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About the cover: Senior setter Camille Conner, sophomore running back Ainias Smith, junior cross country runner Eric Casarez and defender Jimena Lopez will be assets to their respective teams this season. Illustrations by Gabrielle Shreve.
Howdy 12th Man,

Much like the current state of the world, this edition of the fall sports Maroon Life magazine may look and feel a little different.

With sports, and everything really, being in a state of uncertainty, we had to adjust our original plans for this magazine as things kept changing. However, it is our job to serve you — our readers. We have tried our best to do that with profiles of athletes from each of the fall sports.

Sophomore running back Ainias Smith is taking on a new position this year after spending the entirety of the 2019 regular season at wide receiver. The article details what the process has been like for Smith and how he has undergone training during this unusual offseason.

Another football player undergoing a change this offseason is senior defensive tackle Jayden Peevy, who is stepping up after spending most of his time at A&M in a backup role. Peevy’s story also explains his journey to A&M’s football team, which didn’t start until his junior year of high school.

Over in Reed Arena, senior volleyball setter Camille Conner is one of two seniors on the team this year, and as such, is taking on a primary leadership position. The story details her hopes for the year and how she has mentored some new members of the team.

A feature on senior soccer defender Jimena Lopez details her double life as a collegiate athlete and a member of the Mexico women’s national team.

Sophomore cross country runner Eric Casarez is looking to build off his success from his first year in Aggieland. The junior transferred from Oklahoma over a year ago, and quickly became one of the top performers on the team.

While we also have a section previewing the seasons of all fall sports — football, volleyball, soccer and cross country — we also have to keep in mind that those seasons might be cut short or even canceled at some point. In that case, let these previews serve as a document of what could have been and what was supposed to be in 2020.

Editor’s Note: Interviews for these previews were conducted from early June to mid-July, so the quotes may not reflect recent announcements from the SEC and the NCAA.

We have also found it important to use this magazine to document this year and the chaos that has accompanied it. When you turn the page, you will find a timeline of all the events COVID-19 has affected since mid-March.

Additionally, with the release of Texas A&M football’s new uniforms for the 2020 season, we have created a timeline depicting some of the different looks the squad has donned over its 126-year existence.

Whether sports happen this fall, The Battalion sports desk will continue working to provide you with athletics-related content throughout the remainder of 2020, so follow us on Twitter @battsports to stay up-to-date with the latest happenings.

Thanks, Gig ‘Em and God Bless.

Hannah Underwood is a journalism senior and sports editor for The Battalion
COVID-19’s effect on sports

Pandemic continues to shake up college sports, enters sixth month of uncertainty

By Hannah Underwood
@hannahbunderwoo

Every athletic department in the country has seen new changes this year as the coronavirus pandemic has swept the world, and Texas A&M is no different.

For the first two and a half months of 2020, everything was mostly normal. Once Spring Break rolled around, everything changed in Aggieland.

Not only did classes move online, but spring sports were canceled as well. Here’s a timeline of everything that has gone down since March 11, 2020:

**March**
- The SEC announced it would limit fan attendance at sporting events on its campuses after the NCAA announced a similar policy for the men’s and women’s basketball tournaments. The SEC’s policy was originally announced to last through March 30.
- The Utah Jazz’s Rudy Gobert was diagnosed with COVID-19, causing the NBA to suspend its season.
- The SEC first announced the cancellation of the men’s basketball tournament, but later included all regular season and championship events until at least March 30.
- Following the SEC’s announcements, the NCAA decided to cancel all remaining winter and spring championships for 2020.
- The SEC extended its suspension of athletic activity to April 15, including “all organized team activities” in the ban.
- The NCAA Division I Coordination Committee also banned in-person recruiting on and off campus through April 15.
- The SEC canceled all remaining spring sports, including spring football games and Pro Day.
- The Olympic Games were postponed for the first time in the history of the event. According to A&M’s athletic department, over 60 current and former A&M athletes were affected by the announcement.
- Former A&M men’s basketball guard David Edwards passed away from COVID-19 at the age of 48.

**April**
- Former A&M linebacker Von Miller became the second NFL player to test positive for COVID-19.
- A&M announced over 20 seniors in spring sports would utilize the NCAA’s extension of eligibility and return for the 2021 season.

**May**
- A&M Athletics’ COVID-19 testing began, according to their Return to Activities plan released June 8.

**June**
- A&M Athletic Director Ross Bjork told The Dallas Morning News that “less than five” student-athletes across all sports had tested positive for COVID-19.
- The SEC allowed athletes to voluntarily return to campus for workouts.
- A&M Athletics released its guidelines for student-athletes returning to campus. The Return to Activities plan detailed which facilities were open for student-athlete use and protocol for student-athletes using the facilities.
- Former A&M men’s basketball center DeAndre Jordan announced he had tested positive for COVID-19 and wouldn’t join the Brooklyn Nets when the NBA season resumed on July 30.

**July**
- The Big Ten announced its schools would play only conference opponents this fall.
- The Pac-12 announced its decision to play a conference-only schedule in 2020. A&M football was scheduled to host Colorado on Sept. 19.
- The SEC announced it would push back the start of cross country, soccer and volleyball through Aug. 31 to provide schools “additional time to prepare for the safe return of competition on an adjusted timeline.”
- The SEC announced it would allow student-athletes to opt out of the 2020 fall sports seasons due to health and safety concerns without risk to their eligibility or scholarships.
- The SEC announced its football teams would play 10-game, conference-only seasons in 2020, also delaying the start of the season to Sept. 26 and moving the championship game to Dec. 19.

