

12th Man

2022 | VOLUME 27, NO. 2

FUNDING SCHOLARSHIPS, PROGRAMS AND FACILITIES
IN SUPPORT OF CHAMPIONSHIP ATHLETICS



ROBYN '89 & ALAN ROBERTS '78

E. KING GILL AWARD
HONOREES





CARRIE FISH '22

Track & Field

BBA in Marketing
Accepted a position
with Frito-Lay in Dallas

TYLER BULTHUIS '22

Football

B.S. in Construction
Science
Accepted a position
with Marksmen
General Contractors in
San Antonio

KIMBERLY DOW '22

Track & Field

B.S. in Environmental
Engineering
Accepted a position
with Kimley-Horn in
Austin

JUAN ARCILA '22

Track & Field

BBA in Finance
Accepted a position
with Goldman Sachs in
Dallas

NICOLE LEONARD '22

Equestrian

B.S. in University
Studies
Accepted a position
with Bank of America
in Jacksonville, Fla.

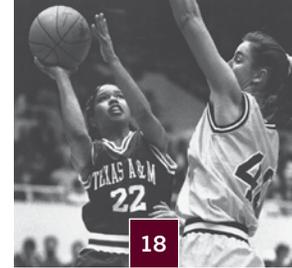
PETER SIMMONS '22

Swimming & Diving

B.S. in Mechanical
Engineering
Accepted a position
with ARCO/Murray in
Dallas

Congratulations to all Texas A&M student-athletes for their continued success in the classroom in 2021-22





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2021 E. KING GILL AWARD RECIPIENTS ROBYN '89 AND ALAN ROBERTS '78 WERE RECOGNIZED AT KYLE FIELD DURING HALFTIME OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA GAME ON OCT. 23, 2021

12th Man

2022 | VOLUME 27, NO. 2

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Funding scholarships, programs and facilities in support of championship athletics



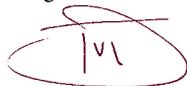
TO OUR DONORS,

The 12th Man Foundation proudly honors Robyn '89 and Alan Roberts '78 as recipients of the 2021 E. King Gill Award. Through their tremendous generosity, the Roberts have made a transformational impact on Texas A&M as a whole, not just with financial gifts, but by their leadership and advocacy as well.

As we enter the 2022-23 academic year, our organization continues to support Texas A&M Athletics because of loyal support from donors and season ticket holders. The changing landscape of college athletics certainly presents a challenge but one that we embrace. Your support makes it possible for Texas A&M Athletics to provide life-changing opportunities for our student-athletes that leave an impact long after their time on campus.

Thank you for making our mission of funding championship athletics possible.

Gig 'em!



Travis Dabney '96
President & CEO

STAFF UPDATES

THE 12TH MAN FOUNDATION IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THE FOLLOWING ADDITIONS TO OUR DEDICATED STAFF:



Megan Demshar '07
Senior Director
of Accounting



Val Flores
Customer Service
Manager



Roxanne Garceau
Annual Fund
Coordinator



Shannaya McFarland
Manager of
Accounting



Ivy Robinson '20
Manager of
Communications &
Creative Services



Savannah Rutledge
Coordinator of
Ticket Operations



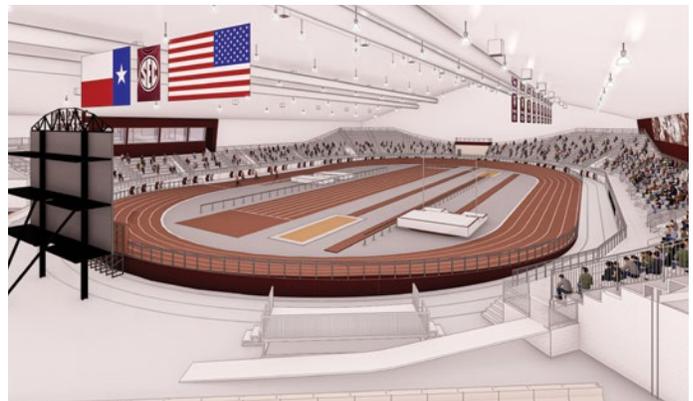
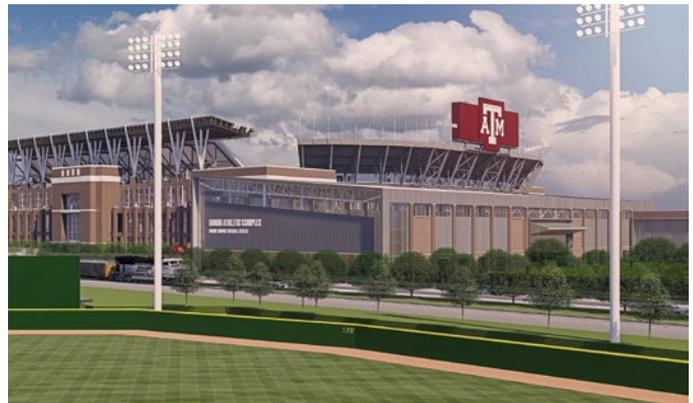
WELCOME JONI TAYLOR AND TRISHA FORD

The 12th Man Foundation welcomes head women's basketball coach Joni Taylor and head softball coach Trisha Ford to the Aggie family. Texas A&M Athletics named Taylor as the program's eighth head coach in March. The 2021 SEC Coach of the Year, Taylor succeeds hall of famer Gary Blair after spending the first seven years of her head coaching career leading the Georgia women's basketball program. Ford was hired as Aggie softball's 10th head coach in June following a six-year stint leading Arizona State's program. A four-time conference coach of the year including the 2022 Pac 12 Coach of the Year, Ford succeeds Jo Evans following her 26-year tenure at A&M.



TEXAS A&M ATHLETICS AND THE 12TH MAN FOUNDATION UNVEIL CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN

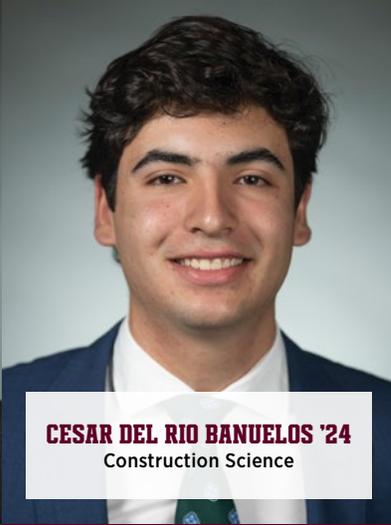
Named in recognition of the 100-year anniversary of Texas A&M’s iconic 12th Man tradition, the Centennial Campaign will feature the construction of an Academic and Wellness Center, Football Indoor Performance Center and Indoor Track Stadium as well as a redevelopment of the Bright Football Complex. This transformational initiative will impact the academic and athletic development of all Aggie student-athletes. Through the Centennial Campaign, the 12th Man Foundation has committed to securing \$120 million in donor contributions, which represents the largest philanthropic fundraising effort in the organization’s history outside of the historic redevelopment of Kyle Field. As a highlight of the Centennial Campaign, the new Academic and Wellness Center will greatly increase resources dedicated to services for all Aggie student-athletes including academics, leadership development, sports psychology and nutrition. The capital campaign will also see a significant investment in the Aggie Football program with the construction of the 160-yard Football Indoor Performance Center and the redevelopment of the Bright Football Complex which will feature expanded locker room, team meeting, sport medicine and recruiting areas. Additionally, with the existing indoor track and field stadium being replaced by the Football Indoor Performance Center, a new indoor stadium for the prestigious Aggie Track & Field program will be constructed adjacent to E.B. Cushing Stadium. For additional information on the Centennial Campaign or to make a gift in support of this transformational capital project, visit www.thecentennialcampaign.com.



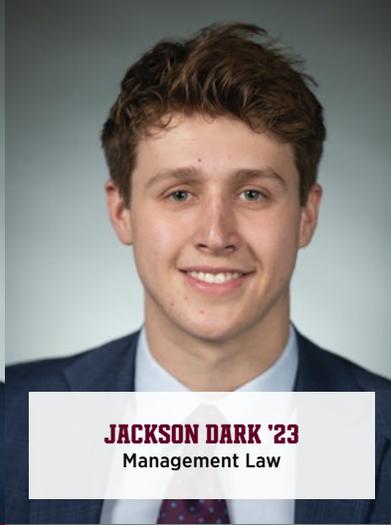
CONCEPTUAL RENDERINGS



CARTER BAJOIT '24
Business Marketing
(Track & Field Student-Athlete)



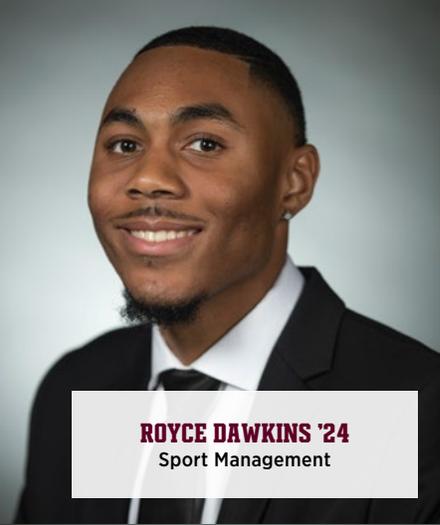
CESAR DEL RIO BANUELOS '24
Construction Science



JACKSON DARK '23
Management Law



JOSH DAVIS '24
Accounting



ROYCE DAWKINS '24
Sport Management



**INTRODUCING
THE 2022-23
COLLEGIATE
COUNCIL**

**2021-22 Collegiate Council Member*



LAINey MANDAVILLE '25
Sport Management



MADISON PENNINGTON '23'
Business Honors and Finance



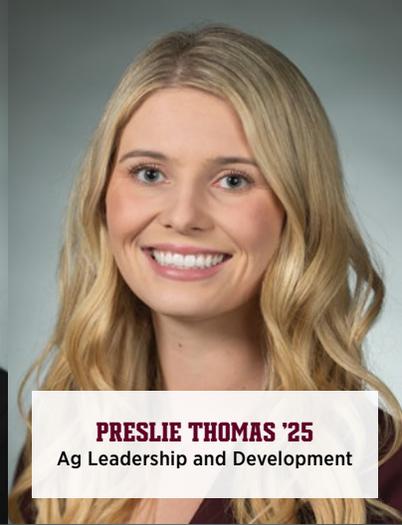
REANNA SANTOS '22
Agribusiness
(Equestrian Student-Athlete)



ANNA STONE '24
Management



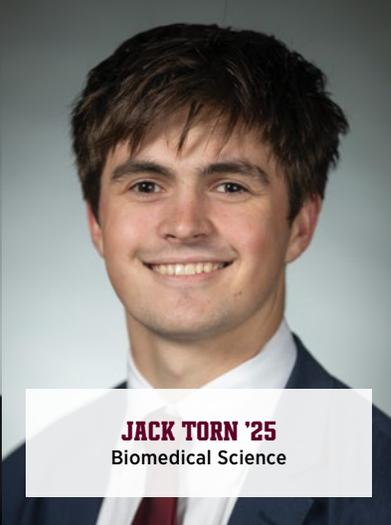
KATIE TAYLOR '24'
Business Marketing



PRESLIE THOMAS '25
Ag Leadership and Development



CAROLINE TORN '24'
Business Honors



JACK TORN '25
Biomedical Science



KYLE VONBEHREN '24
Mechanical Engineering



MOLLIE WRIGHT '22
Allied Health
(Swimming Student-Athlete)

