I’m really, really proud of what we were able to accomplish as a team, and I’m even prouder to be a part of the group that paved the way.”

Olivieri herself undoubtedly made her mark during her first year of college play, ultimately landing the title of SEC Freshman of the Year, thanks in part to her team-leading eight goals and five assists. Other first-years, such as forward Lauren Geczik and midfielder Taylor Pounds, were not far behind her.

As a result, the youngest players on the team arguably became the most integral. By the end of the NCAA Tournament in May, eight out of the 11 starters on the Aggies’s squad were underclassmen. Pounds said this helped solidify her personal confidence in the role she feels she is meant to play.

“I think it’s safe to say that I finally found my place on the team,” Pounds said. “I don’t feel out-of-place at all. I want to play a crucial role on this team as I continue to develop and keep improving, so becoming comfortable in the lineup was a really important step for me to take.”

En route to accomplishing this feat, Olivieri said some of the freshmen felt nervous as they began facing pressure to “make a name for themselves.” Many, including Olivieri, had to switch from the positions they previously played in high school to help fill gaps on the field.

Others were less anxious. For forward Laney Carroll, joining the maroon and white squad meant exposing herself to new opportunities which would allow her to develop as a person, the Spring native said.

“Honestly, I didn’t have any fears going into it,” Carroll said. “As soon as I stepped onto campus, I knew this was where I was meant to be. From there, there was this ‘go, go, go’ of excitement.”

Regardless of nerves, or a lack thereof, the team’s upperclassmen helped all newcomers adjust. Carroll said this was the result of deep rooted priorities within the program itself.

“I think it’s really cool in the fact that I went in and developed so much as a player,” Carroll said. “You get there and the players and coaches are pushing you at every single practice to do your best. I think it was neat that there was so much growth, not just of me, but of all the freshmen. That’s something that our entire team does.”

With the help of seasoned veterans leading the team, Carroll and the others were able to smoothly transition to College Station. Nonetheless, challenges still presented themselves, Pounds said. Many of these were unlike anything the players had experienced throughout their athletic career.

“The speed of play was a huge learning curve for me,” Pounds said. “I am always checking my surroundings. The ball moves too fast, so you have to know what’s around you and what your options are.”

Olivieri seconded this, continuing to explain the hardships all freshmen joining A&M’s squad must overcome.

“On top of the speed of play, soccer at a collegiate level just demands more from you,” Olivieri said. “Physically, you have to be stronger and more in-shape. That makes training a lot harder and more intense.”

For athletes chasing the dream of playing professionally, the hard work is all worth it. Pounds said this is why the Aggies have eight new faces joining the team for the 2021 season, expanding the maroon and white to its largest lineup in years.

Carroll said she sees this growth as an opportunity to take on a greater leadership role on the team. In this way, she will continue the precedent set by Aggies before her.

“I hope I can mentor the new guppies like the upperclassmen did for me,” Carroll said. “I hope that they feel confident enough to trust me as a teammate and as a friend. That’s the Aggie soccer mentality — it’s a very different environment that’s honestly really special.”

For A&M to be successful in the coming season, it will have to make these adjustments quickly. The Aggies will have what might be considered the most difficult schedule in the team’s history.

Pounds said she is confident she, along with her fellow teammates, will be up for the challenge as they step into more experienced positions that shake up the squad’s entire playing style.

“This year, we’re going to be very attack-focused,” Pounds said. “I think that will help us score a lot more goals. It’s going to be an exciting time for Aggie soccer and the 12th Man.”

With talent-filled roster, Texas A&M soccer’s youngest players pushed team to Elite Eight, SEC co-regular season championship
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“As a chemical engineering student, we have the Jack E. Brown Engineering building. I can see that outside my window. There’s very few places that offer that proximity. It’s been my happy place.”

- Mo Adesanmi
When I was younger, I always believed I was able to do outstanding things.”

Texas A&M defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal is now approaching his junior year with Texas A&M. In just two seasons of collegiate football, the San Antonio native’s dreams have turned into reality as many mock drafts have him listed as a top 10 overall pick in the 2022 NFL Draft.