**August**
- The SEC postponed the start of fall football practice from Aug. 7 to Aug. 17, limiting schools to 25 total practices with no more than 20 hours of practice per week.
- Volleyball and soccer began their fall practices.
- The SEC announced the new opponents for each football team. A&M added Florida and Tennessee to its schedule.
- The SEC also announced its new COVID-19 testing protocols, including testing athletes twice per week.
- Amid reports the Big Ten and Pac-12 were considering canceling their football seasons, players across the nation used #WeWantToPlay on social media to express their desire for sports to return this fall.
- The Big Ten elected to postpone its fall sports to the spring, leaving the status of winter sports “to be evaluated.”
- The Pac-12 took it a step further than the Big Ten, pushing all fall and winter sports to 2021.
- The NCAA announced the cancellation of all fall championships except FBS football.
- The SEC announced the final dates for the 2020 football season.
- A&M football started fall camp.
- Kyle Field would host only 30 percent of its normal capacity for 2020, allowing for approximately 33,000 fans to attend games.
- Jimbo Fisher announced backup quarterback James Foster would opt out of the 2020 season.
- Just one day after reducing Kyle Field’s capacity for the fall to 30 percent, the athletic department reduced it further, to 25 percent.
- The SEC announced new start dates and formats for cross country, soccer, volleyball, golf and tennis. The conference also announced restrictions for baseball and softball activities this fall.
- The SEC announced restrictions for on-field personnel for football, including banning band performances for the fall.
- Elijah Blades announced he would also opt out of the 2020 season via Twitter. Blades said he would return for 2021.

**September**
- Derrick Tucker announced on Twitter his decision to sit out of the 2020 football season in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Sources: NCAA, SEC and Texas A&M Athletics.
Everyone on the Texas A&M football roster is a football player, but perhaps no one fits that title more than sophomore running back Ainias Smith.

Jimbo Fisher agrees.

“He’s very natural, and it’s one of the reasons I loved him. My biggest, as I say, love affair with him in recruiting was, people said, ‘Well what is he?’ My description was football player,” Fisher said. “He has a naturalness to the game, whether he’s a running back, whether he’s a receiver, whether he’s a returner, and I felt if he had to be, he could be a heck of a DB. He has a natural instinct to play this game along with a set of physical skills and a toughness and a competitiveness.”

As he has made the switch from wide receiver to running back, Smith has showcased this versatility.

When A&M found itself down to one scholarship running back in mid-December last year, Fisher turned to Smith to pick up the slack. Smith said the move wasn’t a complete surprise as it had been discussed during his recruitment.

“I really wasn’t surprised because coming in and getting recruited, I knew it was a possibility that I was going to get moved, not necessarily moved, but I was going to play a little bit of running back,” Smith said. “That was really the original plan with me coming down to A&M. It was a pretty good adjustment and I’m happy with it. I’m having fun.”

While he knew the move would happen, Smith said he wasn’t expecting it to come when it did.

“[Fisher] approached me about it. It was out of the blue, really,” Smith said. “One day in practice, I was actually doing receiver drills at the beginning of practice and then he called me over to do the running back individual drills. From that day on, I was a running back.”

Smith said the transition involved more than just the on-the-field aspect. He also had to take on a new mentality, one that relied on the toughness Fisher often mentions when he talks about Smith.

“The biggest adjustment for me was basically learning how to be in the trenches every single play,” Smith said. “That really has motivated me basically to encourage everybody on the field to go ahead and step their game up because me being 186, 187 [pounds], coming in every day in practice and I’m going hard in the trenches everyday, I have to make sure that everybody’s on their A-game. I’m not about to come in and let you hit me. That was really the biggest adjustment was me having to become that natural leader that I’m supposed to be.”

Smith’s toughness has been on full display this fall camp, senior linebacker Buddy Johnson said. Johnson recalled one practice in particular where Smith was doing blocking drills across from senior defensive end Micheal Clemons, and the 5-foot-10, 190-pound sophomore lifted the 6-foot-5, 270-pound Clemons.

“Micheal Clemons is flying in, and he’s picking up Micheal Clemons,” Johnson said. “I’m looking at him like, ‘Okay, yeah, you’re doing what you need to be doing.’”

Smith said the trait is a product of his childhood in the greater Houston area’s Missouri City.

“I’m from Mo City, that’s where it comes from. Little League football, that’s all we knew. You either get hit or you’re making the hit. I don’t want to be the person to get hit, so I’m always delivering,” Smith said.

While this offseason has been anything but
After a year at wide receiver, Ainias Smith will shift to running back to fill vacancies at the position.

typical, Smith said he went back to his roots to prepare for his first full season in his new position.

“I focused on] everything about who I am — staying low, making sure I get in and out of my breaks, making sure I keep the ball protected,” Smith said. “Becoming a true technician and a real student of the game and understanding what leverages I can take on certain angles.”

When the SEC allowed players to return to campus for voluntary workouts on June 8, Smith made the decision to remain in Missouri City to train with his dad, who he said is in “crazy shape,” even at 53.

“He’s in crazy shape. He is probably weighing about 185 at 53, bench pressing 315, rep-ping it easy,” Smith said. “My Pops can get me right all the time.”

Though the SEC lifted its ban on athletic activity early in the summer to provide athletes a safe environment to train in, Smith said he felt safe at home.

“We had workouts right outside in our front yard. We had ladders, box jumps, all kinds of stuff right there in the street,“ Smith said. “I felt comfortable working out with my Pops; I always work out with my Pops.”

In addition to adjusting to his new full-time position, Smith and the team have also faced the challenge of fall camp starting around the same time as classes.

“With the busy schedule of fall camp and school, it’s been quite an adjustment, but I believe if everybody just locks in and focuses in on what we have to accomplish and not worry about going out or doing unnecessary things, I believe everybody will be able to strive to be successful in the classroom and on the field,” Smith said.

Smith’s first game at his new position came in A&M’s bowl game win over Oklahoma State in his hometown of Houston. He recorded 54 yards on seven carries in his debut.

Though the Aggies have more depth at running back this year compared to last, Smith will likely be sharing the majority of reps with sophomore Isaiah Spiller. Smith said there are big things ahead for the pair in their second year in Aggieland.

“I believe we’re going to be the best duo that’s in college football, period,” Smith said. “He has natural abilities that a lot of people aren’t able to do, as y’all saw last year. He rushed for nearly 1,000 yards as a freshman, and he’s just getting started. For me, I was just getting started also.”

