WE WILL
RISE

BAYLOR FOOTBALL SEASON IN REVIEW

Photo by Taylor Griffin | Editor-in-Chief

Remember the Bears

Key moments of Baylor's 2015 season

Southern Methodist University

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

■ Jay Lee (4) Wide Receiver — Lee had an ill advised tip, which led to an interception. He would later redeem himself, catching three touchdowns in the Bears' 56-21 victory.

Lamar University

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

■ Corey Coleman (1) Wide Receiver — Coleman's record setting season got off to a hot start, catching four touchdowns against Lamar. The Bears would cruise to a 66-31 win behind Coleman's great night.

Rice University

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

■ Seth Russell (17) Quarterback — Russell's six touchdowns through the air tied a Baylor record. Russell and the Bears routed the Rice Owls, winning the game 70-17.

Texas Tech University

Taylor Griffin | Lariat Editor-in-Chief

■ Shock Linwood (32) Runningback — The Bears defeated Texas Tech 63-35, with Linwood having a career game. Linwood carried the ball 20 times for 221 yards a pair of scores.

Kansas University

Associated Press

■ LaQuan McGowan (80) Tight End — The fan favorite tight end caught his first touchdown of the season during the Baylor route of the Jayhawks. The Bears and McGowan blew out Kansas 66-7.

West Virginia University

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

■ Corey Coleman (1) Wide Reciever — Coleman capped off his record setting season with three touchdown catches against WVU. Coleman broke the single season TD record in the second quarter of Baylor's 62-38 win.

─── **Bowl Issue** ───

Iowa State University

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

■ **Seth Russell (17) Quarterback** — In a Homecoming game against Iowa State, Russell was injured on a run late in the fourth quarter. He fractured his neck on the play and was ruled out for the season.

Kansas State University

Associated Press

■ **Jarrett Stidham (3) Quarterback** — The true freshman put together a near-perfect performance in his first start on the road against the Kansas State Wildcats. Baylor won the game 31-24 in dramatic fashion.

University of Oklahoma

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

■ **Travon Blanchard (48) Nickelback** — In one of the biggest games in program history, a late horsecollar penalty extended the Sooners' drive and ended Baylor's hopes of completing a comeback win at home.
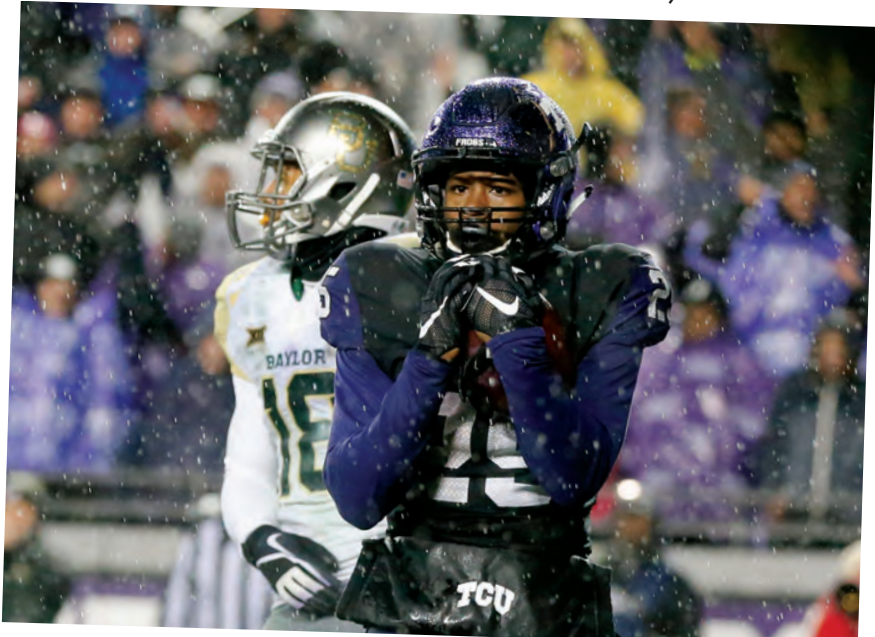
Oklahoma State University

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

■ **KD Cannon (9) Wide Receiver** — Cannon had his biggest performance of the season as third-string quarterback Chris Johnson led the Bears to their first win over Oklahoma State in Stillwater, Okla., since 1939.

