

## Tech, A&M to face off Saturday in Top 25 matchup

Written by Press-Tribune Staff

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In a game that was supposed to open the college football season, the undefeated Louisiana Tech Bulldogs will host one-loss Texas A&M Saturday night at Independence Stadium.

The game between the reigning Western Athletic Conference champions and the new Southeastern Conference member was set for Thursday, Aug. 30, but was rescheduled due to safety concerns over the remnants of Hurricane Isaac moving through the area.

Now, the game has garnered a little more flavor as Tech is off to a rousing start having already scalped two major conference opponents in the Big Ten's Illinois and ACC's Virginia. More impressive, both were on the road.

The game has also become a battle of Top 25 teams. Tech (5-0) cracked the AP Top 25 this week at No. 23. It's only the second time Tech has ever been ranked in the AP poll. The first time was in 1999.

The Bulldogs are ranked No. 24 in the USA Today Coaches' Poll, the first time Tech has ever been ranked in that poll.

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Texas A&M (4-1) has reeled off four straight victories since a season-opening loss to a Florida team that has vaulted to No. 4 in the nation. The Aggies are ranked No. 23 in the AP poll and No. 21 in the coaches' poll.

This rescheduled game, moved to the teams' only open dates, is being billed as a neutral site game. However, Shreveport-Bossier's close proximity to Tech's home in Ruston makes it anything but.

Before the game was postponed, the Bulldogs came to Independence Stadium for a practice.

"We are excited to be in Shreveport," said Tech head coach Sonny Dykes at the initial game press conference. "I think (practicing in Shreveport) is a bit of an advantage, just getting comfortable with the surroundings. I think it's one of those things that gives you a comfort level coming in, but once the game starts, those type of things just go away."

Dykes said there is a difference between preparing for the Aggies now than in the preseason.

"When you play against a new coaching staff you do not know what direction the offense is going to take, defense is going to take or really special teams, so we have an idea now of what they are going to do with all those," he said. "I think that is a positive for us."

"I think the negative is we are not catching them early. They are playing well and executing well."

Even with a home field advantage away from Joe Aillet stadium, Dykes is wary of the talent that the former Big 12 powerhouse has.

"When you play a team like Texas A&M, it's a little different animal. They have obviously been

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in the Big 12 and made the move to the SEC. They train in a little bit different facility than we do, have meetings in a little different facility, eat in a different dining room, recruit a different type of player than we do in a lot of ways," he said.

Still, he is not down on Tech's ability to match up with the Aggies. Especially since Tech only lost in overtime by six points to the SEC's Mississippi State and beat Ole Miss in Oxford, Miss.. last season.

"I like our team. We're not going to match up on paper against many SEC teams. I don't think we did last year against Mississippi State and probably didn't on paper against Ole Miss last year. The thing that's good for us is, the game is not played on paper. It's played out here in this stadium," said Dykes.

"We're going to have to play well to have a chance. There's no doubt about it. Our guys have a lot of confidence and we feel like we're in a good spot."

Texas A&M is not only adapting to a new conference, but a new system under head coach Kevin Sumlin.

Sumlin's high-powered offense led the Houston Cougars to a school-record 12 wins in 2011, a 35-17 overall record at UH, and three bowl games in four years.

One of those wins was against Louisiana Tech. The Cougars rallied from a four-touchdown deficit to win 35-34.

"I see a better team," Sumlin said. "I'm not surprised at them being ranked. We played them last season as a conference champion. They lost three or four very close games last year to some ranked teams. They were a series away from beating TCU in a bowl game. They are not going to be intimidated by us one bit and they shouldn't be."

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After the tough loss to SEC Eastern Division contender Florida in their opening game, the Aggies have taken to Sumlin's system, highlighted by their 58-10 dismantling of Arkansas.

Freshman quarterback Johnny Manziel has quickly become a playmaker. Manziel has rushed for 495 yards and passed for 1,285. He's accounted for 18 touchdowns.

"Their quarterback play has been really good," Dykes said. "He is kind of a unique player with talent. He is very, very difficult to contain."

He is somebody that if you rush him he makes more plays, but if you let him sit back there and have all day then he will pick you apart throwing the football. So, it is kind of a unique challenge."

Ultimately, Dykes and his coaching staff are going to focus on their players and what they can do.

"We can't control A&M. We're in control of ourselves, the way we play, prepare and the way we execute. That's really what it's going to come down to for us. How well do we prepare and how well do we go out and execute the game plan and take care of the ball on offense and create turnovers on defense, and all the little cliché things that are clichés because they are true."