Smith isn’t the only one in his family who has made a transition over the offseason. His older brother Maurice recently signed with the Cincinnati Bengals, and Ainias said he is excited for his brother’s future.

“Me and Mo, we have a real tight relation-ship. I’ll ride for him for whatever. He’s been a great influence on me for everything in life. He’s taught me so much, and I thank him for everything that he’s taught me,” Ainias said. “This year, I feel like he’s about to go insane. If nobody knows his name [now], they’re going to know it this year. He’s taught me so much in life, just being humble, staying true to who I am and never playing victim.”

Though Smith is making the change to running back, he said his time at wide receiver isn’t necessarily over.

“I feel like I’m natural with the ball in my hands, so I feel like for me, [my best position is] receiver because of the way I can set up a DB and then make a move and get separation. My speed can take over the rest,” Smith said. “Receiver’s the natural position for me, and everything else I feel like I’m good at also. “I’m just a football player.”
Jayden Peevy takes on starting role in 2020 after years as backup for Justin Madubuike

By Jennifer Streeter
@jennystreeter3

Although he didn’t expect to become a football player, Jayden Peevy now finds himself stepping into a prominent role as a defensive tackle on Texas A&M’s football team.

Peevy did not start playing football until his junior year at Bellaire High School, choosing instead to pursue basketball through most of his teenage years.

His decision to switch sports was driven by his competitive nature, and he said he was determined to prove he could be the best in any athletic endeavor.

“I knew I could be better than everybody,” Peevy said. “I’m a competitor, that’s what I do best.”

He said his family’s support of his transition from basketball to football meant a lot to him.

“They [were] right behind me, 100 percent,” Peevy said.

When he made the switch to football, Peevy said the coaches were happy to have him.

“When the coaches got me at Bellaire, they were so excited,” Peevy said. “They [saw] my frame and they knew they had something to work with.”

Despite his lack of experience, Bellaire head football coach Herb Kunz said Peevy quickly took to the sport.

“He was very coachable,” Kunz said. “He wanted to be a part of what we were doing, and we wanted him. He really grew to love the football side of things because it was new to him and he started to have success. He’s just a tremendous young man.”

Peevy originally committed to Baylor, but ultimately chose A&M, where he is now entering his senior year.

He finished 2019 with 34 total tackles including 12 solos and 22 assisted, as well as 2.5 sacks.

A&M coach Jimbo Fisher said he is pleased with the direction Peevy is heading, especially considering his late entrance into the sport.

“Right now, he’s doing an excellent job as a leader and setting a great example in practice and practicing very well,” Fisher said. “Him getting better and better is from knowledge of the game of football. They said he was a heck of a basketball player, and I could see that. He is very athletic and can run, change direction. When he jumps and moves, I can see why he was a very good basketball player, just watching his body movements.”

Fisher said football requires a much different set of techniques than basketball, and the transition between the two sports isn’t easy.

“Football is a very, very technical sport, from leverages, how to run a route, how to get open, inside, how do I fit on a block, how do I use my hands, all of those things, and it just takes time [to learn],” Fisher said. “Every year, you can see he’s just gotten better and better. [He’s] very driven to stay there and keep getting better and better. It speaks to his character and who he is as a person. He’s doing a great job leading us right now. Hopefully he’s going to have a great year.”

Peevy’s teammates expect the same for him.

“He’s going to know his assignments, he’s going to play fast, he’s going to give consistent effort. That’s a guy you want to play behind,” senior linebacker Buddy Johnson said. “He’s a great guy on the field and most importantly, off the field.”

As a veteran on the team, Peevy said he is happy with the direction he is going as a leader and will take a more vocal approach this year.

“I’m more of a lead-by-example type of guy, but now I’m starting to be more vocal throughout practices,” Peevy said. “Just getting around the guys, just talking to them, that’s something I’m doing differently now.”

After serving as a backup to the recently drafted Justin Madubuike, Peevy said he has high expectations for himself in his senior season.

“A lot of people didn’t know about me; I always wanted to be a guy to come in and show people that I am that guy,” Peevy said. “It’s going to be a great year for me. I’ll tell you that.”
Texas A&M volleyball senior setter Camille Conner is prepared to lead the Aggies on the court. Entering her final season, Conner’s play on the court and leadership style have set the tone for her to be a pivotal player in a key season for the Aggies. Conner said she is not only excited for the season, but she is also looking forward to taking on more of a leadership role as one of two seniors on the team. With the Aggies in a time of uncertainty due to the coronavirus pandemic, Conner said she will take a positive approach to leading her team.

“I am so excited going into my senior year. I really want to enjoy my last year of playing volleyball,” Conner said. “Individually, I am wanting to lead this team with positivity and optimism as we are in a time of unknown.”

In addition to being a leader, Conner is a mentor to the younger players, especially to freshman setter Melissa Walden, who said Conner has already helped her immensely over the offseason.

“Camille is such an amazingly talented athlete and has so much experience playing the game,” Walden said. “She’s really knowledgeable and has already been more than willing to share some of her perspectives on some aspects of the game.”

A&M head coach Laura “Bird” Kuhn said Conner developed her leadership skills last season and will take on a more vocal role in her senior year.

“Camille’s natural transition as a leader with [last year’s] senior class really solidified her as our vocal leader,” Kuhn said. “Her presence and ability to hold everyone around her accountable started with the trust and respect she has gained from each teammate.”

Not only is Conner a leader on and off the court, she is a leader on the stat sheet as well. During the 2019 season, Conner secured her place in the school record books in five categories: assists (second, 1,201), assists per set (eighth, 10.01), hitting percentage (10th, .313), service aces (14th, 26) and service aces per set (15th, .22).

Conner was also the only player in the SEC to record a triple-double in 2019, posting 10 kills, 17 digs and 52 assists in a Nov. 24 match against Ole Miss.

While she said she wasn’t aware of her triple-double until after the game, Conner gives credit to the team for making it possible.