As the 2021 football season nears its onset, Leal has been named to the Walter Camp Award watch list and the Bednarik Award preseason watch list. Further, the lineman earned a spot on the Athlon Sports Preseason All-America First Team.

Having accrued accolades of this caliber after just two years, Leal is proving his destiny rests firmly in his own hands.

“It’s a blessing, just being able to be here and representing Texas A&M — it’s something I’ve always dreamed of,” Leal said. “Just being able to accomplish this is very big for me.”

In the shortened 2020 season, Leal tallied 37 tackles and led the defense with eight quarterback hurries. Add in an interception, four pass deflections and 2.5 sacks, and his talent and versatility becomes evident.

His excellence within the hash marks has always been apparent. Leal began playing football at 4 years old, and even during his freshman year in high school, Leal was in the varsity rotation, former Judson High School head football coach Sean McAuliffe said. McAuliffe described Leal as “ginormous” when he was just a freshman in high school.

“I knew when he was coming to us as an eighth grader that that kid had a chance to be a Power Five defensive end,” McAuliffe said. “He was a three-year starter and the district MVP. Credit to him, he’s been blessed and he’s done a great job working really hard.”

Leal exited high school in 2018 as a five-star recruit, ranked 16th in the nation and second among all defensive tackles. A&M was the third school to offer Leal a scholarship, and he committed a year later over other Power Five universities.

“He was down to Texas, Alabama and A&M. Really, A&M was his choice the whole time,” McAuliffe said. “He ended up taking his trips to Texas and Alabama and he loves him some fighting Texas Aggies, I guess. It never swayed him at all.”

Even in A&M’s only defeat of the 2020 season, a 52-24 loss to eventual National Champion Alabama, Leal shined. Leal intercepted the first pass of his career before taking off to the end zone, getting so close he could “taste” it. After 43 yards, he was eventually brought down at the 17 yard line, but set up a touchdown to tie the score early in the second quarter.

An athlete with talent and versatility of Leal’s level is rare. McAuliffe said coaching a player of that caliber is often a once in a career opportunity.

“I’m just fortunate enough to have had an opportunity to, hopefully, not screw him up too much,” McAuliffe joked.

Leal continued his stellar 2020 campaign and was named the Aggies’ defensive MVP. No matter the stakes, he remained steadfast in building upon the high standards he set for himself. In the Orange Bowl, A&M’s first New Year’s Six game in eight years, Leal helped in leading the defense by recording seven tackles, tying his career high.

Despite an abundance of confidence in his play and his team, Leal said he still feels nerves before every game simply due to his love for the sport.

“If you don’t have nerves going into a game then I feel like that means you don’t care,” Leal said. “When you play a game that you love, you tend to get a little bit nervous just because you care about it so much.”

Among all the praise the junior has received, he said it inspires confidence in continuing down his path.

“My mom always told me, ‘Always work, keep your head down and just keep moving,’” Leal said.

For many, football is simply a path towards capitalizing on one’s talents or a way to make money and acquire fame. For Leal, it’s much more than a game or a vehicle to wealth. It’s life.
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2021
NIL policy marks new era for college athletics

Student-athletes reap benefits of newly allowed endorsement of names, images, likeness through AMPLIFY program

By Ryne Ryskoski
@rusty_ryskoski

Collegiate sports history was made on Thursday, July 1, 2021 with a new NCAA interim names, images and likenesses, or NIL, policy granting student-athletes the opportunity to benefit from NIL in all NCAA sports.

Due to state law, Texas collegiate athletes were able to accept endorsements when calendars flipped to July. Texas joins Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Georgia, New Mexico and Florida, allowing its athletes to capitalize on NIL deals.

On Friday, May 28 the Texas State Senate approved Senate Bill 1385, which allowed Texas A&M to create its own program titled AMPLIFY. The initiative will assist A&M student-athletes in successfully branding themselves and growing their platforms.

A&M Director of Athletics Ross Bjork said AMPLIFY will provide student-athletes with the resources to grow their brands and position themselves to have success off the field.

“Our new AMPLIFY platform provides Aggie athletes with the right tools and resources so that they are educated, well-informed and can capitalize to their full potential,” Bjork told 12thMan.com. “Our job is to put our student-athletes in the best position for success on and off the fields of play, and AMPLIFY helps them reach their goals.”