AGGIE ACCOLADES



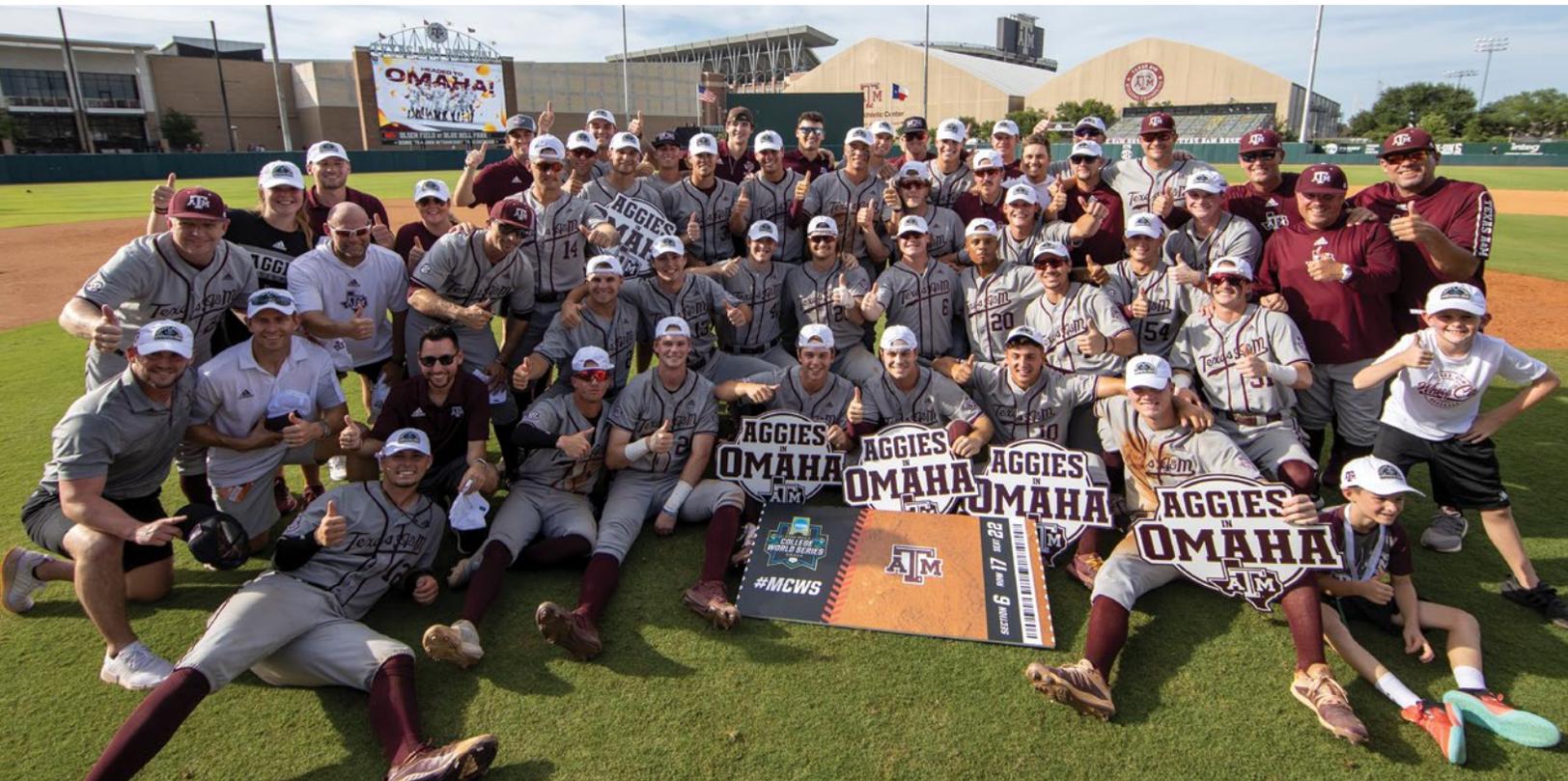
WOMEN'S TENNIS SWEEPS SEC REGULAR SEASON AND TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONSHIPS

The Aggies became the first team in program history to claim both a conference tournament and regular season championship in the same year in 2022. A&M earned the No. 5 final ranking in the Tennis Channel/USTA College Tennis Top-25 following a 33-2 overall campaign, which included a 30-0 record in matches played outdoors and the first perfect season against SEC member institutions in program history.

BASEBALL MAKES PROGRAM HISTORY AFTER ADVANCING TO COLLEGE WORLD SERIES

Texas A&M completed year one under Jim Schlossnagle by advancing further than any team in school history, making the semifinal round at the College World Series. The Aggies finished the 2022 season with a 44-20 record and won multiple games in Omaha for the first time in program history. A&M also finished atop the SEC's Western Division, which made up half of the CWS field in 2022.

TEXAS A&M ATHLETICS



FACTS & FIGURES

\$15.24 MILLION

For the fiscal year end June 30, 2022, the 12th Man Foundation transferred \$15.24 million in annual support of Texas A&M Athletics' operating budget. Those funds help provide vital resources for student-athletes including academic support, athletic training, sports medicine and mental health services.

10 PRIORITY POINTS

Through the 12th Man Foundation referral program, current donors are eligible to receive 10 priority points for each new membership established from their referrals. Referrals can be made by visiting www.12thmanfoundation.com/refer.

93 PERCENT

Ninety-three percent of season ticket holders renewed their seats for the 2022 Aggie football season, the highest renewal rate for redeveloped Kyle Field.

\$349 MILLION

The 12th Man Foundation's current bond obligations total \$349 million. The organization's annual bond payments include \$16.2 million for Kyle Field and \$288,000 for Blue Bell Park through 2043 in addition to \$890,000 for the Bright Complex through 2025.

16,529 MEMBERS

The 12th Man Foundation had 16,529 members in 2021, which included 10,006 at the 12th Man level and 2,079 student members.



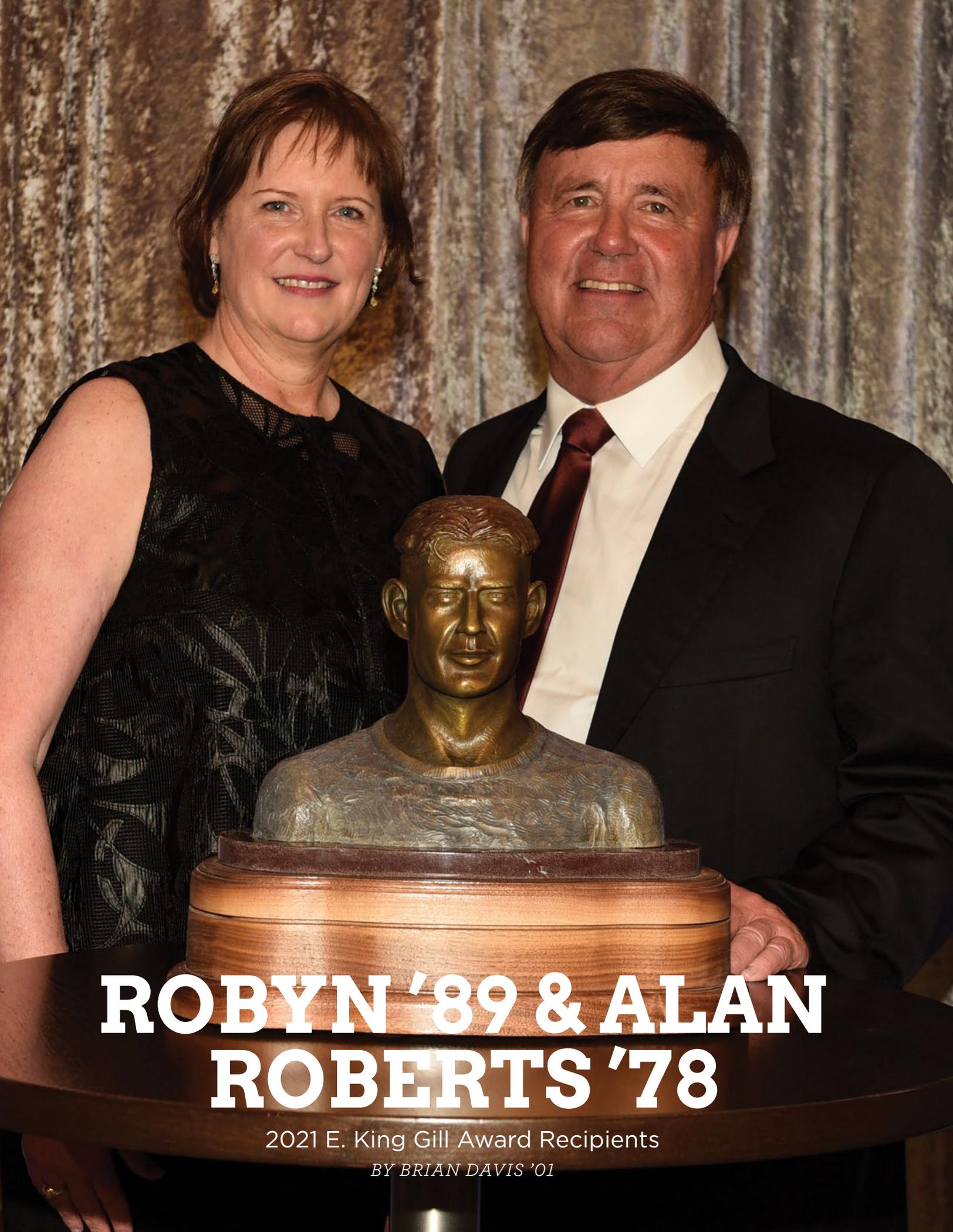
WOMEN'S GOLF EARNS BEST FINISH IN PROGRAM HISTORY

Texas A&M advanced to the semifinals of the NCAA Championships for the first time in program history and earned the highest finish at nationals in school history, ending the first season under head coach Gerrod Chadwell tied for third. The Aggies made their first NCAA Championship appearance since 2015 following a stunning six-stroke comeback to place fourth in the final round at the NCAA Franklin Regional.

STUDENT-ATHLETES HONORED AT NINTH ANNUAL BUILDING CHAMPIONS AWARDS

Women's track & field's Jaevin Reed and men's swimming & diving's Peter Simmons earned Distinguished Letterman Awards at the ninth annual Building Champions Awards in April. The highest honor presented to a student-athlete by the athletics department, the Distinguished Letterman Award is given annually to someone who displays extraordinary talents in the areas of athletics, scholarship, leadership and service. Other award recipients included: Athlete of the Year - Kurtis Mathews (men's swimming & diving) and Athing Mu (women's track & field); Bill Erwin Scholar-Athlete of the Year - Macie Kolb (soccer) and William Paysse (men's golf); Breaking Barriers Award - Patrick Johnson II (men's track & field) and Jordan Nixon (women's basketball); Lohman Inspiration Award - Deshae Wise (women's track & field); Newcomer of the Year - Henry Coleman III (men's basketball) and Mary Stoiana (women's tennis); Nye Academic Award - Tierra Robinson-Jones (women's track & field) and James Smith II (men's track & field); Selfless Service Award - Caroline Dance (equestrian); and Team GPA Award - Aggie Soccer.





ROBYN '89 & ALAN ROBERTS '78

2021 E. King Gill Award Recipients

BY BRIAN DAVIS '01

“

We’ve always been happy to stand on the sideline, give back when we can and continue doing what it takes to help Aggie Athletics succeed.

– ROBYN ’89 & ALAN ROBERTS ’78

TEXAS A&M TRAILED BAYLOR BY 10 POINTS as the teams took the field for the game’s final quarter. The 11th-ranked Aggies’ perfect home record and their hopes of winning another Southwest Conference Championship were on the line.

In a back-and-forth Battle of the Brazos that began with the 20th-ranked Bears jumping out to a 17-0 lead, the pressure was on A&M to mount a comeback in front of more than 74,000 fans at Kyle Field.

The Aggies cut Baylor’s lead to six points, and with under four minutes remaining, Kevin Murray tossed a touchdown pass to Tony Thompson to tie the game. The ensuing extra point secured a 31-30 victory for A&M. It was an instant classic.

The improbable win ignited A&M’s run to the 1986 SWC title, however, that was not the only significant moment for Aggie Athletics on that October day at Kyle Field.

Over on the west side of the stadium in section 107, a recent A&M graduate named Alan Roberts met Robyn Meyer for the first time.

“We were on a double date, but not with each other,” said Robyn, an Aggie sophomore at the time.

The chance encounter changed each of their lives, sparking an Aggie romance that ultimately led to marriage on July 29, 1989. In the 33 years since, the Roberts have raised two Aggie daughters, built an extremely successful business and developed an unwavering bond with A&M Athletics.

Their love for A&M combined with an inspirational passion for philanthropy made the couple deserving recipients of the 2021 E. King Gill Award.

“The 12th Man Foundation’s mission of funding championship athletics would not be possible without the extraordinary support of Robyn and Alan Roberts,” said 12th Man Foundation President and CEO Travis Dabney. “They share the vision for Texas A&M to be the premier athletics department

in the country and have stepped up every time they have been called upon. They are incredibly deserving recipients of this prestigious award.”

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Alan was born and raised near the Texas Gulf Coast in the small town of Refugio. The youngest of three boys, he learned the value of hard work from his father who was a welder. In fact, Alan began working as a welder’s helper when he was only 15 years old.

“We were always taught that we had to work,” he said. “I didn’t know any different.”

Alan’s relentless work ethic paired well with an entrepreneurial spirit that he developed at a young age. He grew up loving to play Monopoly and started several businesses including picking and selling watermelons and running firework stands.

“I can’t even tell you why I did it, but that taught me a lot about business,” he said. “I learned that in order to be successful, I needed to outwork everybody else.”

ALWAYS A&M

There was never a question of where Alan was going to college. He wanted to follow in the footsteps of his brother David, a 1967 A&M graduate.

“I looked up to him all my life and actually never considered going anywhere else,” Alan said. “I always thought I was going to A&M.”

