



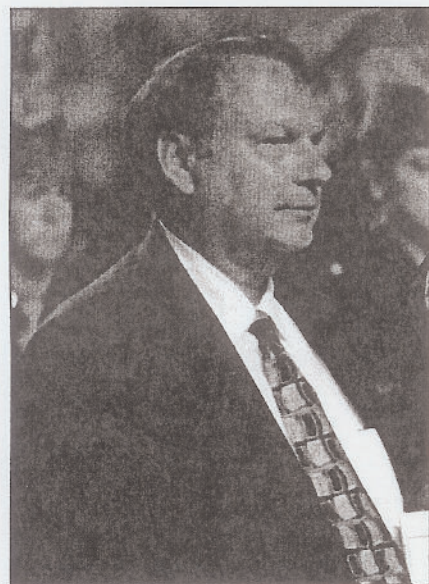
RUSTY BURSON

The national champions are coming to College Station on Oct. 10. In their honor, Texas A&M officials are going to great lengths to make sure it is one of the most memorable, magnificent and glorious days the champs have ever experienced.

No, not Nebraska. But it does seem fitting that the Cornhuskers — college football's best team of the decade — will be in town the day the Aggies honor their best team of the century.

Fifty-nine years after the Aggies won it all in 1939, Texas A&M officials will present a radiant national championship ring to each living member of that team and to family members of deceased players and coaches.

The weekend tribute will include an awards ceremony, a pregame meal at the Letterman's Club and a halftime introduction to a sold-out Kyle Field. As part of the halftime ceremony, the Aggie Band will spell



Wally Groff made sure the '39 team would be honored properly.

RING OF HONOR

1939 national champions to find closure with special ceremony during halftime of the Nebraska game

out "1939 CHAMPS" as the players are introduced.

"It's going to be a very, very emotional moment for all of us," said 1939 team member Howard Shelton. "I get kind of emotional just thinking about it now. I believe (the presentation of the ring) is going to be the culmination of a great life for a lot of us.

"That team was made up of so many extraordinary individuals. It was a team of incredible integrity and character. It was a very special group."

Special, indeed. The '39 Aggies went 11-0, including their 14-13 victory over Tulane in the 1940 Sugar Bowl. That team still holds the all-time NCAA record for total defense, allowing an amazingly low 76.3 yards per game. A&M also finished No. 1 nationally in rushing defense (41.5 yards per game) and scoring defense (1.8 points per contest), as the Aggies recorded six shutouts and allowed only Tulane to score in double figures.

Offensively, the Aggies were led by one of the premier running backs in the country. The legendary Jarrin' John Kimbrough finished fifth in the Heisman Trophy balloting in 1939 and second in '40.

More than statistics or individual accomplishments, however, that A&M team was defined primarily by its character, class and chemistry. For example:

- Virtually every member of the squad eventually served in the Allied Forces' victory in World War II, with many of the players earning prestigious military honors for their courage in battle.

- Of the 54 players on that team, only two did not receive their college degree.

- And of the 51 players who eventually married, only two marriages ended in divorce.

"I'm biased, of course, because I was a part of that team," said the 80-year-old Shelton, who was a reserve center behind Tommie Vaughn on the '39 squad. "But I can't imagine assembling a better group of people. When you look at what the guys on this team accomplished after Texas A&M, it's pretty amazing. There are

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— Howard Shelton

a lot of great success stories in this group."

Without a doubt, this group orchestrated the greatest success story in Texas A&M's football history, as it produced the school's lone national title. Nowadays, of course, national championship teams are honored with a variety of awards, including a trip to the White House and gaudy rings for all the players, coaches and support staff.

But that was certainly not the case in 1939. In fact, Shelton says the A&M players barely even raised an eyebrow at the term "national champion."

"We didn't really know what it meant," Shelton said. "It certainly wasn't a big deal. We each got a little gold football from the Sugar Bowl, and when we got back to the hotel after the game, people handed us bottles of champagne while we were still in our uniforms. But that was about the extent of it.

"We never even thought about

anybody giving us national championship rings."

More than a half-century later, however, commemorative rings crossed Shelton's mind. And after initially being convinced by several former teammates not to pursue the issue, he approached Willard Clark Jr., whose father played with Shelton in 1939. Clark, a representative of Balfour, thought it was a great idea and later designed a ring similar to those given to current national title teams.

Meanwhile, Shelton called A&M athletic director Wally Groff about the subject. Groff, who was surprised that rings had not been awarded to the '39 team, was extremely supportive of the idea. But Groff said university funds could not be used to pay for the rings, which would cost about \$17,000 to supply one for every player, coach and manager.

Groff's support, however, was enough to get the ball rolling. Shelton organized a committee and made a few phone calls, including one to Robert Walker, vice president of development at A&M.

"Robert called me back a few days later and said he had discussed the idea with the president of the university, Dr. Ray Bowen," Shelton said. "And Robert told me that Dr. Bowen thought so much of the idea that he personally gave \$5,000 for the cause. What an incredible start that was.

"All along, I knew that we could buy the rings ourselves. But it would mean so much more to us if they were a gift. And Dr. Bowen's (contribution) was great news."

More great news would soon follow. In fact, by the time Shelton's committee met early last April, Groff opened the meeting by announcing that all the necessary funds had already been raised. In addition to Dr. Bowen's donation, former 12th Man Foundation president Gabe Anderson and former A&M student John Blocker of Houston contributed the rest of the money necessary to purchase the rings.

Not long after the committee meeting, Shelton learned that the Letterman's Association had raised enough money to pay for the luncheon.

"The support from the university has been absolutely incredible," Shelton said. "It makes you proud to be an Aggie. And the fact that it will all take place at the Nebraska game — the biggest game of the year —

this project than what we're getting from Wally Groff," Shelton continued. "He has just been fantastic. He even (rescheduled) one of the women's conference volleyball games so that we could have the luncheon at G. Rollie White Coliseum. In my opinion, Wally Groff is way, way up there."

Groff has indeed gone above and beyond the call of duty in making sure this is a first-class tribute. He has made arrangements for every living player and the families of deceased players and coaches to receive two complimentary tickets to one of the most attractive games in Kyle Field history. He has arranged a parking shuttle for the 1939 team, and he has made it possible for the honorees to buy extra seats so that all of their family members may attend.

And rest assured, plenty of family and friends will attend. As of late July, 22 of the 26 living players had made reservations to attend. Some are bringing carloads of family members. Other are bringing truckloads. Jim Sterling, for example, is bringing 22 people with him. Shelton expects that the luncheon will attract at least 400 people.

"The response from the players and family members has been absolutely incredible," Shelton said.

"Everybody is so excited about this event. And I'm excited about what it can do for the university.

"I hope this gets 'national championship talk' circulating throughout the campus. I hope it serves as an inspiration to the current team. It's going to be special no matter what. But it would really be something to beat (the defending national champions) on that day. That would truly make for a magical day."

And that would be a truly fitting way to honor the magical Texas Aggies of 1939. ■

Send your flashback comments or suggestions to Rusty Burson's e-mail address at: burson@airmail.net.



A second Aggie Ring for the 1939 national champs.

makes it even more special."

Originally, Shelton had envisioned the halftime ceremony taking place at the Missouri game, because he figured the Tigers would not bring their band. He even suggested that idea to Groff.

Said Shelton: "Wally seemed pretty excited about the Missouri game, but he said, 'That Nebraska just called me to say they will not let us bring our band (to Lincoln in 1999). We've always taken our band to conference games. So, they just won't bring their band to Kyle Field. We'll have the ceremony at the Nebraska game.'

"Isn't that something? We could not have had any greater support for