“It is a hard task to do because there are a
Senior setter Camille Conner, a four-year starter, will take on a more prominent leadership role this season.

lot of aspects that go into it. It depends on the pass, how long the game is, how the team is responding to the setter, how the hitters are doing and if the setter is being attacked by the other team,” Conner said. “I never [knew] in the game that I [was] getting close to a triple-double. It was awesome to be in the locker room and our assistant coach telling me that I got a triple-double.”

In her three years with the team, Conner has collected many accolades. In 2019, she was placed on the All-SEC Team, named to two All-Tournament teams, named the SEC Setter of the Week once, placed on the AVCA All-South Region Team and was an AVCA All-American Honorable Mention. In March of 2020, she was also selected to the U.S. Collegiate National Volleyball Team.

A&M associate head coach Kolby O’Donnell said Conner always goes above and beyond with her training.

“I know Camille is prepared to have a strong senior season,” O’Donnell said. “She is someone that puts in a lot of work behind the scenes, whether it is doing extra reps, watching video, fueling her body [or] getting enough sleep to make sure she is prepared.”

Conner’s connection to the sport extends beyond her own playing career. Her sister was also a volleyball player, her brother is currently the head coach for College Station’s A&M Consolidated High School volleyball team and used to be a member of the Reedling Brothers, and her parents have provided support throughout her athletic career.

“It has been a blessing to see how volleyball has brought my family closer,” Conner said. “I am able to support my brother at his volleyball games at A&M Consolidated High School. I played volleyball with my sister growing up, so she really set the standard for me. Lastly, all of these volleyball games have brought us closer to our parents. They are the rock of our family. They are there for everything we have.”

Kuhn said Conner’s work ethic and family oriented mentality fits in with A&M’s team philosophy and has shaped her as a leader.

“Family, Choice, Voice means so much to this group and is the foundation of how they live their daily lives,” Kuhn said. “Seeing her develop and grow into the leader she is for this program is one of the most rewarding things to witness as a staff.”

Conner said her teammates serve as her motivation to be the best she can be.

“My teammates are what keep me going every day,” Conner said. “I know that they are pushing themselves to be better for the team. I couldn’t do it without all 17 of them.”
Jimena Lopez juggles life as A&M student-athlete, Mexico women’s national team member

By Emily Wedemeyer @emilynwed

At Texas A&M, the term “house divided” typically pits the 12th Man against Longhorns fans. But for Jimena Lopez, the phrase has a much deeper meaning.

As A&M’s dual threat soccer star, Lopez will suit up in the maroon and white for one last season this fall. The senior defender from Mexico City has reaped great success not only as an Aggie, but as a member of Mexico’s national women’s team as well.

Lopez is a veteran member of Mexico’s national team at the U17, U20 and senior levels. She was a World Cup participant in 2016 and 2018, when she won the FIFA U20 Championship against the United States. She then went on to participate in the Pan American Games with Mexico in 2019.

Lopez said it is an honor to play for her home country at the international level.

“It’s awesome just to represent my country,” Lopez said. “It’s awesome to do what I love and serve my country in that way.”

The psychology senior has been recognized for her stellar performances in the classroom and on the soccer field. Lopez has earned Freshman of the Week and 2019 Midfielder of the Year honors from the SEC and Midfielder of the Year during the team’s annual banquet, as well as multiple SEC academic honor roll awards. She has also recorded six game-winning goals as an Aggie.

“She is a dream to have on our team,” Jimena is very professional about her approach to the game and competition, but also a very caring and compassionate teammate,” A&M head coach G Guerrieri said. “As our team captain, she is great at setting and living up to high standards on the field, in the locker room, in the classroom and in the community.”

Though she admits balancing her time as a student-athlete and playing for Mexico is an ongoing challenge, Lopez said she has grown accustomed to the high expectations, strict schedule and requirements of both her collegiate and international teams.

Lopez said the dual commitments require her to be diligent in communicating with her coaches, teammates and professors as she spends a considerable amount of time traveling with Mexico’s team throughout the school year and has to hold herself accountable for her schoolwork while on the road.

“As an international student, I’m only allowed to take one online class a semester,” Lopez said. “I’m out of town for a lot of weeks during the semester so sometimes school gets overwhelming.”

While he said Lopez’s dedication to her athletics and academics is impressive, Mexico women’s national team head coach Christopher Cuellar said the university also deserves some credit for her success.

“Since Jimena arrived at Texas A&M, she has invested a lot of time in her academics in order to be able to attend camps and events here in Mexico,” Cuellar said. “It’s a testament to her level of dedication, and I would also have to say thank you to the support system she has at the university. It really wouldn’t be possible if she didn’t have the tools around her that she does.”

Both levels of play have led to growth in different aspects of her performance.
Lopez said playing collegiate soccer has helped improve her physicality, while international competition has made her a smarter player and taught her to use her strengths and weaknesses to her advantage.

“It’s very, very different. International games are definitely at a higher level,” Lopez said. “I struggled playing my first international games, but I have adjusted.”

Collegiate soccer is more physical but uses less technique, Lopez said, while international soccer is more about strategy. Playing for Mexico has also taught her how to see the gaps and easily recognize her opponents’ weaknesses.

Cuellar said Lopez’s competitive nature played a key role in her development as an athlete.

“No doubt Jimena is one of the most competitive people I know,” Cuellar said. “Over the last year and a half, she has played against some of the best players in the world and has never backed down from a challenge or made an excuse.”

Because of Lopez, Guerrieri said he now considers herself a Mexico women’s national team supporter, and he believes his responsibilities as her coach extend far beyond the field.

“We know that she earns every honor and opportunity she’s had. We absolutely love her and want her to win and succeed at the international level,” Guerrieri said. “I think the most important thing for me to provide is my unwavering support for her to chase her dreams. I’m proud of the way my coaches and support staff aid her, teach her and help her to reach her goals.”

In her final season as an Aggie, Lopez said she is looking forward to reuniting with her team and receiving her Aggie Ring in September.