AMPLIFY will give athletes in-class education and resources to improve the athletes' branding. It will also have specific programs such as evaluating job opportunities, creating custom content, social media analysis and much more.

A&M’s national exposure is already high as a member of the Southeastern Conference and the SEC Network. Combining that with AMPLIFY will put A&M athletes directly in the spotlight as they represent a new, revised era of college athletics.

Some A&M football players have already signed endorsement deals such as junior tight end Jalen Wydermyer, junior safety Demani Richardson, junior running back Isaiah Spiller and junior defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal.

Spiller tweeted that he has become a partner with Raising Cane’s Chicken Fingers as a Caniac Ambassador while Demani Richardson became a client with Fans Meet Idols, a personalized social media video message service.

Wydermyer himself signed a deal with Vanguard Sports Group, a full-service sports agency, and recently held a meet-and-greet in College Station, sponsored by State Farm Insurance. Leal announced he joined another sports agency, Ballengee Group.

Richardson and Spiller were each paid for a series of interviews at an NIL event hosted by the fan site TexAgs and sponsored by Green-Print Real Estate Group in early July. The event is a quick result of the revised NIL rules as players like Spiller, Wydermyer and Richardson have signed at least two endorsement deals since the rule changes went into effect.

“This took a lot of work in order to make sure everything was on the up-and-up and by the book in terms of the new NIL rules and this uncharted territory, but it was worth it to see how excited the guys were for the opportunity,” TexAgs co-owner and executive editor Billy Liucci posted on the website.

Fred Spiller, class of 2004, father of Isaiah Spiller and former A&M tight end, said this summer, especially the month of July, has been chaotic with all the changes, and it’s a new experience for their family as well as other NCAA student-athletes.

“It’s been crazy, it really has,” Fred said to San Antonio Express-News. “With all the [offers] coming through, we’re trying to see what’s a good deal and what’s not a good deal. This is all new to us.”

Fred said he and Isaiah have leaned on Brad Barnes and the A&M athletics compliance department in the process’s early stages to help them navigate Isaiah’s brand, from receiving an endorsement offer to accepting it.

“Every deal we’ve gotten or we think about doing, I have a group text with [Barnes],” Fred said to San Antonio Express-News. “[A&M has] an [online] portal to go through, to fill out every NIL opportunity and let compliance see it and make sure it’s OK. They let you know the guidelines.”

Fred also said he and Isaiah have been careful in picking out opportunities because they want all of the focus and energy to be put on the upcoming season.

“I don’t want him to do too much,” Fred said to San Antonio Express-News. “I want him to focus on the season and doing what he has to do this summer for the season. We’re kind of being picky and not just doing everything that jumps out.”

Meanwhile, junior running back and wide receiver Ainias Smith is putting his own twist on the ways athletes are utilizing the rule changes. He tweeted that he will be giving each of his teammates a percentage of the profits he receives from his own NIL endorsements throughout the season.

But with states having differing laws as it relates to student-athlete compensation, it remains to be seen if or when a more permanent NIL policy will be created. This is a result of it only being progressed through further discussions between the NCAA and U.S. Congress, NCAA President Mark Emmert said.

“With the variety of state laws adopted across the country, we will continue to work with Congress to develop a solution that will provide clarity on a national level,” Emmert said. “The current environment — both legal and legislative — prevents us from providing a more permanent solution and the level of detail student-athletes deserve.”
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A&M soccer aims for success

A&M head coach G Guerrieri said his players’ minds and bodies were pushed to their absolute limits by the end of the season. This dictated the need for the players to recuperate before preparing for the fall.

“I asked the players to take some serious time off,” Guerrieri said. “We need them to get some serious rest and time to recover physically and mentally from such a long season. They will ease back into the grind of the new year when most of the team returns to campus in July.”

However, the Aggies will not have long to prepare. A&M’s upcoming schedule promises to be one of the most difficult in the nation and holds potential to be the maroon and white’s toughest year to date. The team’s first three matchups are all against squads that advanced to the NCAA Tournament’s Elite Eight in May — Florida State, TCU and Clemson. The Aggies will also have to face SEC Co-Regular Season Champion Arkansas, as well as Vanderbilt, the reigning SEC Tournament champion.

