

**July 26, 2006**



**An Interview With:**

## **TEXAS A&M COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE**

PETER IRWIN: Coach, welcome. If you would like to introduce your players or make a comment, we'd like to have you join us.

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: Good morning, guys, ladies. How are y'all doing? I appreciate the job you do and the good promotion of this conference you do every year. Certainly means a lot.

Without a doubt we've got a bunch of guys in the back that will come up. Let me introduce you to the group so they can see you well. These three guys are a big part of the reason we're looking forward to the season.

This first guy is from Burnet, Texas, Burn it, Dern it, and not learn it. Stephen McGee, quarterback. Certainly looking forward to his career. He got one start under his belt last year and played some.

The middle guy is Justin Warren, who is one of the leading tacklers in our conference last year and has been a starter since just about the first day he's been at Texas A&M. He's done a great job for us week in and week out. You know you're going to get a steady performance from Justin.

Red Bryant is defensive lineman first are recruiting class red-shirt and started every game since that first year. He's a junior in eligibility and certainly a force in the defensive line and the guy that gives you good performance day in day out. And nobody knows his teammates and speaks more sincerely to his teammates than Red.

So three great guys right there. Thanks, guys, appreciate you coming out.

Those guys, as I mentioned, are the reasons why we're looking forward to the season among others. This football team, you know, it is not an older team. We have 12 scholarship seniors on this football team and we'll play two or

three, maybe four at times on either side of the football.

But it does have some experience, because as I mentioned, Red has played since he's been a freshman and Justin has played since he was a freshman. So we have a lot of guys that have played a lot of ball but are not necessarily in those upper-level classes. These guys are part of our leadership council. They're great leaders on our football team.

The leadership council and the leadership we've had up to this point in time has been as good as ever, really excellent. We hope that they'll continue that and build on it as they go through the season. But we really have a group that I would call bona fide Aggies on that group and love Aggie passion and the fact they play for the Aggies and the tradition and the great things about Texas A&M football that they love so well.

We feel fortunate to be returning an offense that had some success last year. We were one of 12 teams that rushed for over 200 and throw for over 200 yards a game last year, which is the balance we always seek to have. We averaged I think a little over 30 points a game. You gotta score points in this league. There's certainly no doubt about that.

Just in our division alone we probably had two teams score well over 40 points a game. You've got to be able to score in this division. Offensively four out of five starters returned on the offensive line.

They took over from the first day of spring practice and played with confidence and determination and just a totally different demeanor than from the year before, because they had so many games under their belt and so many games together. Cody Wallace, Kirk Elder, Corey Clark and Yemi Babalola. Last year it was three red-shirt sophomores and a red-shirt freshman; this year it's three red-shirt juniors and a red-shirt sophomore. The fifth spot is to be determined. Grant Dickey and Chris Yoder, Mike Shumard, Travis Schneider, there's a lot of guys that could fit into that fifth spot. We'll have to see how that goes.

We feel good about our tightend spot.

Martellus Bennett is returning, Joey Thomas, Amos Gbunblee. Martellus played a lot last year. Every week he'd come in and see me and say, Coach, I'm getting a little bit better. And he was. He got better as the year went on, and he's a guy that I think will be on the field a lot for us this year in our plans.

Joey Thomas is looking as physically good as he ever looked, and so is Amos. That gives us good feelings about how solid that position can be. We've got good running backs. Courtney Lewis has had a good career going into his senior year. Unfortunately Courtney has had a few injuries that kept him from putting up as big a number as he could have put up had he stayed healthy, but he's certainly a guy that's proven he can hit some home runs. And Jorvorskie Lane is back. No doubt Jorvorskie will be our big back as always.

We're excited about Brandon Leone, Keondra Smith. We've got Michael Goodson coming in. I think we're solid there.

The great thing also on offense, we get the return of three receivers. Earvin Taylor, Chad Schroeder and L'Tydrick Riley were all injured last year, and really those losses were significant losses because those three guys are all in our leadership council. They're blue-collar day in, day out, solid practice players. Solid leaders. Lead by example. Say what needs to be said.