After graduating high school in 1974, Alan enrolled at A&M with the goal of becoming a physician. However, he decided to change majors during his junior year and ultimately graduated with a bachelor’s degree in accounting in 1979.

“Biology ate my lunch,” Alan said with a laugh. “That’s why I decided to change to accounting. I figured I had all this experience running businesses, so it made sense to get a business-related degree.”



DREAM TURNED REALITY

After graduation, Alan moved to Victoria and began working for a CPA firm. It was a good job but not what Alan envisioned doing with his life. He quit two years later deciding the timing was right to follow his heart.

“I don’t know why, but I had this dream that I was going to start this construction company,” he said, noting that his father was furious at first when he quit. “When I told my dad I was going to start the construction company, he said, ‘With what? You have nothing.’ I was living in an apartment with three other guys at the time, but I knew I had to go ahead and start the company before I had a wife and a family. Sadly, my dad passed away about two years later and wasn’t able to see the business grow.”

In 1981, Alan founded Pumpco with a \$2,500 investment and set out to find work in Giddings during the Austin Chalk oil boom.

“It was just me and my pickup,” he said.

Every day for the next four months, Alan left Victoria at 5 a.m. and drove 90 miles to Giddings.

“I would stop and buy a couple dozen donuts and cold-call customers and they would give me a little bit of work,” he said. “Whether it was building a fence, painting something or making repairs – I would do every job I could find. It was a steady grind, and I worked at it for years and years.”

SECTION 107

Alan eventually decided to move to Giddings and lived in a trailer with several friends while continuing to build his business.

Meanwhile, he stayed connected to A&M through his football season tickets. He had purchased four seats in section 107 on the first deck of Kyle Field’s west side shortly after graduation.

That’s where he met Robyn on that auspicious day in October of 1986.

“

They are incredibly humble people, but their generous support of Texas A&M Athletics has helped make much of our success possible.

– JACOB GREEN '80



Jennifer, the Roberts' oldest daughter, graduated from A&M with a bachelor's degree in finance in 2013 and is married to Doak Dunkin, a 2010 Aggie graduate. Allyson, their youngest, earned her bachelor's degree in accounting from A&M in 2017 and is married to Jacob Heiner, a 2016 Aggie graduate. Robyn and Alan are also now proud grandparents to three granddaughters.

A 1985 graduate of Giddings High School, Robyn grew up in Giddings and decided to attend A&M after visiting the University of Texas for a basketball camp. Needless to say, she did not feel at home in Austin.

At A&M, Robyn studied accounting and earned her bachelor's degree in just three and a half years.

"I was definitely on a budget," she said. "I'm the only one in my family and even my extended family who has graduated from college. Now everybody is an Aggie because you know we're all Aggies."

THE DIVERSIFICATION OF PUMPCO

For her senior English paper at A&M, Robyn wrote about the diversification of Pumpco.

"The professor called me into his office," recalled Robyn, initially wondering if she had done something wrong. "He said it was one of the best papers, but he wanted to know the whole story."

At that same time, Alan was trying to figure out how he was going to take his business to the next level. Robyn's paper became a roadmap for Pumpco to evolve into a pipeline construction company.

As the company's services grew, Alan was finally able to secure enough capital to start buying equipment.

"He would always tell me, 'Hey Robyn, come ride with me,' and my response would be, 'What are we buying now?'" Robyn recalled. "He would say, 'If

I just had one more truck, I could have another crew.'"

The Roberts poured themselves into the business and transformed Pumpco from an oilfield service company into what it is today – a billion-dollar corporation that specializes in pipeline construction services throughout the U.S.

"It took years and years, but we were finally able to get it done," Alan said.

By 2019 – nearly 40 years after it was founded – Pumpco had grown to 3,000 employees with a \$320 million payroll and over \$400 million in assets.

To secure the financial resources to reach that level, the Roberts sold the company in 2008 to Mastec, Inc. However, the couple still ran the business in their hometown of Giddings with Alan serving as its president until retiring in June 2022, in addition to owning several other companies.

"I work for him, but he lives with me," Robyn joked.

FAMILY AFFAIR

Whether in their business or personal lives, Robyn and Alan have always centered everything around family and teamwork. Despite its exponential growth, they continued to operate Pumpco as a family-oriented business. The couple are also the proud parents of two Aggie daughters, Jennifer and Allyson, and grandparents of three grandchildren.

The Roberts shared their love of A&M with Jennifer and Allyson from the beginning. In fact, Alan bought an RV in the mid-1990s for the family to spend gameday weekends together in Aggieland.

“I told her I had this plan,” he said of Robyn who initially thought they were too young to buy an RV. “We’ll take the kids and a babysitter with us to the tailgate, and then we can go into the stadium and use walkie talkies to stay in touch with them.”

The plan worked, and their daughters have been attending games for as long as they can remember.

“The babysitter still works for us today,” Robyn added. “She’s like another daughter to us.”

The Roberts have continued their tailgating tradition for more than 25 years. Like their business, the event has grown significantly but remains focused on family.

“Growing up, experiencing gameday with our parents was something really special for us as a family,” said Jennifer, who has two young children of her own. “Now, having that opportunity with our growing families has been fun.”

“It’s just really special,” added Alan. “It’s a way to bond with other Aggies and get to visit with new and old friends alike. They don’t have to have an invitation. They just know they’re invited. That’s why today we have almost 100 people at every tailgate. The whole thing is a great experience for everybody involved.”

CALLED TO GIVE

Beyond attending Aggie football, baseball and men’s and women’s basketball games as longtime season ticket holders, the Roberts have shared a giving spirit that has forever impacted A&M.

“When we started giving, it was very family-oriented,” Robyn said. “We gave what we could when we could because we wanted to go to the games and sit in good seats. We still have the four seats in what I call section 107 that Alan bought after he graduated. I can’t give them up.”

Their investment in Aggie Athletics includes significant gifts to the construction of the Bright Football Complex, the Cox-McFerrin Center for Aggie Basketball and Blue Bell Park. The couple also contributed one of the lead gifts to the redevelopment of Kyle Field.

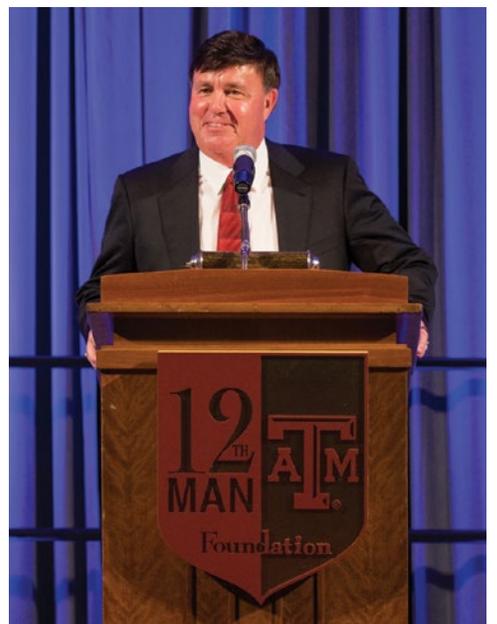
“We feel rewarded for giving back,” Alan said. “We worked our way through college when we came here, and we know the student-athletes are working hard in sports and in class while being under a lot of pressure. And we’ve seen how the facilities attract the best student-athletes and how they have helped so many of them be successful in life. It’s a win-win.”

“It’s fun to see them start a career and have families,” added Robyn. “It’s fun to follow that.”

The Roberts have also given back their time as leaders and advocates for the 12th Man Foundation

The Roberts have been influential investors and ambassadors for Texas A&M Athletics for many years, helping fund multiple facility projects including the redevelopment of Kyle Field. Alan also served on the 12th Man Foundation Board of Trustees and was the 2015 board chair.







THE E. KING GILL AWARD

Established in 2011, the E. King Gill Award is presented annually to a person or couple who has been an influential investor and ambassador for Texas A&M Athletics.

The prestigious award honors supporters who have generously helped the 12th Man Foundation realize its mission of funding scholarships, programs and facilities in support of championship athletics. The recipient is selected based on financial commitment, exemplary service and leadership as a volunteer advocate, ethics and a high level of distinction as a role model.

The honorees of this prestigious award are recognized on an engraved plaque in the Claudia and Rod Stepp '59 Grand Lobby, located just outside the 12th Man Foundation offices.

E. King Gill Award Honorees

- 2011 Col. George J. Eppright '26
Carolyn & Jack E. Little '60
- 2012 Kay & Jerry S. Cox '72
- 2013 Judith & Weldon Jaynes '54
- 2014 Alice & Erle A. Nye '59
- 2015 Dorothy & Artie R. McFerrin '65
- 2016 Susan '13 & Sam '70 Torn
- 2017 Carolyn & Tommie E. Lohman '59
- 2018 Sharon '81 & Jim Wilson '81
- 2019 Trisha & L.C. "Chaz" Neely '62
- 2020 Rhonda & Frosty Gilliam Jr. '80
- 2021 Robyn '89 & Alan Roberts '78

“

The 12th Man Foundation and Texas A&M Athletics are deeply grateful for the Roberts family’s extraordinary support.

– TRAVIS DABNEY '96

with Alan serving on the Board of Trustees from 2010-16, including a tenure as chair in 2015.

“Alan served the 12th Man Foundation as chair of the Board of Trustees during a very tumultuous time for the organization,” Dabney said. “We were deep in the process of the Kyle Field redevelopment, and Alan’s leadership and steadiness were always welcomed by the staff.”

The couple have also made generous commitments to The Association of Former Students and Mays Business School. In 2008, Robyn and Alan received Mays’ Outstanding Alumni Award.

“It’s super important for my mom and dad and our whole family to give back,” said Jennifer, who along with Allyson was active in the 12th Man Foundation as a student and now as a donor. “A&M helped us all get to where we are today.”

Beyond A&M, Robyn and Alan feel blessed to be able to help their local community of Giddings.

With their time, talent and resources, the Roberts have generously supported their church, their local schools and hospital, their neighbors – the list goes on and on, and their impact is felt far and wide.

“We’ve been blessed in so many ways,” Alan said. “It’s just something we have always done.”

“It’s in his heart,” Robyn added. “I mean, that’s why I married him. If we can help or do something, we do it.”

SPECIAL BOND

Through their support of Aggie Athletics, Robyn and Alan also established a deep connection with the A&M women’s basketball program and were an integral part of its 2011 National Championship.

Within the Aggie program, the Roberts discovered excellent role models for their daughters and developed lasting relationships with many of the coaches and student-athletes.

“My favorite moment is when we were at the hotel in Dallas during the NCAA Tournament to send the team off to play Baylor for a trip to the

Final Four,” said Robyn, who coached her daughters’ basketball teams for six years. “When the team came down the escalator, Danielle Adams spotted Alan and I in the back and parted the crowd to get to us. She said, ‘I need a hug from my favorite fan.’”

The couple was there every step of the way for the program’s magical run to its first national title.

“It just makes your heart feel good when you see those kids succeed,” Robyn said.

The Roberts have gone above and beyond in their support of Aggie women’s basketball. The team’s practice gym bears their name, and the couple shared their airplane with the coaching staff to help them travel more efficiently when recruiting. That generosity impacted other Aggie teams as well, with the Aggie football program greatly benefiting from easy access to air travel courtesy of the Roberts.

WELL-DESERVED HONOR

The Roberts family tailgate was in full swing on Sept. 4, 2021, as the Aggies were preparing to kick off their season at Kyle Field against Kent State.

Always welcoming, Robyn and Alan were happy to oblige when Jacob Green said he was bringing some friends by before the game. What they did not expect was for that group to include some of

their closest friends and 12th Man Foundation staff delivering the surprise announcement that they were the recipients of the 2021 E. King Gill Award.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Alan said. “We were so just so honored and so surprised. I never even imagined it.”

“Seeing them get rewarded for all their hard work and passion for Aggie Athletics is awesome,” Allyson added. “The joy on their faces is what it is all about.”

Green was proud to celebrate the moment with his longtime friends.

“Robyn and Alan have made a tremendous impact on the 12th Man Foundation over the years,” said Green, vice president of principal gifts. “They are incredibly humble people, but their generous support of Texas A&M Athletics has helped make much of our success possible.”

For the Roberts, the recognition was unexpected but is something they will forever cherish.

“As students, we stood as the 12th Man,” Robyn and Alan said. “To be rewarded today with this honor is just beyond words.

“We’ve always been happy to stand on the sideline, give back when we can and continue doing what it takes to help Aggie Athletics succeed.”

Robyn and Alan first found out they were recipients of the E. King Gill Award during a surprise announcement at their famous tailgate prior to the Kent State football game in September of 2021.



