



Photo: Texas A&M Athletics

# Relationship Builder

**Texas A&M head coach Kevin Sumlin has been building relationships his entire career, with head coaches, assistant coaches, strength coaches and student-athletes. That experience at all levels of the game has helped him become one of the top coaches in college football.**

*By Paul Markgraff*

It could be said that the career path leading Kevin Sumlin to the offensive promised land that is Texas A&M football started in Indiana at Purdue University. Ironically, Sumlin wasn't an offensive-minded player. Rather, he was a playmaker at linebacker with the Boilermakers.

He was a member of the 1984 Peach Bowl team and finished in the top 10 in total tackles (375) and in the top 20 in solo tackles (191 solo, 184 assisted). He led the team in tackles his freshman season (1983) with 91 total tackles (50 solo and 41 assisted).

"Playing defense gives you a sense of the complete game," says Sumlin. "It allows you to recognize defenses. It gives you a sense of what one side can do to the other. It gives you a better feel for the game on both sides of the ball. That can really help you."

"Lots of people don't realize there are many successful coaches who haven't always been offensive or defensive. Tony Dungy was a quarterback in college before he moved to defensive back. Mike Price and Joe Tiller had an influence on me from that standpoint, especially as I was starting out in coaching."

Price and Tiller are common threads that run through Sumlin's early career, specifically as Sumlin served in various coaching positions at Washington State, Wyoming and Purdue.

At Washington State under Price, Sumlin was named head coach of the Junior Varsity squad. They ran a lot of one-back, empty sets. They were installing what we all today call the spread offense.

"We had a quarterback by the name of Drew Bledsoe at the time," Sumlin says, laughing. "We played junior colleges and did some travelling. He actually played a couple of junior varsity games to get ready to eventually start in the real game."

Tiller left Washington State for Wyoming and Sumlin followed, becoming Tiller's wide receivers coach before moving on to Purdue.

At Purdue, Sumlin and then-offensive coordinator Jim Chaney helped Tiller implement the spread offense, which was fairly uncommon at that point. In 2001, with the help of Drew Brees at quarterback, Purdue won its first Rose Bowl in three decades.

Sumlin continued to indulge his offensive sweet tooth. He left Purdue for Texas A&M, then Oklahoma, where he served under head coaches R.C. Slocum and Bob Stoops, respectively, coaching a variety of positions including wide receivers, tight ends and special teams, ultimately landing in the position of offensive coordinator at both universities. In his final year with the Sooners, his offense averaged 44 points per game, and was one of the best in the country.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPETITION



Source: [TrackingFootball.com](http://TrackingFootball.com)

A May 2 tweet from Texas A&M head coach Kevin Sumlin caught the attention of many within the social media world. Retweeted 118 times, it shows that 93 percent of players drafted during rounds 1-3 of the 2016 NFL Draft played multiple sports in high school.

Only 7 of 98 players taken during the first three rounds of the draft played only football in high school.

It begs the question. Are multiple-sport athletes more capable of excelling in the game of football than athletes who specialize in football? There is data on both sides of the argument, but for Sumlin, there is no controversy.

“That Twitter post stunned a lot of people,” he says. “They look at elite athletes and particularly the guys taken early in the draft. Look at the number of guys who are multi-sport athletes. It says something. We encourage it. Any type of competition is healthy for you with regard to how you are training. Different types of competitions keep you mentally fresh, particularly in younger guys. It’s a difficult topic in this age of specialization. I’ve got four children myself, and they can burn out if they’re doing one sport year round from an early age.”

Sumlin’s first head coaching job at the University of Houston saw his team go nearly undefeated by his third season. In 2012, Sumlin took the head job at Texas A&M and led the Aggies to an 11-2 record in the SEC (the team’s first year in the conference) and wins over then-No. 1 Alabama and No. 11 Oklahoma in the Cotton Bowl. The Aggies led the SEC that season in total offense, total scoring offense, total rushing yards, and led the nation in third-down conversion percentage.

Sumlin and his Aggies would become the first SEC team in history to generate more than 7,000 yards in total offense during a single season.

Not too shabby for a linebacker from Purdue.

### The Right Stuff

Winning football games, as any coach can attest, doesn’t only come down to implementing the proper scheme. It’s extremely important to find the right players for the job, and that starts with recruiting. Sumlin looks for a variety of player types, both from a physical and personal standpoint.

“It’s just like anything; you want guys from all walks of life,” says Sumlin. “We’ve got a lot of success stories from guys who didn’t come from that typical background. We’ve got players who haven’t had the resources in high school that many others do. Maybe they haven’t had a positive role model, maybe no father, maybe they’re from single parent homes. But it’s the same with those student-athletes as it is with anyone else. We sit down with them and start to develop a relationship. It becomes a relationship about respect and a player’s personal drive. We find out what he really wants from life.”

At Texas A&M, they have the resources to help young men who may be a little academically behind, which means they’re not recruiting straight-A students in many cases.

“But what we have been able to do is develop a system and a program where a young man can come in, we can give him the tools necessary from a time-management, academic and support standpoint, and it not only keeps him eligible, but it allows him to graduate,” says Sumlin. “Our graduation rates for football are the highest they’ve been since we’ve kept records here at Texas A&M. That means a lot to me and it means a lot to us as a program.”