You can always count on them to give you a great day's practice, a great game. They're going to play hard. They're not going to make many mistakes and they're going to do what they're supposed to do. And as a quarterback, you can count on them to be at a five-yard run or five yards, whatever it will be. Most of the time they'll be pretty consistent ball players. I think we have a chance to build on that. Our quarterback position, we're certainly excited about with Stephen. This is a guy that we were excited about when we were able to recruit a few years ago.

He's a tremendous competitor. He's a great leader. He's an outstanding person. He's a player that leads our team. He's made a tremendous impact on his style of leadership already at a young age.

I want to guard all my positive comments about him and not put too much pressure on him too quickly because he started one football in college to this point in time. He played a game and a half at the end of last year and certainly did some great things and played a little bit in a few

other games. So he's going to go through some growing pains, obviously.

But he's got some experience to draw from. He's not going to go out there and take his first college snap on September 2nd. And I think that will be really pivotal for him.

Obviously defense is where we've got to make some improvements and we've kind of changed schemes a little bit. We're fairly solid on the defensive line with Red Bryant and Michael Bennett and Cyril Obiozor and Chris Harrington and Bryce Reed and a number of guys I could mention in there that have played a lot of football to this point in time.

Bryce Reed is one senior up there in front that we have and all of them have played, but they've played as younger players.

Justin, Mark Dodge who came in as a junior college guy went through spring practice and made quite a impact. Misi Tupe, Nurahda Manning, Anthony Lewis, Matt Featherston will be our linebackers for the most part. We should get back Japhus Brown in the secondary, who hurt his knee last year. That hurt us a little bit losing him because he started at as a red-shirt freshman and all our secondary was young last year. And certainly had to learn some days trial by fire without a doubt.

But I think a year's experience and some changes in the secondary that I think will help them a good bit gives us a chance to improve on that side of the ball. And that's important for the success of our football team.

It's a challenge to play defense in this league. We've got some fine offensive teams, like we said. Kicking game-wise, Justin Brantly is back and, you know, he was the leading freshman punter in the nation last year. Richie Bean and Layne Neumann are certainly returners that will compete for Todd Pegram's spot now that he's gone and you all know that Matt Szymanski has decided to enroll early and he brings in a tremendous presence and leg; 61-yard field goal last year in the playoffs. Has handled punts, kickoffs and PAT field goals. And we're excited about him and the impact that he could make. He's a very mature young man, obviously, that certainly can make a difference for you as a kicker.

Again, he'll be a freshman, but he's pretty mature. He kicked off the ground last year in high school, so he's been working very hard to prepare himself for this opportunity.

12-game schedules this year. You know everybody has their own take on all of this, but my concern, 11 games in a row before we get an open date before we play our final game, I think that's always a challenge. But now with 11 straight and no open date early, it will be a challenge to get your team ready to play physically, emotionally and mentally every week. Especially with playing in this conference and what it takes to play at such a high level every week.

I think managing our players in the heat of South Texas and getting them ready to play is certainly going to be pivotal as we go through this season and we certainly made some adjustments as we approached all this.

So we've got a tough November ahead of us. Oklahoma, Nebraska, Texas at the end of the season. So that will be three tough games and three exciting games at the end of the season for us to take on. So questions?

**Q. Can you give an example you talked about McGee's tremendous impact as a young leader, what does that mean?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: Well, I don't know if I've ever had a red-shirt sophomore kind of take over the leadership that he has. I mean, he's made his impact across the board with our football team. I'll give you an example. One day -- this is a story about Justin and Stephen. One day last spring we were about two-thirds of the way through spring, I'm talking to Stephen and telling him he's doing a good job of leading and especially the offense, but to lead the whole team. He said, I don't know what I can do to lead the defense other than make them mad. I said, If you gotta do that, you gotta do that.

And so later that day when quarterbacks wore black shirts, so Stephen breaks a run comes down the line, and Justin comes over to tag off like he's supposed to do with the quarterback and Stephen lowers his shoulder and knocks Justin down. Justin jumps up and I think he knocked Stephen down. So from then they got into a little bit of a scuffle, but it was all in good feelings. I think the team responded well to it and, you know, got everybody a little bit fired up. And that was his way of sending his message to compete hard.