LISA BRANCH '96

Aggie legend using experience and education at A&M to help lead the next generation through basketball

BY CHAREAN WILLIAMS '86

BASKETBALL IS LISA BRANCH'S LIFE. The first All-American in Texas A&M women's basketball history, Branch has spent more than half of her life either playing the game or coaching the game. Branch, 48, can't even begin to guess what she would be doing if not coaching basketball.

"When I was going to school, I knew I wanted to be in the sports industry," said Branch, the head coach of Lewisville ISD's Hebron High School varsity girls basketball team. "I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I did know I didn't want to coach. I just saw the stress of my coaches, and I'm sure I had something to do with it, and I was like, 'This is crazy. I know I will never coach.' But God had a different plan for me. The coaching field chose me is how I look at it."

Branch did not play her first organized basketball game until she was 13, but for years before that, she played pickup games with her male cousins. That is where she not only honed her game but developed a love for it.

"My cousins told me how good I was, and I was always one of the first ones they picked," Branch recalled. "I think once they gave me that nod of approval, I was like, 'OK, I must be something,' because they don't hand out compliments, especially to girls."

Branch's older sister, Tina, went to the University of Texas on an academic scholarship. Lisa's father realized when Lisa was a freshman at DeSoto High School that an athletic scholarship was in her future.

"She was special," said John Branch, who lives in Lancaster.

Branch was first noticed by college programs while playing on an AAU team with future A&M teammate Martha McClelland. The Aggies diligently recruited both Branch and McClelland.

"From the time they were seventh graders, we went to every game they played in the summer," said Lynn Hickey, the women's basketball coach at



A&M from 1984-94. "I would sit on the front row and make sure my Texas A&M briefcase was sitting there, facing the floor."

Branch, though, tore an anterior cruciate ligament as a junior in high school. Only A&M, Stephen F. Austin, Stanford and Arkansas continued to recruit her, and Branch took recruiting visits to all four schools.

Branch's mother wanted her to go to SFA. Her father wanted her to go to A&M. She ultimately decided to follow McClelland to Aggieland.

"It was close enough to home for my parents to watch me," said Branch, "but it was just far enough from home to feel like I had some independence."

Texas A&M's first women's basketball All-American, Lisa Branch led the Aggies to their first two NCAA tournament appearances in 1994 and 1996. Branch was a three-time First Team All-Southwest Conference selection, and the league's player of the year in 1994.

Branch led the Aggies in scoring every year and became the first player in school history to start every game in four consecutive seasons. She was the 1993 Southwest Conference Newcomer of the Year, and a year later, the SWC Co-Player of the Year.

Branch led the program to its first two NCAA tournament appearances, with the 1994 team advancing to the Sweet 16. She hit two free throws with four seconds left to lift the Aggies to a 78-76 upset of No. 20 Florida in the first round of the NCAA tournament in 1994.

A&M won the 1995 NWIT title – with Branch earning MVP honors – and, in 1996, the Aggies won their first SWC tournament championship in the last year of the conference.

“Lisa was the player you figured out really quick that at the end of a game, she’s who you wanted to have the ball,” said L.J. Jordon, who played at A&M before returning as an assistant coach in Branch’s second season. “She never panicked. She just did what she had to do. She was the complete point guard that everyone wants but few ever have.”

Branch ended her career with school records in points (1,939), assists (795) and steals (309). Twenty-six years later, the program has a national championship trophy, a winning tradition and 14 All-Americans, yet Branch still has the fourth-most points, the most assists and the second-most steals in school history.

The three-time All-SWC player averaged 16.6 points and 6.6 assists in 120 career games.

“She could do things that you can’t really teach people to do,” said Hickey, now the athletics director



at Eastern Washington. “She just had some God-given talent. She was very, very small, but she could shoot the ball, and she could get down and around and under people to get shots off.

“I think the No. 1 thing about Lisa is she may be the most competitive person I’ve ever been around. When she came on her recruiting visit, I remember being in the dorm and there was a Ping-Pong table. I think there was almost a fight.”

Branch graduated from Texas A&M in 1997 with a kinesiology degree and an emphasis in sport management. She began working at the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Brazos Valley right out of school before receiving a call from Henry Thomas, the athletics director at Calvert ISD at the time.

“He said, ‘Well, we’ll pay you more money than what you’re making at the Boys & Girls Club,’” Branch recalled, laughing. “He also tugged at the heartstrings of being able to help kids and change their lives. I thought that would be pretty cool.”

Branch’s unexpected coaching career began at Calvert and continued with assistant roles at

In 2019, Branch became the first Texas A&M women’s basketball player to be inducted into the Southwest Conference Hall of Fame.



“
YOU CAN TELL HER PLAYERS WOULD RUN THROUGH THE WALL FOR HER. THAT’S JUST THE AMOUNT OF RESPECT HER KIDS GIVE HER.

– MARTHA MCCLELLAND '96

“

BASKETBALL HELPED ME GO TO COLLEGE, GET A DEGREE AND DO WHAT I LOVE. I WILL NEVER FORGET THE MEMORIES AND FRIENDSHIPS I MADE.

— LISA BRANCH '96

Hearne and Brenham as well as a one-year stint on the Aggies' staff. In 2004, former A&M head coach Candi Harvey hired Branch at Mansfield Timberview. She was there for eight years, winning a state title in 2010, before earning her first head coaching opportunity at Lovejoy.

Two years later in April 2017, Branch landed her current job at Hebron and led the Hawks to the playoffs four straight seasons.

“Lisa has such a feel for the game,” said Harvey, who coached Branch for two seasons at A&M. “A lot of people know X’s and O’s, but that’s all they are. They’re X’s and O’s. Lisa knew how – and still knows how – to take X’s and O’s and make players understand them.

“The surprising thing is Lisa didn’t really show by example or really even want to. It wasn’t like she’d get a ball in her hands as a coach and say, ‘Let me show you how it’s done.’ That never really interested her. What interested her was truly the

teaching aspect of it and communicating with kids. They bought in from the beginning.”

McClelland, an elementary school PE teacher in Argyle, has sent her daughters to Branch’s summer camp and usually attends at least one of the Aggie legend’s games every season. She knows firsthand that her former teammate is as good a coach as she was a player.

“She’s intense,” said McClelland, whose married name is Murphy. “She may be short in stature, but she demands attention. You can tell her players would run through the wall for her. That’s just the amount of respect her kids give her.”

Branch’s father gets more nervous watching Lisa coach than he ever did watching her play.

“When she was a player, I had confidence in her to get it done,” John Branch said. “It’s something now, with coaching, that she doesn’t have any control of out there on the floor.”

Lisa Branch will never be forgotten for what she did at A&M as a student-athlete. She earned induction into the Texas A&M Lettermen’s Association Hall of Fame in 2002 and was the Aggies’ SEC Women’s Legend in 2015, even though she never played in the league.

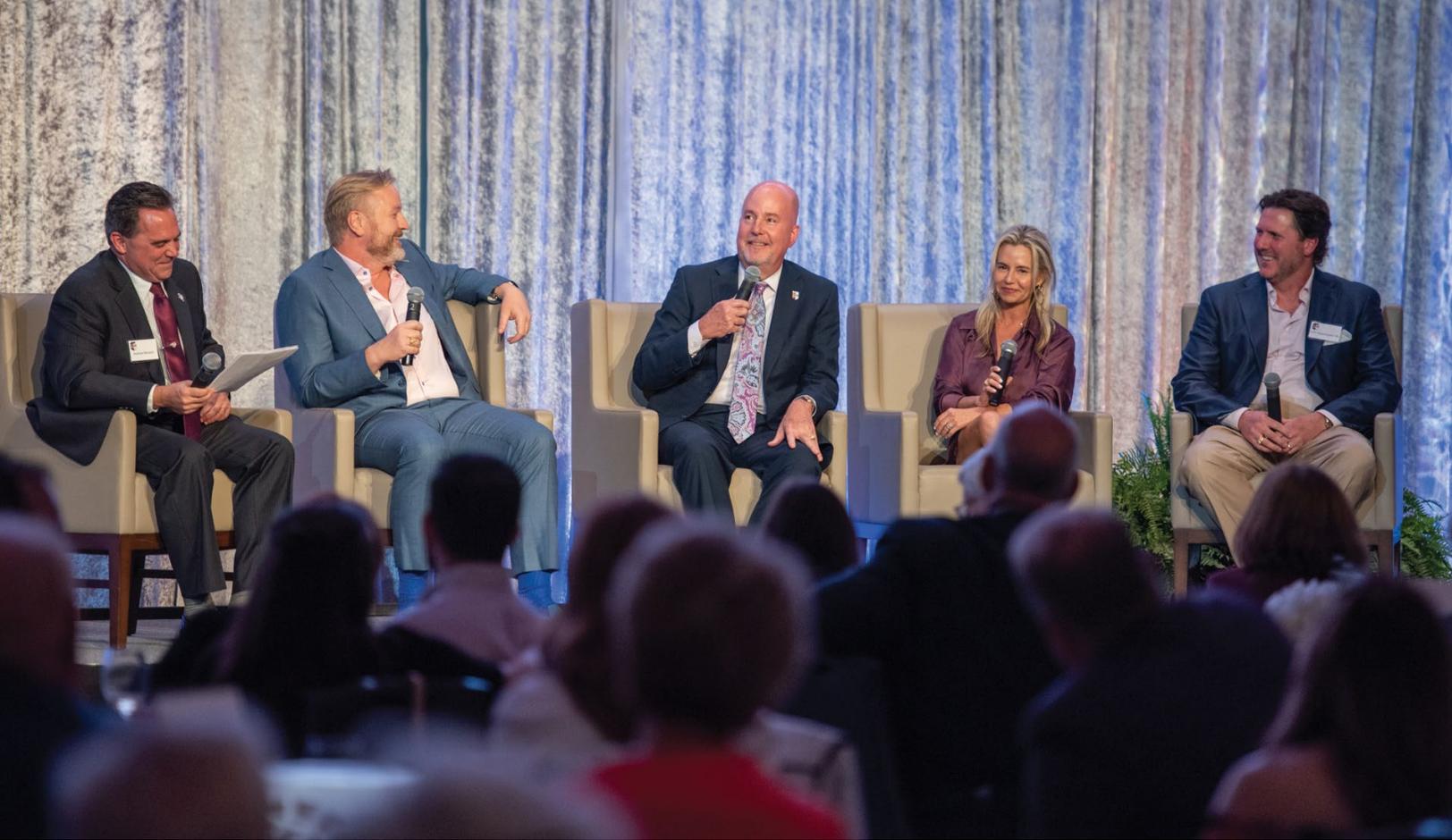
Branch said she would not be where she is without basketball or without Texas A&M.

“It helped me go to college, get a degree and do what I love,” Branch said. “I will never forget the memories and friendships I made.”

As a senior in 1996, Branch led A&M to its first and only Southwest Conference tournament championship in the final edition of the event. Today, Branch is helping teach and develop young women as a basketball coach at Hebron High School.



TEXAS A&M ATHLETICS (LEFT); COURTESY OF LISA BRANCH (RIGHT)



CHAMPIONS COUNCIL WEEKEND FEATURES LAUNCH OF CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN

Donors were introduced to the Centennial Campaign during Champions Council Weekend in April at Kyle Field. Panels featuring Texas A&M and 12th Man Foundation leadership as well as lead donors to the campaign shared the vision for the \$120 million endeavor, which includes the construction of an Academic & Wellness Center, Football Indoor Performance Center and Indoor Track Stadium as well as a redevelopment of the Bright Football Complex. For information about supporting the Centennial Campaign or joining Champions Council, contact the Major Gifts staff at 979-260-7952.





POWER OF A SCHOLARSHIP

DESHAE WISE '23

Aggie student-athlete thrives through adversity to find success on the track and in life

BY HALEY STANGLE

ON THE SURFACE, DESHAE WISE'S EARLY CHILDHOOD appeared normal. She went to school. She participated in after-school activities. She looked happy and healthy.

Her mother, Rebecca Bender, worked the night shift at a 24-hour restaurant. At least that is what Wise assumed at the time. All Wise knew was that her mother was dressed in nice clothes when she tucked her into bed each night.

In reality, Bender was a victim of human trafficking, and both mother and daughter lived under the same roof with Bender's traffickers for nearly six of the first eight years of Wise's life.

On December 31, 2007, they were finally able to break free after a federal indictment of Bender's trafficker. Following their escape, Bender not only

had to recover from what they had been through, but she had to start a new life and raise her daughter as a single mom.

As Wise grew older, she realized certain aspects of her early childhood were anything but normal.

While nothing happened to her personally, Wise spent six years surrounded by terror, trauma and manipulation. Being in an environment like that, no matter how shielded, can leave a lasting impact on a child.