Lopez has high hopes and expectations for the team as well.

“It’s always a goal to win the NCAA title and qualify for the NCAA tournament,” Lopez said. In addition to leading her teams on the field, Lopez said she aspires to influence the lives of others. Those around her can attest to her ability to do so.

“Jimena has proven to be an impact player in both college and international competition. I have no doubt she will be a successful professional player,” Cuellar said.

A&M junior defender Macie Kolb said Lopez is a natural born leader and a true competitor. Kolb said Lopez is one of her role models, both on and off the field, and said she has developed as a player with the help of Lopez’s guidance.

“She’s the type of teammate that will check up on you and push you to play your best,” Kolb said. “She wants what is best for the team and she wants to win. She’ll be the last one on the field after practice and the first one to pick you up if you’re down.”

Guerrieri said he can’t think of anyone who puts more time and focus into their craft than Lopez does.

“That’s a valuable lesson for younger players to learn from a peer,” Guerrieri said. Lopez doesn’t only influence the younger players, though. Guerrieri said Lopez’s love for soccer has been contagious and her attitude toward the game has changed the nature of A&M’s team.

“I definitely think that impact will last long after she leaves. I know for me, she’s impacted me by exemplifying perseverance, determination and true grit,” Guerrieri said.

Lopez said she’s looking forward to more than just completing her degree and playing soccer this fall.

“The people here have enriched my college experience and I will miss them,” Lopez said. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to receive an education while playing for A&M.”
As Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, “Change is the only constant in life.”

Texas A&M junior Eric Casarez is familiar with change. He transferred to A&M from the University of Oklahoma last fall and is now heading into his second season as an Aggie.

A distance runner for A&M, Casarez routinely competes in the 3,000 and 5,000-meter races in the indoor season and considers the 5,000-meter to be his best race. However, he said his favorite race to run is the mile. Although he doesn’t typically race the mile in conference competition, he opened his first indoor season as an Aggie by winning the event with a time of 4:10.62 in the Ted Nelson Invitational.

“The intensity of it, I love it,” Casarez said. “It’s like a really long sprint; there’s no letting up in it.”

In addition to qualifying for the 2019 NCAA Cross Country Championships, Casarez has earned his name on A&M’s all-time top-12 performer list in two events. Currently, he is ranked third in the indoor 5,000-meter and fifth in the indoor 3,000-meter.

“He is one of those guys with a happy-go-lucky personality, great spirit and is always smiling and having fun, but when he competes, he’s tough and serious-minded,” A&M cross country coach Wendel McRaven said. “Great competitors know how to turn it on, and Eric’s got that.”

In addition to being close to home, Casarez said A&M’s welcoming environment makes it the “best fit” for him. He credits his sophomore successes to his coaches and teammates who helped make his transition to A&M smooth.

“I settled in really well with people, and once I started racing it felt like home,” Casarez said.

Once Casarez arrived on campus, McRaven said the newcomer quickly became a central part of the team.

“We had a pretty good group of returners this past year, and Eric instantly fit in with them,” McRaven said. “He’s positive and upbeat and developed a synergy with our group of guys.”

Despite his confidence in the decision, Casarez admits transferring after redshirting his freshman year was overwhelming. He said the uncertainty of not knowing how he would compare to A&M’s team was intimidating, but he arrived eager to get to work and wanted to help the team in any capacity.

“Other than different coaching styles, A&M’s coaches had the same expectations of me, it was the same concept, and I had the same goals for myself,” Casarez said.

Casarez may have been hesitant, but some of his teammates had no qualms about accepting him into their ranks.

“I’ve known Eric since high school, and one thing I’ve always admired was his work ethic,” junior distance runner Julia Black said. “When I heard that he was transferring to A&M, I was so excited to be teammates with him. I knew what he would bring to the team and I was excited for the future of our men’s program.”

McRaven said he considers Casarez to be a great addition to the program. Even on his worst days, Casarez is a great leader and teammate, McRaven said.

“He’s even more talented than I thought he was when he was coming in,” McRaven said.

By Emily Wedemeyer
@emilynwed

After successful first year in Aggieland, Eric Casarez is expecting big things in 2020

Finding a new finish line
Junior distance runner Eric Casarez hopes to achieve his long-time goal of beating the 14-minute mark in the 5,000-meter.

“With more experience, he’ll be incredible.”

Junior distance runner Abbey Santoro said she is grateful to call Casarez her teammate as well. She said the success he has had is no surprise to her and he has proven to be a great asset to the team.

“His first year as an Aggie was a great step in the right direction,” Santoro said. “During his short time here, he’s already positively impacted the team’s culture, and I’m confident he will continue to be a great leader for his teammates, especially during this next season.”

After his successful cross country and indoor seasons, Casarez said he was looking forward to his first outdoor season as an Aggie, during which he hoped to achieve his long-time goal of beating the 14-minute mark in the 5,000-meter. However, the coronavirus pandemic cut those dreams, and the season, short.

After finishing fifth with a time of 14:01.5 in the SEC Championships this past year, Casarez said he is even more determined to shave off one last second in order to reach this long-time goal of his.

“I just need another opportunity to prove to myself and everyone else that I can do it,” Casarez said. “I know I can do it.”

After an extended period of time away from competing, Casarez said he would do anything it takes to be able to run this fall.

“You don’t come to college to train. You come to college to race,” he said.

With a year of experience as an Aggie under his belt, Casarez said the focus is now on improvement. His goals for the season include returning to the NCAA Championships and earning All-American status.

“There’s no pressure this year of adapting to a new school with a new coaching staff,” Casarez said. “I want to go to nationals and make some noise.”

McRaven said based on his success last season, Casarez has a lot to look forward to. As his coach and mentor, McRaven said the plan of action moving forward is for Casarez to continue to progress and build on what he’s learned.

“Staying healthy and sticking to a routine will set him up for success not only for this coming season, but for future years as well,” McRaven said.