And Justin, he didn't like it when he came through there and knocked him down, but he got up and did what he needed to do. They got back in the huddle and played more inspired plays and

that's the kind of impact he's made on our football team.

**Q. Could you tell us a little bit about Gary Darnell and what went into your decision to bring him on board?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: Well, Gary is somebody I deeply respect and admire. I've known for a long time. We did a lot of research and one thing I found, there were 80,000 applicants for our job. All those people sitting in Kyle Field know defense every Saturday.

But he emerged as the guy, and I have admired him because he's taken a little and done a lot. He's taken a lot and done a lot. And he's always got a great positive attitude. He's played a number of different schemes. I felt like what he was doing was what we needed to do. Have tremendous trust in Gary. I think he's made -- he's been at great programs, he's got a grade pedigree. He's been a head coach. There were so many up sides to him in our position, and especially for our program.

**Q. What scheme are you talking about?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: 4-2-5, which is not a big adjustment from 4-3. You know, with all the one-match sets that you'll face today, you're actually playing with nickel personnel in the game most of the time anyway. So it was like we were starting to play more snaps in a season with five DBs than we were with three linebackers, whether you start one way and work the other way it works out very similar. And that was part of the reason was that the adjustments for our defense wouldn't be tremendous other than we would be able to do more things in the secondary, and I thought that was pivotal for our improvement there.

**Q. Along those lines, the fact that Bill Clay had coordinated that type of defense, Oklahoma is not a big factor in that filling in that spot?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: It was. I feel like I got two great coaches right there. Bill has been a defensive coach for a long time. He's been a defensive coordinator. I feel I got two guys that can coordinate the defense. They've got a great relationship. Bill Clay is just a ball coach now. That's the only way to describe it. He's just a ball coach. And I like that about him and players like that about him, and he coaches with a very

upbeat tempo and a great enthusiasm. And with his knowledge of that defense, it's been really fun and interesting to sit in defensive meetings and hear the dialog of the experience that's gone on between those guys.

**Q. Coach, in terms of changing schedule the way that it will be, without that off week, how are you anticipating the initial fact that's going to have on your players not just with regard to their on field football responsibilities but just looking at their -- you know, their entire life, everything that they need to do?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: Well, I think if you ask the guys, they like to play the games. I don't think the student athlete committees were against a 12th game. They probably don't enjoy the preparation as much to play the game. And that's the point where you're going to have a week of mental and physical training a little bit more difficult than you would in an open week. And as a result of that, I've altered some practices in August and I've altered some approach to the season going forward in trying to make sure we are ready to play but still fresh to play. Because in this league playing back to back every week without an open date to get away from it for a few days is always a challenge. And what we're going to have to be focused and ready for that, because we do not get a week off until right before our last football game.

**Q. Matt Szymanski, your young kicker, did you try to dissuade him coming to college in any way since that is such a big job, skipping his senior year?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: I didn't try to talk him out of it. I tried to make sure that he was prepared to do this. You know even the guys today that lead and come in in January, I still think that they have to be ready to make this kind of move maturity-wise, emotionally-wise, and physically, obviously, but most of them physically are ready. And I think Matt is ready. Matt is a very intelligent young man. He's a very focused young man, very confident.

It's pretty clear in listening to him that he was ready to do this. His family felt like he was ready to do it. Matt had approached his family about doing this. So I didn't try to talk him out of it. I just wanted to make sure he weighed all the issues before he made a pretty tough decision, I

think, pretty in depth decision about leaving a year early. We don't hear that much in high school. I only know of one other person that I can think of a quarterback that went to Southern Cal that did it like that.

I think Matt will do fine. And I think the fact that he's instead of stopping at A&M consolidated, he's going to drive a few more blocks to the Kyle Field and the Bright Complex. It's probably going to be an A for him that will help because he has a lot of support.

**Q. Was he in the mix from the beginning?**

COACH DENNIS FRANCHIONE: I think you have to put him in the mix. Everybody is in the mix right from the beginning. He kicked a 60-yard field goal. He was in our kicking camp after his sophomore year there was no doubt then that he would be an exceptional kicker. So you have to consider him as a factor, I think.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you very much, Coach. We wish you the best for the season.

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