Once Bender was able to process everything, she was open with Wise about what they had endured.

"I was around eight or nine when she tried to explain to me what the situation was in terms that are not too intense for a child," recalled Wise.

Wise watched her mother overcome years of

“

I WAS AROUND EIGHT OR NINE WHEN SHE TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO ME WHAT THE SITUATION WAS IN TERMS THAT ARE NOT TOO INTENSE FOR A CHILD.

— DESHAE WISE '23

abuse while struggling as a single parent. She has also witnessed her mother thrive in the years since.

In 2014, with her daughter by her side, Bender started an anti-trafficking non-profit called the Rebecca Bender Initiative. She also founded Elevate Academy, which has grown to become the largest online school for survivors of human trafficking in the world.

Wise has seen firsthand how important these resources are for survivors.

“I think human trafficking is a very misunderstood concept because it is not just people getting kidnapped and forced into this,” Wise explained. “It’s the coercion and the belief that this person really loves you and wants what’s best for you.”

While Bender channeled her energy into helping survivors, Wise became involved in sports. She played basketball, volleyball and soccer. She also ran track and learned quickly that she had a gift for running.

By her junior year of high school, Wise was on pace to earn a Division I track scholarship. A Gatorade Athlete of the Year, Nike Athlete of the Year, and four-time state champion as a high schooler in Oregon, Wise chose the University of California, Berkeley because of its academic prestige and proximity to her hometown.

After competing for Cal for three seasons and graduating with one year of eligibility remaining, Wise began looking for more. She wanted an opportunity to improve on the track while earning a full-ride scholarship that was not solely linked to performance.

As she entered the transfer portal, Wise searched for a school that offered both a world-class track program and a top-notch master’s program in her field. Once she paired Aggie track and field with the Master of Public Service and Administration program offered at A&M, the decision was easy.

Wise arrived in Aggieland accustomed to finishing in front of her competition on the track. However, the graduate transfer found herself in the middle of the pack when competing with her new teammates. Like most things in her life, Wise did not allow this to set her back. Instead, Wise used it as motivation to achieve her goals.

When the 2021-22 track and field season began, Wise made an immediate impact on the team. She climbed to No. 5 in the nation in the 400-meter hurdles after arriving at A&M unranked in the event.

Deshae Wise’s mother, Rebecca Bender, was a victim of human trafficking, and both mother and daughter lived with traffickers for nearly six years until their escape in 2007.



COURTESY OF DESHAE WISE

“

**TEXAS A&M IS TRULY A VERY SPECIAL PLACE,
AND I'M SO THANKFUL TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE
OPPORTUNITY TO COME HERE AND EXPERIENCE IT.**

— DESHAE WISE '23

She also earned a spot on the Texas A&M All-Time Top-12 Performer List for her time in the indoor 60-meter hurdles. Her performance exceeded the lofty expectations of coach Pat Henry.

“Deshae had not really run the intermediate hurdles prior to coming here,” said Henry, Texas A&M’s head track and field coach. “She hadn’t trained for it, and it’s a completely different event than 100-meter hurdles. She really did a great job of adapting to our system, and I think she’s flourished in it.

“And she now has an Aggie smile.”

Since arriving in Aggieland, Wise has utilized every resource available to student-athletes to help her be successful on the track and in the classroom, and she is thankful to 12th Man Foundation donors for their passion and support which makes opportunities like hers possible.

“The institution as a whole is so amazing,” she said. “Student-athletes are treated phenomenally.

We are supported and not just as athletes. We are supported on the nutrition side, the academic side – everything.”

In her first and only season as a member of the Aggie track and field team, Wise was named the recipient of the 2022 Lohman Inspiration Award – an honor that recognizes a student-athlete at Texas A&M who has demonstrated integrity and tenacity in overcoming incredible challenges in pursuit of his or her education.

For Wise, the award is a testament to the Aggie Spirit.

“Texas A&M is truly a very special place, and I’m so thankful to have been given the opportunity to come here and experience it,” she said. “The Lohman Inspiration Award allows student-athletes to see their peers in a different light and know that others don’t just define them by their athletic career.”





A graduate transfer, Wise was named the recipient of the 2022 Lohman Inspiration Award. The award, presented by Carolyn Lohman (above), recognizes a student-athlete who has demonstrated integrity and tenacity in overcoming incredible challenges in pursuit of his or her education.

In June, Wise wrapped up her collegiate track career in her home state of Oregon at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships. She recorded a personal best time in the women's 400-meter hurdles, finishing fifth and earning All-America honors while helping the Aggies place fourth in the team rankings.

"Some people may be unhappy with a fifth-place finish, but words cannot express how proud I am of myself," Wise said in an Instagram post following the accomplishment. "I'm so thankful to see my hard work, mental fortitude and risk-taking pay off exactly when it needed to. I couldn't have done this without my teammates, coaches and support system."

After an impressive collegiate career, Wise has decided to continue her running career as a professional track athlete.

An incredible testament to making the most of opportunities, Wise has overcome much adversity to get this far, and she is not hitting the brakes anytime soon. Instead, she embraces her experience and uses it to better understand and encourage others.

After all, she knows you can never tell what someone is going through just by looking at them. ♥



MICKEY WASHINGTON '90

Aggie football letterman achieves early life goals by making the most of opportunities in athletics and academics

BY OLIN BUCHANAN



A 1991 graduate of Texas A&M, Washington earned a Juris Doctor degree from the Thurgood Marshall School of Law following his professional football career. In 2003, he founded Washington & Associates, a thriving law firm in Houston.

LONG BEFORE HIS VOICE CHANGED, Mickey Washington was planning life changes.

He set life goals when he was only nine years old.

“As a little kid I made a list of four things I wanted to do,” said Washington, who starred at cornerback for the Texas A&M football team from 1986-89. “I wanted to own my own business, become an attorney and an accountant and I wanted to play pro football.”

Now a 54-year-old father of two, Washington said his football scholarship to Texas A&M enabled him to reach three of those four life goals.

“My courses in accounting became a problem at A&M,” Washington joked. “I wish I had known

earlier that I didn’t like accounting as much as I thought.”

Hey, three out of four ain’t bad.

The pro football goal? Washington played eight seasons in the National Football League.

Becoming a lawyer? Upon completing his pro football career, Washington earned a Juris Doctor degree from the Thurgood Marshall School of Law.

Owning his own business? In June 2003, he founded Washington & Associates, a thriving law firm in Houston, Texas. He is licensed in Texas and Mississippi.

Washington’s intelligence, athleticism, drive and family support suggest he would have succeeded regardless of where he chose to attend college.

Yet, three decades after leaving A&M with a degree in sociology and a minor in health, Washington is adamant that his Texas A&M experience was a launching pad to his success.

“I guess you’d call it my springboard to getting where I wanted to go,” he said. “The culture that Aggies take care of Aggies and Aggies are family for life was important for me.”

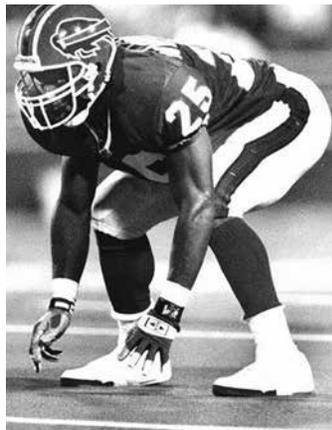
In his own family, Washington states he was blessed to have two great men as “fathers.”

His athleticism and ability to take care of himself came from his father, Edwin Washington, Jr.

Don Scott, Washington’s stepfather, married Mildred Washington when Mickey was six years old.

Retired after working 40 years in Beaumont refineries, the soft-spoken, 80-year-old Scott confirms A&M’s family-like environment was of utmost importance.

“An Aggie is an Aggie for life,” Scott said. “He had in mind that wherever he goes and whatever he decides to do he could always fall back on another Aggie. He believed an Aggie would always be in his



Originally recruited as a wide receiver, Washington starred at cornerback for A&M from 1986-89 earning All-Southwest Conference honors for two seasons in addition to being named an honorable mention All-American in 1988. He was drafted by the then-Phoenix Cardinals in 1990 and played eight seasons in the NFL.

background to give support if he needed it.”

Washington found that support almost immediately after accepting a scholarship offer from then-A&M head coach Jackie Sherrill.

“A&M was good for me being that I was kind of quiet and a shy guy,” recalled Washington, noting that two of his cousins, Tai Scott ’90 and Danny Scott ’93, were on campus serving in the Corps of Cadets while he was a student. “Each year the teams we had were all family. We were all in Cain Hall. Some of the principles Jackie and R.C. (Slocum) impressed upon us were important to me – unity, team building and how to accomplish those things.

“I always worked hard in school, but at A&M I took it to another level because I had such great team leaders as examples.”

Washington, who had been a star at West Brook High School in Beaumont, also took his game to another level.

He was an All-Southwest Conference player for two seasons and earned honorable mention All-America recognition in 1988. He also helped contain Heisman Trophy recipient Tim Brown in a 35-10 Cotton Bowl victory over Notre Dame.

Recalling memories from that Cotton Bowl victory with old teammates and fans is always special. It is even more special when his nine-year-old son, Brayden, and 17-year-old daughter, Eliana, accompany him to College Station.

“During the football season we had an autograph

session and my son was able to be there,” Washington said. “He loved it. He got a kick out of it. My daughter just visited A&M, so I was able to show them many of the things that I loved about A&M.

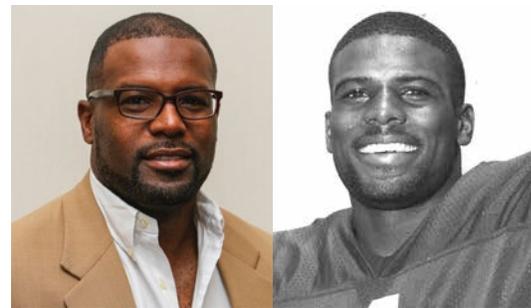
“My son talked to a lot of different Aggies telling him positive things that they remembered when I played. It was an honor and a privilege. I’m humbled and blessed that my kids know about my college days at A&M.”

The season after that 1987 Cotton Bowl victory, Washington sustained a shoulder injury which compromised his performance.

Despite the injury, he was still drafted the following spring by the then-Phoenix Cardinals. He was released and signed with the New England Patriots where he played two years before moving on to the Washington Redskins. He eventually joined the Buffalo Bills organization and was a starting cornerback in Super Bowl XXVIII. Washington went on to play for the Jacksonville Jaguars and New Orleans Saints later in his career.

“After eight seasons, I was the strongest and fastest I’ve ever been, but I was in free agency and didn’t have a contract,” Washington said. “I had taken the LSAT a couple of years earlier in anticipation of a later retirement, so I decided to go to law school. I didn’t want to sit out a year and figure out what would happen in life.”

What happened was Washington embarked on achieving two more of his life goals.



“
**THE CULTURE THAT AGGIES
TAKE CARE OF AGGIES AND
AGGIES ARE FAMILY FOR LIFE
WAS IMPORTANT FOR ME.**

— MICKEY WASHINGTON ’90



Washington has stayed involved with Aggie Athletics over the years and currently serves as President of the Texas A&M Lettermen's Association.

Now, Washington handles personal injury litigation, labor and employment litigation as well as representing clients in business law matters.

He has served on the Executive Board of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) since 2011. He was selected as chairman for the NFLPA in 2016 where he termed out a couple of years later.

Washington currently serves as President of the Texas A&M Lettermen's Association, and is also on a Harvard University advisory board for the study of football injuries.

He has represented more than 80 plaintiffs in class action lawsuits, more than 350 plaintiffs in mass tort litigation and more than 130 plaintiffs in civil rights, racial profiling and false imprisonment cases.

Washington's law firm operates with a belief that commitment, excellence and integrity drive success. Those values mirror what was ingrained in him at A&M. Indeed, Washington often shares things he learned from Sherrill with his employees.

"Overall, I'm preaching the same deal," Washington said. "Let's represent ourselves the way we should. Keep pushing in a positive direction and you'll get there. That was echoed a lot through my time at A&M."

Washington's time at A&M obviously prepared him for success. His scholarship put him on the path to attain his life goals.

"I'm most proud I accomplished the feat of actually reaching the goals I set at a young age," he said. "It's not so much the success in terms of money and material things. It's being a blessing to others and utilizing the gifts that God has given me." ■

“
**I'M MOST PROUD I
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THE GOALS I SET AT A
YOUNG AGE.**

— MICKEY WASHINGTON '90



12TH MAN FOUNDATION HOSTS 1922 FUND AND JOHN DAVID CROW LEGACY SOCIETY DINNER

1922 Fund donors and John David Crow Legacy Society members enjoyed an intimate dinner with student-athletes at the Texas A&M Hotel & Conference Center in May. The event featured Brian Williams (football) and Caroline Theil (swimming), two extraordinary student-athletes who are making the most of their opportunities at A&M. 1922 Fund donors directly support student-athlete education through scholarship endowments, while joining the John David Crow Legacy Society through estate planning provides an enduring contribution to A&M Athletics. For more information, contact the Major Gifts staff at 979-260-7952.