In order to accomplish these goals and meet the expectations set out for him, Casarez said he generally does not have the luxury of free time. As with any collegiate athlete, classes and workouts keep him on a strict schedule. However, when he’s not running, Casarez has another sports-related hobby that keeps him busy.

An agricultural communications and journalism major, Casarez said he plans to pursue a career as a sports broadcaster. Casarez grew up an avid sports fan and became interested in sportscasting after taking a broadcasting class in high school.

He recently created a podcast entitled “RickSix,” which can be found on Spotify and Apple Music and serves as his creative avenue for practicing sportscasting with his friends. He sometimes invites his teammates to appear on the show.

“A lot of people like to focus on writing and news articles, but I want to focus more on broadcasting and analyzing,” Casarez said. “If I’m not running, I’m working on my podcast.”

The sports content he produces is ultimately for entertainment purposes, but it is simultaneously preparing him for the opportunity to continue his involvement in the athletic atmosphere. The day will come for Casarez to hang up his cleats, but he said he hopes to never retire completely from the sports industry.

Though his journey to Aggieland took a detour to Oklahoma, Casarez said he is grateful for the destination.

“Coming to Texas A&M was the best decision I could have ever made,” Casarez said.
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1897

J. B. “Josh” Sterns, captain of the 1897 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library.

1951

Bob Smith, All-American fullback and co-captain of the 1951 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library.

1964

Halfback Mike Pittman and quarterback Dan McIlhany of the 1964 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library.

1984

Defensive back Jimmie Hawkins of the 1984 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of the Aggieland Yearbook.

E. King Gill - the original 12th Man. Photo courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library.


Quarterback Corey Pullig of the 1994 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of the Aggieland Yearbook.


Running back Ainias Smith of the 2020 Texas A&M football team. Photo courtesy of the Texas A&M Athletics.
Despite unknowns, Aggies’ expectations remain high

By Adithya Prabakaran
@ADP_445

After a 2019 season in which the Aggies had one of the most difficult schedules in the nation, the 2020 season is bringing a new set of challenges to the Texas A&M football team.

In an interview with ESPN’s First Take, A&M coach Jimbo Fisher said the current situation calls for a special response.

“We’re in unprecedented times, so we have to be prepared to do unprecedented things to create the best scenario from a safety aspect for our players, but also from getting this game to go forward because of the importance of college football, not only because of what it does for America but also for what it does for surrounding universities and the other sports at these universities,” Fisher said.

The way the team is preparing for the season is similar to coaching a football game, Fisher said.

“Be prepared for the unprepared,” Fisher said. “It’s kind of like coaching a game. You have a gameplan going in, sometimes they come in doing something different, somebody gets hurt. You always have alternate plans.”

After an offseason that saw the Big Ten and Pac-12 postpone their football seasons, starting fall camp on Aug. 17 was a milestone for A&M.

In his first press conference of the fall, Fisher discussed the changes to practices.

“Only the people who are a necessity for the team to practice [are at practice],” Fisher said. “All the coaches are wearing a shield or mask. When guys stand in the back, we have to spread them and keep them away from each other.”

Senior quarterback Kellen Mond said a challenge for the team has been focusing on preparing for the fall while also juggling classes, which began on Aug. 19.

“[Normally] when you’re in fall camp, there isn’t much time to do anything except football,” Mond said. “We’re either watching film, taking care of your body or practicing. With school starting, it is hard to keep us [at the athletic facility] all day. We’ve talked about how as a team we have to be held accountable for staying away from some things and some people.”

The team finished 2019 with an 8-5 record, with three of those losses coming against No. 1 ranked teams (Clemson, Alabama and LSU). Originally, the 2020 schedule did not look as daunting with the University of Colorado being the only Power 5 nonconference opponent for the Aggies. However, that matchup, originally scheduled for Sept. 19, was canceled on July 10 when the Pac-12 announced its decision to move to a conference-only schedule before later postponing the 2020 season altogether.

The SEC eventually followed suit on July 30, announcing the conference would partake in a 10-game, conference-only slate. Games against Abilene Christian, North Texas and Fresno State were replaced with SEC East opponents Florida and Tennessee on Aug. 7.

The Aggies are scheduled to start their season on Sept. 26 against Vanderbilt in College Station, followed by games against Top 25 opponents Alabama and Florida. The team will have a five-game stretch to increase its win total against Mississippi State, Arkansas, South Carolina, Tennessee and Ole Miss before ending the season against LSU at home and Auburn on the road.

“I never really cared what the schedule is,” Mond said. “We’ve always known playing in the SEC is always going to be a difficult thing.”

However, for all their challenging matchups, the Aggies are returning more starters at key positions. Mond will look to improve in his senior season after showing signs of progress in his junior season, while also etching his name in the record books as one of the most decorated passers in school history.

After completing 61.6 percent of his passes for 2,897 yards and 20 touchdowns with nine interceptions in 2019, the signal caller needs only 633 passing yards and 16 passing touchdowns to set the school record in career passing yards and career passing touchdowns. He is also 1,297 total yards and 23 total touchdowns from holding the record for the most total yards and total touchdowns over a career in school history.

Despite losing wide receivers Quartney Davis and Kendrick Rogers to the NFL, the offense returns senior wide receiver Jhamon Ausbon, sophomore tight end Jalen Wydermyer and redshirt freshman tight end Baylor Cupp, and adds freshman wide receiver Demond Demas to the roster. Senior wide receiver Camron Buckley was in line for a starting role but had surgery to repair his ACL and will be out for the season.

While the team has veteran experience at quarterback and receiver, running back tells a different story. With Jashaun Corbin returning to his home state of Florida and Cordarrin Richardson also looking for a new home, the running back depth consists of sophomores Isaiah Spiller and Amin Smith and redshirt junior Connor Blumrick.

As a freshman, Spiller recorded 946 yards and 10 touchdowns, also catching 29 passes for 203 yards. Smith played wide receiver for the majority of the season and logged his only rushing attempts in 2019 against Oklahoma State in the Texas Bowl, accumulating 54 yards on seven carries. Blumrick has moved to the position from quarterback.