Smith said the squad’s newest additions will have to quickly find their place on the team and step up if A&M wants to remain competitive against the intense lineup of opponents.

“We were able to go as far as we did last year because our team is so young,” Smith said. “We know that we’re going to get the same quality of players that we have, and maybe even better, with the eight coming in. They’ll fit right in and meet expectations, no matter how old they are.”

The incoming freshmen are not the only players looking to make adjustments. Forward Barbara Olivieri, last season’s SEC Freshman of the Year, said the more experienced players will still need to develop themselves further for the upcoming season.

“Even though I’m a returning player, I still feel like I have some stuff to work on,” Olivieri said. “I want to get better at turning and driving out the defenders. If I do that, and keep perfecting my striking and finishing, I think I can become a much better player.”

One adjustment players like Olivieri will have to make is based on the league’s scheduling criteria. Last season was split into two halves due to COVID-19, with the SEC Tournament played in the fall and the NCAA Tournament in the spring. This meant the Aggies only had to play one game per week instead of the two seen in a regular year.

Last year also featured a slimmer lineup for the maroon and white, with only 20 athletes on the roster. Guerrieri said he is confident the team moving to a fuller size of 27 players will be enough to deal with the more rigorous schedule.

“I’m not worried about the players’ transition back into a more traditional NCAA fall season,” Guerrieri said. “Now that we have built such a great depth into the roster, I think playing more than one game a week won’t be as debilitating as it was last season.”

Smith agreed with her coach, claiming the more exhausting schedule format may actually benefit the team in the long run.

“As a team, we mainly focus on ourselves rather than making adjustments to other teams,” Smith said. “We prepare for ourselves, not for other teams. It’s very special that we get to do that, especially because other schools may struggle with that.”

The pandemic brought fan occupancy restrictions, which many believe impacted team energy and play success across the country. The upcoming season will see a return to full-attendance stadium standards, including the revival of A&M’s annual Fish Camp Game, one of the most-attended collegiate soccer games in the nation.

Guerrieri said this will allow the stars to “perfectly align” so that Aggie fans in the Brazos Valley and beyond can fully enjoy the fall as the maroon and white push toward a return to normalcy in collegiate athletics.

“The 12th Man can be really excited about being back at Ellis Field this season,” Guerrieri said. “We have a very talented team ready to defend our SEC [Co-Regular Season] Championship and try to put ourselves in position to again compete for a national championship in December.”

A&M’s season will open in Fort Worth on Thursday, Aug. 19. The team will start things off back in College Station the following week on Saturday, Aug. 28. Though the kickoff time has not been officially announced as of press time, fans can begin preparing for the homecoming celebration.

Olivieri said fans should take advantage of the team’s 10 home games as they set up what will likely become an experience nobody wants to miss.

“Freshman year was a great time,” Olivieri said. “Now it’s time to go out there for another successful season, but this one should have even more wins and titles than last year. I’m pretty positive that will happen.”

Aggies, Guerrieri will likely take on their most challenging schedule to date following 2021 Elite Eight appearance

By Ryan Faulkner
@ryanfaulk03

With the fall season quickly approaching, all eyes are on Texas A&M soccer and what the young team may accomplish.

A&M finished its 2020 season with a final record of 12-4-1, going 7-1 in the SEC competition and remaining undefeated while playing at Ellis Field. The team claimed the SEC Co-Regular Season Championship in the fall, then advanced to the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament before falling to then-No. 2 North Carolina. The “season of breaking records,” cut short of a national title, is still largely considered to be a success by almost every metric.

Team co-captain Katie Smith, a junior defender, said the team plans on repeating this success every year going forward.

“That should be the new minimum,” Smith said. “We want to go even further, so I think that’s the new expectation we have for ourselves. Last year was a great experience that will push us to do even better next season.”

With the NCAA Tournament taking place in May for the first time in collegiate history,
Due to NCAA guidelines, athletes cannot have contact with their coaches during the summer offseason. However, this has not held Texas A&M volleyball back from preparing for the return to a normal season.

