

# Aikman returns, but will Mr. Smith go to Washington?

By Michael Scogin

Super Bowl MVP quarterback Troy Aikman will be strapped up and ready to play when his world champion Dallas Cowboys face off against the Washington Redskins in ABC's "Monday Night Football" season opener on Sept. 6. But will Pro Bowl running back Emmitt Smith, who at press time was still holding out, be there too?

Aikman has been chomping at the bit for more playing time this preseason after recovering from off-season back surgery. Coach Jimmy Johnson has stood firm, keeping his golden boy on ice to make sure Aikman would be 100 percent ready for the Cowboys' opener against Washington. When the injury was first diagnosed, doctors and team officials predicted Aikman could miss four to six weeks of the regular season, but Aikman's remarkable recuperative ability and his hard work during rehabilitation have expedited the process.

"He's young, and that's the best part about it," says "Monday Night Football" commentator Frank Gifford. "I had back surgery myself a few years ago, and I wouldn't have wanted to play right away."

The 'Boys won't be the same team without Smith, who has led the NFL in rushing yards and touchdowns over the past three seasons. Smith has been holding out for a contract similar to Thurman Thomas' \$4 million-a-year deal. Without him, the Cowboys put the running game into the inexperienced hands of rookie Derrick Lassie, a fourth-round pick from Alabama, and Michael Beasley, who spent the past season on Dallas' developmental squad.

When Smith's holdout began, most of Dallas was sure that owner Jerry Jones would have Smith signed before the season opener, but as the summer wore on, doubts crept in. This was bad news for Aikman and wide receiver Michael Irvin, who rely on Smith's potent rushing attack to open up the Cowboys' aerial show.

The Redskins open the 1993 season with a new coach, Richie Petitbon, who takes over for the retired Joe Gibbs after a long stint as Washington's defensive coordinator. Petitbon's arrival has already been felt by Redskins followers, who have seen their team experiment with a two-back set for the first time in years.

"I don't know why he hasn't been

a head coach somewhere sooner, after all the big years he's had personally," says Gifford. "I just hope he's the kind of guy that can make the transition from a great assistant coach to a head coach. When you're a head coach, you've got to be half shrink, half F.R. man and 100 percent coach. Richie will have to do it in his own way."

The Redskins are trying to recover from a subpar 1992 season, despite going 9-7 and making it into the playoffs as a wild card. Last year's biggest disappointment was the performance of quarterback Mark Rypley, who fell from the heights of Super Bowl MVP to the basement of NFC passers.

"I think Rypley will probably be a lot different this year," Gifford predicts. "He went into a kind of a shell last year at the beginning of the season and had a couple of really bad games."

"As a team, I think they were embarrassed about what happened last season, but I would say that this year, they'll be the team right behind the Cowboys in their division."



Brian (Steven Weber) makes a play for Alex's affection in NBC's "Wings" on Thursday.

## TRIVIA

Filmmaker Samuel Fuller worked as a copy boy for a New York paper at age 14. His first novel, "Burn Baby Burn," was published in 1935.

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