It also means a lot to the student-athletes, the vast majority of whom don’t end up on the dais nominated for the Heisman Trophy or running 40s at the combine. Most guys who come through the football program at Texas A&M go on to become husbands and fathers, and Sumlin loves being a part of those players’ lives.

“We’re able to create a bigger picture for a young man than just football,” he says “If a guy comes to Texas A&M and does the things we ask, not only will he be successful on the field, but he’ll be successful in the classroom, and he’ll earn a valuable degree as well.

“It’s really the reason that we do this and the reason I got involved in coaching. Sure, there’s a lot of publicity at draft time, but the majority of guys aren’t going to be in New York or Chicago. I enjoy helping guys make the transition from young adulthood into adulthood. From 17 or 18 years old to sometimes 22 or 23 years old, it’s a substantial period in a young man’s life. There is a lot that changes for them, and there’s a lot we can do to effect that change, helping



## CHOOSING YOUR QUARTERBACK

At first blush, many coaches may not truly understand the quality of quarterback that Texas A&M head coach Kevin Sumlin has had the opportunity to work with during his career. Names like Drew Bledsoe, Sam Bradford, Johnny Manziel and Drew Brees top the list. Most coaches would be thrilled to work with just one of those quarterbacks during a long career.

When evaluating quarterbacks, Sumlin says he uses a variety of measures that tell him which quarterback is performing best, but in the end, it's the old metrics that continue to outperform.

"Accuracy, leadership and being good team guys, that's important," says Sumlin. "There's no silver bullet. We've had different-sized guys over the course of my career, from 5'10" to 6'6". Leadership and overall knowledge of what we are trying to do is important. Leadership is earned. Everybody's got their prototypical guy they think will do it for them, but from Drew Bledsoe to Drew Brees, it's not one specific thing we're looking for. But the things that have made quarterbacks successful and continue to make quarterbacks successful are accuracy, leadership and being there for the team."

them gain a sense of responsibility. We want them to have a degree, and we want to help them transition into society and play a positive role in whatever they decide to do in life."

### Staying Strong

Once Sumlin and his coaches begin practicing with players, that's when the fun begins. In recent years, head coaches and position coaches weren't allowed to spend much time with student-athletes during those long summer weeks.

That's where Larry Jackson comes in. Respectfully nicknamed "Black Death" because of his hardcore workouts, Jackson has helped coach some of the best football players in the world alongside Sumlin, including Heisman Trophy winners Johnny Manziel and Jason White, and former NFL MVP Adrian Peterson. As director of football sports performance, Jackson also holds the Master Strength & Conditioning Coach (MSCC) title of distinction from the Collegiate Strength & Conditioning Coaches association (CSCCa).

Sumlin and Jackson have worked together for much of their coaching careers, and Sumlin trusts Jackson with the team during those long summer workouts when position coaches and head coaches were historically prevented from being present.

"We understand each other and understand what we're trying to get done here," says Sumlin. "We coaches



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used to have little or no access during the summer and our strength and conditioning coaches were really the driver for attitude, discipline, strength, conditioning and really the pulse of the team. That toughness – mental toughness and physical toughness – they create throughout the summer can carry a team through the fall.”

The ability to communicate well with his head strength coach was huge for Sumlin during those years, because the team’s development rested squarely on the massive shoulders of those strength coaches. Over the course of time, access rules have relaxed somewhat, but Jackson’s role hasn’t eroded, it’s just changed.

“We’ve got more access now and our ability to work-in our position coaches with our student-athletes becomes very important,” says Sumlin. “But working hand-in-hand with our strength coaches is also important because there is carryover that must take place between those coaches. That communication from both sides, how a guy is doing in the weight room, what kind of conditioning work he’s doing, it’s critical.”

In fact, it is part of the position coach’s job to work closely with strength coaches because athletic performance is becoming more of a numbers game. Position coaches know what they need from individual athletes as far as off-season improvements, explosiveness, muscle mass, weight and strength. These are all measureable and Texas A&M’s coaches work together to stay on the same page.

Sumlin is leading that charge, helping coaches understand they must be constantly concerned with optimizing student-athletes’ abilities and maximizing their health and safety.


“There is more communication now than ever on our staff,” he says. “It’s critical for player development. It all starts with those relationships between coaches of all types.”

### Steering The Ship

Leadership is just one type of ship that requires a firm hand on the steering wheel. While Sumlin and his staff have great relationships with each other and with their student-athletes, it doesn’t come without focus.

“Everyone understands from the beginning that we have to set expectations and define them clearly. There aren’t a lot of questions from individual players about what they need to do or what’s expected of them,” says Sumlin. “Leadership means influence. We influence student-athletes to understand what it means to be great in the classroom, what it means to be a great teammate. It’s never about you; it’s about everybody. It’s about the team. After that, it’s about your role and where you fit in as a player.”

That sort of influence is what coaching is all about, says Sumlin. Young men will understand that if you are trying to help them and you show them you really care, they will go the extra mile for the team.

“As long as you set the expectation early and hold people accountable across the board, your players will understand,” he says. 



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