Senior libero Allison Fields said the team has been voluntarily exercising and conducting open gyms in College Station since June 1. “Workouts have been awesome because it has been our choice to be in the gym,” Fields said. “The past year, we have been on a leash with where we can go and what we can do, but we have our freedom back in a way.”

Despite missing out on the NCAA tournament in 2020, coach Laura “Bird” Kuhn believes her players are better prepared for the 2021 season. Kuhn said the team fully understands the expectations and level of play needed to be more successful in the fall.

“Having a 9-9 record is not where we want to be at the end of the season. However, our young players gained a lot of experience, and we grew significantly as a whole,” Kuhn said. “Our goal going into next season is knowing the expectations of where we want to be and knowing as individuals, and as a team, what that takes.”

Senior middle blocker Mallory Talbert finished last season leading the Aggies in blocks, blocks per set and was second in kills. Talbert said maintaining the same intensity and pushing herself and her teammates to the best of their abilities will be important in repeating her success.

“It all goes back to the team. I work so hard for every other person on the team, for their success and the success of our team,” Talbert said. “I am capable of doing all of that because of everyone who has touched my life in the past and all my coaches and teammates who continue to touch my life and push me to the best of my ability.”

The Aggies are going into the season with five seniors, all bringing different leadership roles to the team. Being a senior comes with a lot of responsibility, Talbert said, by having more experience than anyone else on the court.

Alongside Fields and Talbert are libero Taylor Voss, middle blocker London Austin-Roark and outside hitter and setter Camryn Ennis. Fields said she wants to be a motivator and the best version of herself so she can lead the team.

“None of that motivation or drive just comes from me,” Fields said. “Mallory Talbert and every single one of my teammates is on the court every day keeping each other accountable and making sure we are working our hardest and that motivates me to do the same.”

Along with the five seniors, the team expects two players to exercise their extra year of eligibility from COVID-19 — Camille Connor, who made the All-SEC team in 2019, and University of Denver transfer Macy Carrabine, who played libero for four years.

Kuhn said the depth of competition the Aggies have at each position will have a significant effect on their success this fall.

“Mallory Talbert and London Austin-Roark are two veteran middles whose presence and personalities — not just as middles on the court but as people — are significant to the team,” Kuhn said. “Allison Fields is also a returning captain for us. She got injured near the end of last season. However, her rehab over the summer has been very successful. There is an undertone that she provides for this team that is unmatched.”

The Aggies will be facing tough competition in the 2021 season, including a young and competitive Missouri squad and the No. 1 returning National Champion, the University of Kentucky. Ensuring the Aggies are in top shape for the upcoming season is key, Talbert said.

“The weight room has also been the biggest help this summer because we didn’t have that spring off-season to get stronger and tune things,” Talbert said. “We also have been doing a lot of conditioning because we are playing a lot of tough teams this fall and we need to outlast them during the season.”

Reflecting on her past three years of playing for A&M, Talbert said one of her favorite memories was beating Rice during the 2019 postseason. Talbert recorded 10 kills and six blocks in the 3-1 win.

“That game went into the thirties, and there was definitely a point during the game where we thought we were going home,” Talbert said. “We went all-out for each other, for the 12th Man and for what we’ve been working so hard for all season.”

The Aggies’ first game of the season will be held Friday, Aug. 20 at Reed Arena against Baylor. A&M will host the Texas A&M Invitational Friday, Sept. 10 and will then face the University of Texas on Friday, Sept. 17 before the team’s first conference game on Wednesday, Sept. 22 against Alabama.

Ahead of their upcoming season, Texas A&M volleyball coach Laura “Bird” Kuhn said the expectations for her team are higher than ever.

Veteran Texas A&M volleyball players look forward to more challenging fall schedule after 9-9 record in 2020 season

By Grant Gaspard
@grantgaspard
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ATHLETE FEATURE: TREYAUNNA RUSH

Treyaunna Rush has tallied 230 kills throughout her collegiate career.

As a two-year veteran of the team, Rush said she remains focused on her current role by perfecting her craft and contributing to A&M’s success in any way possible.