The offensive line is also returning most of its 2019 starters. The team lost center Colton Prater to graduation and expect senior Ryan McCollum to replace him. McCollum will be joined by senior left tackle Dan Moore, senior right tackle Caron Green, sophomore right guard Kenyon Green and senior left guard Jared Hocker.

Defensive coordinator Mike Elko and the defense saw improvement in some areas in 2019. While the Aggies had the 30th run defense in 2019 (a drop from their No. 3 ranking in 2018), the secondary made strides in pass defense, ending 2019 with a No. 48 ranking showing a significant increase from their No. 98 ranking in 2018.

The coaching staff has also seen a change over the offseason, as defensive backs coach Maurice Linguist has moved on to the Dallas Cowboys. TJ Rushing joins the Aggies as his replacement.

However, the biggest question on the defensive side for the Aggies will be how they replace third-round draft pick Justin Madubuike. The junior defensive tackle declared for the draft after recording 5.5 sacks and 11.5 tackles for loss last season. While senior Jayden Peevy is expected to fill Madubuike’s shoes, the combination of Peevy, redshirt senior edge rusher Micheal Clemens, junior defensive tackle Bobby Brown and sophomore edge rusher DeMarvin Leal will need to chip in and produce for the Aggies in order to help out an improving secondary.

If the 2020 season happens as expected, it should give A&M an opportunity to step into the spotlight as a top football program. The returning talent combined with sustained recruiting success and player development should finally yield the results fans have been waiting for since Fisher first stepped into College Station.
2020 TEXAS A&M FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

SEPT. 26
VS. VANDERBILT

OCT. 3
AT ALABAMA

OCT. 10
VS. FLORIDA

OCT. 17
AT MISSISSIPPI STATE

OCT. 31
VS. ARKANSAS

NOV. 7
AT SOUTH CAROLINA

NOV. 14
AT TENNESSEE

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VS. OLE MISS

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Coming off of its most successful season since 2016, Texas A&M volleyball has high expectations for the 2020 season despite the uncertain circumstances facing the Aggies.

Though the team's spring schedule was canceled amid the coronavirus outbreak, the Aggies were allowed to return to campus June 8 on a voluntary basis, and they have been deep in preparation for the season since. The team, which finished 2019 with a 23-8 record, began fall practice on Aug. 6.

Senior setter Camille Conner said being able to have everyone together for practice was a milestone moment of the offseason.

"We've gone through a lot, so getting everybody back and preparing for the season is important because we haven't been able to with [COVID-19]," Conner said.

Heading into her third season as head coach, Laura "Bird" Kuhn said it's best to prepare for the upcoming season like normal.

"I compare it to a match. During the match, we have a game plan and have to know how to adjust and adapt," Kuhn said.

The key in preparing for the upcoming season, Kuhn said, is within the day-to-day activities. Over the offseason, this included sending care packages to the players with resistance bands, protein bars, Gatorade and vitamins. They also held Zoom sessions at least twice a week to check in on everybody and make sure they were keeping up with their workouts.

"We are trying to keep things as normal as possible. Day-to-day activities will get them to their outcome goal," said Kuhn.

Training over the offseason included four strength workouts a week at home and occasionally playing sand volleyball together to help with strength and mobility, Kuhn said.

While most of the team's summer workouts were on their own, the players had accountability partners who made sure they stayed on track by upholding their training schedule and diet. Conner said the team's goal during this unusual offseason was simply to prepare for the start of the season through whatever means necessary.

"I think the most important thing right now is to get everyone back healthy and excited for the season, that's my goal," Conner said.

Heading into the 2020 season, the Aggies are not only facing complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also must replace All-American Hollann Hans, who graduated in May.

"Hollann was not only an amazing player, but also just a good human," Kuhn said. "The process of filling her shoes will be tough, but it has given new players an opportunity to step up."

Despite the loss of Hans, senior middle blocker Morgan Davis said the team’s mentality isn’t any different from last year.

"The goal is to get everyone back in the gym practicing and keeping the same expectations we had all last season with Hollann," Davis said.

Though the season is still shrouded in uncertainty due to the pandemic, Kuhn’s advice to the two current seniors is to stay present and enjoy the moment.

“Everyone will remember this season. The players can make an impact on how they live, how they can compete and perform under these unique circumstances,” Kuhn said. "Be you all the time, leave your impact and legacy on the court."

One upcoming senior is Conner, whose presence on the team is key, Kuhn said.

“Camille showed to be a great leader even last year. She does well transitioning with freshmen and transfers. Always committed, super competitive and mature," Kuhn said.

Reflecting on the past three years, Conner said one of her favorite memories was playing against No. 4 Wisconsin in the Sweet 16 last year.

“It was such a cool experience to have since the last two years we weren’t able to get to that tournament," Conner said. "It was amazing for our program."

Davis said her favorite memory thus far has been playing alongside her sister, sophomore outside hitter Lauren Davis.

“Playing with my sister is something I will remember for the rest of my life, also all the behind the scenes stuff, our team meals and traveling together, sharing memories throughout the whole entire season," Morgan said. "Last season, we built this chemistry that was really cool to see."

The SEC announced on Aug. 27 the new start date and format for the 2020 volleyball season. Though their new schedule has yet to be released, the Aggies can begin their eight-game season on Oct. 16.
The SEC soccer season is scheduled to start on Sept. 18. Texas A&M’s 2020 schedule has yet to be announced.

The team learned to improvise during the offseason when they were unable to use their facilities due to the pandemic. Although the team has faced unusual challenges, their desire to compete remains, said junior defender Macie Kolb.

“It has been difficult since we went home for spring break and then never returned to our normal routine. We have had to adjust to new ways to try to stay in shape,” Kolb said. “From playing soccer in my backyard to figuring out where I can run, it has been something that the team and myself has had to adjust to during this time.”

