



# THE IMMOVABLE OBJECT

## TEXAS' 1983 DEFENSE

by Adam Jones

Twenty-five years ago, the 1983 Longhorns played defense like no one had ever seen before . . . and maybe since.

*Jordan-Hare Stadium, Auburn, Alabama, September 17, 1983*

*Randy Campbell was leading a charmed life. The quarterback for the fifth-ranked Auburn Tigers trotted onto Jordan-Hare's sacred turf in front of over 70,000 screaming sons and daughters of the South, all hell-bent on exhorting their Tigers to victory. Campbell obliged them, quickly firing a 23-yard completion to put the Texas defense on its heels. Little did he know that he and his offensive teammates had—on the second play from scrimmage—recorded their lone highlight of the next two hours . . .*

David McWilliams liked what he saw. Truth be told, there wasn't much McWilliams hadn't seen in his career. The Longhorn defensive coordinator was a pure football man, dating from his days as an undersized center on Darrell Royal's 1963 national championship squad. He knew every small town in Texas, every coach, every player, every way anyone had ever devised to stop an opposing offense. In the summer of 1983, McWilliams knew he had something special on defense. Texas returned nine starters, eight of them seniors who bred a contagious work ethic. Guys who always "handled their business," McWilliams liked to say. The coach knew from long experience that it doesn't much matter how smart the coach is; what matters is how much the players on the field can adjust to the events that unfold around them. This was the smartest and most fundamentally sound crew he had coached.

Oh, and they were immensely talented, ferocious, and would fight at the drop of a hat.

The Texas 11 rarely moved out of their basic set: "26 tim cover one banjo"—to the layman a standard 4-3 with tackles on guards, the middle linebacker choosing his gap and cornerbacks responsible for the sidelines, with safety help in the seams. The Longhorns didn't blitz much, only occasionally went nickel and never, under any circumstances, played prevent. The personnel afforded McWilliams a Gulf of Mexico-sized margin for error.

It started with four NFL-caliber linemen. The tackles were physical marvels. John Haines played one inside spot and, at six-foot-six, was a nightmare for centers and guards to contain. Good luck to any quarterback trying to find a decent passing lane when Haines came up the middle. His partner was Tony DeGrate, one of the most gifted players in Texas' storied history. (It seemed that everything ever written

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*Jerry Gray (#25) was an All-American for the Longhorns before being drafted in the first round by the Los Angeles Rams.*

about DeGrate during his career included mention that, at six-four and 280 pounds, he could dunk a basketball.) He was devastating as a junior and even more dominant the next season, when he would win the 1984 Lombardi Award.

One offensive teammate, wide receiver Russell Hays, described strong-side end Eric Holle as “the most brutal physical individual I had the displeasure of meeting.” He meant this as a compliment. Holle lived up to it, making play after play in crucial situations. His counterpart was the speedy Ed Williams, who led the team in sacks. The team benefited from a number of other quality linemen who could be plugged in anywhere: Ray Woodard, Mike Buchanan, James McKinney, Bill Heathcock, and Rocky Reid. Texas almost always managed an aggressive pass rush from just the front four (proving to modern day Longhorn fans that this is indeed possible in college football).

Holle, who had an amazing 42 quarterback pressures on the year, described practice as “all-out war.” Almost every day featured one-on-ones between defensive and offensive linemen, most of whom would also end up in NFL training camps. It was not uncommon for

these drills to deteriorate into shouting matches—not between teammates, but between coaches, as defensive line mentor Mike Parker and his opposite number Leon Manley never wanted the other side to feel like it had the upper hand.

Not that they needed it, but the front four could rely on a nasty group of backers behind them. June James and Ty Allert split the weakside duties. James was built of granite and perhaps the fastest linebacker Texas fans would see until Derrick Johnson showed up almost twenty years later. Allert, a sophomore, was one of the only defensive underclassmen to receive significant action in 1983; it was obvious to most that he was the next great one at Texas. The strong side was quietly manned by Mark Lang. He rarely spoke, never celebrated a play on the field, and was not particularly celebrated off of it. Lang didn’t do much, other than record 120 tackles to lead the team the previous season. Apparently this went unnoticed by anyone who selected all-conference teams, which irritated Head Coach Fred Akers and he didn’t mind saying so.

All-American Jeff Leiding proudly wore 60 and patrolled the middle. He was a six-four, 240-pound senior bundle of aggression and great instincts, but missed half of the previous season with a knee injury and was nicked up during the beginning of 1983. This might have posed a problem for some teams. For David McWilliams, it meant only that Leiding was temporarily spelled by a six-two, 245-pound junior bundle of aggression and great instincts named Tony Edwards.