Texas Christian University

Associated Press

■ **Chance Waz (18) Safety** — Playing in a freezing, torrential downpour, a crucial pass interference in overtime helped keep the Horned Frogs alive. Baylor went on to lose the game 28-21 in double-overtime.

University of Texas at Austin

Stephen Nunnelee | Lariat Photog-

■ **Chris Johnson (13) Quarterback** — Baylor's third-string quarterback was knocked out of the game in the first quarter after suffering a concussion. With a makeshift quarterback under center, BU would lose 23-17.

Seasonal Success
A LOOK BACK AT BAYLOR FOOTBALL 2015

1.

Penelope Shirey | Lariat Photographer

2.

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

3.

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

4.

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

5.

Penelope Shirey | Lariat Photographer

6.

Trey Honeycutt | Lariat Photographer

1. Senior wide receiver Jay Lee slides into a touchdown at the Blackout Game against Oklahoma on Nov. 14.

2. Junior cornerback Ryan Reid directs the next play with his teammates on SMU's field on Sept. 4.

3. Freshman wide receiver Chris Platt makes it into open field on a 84 yard kickoff return in the fourth quarter versus West Virginia on Oct. 17.

4. Junior wide receiver Corey Coleman receives a pass from junior quarterback Seth Russell and makes a touchdown during the home game against Iowa State on Oct. 24.

5. Freshman second-string quarterback Jarrett Stidham makes a run for it on offense at home on Nov. 14.

6. Senior wide receiver Jay Lee and sophomore wide receiver Davion Hall celebrate after Lee matched a touchdown catch versus West Virginia on Oct. 17.

Photo Illustration by Taylor Griffin | Editor-in-Chief

Rollercoaster

Bears experience highs of big wins, lows of injuries and upsets

JOSHUA DAVIS
&
TYLER CAGLE
Sports Writers

Baylor football began its 2015 campaign with hopes of making the College Football Playoff, but a bevy of crucial injuries proved too costly as the Bears finished their season 9-3.

After ending fourth in the Big 12, head coach Art Briles and Baylor are left thinking about what could've been.

Although the outcome didn't meet the expectations, the season was not a complete loss, players said.

"There are some teams that love to go 9-3, so I don't really see it as a disappointment," senior left tackle Spencer Drango said. "The disappointing thing is not sending the seniors out with a win at home. But we're still going to a bowl, so we're excited to be a part of that."

Injuries played a big role in the Bears ability to cope with the gauntlet of games toward the latter part of their schedule.

Whether it was a quarterback, running back, defensive lineman or defensive back, Baylor was unable to keep its best players healthy.

After reaching the highest AP ranking in program history (No. 2), the Bears had made the case to be one of the best teams in the nation.

Had the Bears been fully healthy, the turnout of Baylor's 2015 season could have been significantly different.

Despite the fourth place finish in the conference, injuries put a damper on an otherwise extraordinary Baylor team, Coleman said.

"This was probably the best Baylor team that's been here, the record doesn't show it," Coleman said.

Baylor faces No. 10 UNC in the Russell Athletic Bowl on Dec. 29 in Orlando, Fla.

PRODUCING ON THE FIELD Head coach Art Briles paces the sideline during that Bears' game against West Virginia on Oct. 17 at McLane Stadium in Waco. Briles led Baylor to its sixth-straight bowl after finishing 9-3 on the season.
Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

SHOWIN' SOME PROPS Sophomore tight end Jordan Feuerbacker (left) congratulates sophomore running back Johnny Jefferson for a touchdown against Texas Saturday in Waco.
Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

OFFENSE

Junior quarterback Seth Russell and junior wide receiver Corey Coleman were forming into one of the most dynamic duos in college football, and Baylor's offense appeared unstoppable.