TEXAS A&M ATHLETICS

INTRODUCING JONI TAYLOR

New head women's basketball coach eager to build upon the legacy left by Gary Blair

BY CHAREAN WILLIAMS '86

WHEN JONI TAYLOR ACCEPTED THE JOB to become the head women's basketball coach at Texas A&M, she did so without taking an official visit. In fact, her only trips to Aggieland came as an opposing coach. But Taylor did not need long to feel at home.

She opened her first press conference with a "Howdy," and within a month, she could find her way to Starbucks, Orange Theory and Smoothie King without GPS.

Taylor is happy to be an Aggie, and the Aggies are happy to have Taylor.

"I watched Texas A&M from afar for a long time," said Taylor, who in June led USA Basketball Women's U18 National Team to gold at the 2022 FIBA U18 Women's Americas Championship in Argentina. "I always thought, 'Man, that's a great place to work.' Never, ever did I think that would be something that would come my way, but I've always had great admiration, respect and appreciation for it."

On Oct. 28, 2021, Gary Blair announced he was retiring after his 19th season, and the search for his replacement began in mid-January.

"Texas A&M is a destination job in college basketball," said Ross Bjork, A&M's director of athletics. "It was my belief all along that we had to target high profile, sitting head coaches."

Taylor, 43, has already followed in the footsteps of one Hall of Fame coach. She was hired by the University of Georgia in 2015 to follow Andy Landers, who won 862 games in 36 years for the Bulldogs. Taylor did not have any head coaching experience, but she had spent 13 years as an assistant coach or associate head coach at five schools including her alma mater, Alabama, before going to LSU and then Georgia.

The Bulldogs selected Taylor as the second head coach in school history after four seasons as an assistant coach under Landers, including three as associate head coach.

In seven seasons, Taylor led Georgia to a 140-75 record, including 62-48 in the SEC, with four NCAA tournament appearances. She won SEC Coach of the Year honors in 2021.

"I think Joni has the personality and the wisdom

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JONI’S EXPERIENCE AS A PLAYER IN THE SEC, ASSISTANT COACH IN THE SEC AND SEVEN YEARS A HEAD COACH WAS AN AMAZING COMBINATION OF WHAT I BELIEVED WAS IMPORTANT IN OUR CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR NEXT HEAD COACH.

— ROSS BJORK

to understand where she is and who she’s with and who was there before her,” said Landers, now a women’s basketball analyst for ESPN, “and she knows how to blend that into what she wants it to be without disrupting what came before her. A lot of people go in and want to make a lot of changes and changes that are not necessary. If changes are necessary, Joni will do those respectfully.”

Blair turned A&M into a national power, going 444-185 and winning the 2011 NCAA Championship. If the shadow of that banner hanging in Reed Arena is not enough to remind Taylor of the expectations, she need only to look at the newly named court, where “Gary Blair” is etched in the wood.

“I think what’s special about both of those men is that they understand it’s about women’s basketball and it’s about growing leaders and it’s about doing whatever is best for our game and our sport,” Taylor said. “That’s what I want to do.”

Taylor and Blair have conversed several times, with Blair offering to help, if needed, but to stay out of the way, if not. It is now Taylor’s office, Taylor’s program and Taylor’s time.

“The last three places she’s been, there’s been an active Hall of Famer that lives there or right around the corner,” Blair said. “A lot of people wouldn’t want that challenge, because there are going to be comparisons. What Joni is going to have to do is not worry about living in the shadows of (Leon) Bar-more at La Tech, Van Chancellor or Sue Gunter at LSU, Andy Landers at Georgia and now Gary Blair. Be the best that Joni can be. The best of Joni. I think she can do that.”

Taylor’s goal at A&M is to win championships. However, she knows that is a common goal for

every SEC program. For Taylor, it is about what makes you different.

“Trust the process” is her mantra, stacking good days together – one after another – to get where they want to go.

“It’s not about throwing these goals out here or this ending date of when something is going to happen,” she said. “It is about the details and how you get there. It is a process. If we do the everyday things daily the way we’re supposed to, then we will have gotten to where we’re supposed to be.”

Taylor’s efforts at A&M so far include adding former Georgia freshman guard Tineya Hylton from the transfer portal and signing Sydney Bowles and Janiah Barker. Barker, an All-American and the nation’s No. 3 recruit, is the highest-ranked recruit ever to sign with the Aggies, while Bowles is the No. 37 recruit in the country and the Georgia Gatorade Player of the Year.

“We’ve gotten off to a great start,” said Taylor, “but we definitely do have work to do in order to be who we all want us to be.”

Joni Taylor was officially welcomed during an introductory press conference in March with Gary Blair in attendance offering his support to the new women’s basketball coach at Texas A&M.



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THE COMMITMENT TO WOMEN'S BASKETBALL IS CLEAR, AND THAT IS SOMETHING THAT I WANT TO BE A PART OF AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL.

— JONI TAYLOR

Taylor grew up in Mississippi, played at Alabama and has coached most of her career in the SEC. A&M's leadership was interested in Taylor because of that invaluable experience, but it had no idea if she had interest in A&M. A phone call to her agent put things in motion to get Taylor to Aggieland as the eighth head coach in the program's history.

"Joni's experience as a player in the SEC, assistant coach in the SEC and seven years a head coach was an amazing combination of what I believed was important in our characteristics of our next head coach," Bjork said. "Experience matters, and experience in the SEC matters even more."

"When we first heard that coach Taylor might be interested, I was a little surprised based on the great job she was doing at Georgia. Once we were able to engage with her, it became crystal clear that she was the right choice for the Aggies."

Taylor's husband, Darius, will remain in Atlanta for now, working for the WNBA's Atlanta Dream.

He coached under Dawn Staley at Temple and at South Carolina before he and Joni were married. Georgia nepotism laws prevented Darius from working with his wife, so he instead joined the Dream's staff in 2017. Their parents will alternate living in the Taylors' home in Bryan-College Station to help with the couple's two children.

"We've done the extended stretches apart for a while," Joni Taylor said. "It's not anything we ever want to do permanently. We are not about living separately, but I think we both knew when we started dating what he was capable of in his career and what I was capable of in my career. We were going to figure out how to make it work to the best of our abilities and with parents who support us. I think we both just do whatever we have to do to make it work."

For Taylor, the opportunity to take over an A&M program with the tremendous resources and support it has in place was something she could not pass up.

"I think it's an honor that I'm in the position to be at an institution that had a legend and that I have an opportunity to follow behind and learn from and continue to enhance what was created here," she said. "The commitment to women's basketball is clear, and that is something that I want to be a part of at the highest level." ■

Taylor immediately embraced Aggieland after arriving in March, speaking to student volunteers at The Big Event and greeting the 12th Man at Kyle Field, Reed Arena and Blue Bell Park.





ANNUAL SUMMER MEETING HONORS DONOR IMPACT ON AGGIE ATHLETICS

Donors, coaches and staff gathered with current and former student-athletes at the JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa in June for the 2022 12th Man Foundation Summer Meeting. The weekend of Aggie camaraderie highlighted the impact donors make on Texas A&M Athletics and featured several special guests including SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey and Athletics Director Ross Bjork as well as former student-athletes Amanda Scarborough, Alex Caruso, Sean Porter and Spencer Neely. Members at the MVP level or higher are invited to the annual convention-style event. For information about attending the Summer Meeting, contact the Annual Fund staff at 979-260-2394 or visit www.12thmanfoundation.com/summermeeting.



THORNTON-MCFERRIN COACHING ACADEMY

Texas A&M initiative helps prepare prospective and current coaches to make a positive impact through their profession

BY ADAM QUISENBERRY

DEVIN MORRIS WONDERED WHAT WAS NEXT.

A Texas A&M defensive back from 2017-20, Morris was experiencing what virtually every student-athlete faces when their playing days are over.

“When my football career ended, I was really stuck and didn’t know what I wanted to do in my life,” said Morris, who earned a university studies degree from A&M in 2021. “I started thinking that I still wanted to be around the game, and for the first time, I really started thinking about coaching.”

Faced with a late start on his road to establishing a coaching career, Morris found his path with the help of Dr. John Thornton through a unique initiative called the Texas A&M Thornton-McFerrin Coaching Academy.

“When Devin first expressed an interest in coaching, I said, ‘Let’s figure out a path for you,’” recalled

Thornton, an executive professor and director of the coaching academy. “We were able to help him through the process of getting his certification and attending the Texas High School Coaches Association convention. Ultimately, that led to him finding the opportunity to teach and coach in his hometown of Caldwell.”

Now coaching football, basketball and track at Caldwell Junior High School, Morris stands out as one of many stories of success from the coaching academy, which holds the goal of supporting prospective and current coaches by providing resources to make a positive impact through the coaching profession.

Shaped by a professional career in athletics and as a first-hand witness of the impact coaches can have on the development of a young person’s life

Dr. John Thornton, pictured below with assistant director Dr. Mike Thornton, serves as the director of the coaching academy and was the driving force behind its creation.



The coaching academy, which has grown with support from generous donors including the Artie and Dorothy McFerrin Foundation, hosts and participates in multiple coaching events including seminars, clinics, workshops and conferences.

as a former A&M student-athlete, Thornton was the driving force behind the coaching academy's creation.

Formally launched in January 2013 as the Texas A&M Coaching Academy, the initiative was established to deliver programs for future and current coaches in the local, regional and state-wide areas. Its creation was a combined effort by Texas A&M's Department of Health & Kinesiology, the College of Education & Human Development, the Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance.

"My original goal was to help students-athletes," said Thornton, a member of the Texas A&M Athletics Hall of Honor. "I did not realize that there are a lot of undergrads, just regular undergrads, in the same boat. They figure out late that they want to coach, or they are in a major that is not conducive to getting them there and they decide to change."

Thornton's original initiative has grown since its founding with support from generous donors, including the Artie and Dorothy McFerrin Foundation, which made a signature \$3 million endowment gift in August 2021.

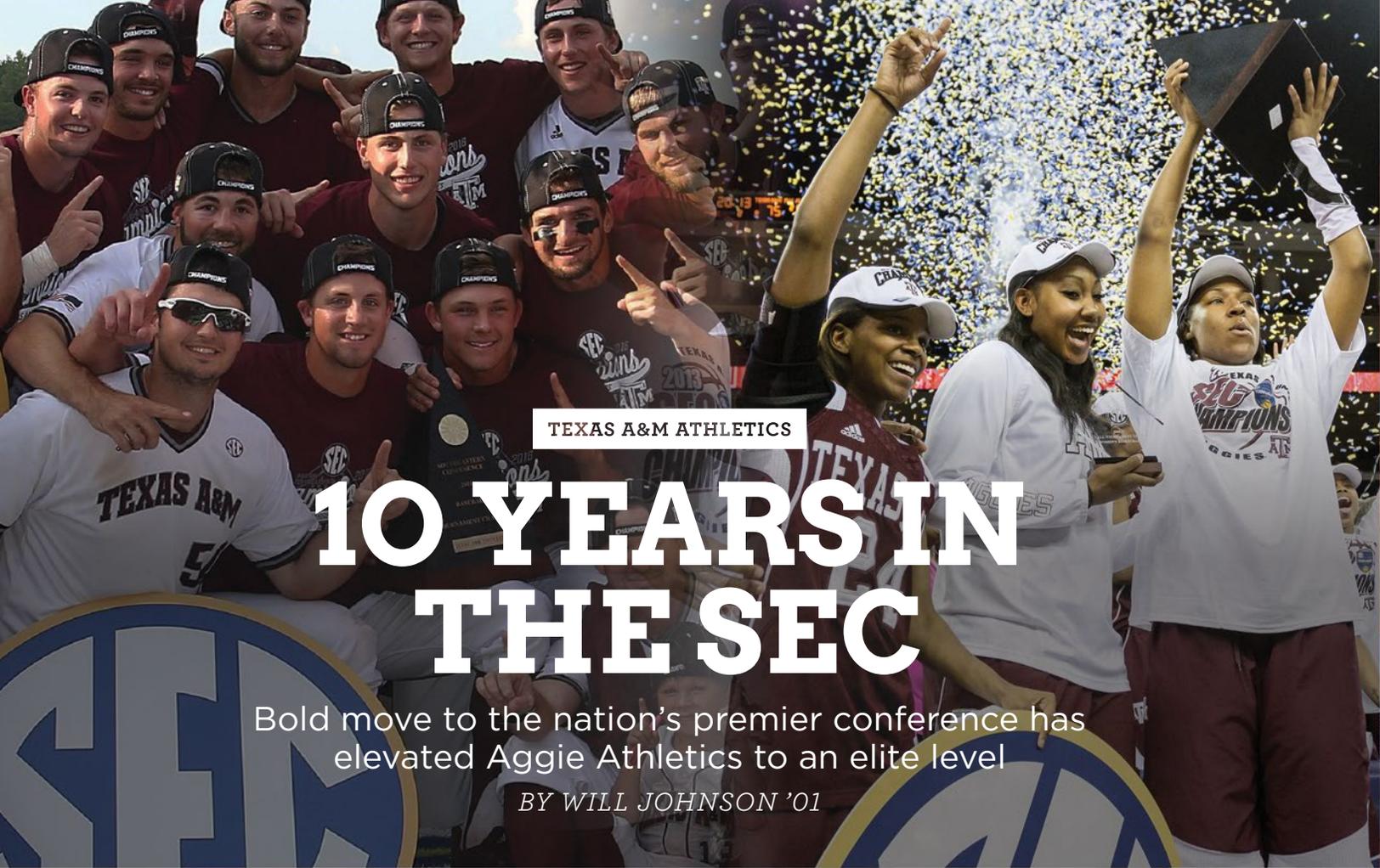
"I love matching up people with their passion and providing them tools and support to help them get there," Thornton said. "That gives me great satisfaction because we all know how important coaches can be for both individuals and communities."