Part of what sold Rush on A&M is how similar Kuhn is to her previous high school and club coaches, she said. Having a close relationship with her instructors is important to Rush, which she said makes her appreciate of the special bond she shares with Kuhn.

“During games, I can look over at Coach Kuhn, and she’ll signal with her hands what she wants me to do,” Rush said.

Building on this, Kuhn said she believes her job is to make her players as comfortable and confident as possible.

“They’re out there to be their best, so if there’s anything [we] can do as a staff, then we want to do that,” Kuhn said. “So yeah, sometimes I just give her our little hand motion — it’s her bread and butter. She knows what she’s good at — it’s just my way of reminding her and making her feel like I have her back.”

With two years of NCAA eligibility remaining, the Texarkana native has no plans of retiring from volleyball anytime soon. Rush said she would love the opportunity to play professionally, but her long-term goal is to coach volleyball at the collegiate level.

The rising junior attributes her desire to teach to her former instructor.

“Growing up, every coach that passed through my life helped [me] out with anything they could,” Rush said. “I just want to be the same type of role model for younger girls.”

A&M middle blocker Madison Bowser said she sees great potential in Rush as a coach.

“I think we all want a coach that is encouraging and who has the power to make you feel like they believe in you,” Bowser said. “Treyaunna does a great job of doing that.”

Despite Bowser praising her teammate for her outward support, Rush said she wants to become a more prominent leader as an upperclassman.

“For me specifically, I’m not a very vocal person,” Rush said. “I’m more of a lead-through-actions [kind of person], so I’ve been working on being more vocal with the coaches and the team.”

Kuhn said the coaching staff works with the players’ athletic and personal development. Becoming more outspoken is one area where she’s challenged Rush.

“It’s so funny because Treyaunna has such a big presence, but she’s actually a pretty quiet person,” Kuhn said. “[It’s] all about being comfortable and just, as a person, having the confidence to speak up and know you’re making an impact. So yeah, that’s huge for her.”

One attribute Bowser said the team admires most about Rush is her work ethic.

“Treyaunna’s very intense and super competitive — I think that’s what makes her special and different from everyone else,” Bowser said. “She’s been working hard and coming in by herself to work on stuff she needs to do to get to where she wants to be. She knows that what you do in the dark is what puts you in the light.”

Rush is also widely praised for her optimism. Kuhn said Rush’s positive energy not only makes her an impactful teammate, but will serve her well as a coach someday.

“[Treyaunna’s] an introvert, but when she’s around people, she’s on. So I think it’s that — the energy she has and the ability to turn it on when she needs to,” Kuhn said. “I think she’s had some great coaches and influences in her life, and I think that’s so cool that she already knows that’s what she wants to do.”

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“We all look up to Treyaunna. I don’t think she knows that yet, but we all do.”

Madison Bowser, middle blocker

In addition to her past and present coaches, Rush attributes her success to her support system and expressed gratitude to those that believe in her.

“[My teammates] push me in practice a ton. They believe in me, and them believing in me gives me the confidence to believe in myself,” Rush said. “Both [my mom and aunt] have been by my side this entire time. They’ve always encouraged me to do my best, they’ve always believed in me, and if it weren’t for the two of them, I would not be sitting here.”

Stepping up in team meetings, open gym and in the weight room are among the ways Bowser has seen Rush making strides toward her goal of becoming a more vocal leader.

“We all look up to Treyaunna,” Bowser said. “I don’t think she knows that yet, but we all do.”

Rush seeks to establish more vocal role while maintaining statsheet presence with two more years of NCAA eligibility

By Emily Wedemeyer
@emilynwed

Texas A&M volleyball hitter Treyaunna Rush is making a name for herself.

As a freshman, Rush accumulated multiple SEC honors and was deemed the Aggies’ most improved player. Now, heading into her junior year, the opposite hitter ranks No. 18 in A&M’s record book in blocks.

Although she originally decided to attend Wichita State, Rush said she’s glad she made the switch to College Station following a conversation with A&M coach Laura “Bird” Kuhn.

“I took a trip down to campus, and I mean, I loved every bit of it,” Rush said. “I fell in love with everything here — the coaches, the teammates. I called [Coach Kuhn] back two days later and told her I wanted to commit.”