Coleman made opposing cornerbacks look foolish at times, as he shattered the Baylor record for most receiving touchdowns in a season with 20.

With his stellar season, the All-American receiver said he will head for the NFL Draft after the bowl game. According to his head coach, Coleman may be the best receiver ever to come through Baylor.

"We've had some great receivers here … but what makes Corey great is that he's very dynamic with the football," Briles said. "He's a very aggressive receiver going after the ball – very sudden, strong, powerful and confident. That's what separates him [from the greats]. He's a very passionate guy that plays with a lot of emotion, and when his emotions are in check, he's about as good as there is."

And just when teams thought they had Briles' offense and Coleman figured out, the Bears could throw in a hiccup with sophomore wide receiver KD Cannon and senior wide receiver Jay Lee.

By many accounts, Baylor had the recipe for success.

The balance between the Bears' passing attack and their ground game, with junior runningback Shock Linwood leading the charge, looked like a juggernaut. The running back's uncanny ability to remain on his feet and pick up first downs helped Baylor own the ranking of No. 1 offense in the nation.

But that all changed after the Bears' homecoming game against Iowa State.

Russell was ruled out for the season, and true freshman Jarrett Stidham took over. Despite many people doubting the young signal-caller, Stidham appeared to be able to handle the spotlight of being the QB of the most explosive offense in the nation.

After two noteworthy performances, the Bears were hit again by an unfortunate injury. Stidham broke his ankle in the first half of the game against Oklahoma State and was ruled out for the rest of the season.

When all appeared to be lost, third string QB sophomore Chris Johnson took over and helped Baylor earn its most impressive victory of the season.

The inexperience of Johnson would show in the Bears' next game against rival TCU. In what several analysts described as one of the worst torrential downpours in recent history, Baylor lost a war of attrition 28-21 in double overtime.

Hoping to right the ship in their final game against Texas at McLane Stadium, the Bears unbelievingly lost another quarterback.

Johnson picked up a concussion in the first quarter, and junior wide receiver Lynx Hawthorne was forced to play an unknown position.

The impromptu switch ultimately cost Baylor the game and its bid at the Sugar Bowl, as Briles scripted an offensive game plan of nearly all running plays.

DEFENSE

After facing questions and doubts during the preseason, the Bears' defense showed it was a quality unit. The stats don't entirely show the impact of the Bears' elite play on defense this season.

After combining for 90 tackles, 31.5 tackles for loss and 13.5 sacks last season, senior defensive end Shawn Oakman and senior defensive tackle Andrew Billings have relatively underperformed on paper. The duo has registered 80 tackles, 27.5 for loss and only 9.5 sacks in 2015.

The true gem of the Baylor defense was sophomore nickelback Travon Blanchard.

Blanchard stepped up to the Bear position in 2015, a hybrid linebacker/safety position in defensive coordinator Phil Bennett's scheme.

He offered the Bears a rangy, athletic tackler that could step up in the run as well as defend the slots.

Blanchard accounted for 80 tackles, 7.5 for loss and forced five turnovers. His ball-hawk abilities allowed the Bears to force a turnover in their first 9 games.

The Bears' secondary was vastly improved from past seasons. After ranking 104th in the nation last season, the Bears finished the regular season 77th in passing yards allowed per game in 2015.

With All-Big 12 safety Orion Stewart out, sophomore cornerback Chance Waz filled in at the safety.

In his 11 games of action, Waz racked up 59 tackles, starting nine games in 2015.

Junior cornerback Xavien Howard finished the season with five interceptions and nine passes defended. Howard's big time play and ability to cover one on one with receivers relieved stress for Baylor's safeties.

Junior cornerback Ryan Reid finished the season with 3 picks, all coming in zone coverage and showed his improvements on the field.

With a battered Baylor secondary, the play of Howard and Reid came at the right time for the Bears.

The Bears ranked 52nd in the nation, allowing 156 rushing yards per game this season. Although the Bears started off rocky against the rush, they gradually improved.