As with many of the students who progressed through the coaching academy, Morris credits its programming as critical to his success.

"The opportunity I had to go through the coaching academy prepared me to both coach and teach," Morris said. "The teaching side of things is so important because you have to enjoy the classroom. I really enjoy teaching, and the coaching academy really prepared me for that." 🍷

To learn more, visit coachingacademy.tamu.edu. Support for the Thornton-McFerrin Coaching Academy is provided through the Texas A&M Foundation.





TEXAS A&M ATHLETICS

10 YEARS IN THE SEC

Bold move to the nation's premier conference has elevated Aggie Athletics to an elite level

BY WILL JOHNSON '01

WHEN TEXAS A&M ANNOUNCED IT WOULD JOIN the South-eastern Conference in September 2011, there were skeptics – many from right inside the Lone Star State.

Perhaps envious of the Aggies' new destination, several within the state made “good luck being a doormat” type jabs toward Aggieland.

However, A&M has had a seat at the table from the beginning, and most within the Aggies' new league were aware of what they were getting upon the school's arrival in time for the fall of 2012.

“Having visited A&M numerous times during my career in athletics, I understood the size, scale, spirit, atmosphere, traditions and passion this school possessed as a university, athletics program and fan base,” said A&M Athletics Director Ross Bjork, who in 2012 served in the same role at Ole Miss. “My initial reaction was the Aggies were the right fit based on those factors. When you combine the spirit of Texas A&M and the history and passion within the SEC, it's a perfect match.”

Looking back 10 years later, it is safe to say the Aggies have competed quite well.

Many of the snide comments as A&M entered

the league centered around football. However, it is the Aggies who have won more games on the gridiron than any other school in the state since 2012, doing so in the most rugged division of the toughest conference in the land. A&M football finished ranked in the Top 5 in 2012 and 2020, and with the highest rated recruiting class in history joining an already talent-rich roster on campus, the program is poised to compete for conference and national championships.

The visibility and exposure that comes with that success is incredible in the SEC. When the Aggies defeated No. 1 Alabama at Kyle Field in October 2021, over 8 million viewers on CBS saw the passion and energy of the 12th Man. It was the sixth time since joining the conference that an audience topping seven million watched an Aggie football game on television.

“The SEC has provided us with an amazing platform to showcase all the great things that happen in Aggieland,” Bjork said. “When you combine the timing of when A&M entered the SEC, the 2012 football season, Johnny Manziel's Heisman, Kyle Field's redevelopment, several SEC championships



in numerous sports, the launch of the SEC Network and now all the momentum we have as a university and athletics program, these 10 years have been transformational for our entire university.”

The exposure is not just limited to Kyle Field and Aggie football. In A&M’s previous conferences, the opportunity to watch other sports such as baseball, softball, soccer and women’s basketball were scarce. Any matchup involving those programs being televised was a rarity.

With the SEC Network, Aggies across the world can watch the action on a variety of platforms. In men’s basketball, for instance, all games are now available for viewing and every conference game is on national television.

Financially, the move to the SEC elevated A&M’s athletics department into one of the nation’s elites. The television contracts alone have significantly impacted A&M’s overall budget, but it is the extraordinary commitment from 12th Man Foundation donors that has altered Aggie Athletics’ trajectory starting with the historic redevelopment of Kyle Field and continuing with an investment in facilities that is unrivaled in college athletics.

That significant support combined with the increased visibility of the university as a member of the SEC has attracted elite student-athletes and coaches to Aggieland.

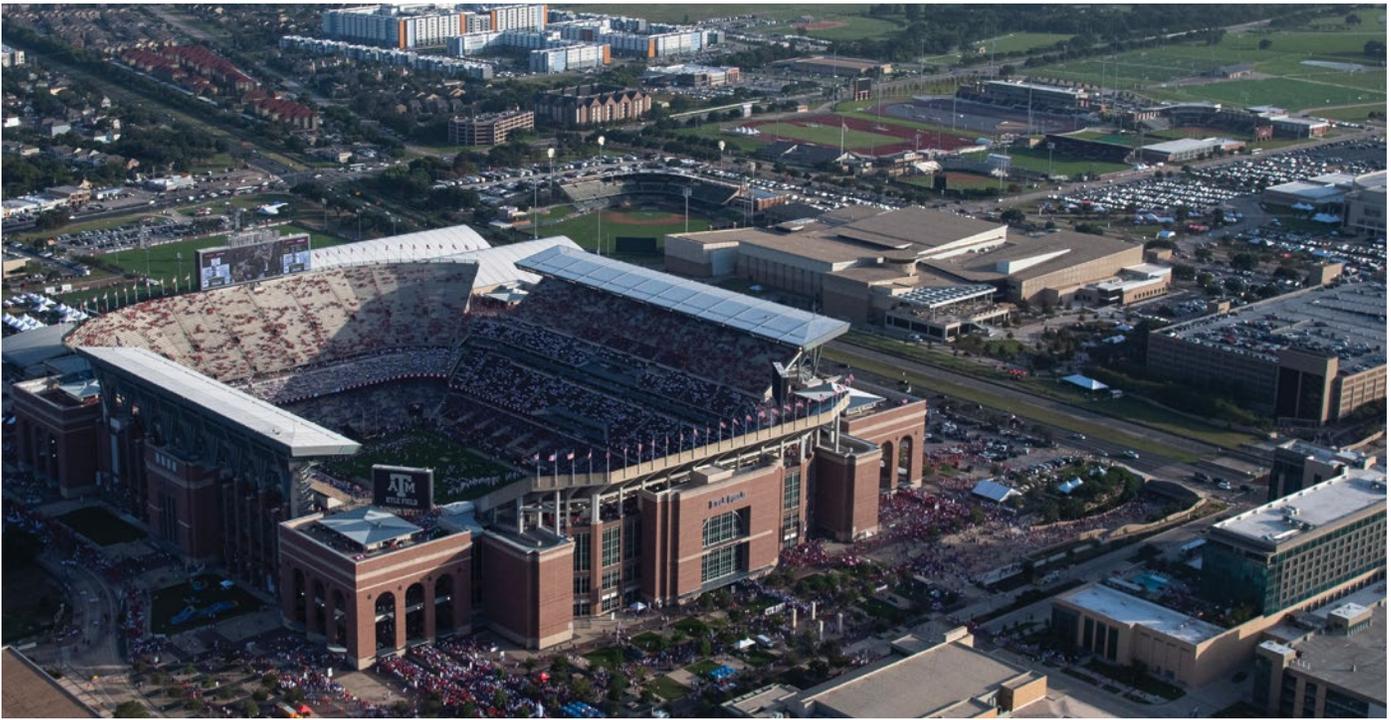
“Although I loved my time in the Big 12 at TCU, the great opportunity and challenge of competing in the SEC West was super attractive,” said A&M Head Baseball Coach Jim Schlossnagle. “It’s the best division of the best conference.”

Schlossnagle knows that willingness to compete in the best league in the nation has to come with the right mindset.

Texas A&M has won the third most SEC championships (28) since joining the league in 2012 and has claimed at least one title every year outside of 2019-20 which was cut short due to COVID-19.

“**ALTHOUGH I LOVED MY TIME IN THE BIG 12 AT TCU, THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE OF COMPETING IN THE SEC WEST WAS SUPER ATTRACTIVE. IT’S THE BEST DIVISION OF THE BEST CONFERENCE.**

— JIM SCHLOSSNAGLE



Thanks to the generous support of 12th Man Foundation donors, Texas A&M Athletics has invested in multiple facilities since joining the SEC including the historic redevelopment of Kyle Field.

“I believe that if you aren’t living your life on the edge you’re taking up too much room,” he said. “So, I was very interested in competing against some of the best coaches and players.”

As for those in-state skeptics who thought A&M might as well lock its trophy case for good? Well, the Aggies have done just fine filling it in an array of sports.

In fact, since 2012, A&M has won the third most SEC titles (28) among the 14 member schools behind only Florida (61) and Arkansas (54).

Leading the way, A&M’s soccer and men’s tennis programs have each claimed six SEC trophies since joining the league.

Both men’s (2016) and women’s (2013, 21) basketball have won SEC titles as well as volleyball (2015) and women’s golf (2015).

Baseball won the tournament championship in 2016 and finished on top of its division in 2022 before advancing to the College World Series semifinals.

The track and field programs have hoisted three national championship trophies under the SEC banner in addition to multiple outdoor conference titles for the women (2013) and men (2014, 17).

Many call the conference’s swimming and diving championships a “mini-Olympics.” The Aggie women won “gold” among SEC competition for four straight years from 2016-19.

Women’s tennis won a share of the conference title in 2013 and dominated the league in the spring of 2022. The Aggies swept through the conference’s regular season and tournament bracket without losing a match.

Indeed, A&M does not feel like a newcomer to the SEC any longer, and it is well-positioned for success in the nation’s best conference for decades more.

“Ten years goes by fast, and our program has evolved,” Bjork said. “We have the right ingredients in place for a program that is built to last, and to provide opportunities through championship athletics.”

Those jabs thrown out by naysayers when A&M entered the SEC a decade ago – they swung and missed with their predictions. The Aggies were right on target with the decision to join the conference. Now the program takes aim at the next 10 years and beyond. 🍀

“
TEN YEARS GOES BY FAST, AND OUR PROGRAM HAS EVOLVED. WE HAVE THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS IN PLACE FOR A PROGRAM THAT IS BUILT TO LAST, AND TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH CHAMPIONSHIP ATHLETICS.

— ROSS BJORK

TROY CLAUNCH '23

Graduate transfer embraces everything about being an Aggie during one historic baseball season

BY WILL JOHNSON '01

ON A COOL NIGHT IN JANUARY at Blue Bell Park, Troy Claunch stood on Olsen Field in full uniform ready for his moment under the lights.

When his cue came, Claunch shouted, “Selfless service – one of this university’s timeless traditions!”