In modern parlance, I believe the term used to describe this talent level is “sick.” And we are not even to the secondary.

The University of Texas has long been a pipeline of defensive backs to the NFL. From Bill Bradley to Aaron Ross, one would be hard-pressed to identify many Texas squads lacking in a top flight corner or safety and usually there were a handful on campus. The back four in 1983 staked a legitimate claim to being the best unit ever. Jerry Gray was the finest free safety in college football, a consensus All-American in both 1983 and 1984 who was denied the Thorpe Award only because it didn’t exist

until 1986. Everyone knew that Gray was special the day he stepped on the practice field, a born leader completely unintimidated by the star power surrounding him. The best cover corner in the nation was Mossy Cade, another first-team All-American. Therefore, half of the secondary literally could not have been any better. To attack the Longhorns' "weakness" an opposing offense could go after the strong safety combination of Craig Curry and Richard Peavy, both smart and aggressive players with NFL talent (Peavy's career was derailed by injuries), or you could pick on poor Fred Acorn, the undersized cornerback with blazing speed who was merely first-team all-conference and a third-round NFL draft pick.

These, then, were the options afforded an opposing offensive coordinator. You could devise a game plan to grind out a running game against sometimes unblockable interior defenders. You could go wide against linebackers well-versed at option football and backed by sure-tackling safeties. You could pass the ball, assuming that, in the roughly two seconds your quarterback might have, a receiver would break free against the likes of Mossy Cade.

Teams can succeed with disciplined defensive players who overcome lack of talent with chemistry and sound decision making. Teams also succeed with immensely talented and fast defensive players who have the ability to overcome mistakes borne of either undisciplined or reckless play. Rarely does a coach get the best of both worlds. In the summer of 1983, David McWilliams realized he had everything he could possibly ask for among the eleven charges under his command.

The Auburn Tigers found this out the hard way.

### LIONEL AND BO... AND NOWHERE TO GO

The voters of the Associated Press legitimately reasoned that Auburn belonged in their top five. The Tigers were one of the SEC favorites behind a stout defense and a running game keyed by Lionel James and a precocious sophomore named Bo Jackson, who could not only run with speed and power, but also hit prodigious home runs for the varsity baseball squad and leap tall buildings in a single bound. By the time Texas showed up, the Tigers already had a game under their belts, easily handling Southern Mississippi as James ran for 170 yards.

If Auburn could muster any sort of passing game, the Longhorns might be that much more hesitant against the James/Jackson option game out of the wishbone. But Campbell's first completion was no harbinger of any success moving the ball. Haines and DeGrate completely

dominated the line of scrimmage, holding the Auburn backs to two- and three-yard gains. Texas had fashioned a 10-0 lead before Campbell had his next chance to get Auburn moving.

From the Auburn 44, Campbell went play-action out of the option. Drifting back, he found his tight end running free through the Texas secondary. As the ball took flight, Jerry Gray, who had bitten badly on the fake, served notice that he would be the next great Texas defensive back. Gray got on his horse and closed. With the Auburn receiver still two steps ahead, Gray went airborne. He one-handed the ball, picking it cleanly and crashing to the turf at the Texas ten. Three plays later, Longhorn QB Rick McIvor went 80 yards to Kelvin Epps for a 17-0 Texas lead.

Auburn did not cross mid-field in the first half. Campbell's initial 23-yard completion was almost half of their offense, the rest a paltry 28 rushing yards they needed 12 attempts to pick up. In the second half, Texas pushed the lead to 20-0. A late Auburn touchdown made the final 20-7 and the Longhorns were on their way to the airport.

Texas had completely stymied the fifth-best team in college football, a squad that boasted one of the greatest running backs the game would ever see. Bo Jackson totaled 35 yards for the evening, Lionel James added 33. Though no one knew it at the time, the result was not an early season aberration. Auburn deserved their ranking; after the Texas game, the Tigers would win 11 straight, four of them over teams in the top 10.

### MARCUS DUPREE'S FAREWELL AND THE END OF A SOUTHERN MONEY STRING

The Auburn win elevated Texas to second in the AP, where they would remain for the rest of the season, looking up at the Nebraska Cornhuskers. The Saturday after Auburn, Texas turned in a lackadaisical offensive performance against North Texas, actually trailing 6-2 at halftime with an Ed Williams sack in the end zone accounting for the only Longhorn points. The offense got cracking in the second half for a 26-6 win, but their struggles couldn't just be explained away by a typical letdown against the Mean Green. Texas celebrated their annual threshing of Rice the next week, which was significant only because it preceded the Oklahoma game.

On October 8th, Texas spilled out of the famous tunnel and onto the aging Cotton Bowl turf to face 8th ranked Oklahoma. The Sooners had upset Texas