The pinnacle of the Bears' rush defense came against the Oklahoma State Cowboys in Stillwater. The Cowboys only gained 8 yards on the ground against Baylor, averaging 0.3 yards per carry.

The Bears have shown they have the potential to be great defense. Lost in the numbers is the fact that the Bears do play in the Big 12 conference, where there are many more possessions due to the pace of play.

With Oakman, Campbell, Blackshear and Palmer all moving on as seniors, the Bears could again field an experienced defense in 2016 led by Young, Billings, Stewart and Howard.

HEADBUTT Junior nickelback Patrick Levels celebrates after a defensive play with sophomore nickelback Travon Blanchard against Oklahoma on Nov. 14 at McLane Stadium.
Penelope Shirey | Lariat Photographer

Bowl Issue

Player Ratings: Baylor's depth gets tested

OFFENSE

SETH RUSSELL (QB) — After throwing for 2,104 yards, 29 touchdowns with six interceptions and running for 402 yards and six touchdowns through seven games, he had Baylor looking like a contender for the College Football Playoff. **GRADE: A**

JARRETT STIDHAM (QB) — Taking over after Russell's injury was a tall task for the true freshman, especially with making his first start on the road against a hungry Kansas State squad. But Stidham dominated the night and helped lead the Bears to a 2-1 record over the next three games. **GRADE: B+**

CHRIS JOHNSON (QB) — Not only did the sophomore deliver the Bears a win against undefeated OSU, but it appeared that Baylor wouldn't miss a beat with its third-string quarterback. However, even with the horrid conditions against TCU, Johnson's inexperience showed, and the offense looked less explosive for the remainder of the season. **GRADE: B-**

SHOCK LINWOOD (RB) — Linwood was one of the primary reasons for the Bears' success in the running game. His extraordinary balance and ability to turn something out of nothing helped Baylor rack up yards with ease. 1,329 rushing yards, 6.8 yards per carry and 10 touchdowns this season moved him to second place on Baylor's all-time rushing list. **GRADE: A-**

DEVIN CHAFIN (RB) — The physical running back had some momentum early in the season, but a hamstring injury derailed the touchdown machine. Chafin didn't appear as explosive in his first couple games back and struggled with some ball security. He did finish the season with 422 yards and eight touchdowns in nine games of action, though. **GRADE: B-**

JAY LEE (WR) — The senior pass-catcher didn't have a high volume of passes in his direction, but he came up with several game-clinching catches. Although he only hauled in 36 catches, they were typically of the long distance variety (20.2 yards per catch). Lee also caught a career-high eight touchdown passes in 2015. **GRADE: B**

KD CANNON (WR) — Cannon entered his sophomore season with high expectations after putting up 1,030 receiving yards and eight touchdowns in his first year with the Bears. But the Mount Pleasant product failed to reach the numbers set in 2014, as he got off to a sluggish start for Baylor. Despite a couple late season gems, he ended this season with 828 receiving yards and six touchdowns. **GRADE: B-**

LaQUAN McGOWAN — McGowan's usage failed to optimize his strengths, and the offense suffered. His 23 receiving yards and two touchdowns don't seem to match his incredible hype. **GRADE: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE — Entering the season as one of the most touted offensive lines in Baylor history, the group this year made a case of being worthy of such praise. At one point in the season, the Bears had the best rushing attack in the country. **GRADE: A-**

DEFENSE

SHAWN OAKMAN (DE) — After winning All-American honors in 2014 with 52 tackles, 19.5 for loss and 11 sacks, Oakman returned to terrorize opposing QB's. However, Oakman has underperformed in 2015, registering just 40 tackles and 4.5 sacks. While opposing offensive lines often double-teamed the 6'9 Oakman, his play simply did not live up to the hype. **GRADE: B-**

ANDREW BILLINGS (DT) — Billings established himself as one of the best defensive lineman in the country this year. Billings racked up 32 tackles, 12.5 for loss, and tied his 2014 total with 4.5 sacks. Billings battled through an ankle injury in the second half of the year but, when healthy, was extremely disruptive in the trenches. **GRADE: A**