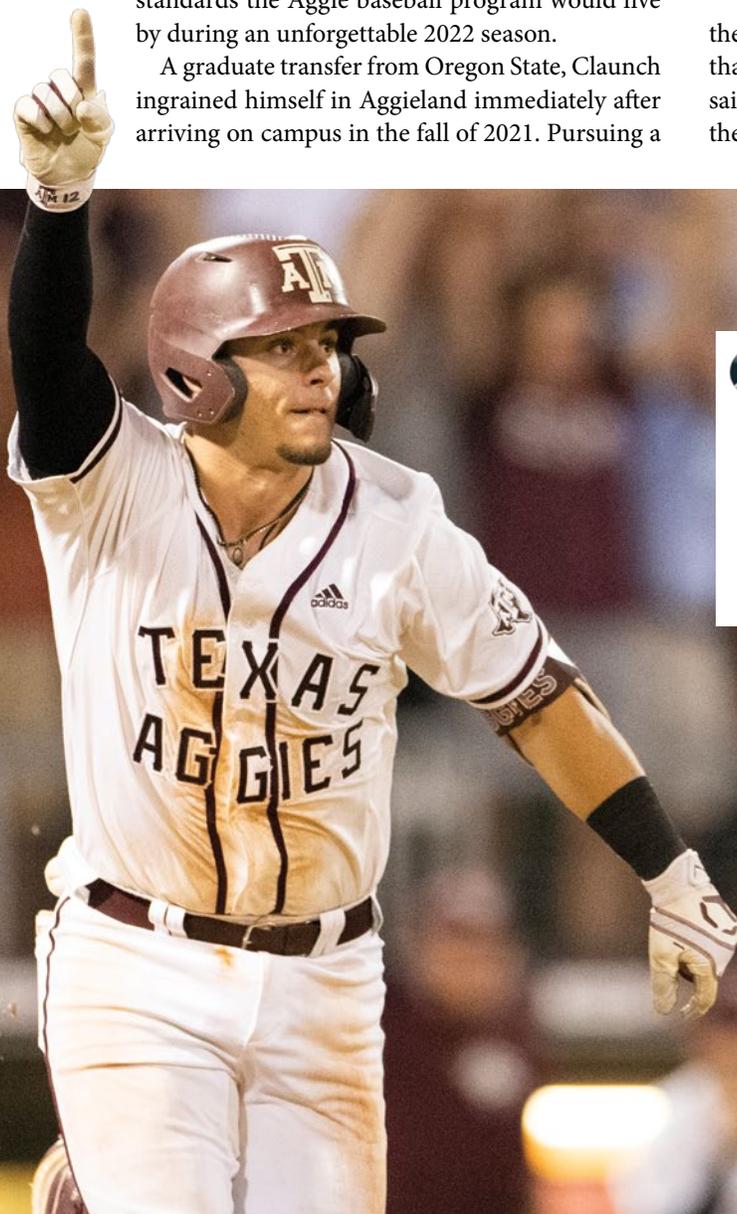
He was belting out a line from a script for a video that would be shown during games throughout the season. The piece, titled “The Corner,” focused on Texas A&M University’s core values – the same standards the Aggie baseball program would live by during an unforgettable 2022 season.

A graduate transfer from Oregon State, Claunch ingrained himself in Aggieland immediately after arriving on campus in the fall of 2021. Pursuing a

Master of Real Estate degree through the Adam C. Sinn '00 Department of Finance while preparing to play his final season of college baseball, Claunch knew exactly what A&M represented and was all in on being an Aggie.

When Jim Schlossnagle decided that a deserving student-athlete would represent the 12th Man on the Aggie baseball team by wearing the No. 12 jersey, it was Claunch who was selected for embodying the ideals of the program and university.

“Our staff talked long about this selection because there are so many great human beings on our team that represent the values of this great university,” said Schlossnagle, A&M’s head baseball coach. “At the end of the day, we felt like Troy stood out. He



troyclaunch_7 A relentless group of misfits determined to prove each other right and everyone else wrong. A team, school, and fan base who rallied together to do the unthinkable. A group of brothers that committed to a culture and set a new standard in Aggieland. An unforgettable year that has forever changed my life. Proud to be a Fightin' Texas Aggie ❤️👍



is truly committed to excellence and selfless service on a daily basis.”

Claunch knew the significance of having the revered number on his back, and he hopes the example he set in one season brings longevity to a tradition started upon his arrival to Aggieland.

“When coach presented me with the opportunity, I was really humbled,” Claunch said. “It’s something I did not take lightly. Every time I put it on, I wanted to leave that jersey better than how I found it.”

When Schlossnagle took the job, much was new within a program that had existed since 1894. There was a new coaching staff, multiple transfers, returnees learning a new system and high school signees stepping into college athletics for the first time. With leaders like Claunch as the backbone, the team came together brilliantly for the 2022 season.

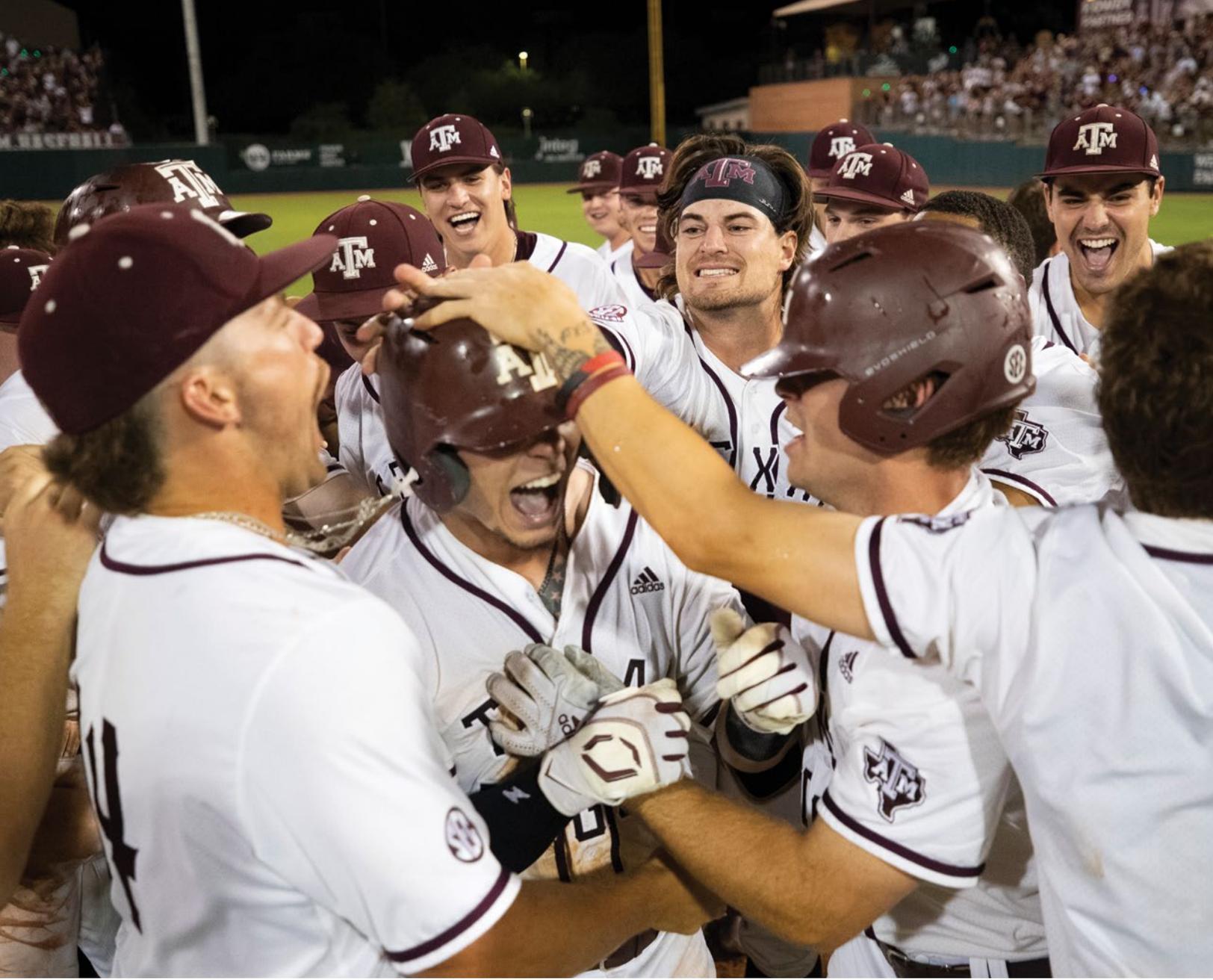
“None of us had really played together in a real game,” Claunch recalled of the start of the year. “You have to have a lot of trust in your teammates. If you have a bad at bat you have to be able to trust the guys behind you to be able to come through. It’s something we were quickly able to do. Just trust each other.”

Trust was a key ingredient to what turned out to be a magical season for the maroon and white. An example came on May 7, when A&M trailed South Carolina 9-0 after four innings at Blue Bell Park. The Aggies mounted a serious charge, and when Jack Moss scored on a Brett Minnich ground out in the 8th inning, they trailed just 10-9. Claunch was coming to the plate with the tying run on third base and the go-ahead run on second.

“Jack scores and I’m walking up to the plate,”

“
**COMING TO TEXAS
A&M HAS BEEN A LIFE-
CHANGING EXPERIENCE.
THIS PLACE HAS MEANT
A LOT TO ME, AND I’M
GOING TO HOLD IT DEARLY
IN MY HEART FOR THE
REST OF MY LIFE.**

— TROY CLAUNCH '23



Claunch recalled. “He just gives me a hug and says, ‘I love you.’ I said, ‘Alright, I’m going to do this for you – I got you.’”

Claunch ripped a base hit scoring two and put the Aggies up 11-10. They finished off the amazing comeback in the bottom of the ninth, winning 13-12.

“Troy is a winning person and player, plain and simple,” Schlossnagle said. “The greatest compliment I can give a player is that he is who I would want my son to grow up to be and who I would want my daughter to marry. That can definitely be said about Troy.”

On June 11, Claunch delivered Olsen Magic again with a bases-loaded single in the bottom of the ninth against one of the best closers in college baseball giving the Aggies a 5-4 walk-off victory

over No. 9 Louisville in the opening game of the College Station Super Regional. That comeback victory and A&M’s win over the Cardinals the next day propelled the program to Omaha for the first time since 2017.

Indeed, Claunch was at the core of one of the finest seasons in A&M baseball history, which included advancing to the semifinal round as one of the final four teams in the College World Series for the first time.

That success combined with his embrace of A&M and its core values represent a remarkable example of making the most of an opportunity.

“Coming to Texas A&M has been a life-changing experience,” Claunch said. “This place has meant a lot to me, and I’m going to hold it dearly in my heart for the rest of my life.” ■

In just one season with Aggie baseball, Claunch made an incredible impact on A&M’s program in the locker room as a teammate, on the field as catcher and at the plate as a hitter with a knack for delivering in clutch moments. Following his unforgettable year in Aggieland, Claunch fulfilled a lifelong dream by signing with the Chicago White Sox.

REBECCA MCCAULLEY

12th Man Foundation's Director of Premium Seating

BY KATELYN BUYS '14



ABOUT REBECCA

- » JOINED THE 12TH MAN FOUNDATION STAFF IN AUGUST 2021
- » 2008 GRADUATE OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
- » SEATTLE SEAHAWKS FAN
- » HAS A SON NAMED CAMERON WITH HER HUSBAND ADAM

Rebecca, her husband Adam and their son Cameron are huge sports fans who proudly support the Aggies and the Seattle Seahawks.

TWO THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-TWO MILES span the roadways between Corvallis, Ore. and College Station, Texas. Fortunately, Rebecca McCaulley and her family, husband Adam and son Cameron, decided to make that journey to join the 12th Man Foundation staff last August.

Rebecca began her career in college athletics fundraising at Oregon State University, her alma mater, in May of 2013. A collision of her passions – people and sports – Rebecca has found a calling that lends itself well to her vivacious and hard-working personality. Those same characteristics led her to apply for an opening at the 12th Man Foundation.

“I was ready to grow professionally,” Rebecca said. “The 12th Man Foundation, being an industry leader, was at the top of my list, but I also was looking for a place that would be comfortable for my family.”

Just prior to her one year anniversary with the organization, Rebecca was promoted from senior manager to director of premium seating. This advancement in her career speaks to Rebecca's work ethic and lead-by-example attitude.

“Rebecca has exuded a true passion for providing high-level service from our first phone call,” said Christina Webster, senior director of development. “Since joining the team, she has worked to preserve processes that have been successful while evaluating and improving others. Her

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I HOPE EVERY FAN THAT ENTERS KYLE FIELD EXITS WITH A SMILE BECAUSE THEIR EXPERIENCE WAS SPECIAL, MEANINGFUL AND MAGICAL.

– REBECCA MCCAULLEY

ability to learn and retain information quickly combined with the positive attitude and passion for her job she brings to work every day has really helped to propel our team to the next level.”

Rebecca's approach toward her professional goals and personal expectations aligns nicely with those of the 12th Man Foundation: respect, accuracy, service and excellence.

“I hope every fan that enters Kyle Field exits with a smile because their experience was special, meaningful and magical,” Rebecca said.

Brian Bishop, vice president of major gifts, calls Rebecca a true professional.

“She is an absolute gem to work with in the office and someone I enjoy visiting with on a personal basis,” Bishop said. “Every time I have needed something for a donor, ticket holder or guest at one of our venues, Rebecca has always responded with a willingness to help and does so with a caring and engaging personality. No task is too big or too small for her.”

Outside of work, Rebecca and her family have enjoyed putting down roots in their new community, exploring all that the State of Texas has to offer and, of course, supporting A&M every chance they get.

“College Station is similar to Corvallis,” said Rebecca, “and since moving here, my family is falling in love with it.”

The 12th Man Foundation is proud to have Rebecca on its team and looks forward to donors and tickets buyers engaging and interacting with her for years to come. ♥





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