As a two-year veteran of the team, Rush said she remains confident in her decision to become an Aggie.

“I still haven’t found anything to put under the ‘con’ list at A&M,” Rush said. “I really do think I made the right choice.”

Part of what sold Rush on A&M is how similar Kuhn is to her previous high school and club coaches, she said. Having a close relationship with her instructors is important to Rush, which she said makes her appreciate of the special bond she shares with Kuhn.

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this view never gets old.
The Texas A&M cross country team is preparing for the upcoming season after last year’s squad was heavily affected by COVID-19 and its accompanying regulations. Despite these issues, the Aggies are looking to bounce back with many aspects of the upcoming season returning to normal.

Two of the top performers on the team are coming off of injury-riddled 2020 campaigns. Incoming seniors Eric Casarez and Julia Black are looking to make up for lost time after these obstacles.

Casarez is entering his third season as a member of the A&M team. After transferring from The University of Oklahoma, he had an immediate impact on the squad’s success, placing 15th in the 2019 SEC Championships. Since then, Casarez has achieved A&M’s third all-time finish in the 5000-meter indoor and fifth all-time in the 3000-meter indoor.

The Fort Worth native was unable to compete in most of the 2020 outdoor season after suffering a foot injury during the LSU Preview Meet and was sidelined until the 2020 SEC Championship. He said he was disappointed in the results of the season but is optimistic his time off has prepared him to return to his “2019 form.”

“I placed 36th, and going in, I wanted to place [in the] top five,” Casarez said. “If I could recap this year, I would say it was forgettable. This break has been much needed. I want to pick up where I left off in my first year and build off that.”

Black is entering her fourth season running with the Aggies. She has a decorated career at A&M, earning four placements on the SEC Honor Roll and the school’s ninth all-time finish in the 3000-meter steeplechase. The Keller native hurt her foot, which made it difficult for her to compete at the level that she was expecting.

“The injury wasn’t major, which is why I was able to run through it,” Black said. “But it was still mentally draining thinking, ‘What would I be able to do if I wasn’t being cautious with my foot?’ I wasn’t at my best, but thankfully, it didn’t show’.

The 2020 season was shortened to just four meets, and the team’s regular operations, such as practicing, team meals and working out, were heavily reduced. The athletes also underwent constant testing for COVID-19 to make sure the virus stayed out of the program throughout the season.

“I know I’m not unique in this, but I think it was the hardest year of my life so far,” Black said. “Usually, practice is like your home. You’re with your teammates every day and it becomes your safe place. It was really hard during COVID-19, being excited to see your teammates but still having the thought that you could get COVID-19 there.”

Despite these obstacles, the Aggies still had a productive season, with the men’s and women’s teams each earning top-five placements in all of the regular-season meets. The squad took a step back in the postseason, with the men placing ninth and the women placing 13th in the SEC Championships. Black and junior Gavin Hoffpauir led the Aggies, with Hoffpauir finishing 29th and Black finishing 42nd.

A&M’s first meet, the Aggie Opener, is scheduled for Wednesday, Sept. 1, with the Aggies already preparing for the fall season. Though many of the athletes are spending the summer outside of College Station, Black and Casarez said they are making sure to train intensely during the break.

Black, who normally runs around 70 miles per week during the summer, has cut her routine down to about 40 miles while nursing a different minor foot injury.

“I like to plan out my runs at the beginning of the week,” Black said. “Coach [Pat] Henry always says, ‘Don’t let the day get away from you,’ and I like to apply that to the week.”

The squad is led by Henry, who enters his 17th season coaching the track and field and cross country teams. During his time, he has helped produce unparalleled success for the Aggies, leading to his induction into the Texas Sports Hall of Fame in 2017. Henry and assistant coach Wendel McRaven, who is entering his 11th season with the program, helped create a culture that emphasizes both accountability and guidance, Casarez said.

“The expectations of being an Aggie are big,” Casarez said. “Coach Henry means business, and that’s what I really like about it. Coach McRaven is a really well-spoken guy. You want a guy who cares and who will do anything for their athletes. They’ve coached together for a long time and I think that benefits the team as well.”
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