For the first time since 2014, the Aggies will play without forward Ally Watt on their roster. In January, Watt was selected sixth overall by the North Carolina Courage in the 2020 NWSL College Draft and signed with Melbourne City for the remainder of the W-League season later that month.

Watt started in all 20 games during the 2019 season, racking up 1,427 minutes of action. She collected 11 goals and two assists for 24 points in conference play while leading the SEC in points, points per game (1.95), goals, goals per game (.80), shots (97) and shots per game (4.85).

A&M’s first two-time United Soccer Coaches All-American First Team honoree, Watt ended her college career with 110 points on 49 goals and 12 assists.

Despite losing Watt, Guerrieri said the Aggies have several key players that can step up. “We will have a different look, but I believe we will see more of an attack from a lot of different personalities, including seniors Addie McCain, Jimena Lopez and Taylor Ziemer,” Guerrieri said. “Lopez, who is our captain, will make a huge impact on the way we play, McCain orchestrates things in the middle of the field well and Ziemer can play many different roles.”

McCain, a midfielder, has 36 career points with 11 goals and 14 assists. In 2017, she received SEC All-Freshman recognition and garnered United Soccer Coaches All-Southeast Region Second Team and All-SEC Second Team recognition in 2018.

Lopez, a defender, has played on Mexico’s national team and logged 49 points on 15 goals and 19 assists in her career. She led the SEC with 15 assists, which ranked her third in the nation in assists and assists per game and has collected six game-winning goals as an Aggie.

Ziemer, a midfielder, boasts 44 career points on 17 goals and 10 assists. She started all 22 games for the Aggies in 2019 and was ranked second on the squad with 12 points on five goals and two assists.

Although the spring schedule was cut short amid the coronavirus outbreak, the team’s positive outlook has allowed them to grow stronger and remain focused, Kolb said.

“We are a family, and everyone truly cares about each other and wants to win,” Kolb said. “We have a lot of new players coming in, but I am confident that they will contribute and will be eager to grow with us.”

While the Aggies have endured many changes this year, their chemistry keeps them strong, sophomore goalkeeper Shantel Hutton said.

“We have been focusing on team bonding, leadership and holding each other accountable,” Hutton said. “We are a really young team, and everyone is hungry and wants to be successful. The mentality of this team is focused on winning and I believe that this is what makes this team so special.”

Before changes to the season, A&M was originally scheduled to open the 2020 season against Stephen F. Austin on Aug. 7. On Aug. 28, the SEC announced an eight-game conference-only schedule running from Sept. 18 to Nov. 8.
Texas A&M cross country season remains unsure, team remains prepared

By Casey Stavenhagen  
@CSStavenhagen

Despite the ever-present fact that their season may still be canceled, Texas A&M cross country athletes and coaches remain hopeful in preparation for a season they are not sure will occur.

On July 14, the SEC announced its decision to postpone the start of the cross country, volleyball and soccer seasons through Aug. 31. The conference then revised the schedule in an Aug. 27 announcement. The move pushed back A&M cross country’s season opener to Sept. 19, only increasing the anticipation of coaches and athletes alike after the high expectations set by last season.

“I’m really fired up because of how we ended the indoor season,” A&M cross country coach Wendel McRaven said. “We scored significant points on every distance on the track. We had some guys really step up. We’ve got some experience coming back on the women’s side that just needs to be healthy and consistent. I think they have got some momentum and some synergy.”

Despite the adversity the pandemic has caused for the team, McRaven said the nature of the sport has made his athletes more resilient.

“All my conversations with kids on the team have been pretty positive like, ‘When it matters, we will be ready,’” McRaven said. “Track athletes in general are well-prepared to deal with something like this. You learn you have got to be self-reliant in this sport.”

On the heels of last season’s third place finish for men and women in the NCAA South Central Regional Championship, the Aggies have remained diligent in their preparation, but the uncertainty has made them flexible, junior Abbey Santoro said.

“As more information comes out, we just have to adapt,” Santoro said. “A lot of running is adapting to new situations and changes because you can’t predict how a race is going to turn out. You can only control how you compete, how you race and how you train.”

Determination has been an important part of the athletes’ training while the world is operating differently than normal. During team meetings, McRaven has stressed that the athletes need to be disciplined, said senior Zephyr Seagraves, who had three top 20 finishes his junior season.

“The most important thing is [coaches] recommending everyone just keep a good routine going,” Seagraves said. “I think most students in school realize that with everything on Zoom it’s hard to get motivated to pay attention to class when you’re watching it from bed in your pajamas and not really in the school mode. So just making sure you’re waking up at a decent time, going out and doing whatever your workout is, eating good food, going to bed at a reasonable time and just making sure you’re keeping things normal while also being cautious.”

To supplement the training of the athletes while working to keep everyone safe, the A&M athletics department has installed several safety measures to reduce potential exposure to the virus. Systems such as meal pick-ups, cleaning stations in the weight room and a touchless method of scanned entry have become commonplace for A&M athletes.

“I hope our students know how good we have it at Texas A&M. There are a lot of places in the country that are just shutting things down,” McRaven said. “I talk to other college coaches almost every day, the stuff we are doing is so far ahead of what most schools are doing, it’s amazing. There are some schools that can’t test everybody. At A&M they’re going to test everybody, and if you get symptoms, they’re going to re-test you. I’ve been blown away by the leadership. This is the premier place in the country in my opinion.”

A&M’s continued vigilance for the health of the athletes and staff has allowed its athletes to focus on training to prepare for the season. McRaven said A&M will provide the best possible care for its athletes so they can reach their goals.

“You can’t control what’s going to happen, you can’t control what other people do, you can’t control the news you’re hearing,” McRaven said. “We just can control how we operate and how we react to things and take care of our business. When our time comes and when we do get to compete again, we will take advantage of that opportunity.”

The Aggies are scheduled to kick off the season Sept. 19 at the SEC Preview Meet in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Junior distance runner Abbey Santoro is a member of the cross country team that will kick off its season on Sept. 19 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
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