BEAU BLACKSHEAR (DT) — Often the forgotten member of Baylor's D-line, Blackshear suffered an injury ridden campaign as well. With knee problems troubling Blackshear, he recorded just 22 tackles in 2015. Blackshear's absence was felt late in the season when he was out with injury, attesting to his importance to the defense. **GRADE: A**

TAYLOR YOUNG (LB) — Although a shoulder injury slowed down Young early in the season, he bounced back tremendously. Young ended the regular season with 66 tackles, 11.5 for loss, and 2 sacks, showcasing versatility at both the middle and outside linebacker positions. **GRADE: B**

GRANT CAMPBELL (LB) — Campbell missed plenty of tackles, as well as failed to control gaps in the run game. While his zone coverage was decent, Campbell unfortunately did not live up to the level of his predecessor Bryce Hager. **GRADE: C+**

XAVIEN HOWARD (CB) — Howard established himself as an elite corner in the Big 12, intercepting five balls on the year. Howard used his huge frame and speed to effectively cover some of the nation's elite wideouts. **GRADE: B**

RYAN REID (CB) — Reid was a target of many passing schemes last year. While many teams threw to him again in 2015, Reid showed improvement from 2014. While his man-to-man skills are below average of a Big 12 corner, his speed and zone reads were greatly improved, picking off 3 passes. Still, his penalty prone play was disastrous for the Bears' defense at times. **GRADE: B-**

ORION STEWART (S) — As the season progressed, Stewart showed the same All-conference play from 2014. However, a shoulder injury nagged him all season, playing in just 8 games this year. With 48 tackles in those 8 games, Stewart was still highly effective when healthy. **GRADE: B**

CHANCE WAZ (S) — After starting over opening day starter Terrell Burt, Waz developed into a fine safety for the Bears. Waz registered 59 tackles from his safety spot, showing great speed. However, his inexperience got in the way sometimes, with miscommunications and penalties proving costly to the Bears. **GRADE: B-**

OFFENSIVE MVP

Sarah Pyo | Lariat Photographer

COREY COLEMAN (WR) – Coleman had a season for the ages and perhaps the greatest season in Baylor history. Coleman racked up an astounding 20 touchdown catches, 7 shy of the NCAA record. Coleman hauled in 74 receptions for 1,363 yards along with his 20 scores. **GRADE: A+**

DEFENSIVE MVP

Taylor Griffin | Editor-in-Chief

TRAVON BLANCHARD (NB) – Blanchard was a turnover machine this season, intercepting 2 passes and forcing 3 fumbles. His rangy, athletic play at the Bear hybrid position was fantastic. Blanchard ended his first starting season with great numbers, registering 76 tackles. 7.5 for loss, and 2 sacks. **GRADE: A+**

Bears to play in sixth-straight bowl

TYLER CAGLE
Sports Writer

The No. 17 Baylor Bears are headed to the Russell Athletic Bowl for the first time in school history. The bowl game, which takes place in Orlando, Fla., will see the Bears match up against No. 10 North Carolina Tar Heels of the ACC.

The Tar Heels finished the season 11-2, losing in the ACC title game to the No. 1 Clemson Tigers. For the Bears, who finished fourth in the Big 12 with a 9-3 record, the bowl will present a challenge.

"We are extremely excited and honored to represent Baylor in a bowl game. Coach [Larry] Fedora is a great football coach, great man, We know the quality of the opponent, a very, very good football team," said head coach Art Briles of the Tar Heels.

North Carolina will be one of the toughest opponents Baylor has seen all year. The dual-threat quarterback Marquise Williams, who has been great all season, leads UNC's offense.

Williams has been tremendous, throwing for 21 touchdowns opposed to 9 interceptions. Williams has also thrown for 2,829 yards as well as run for 867 yards and 11 scores.

Williams has spread the ball around to his receivers, with nine Tar Heels over 100 yards receiving. Mack Hollins and Ryan Switzer have been Williams' main targets all year. The pair have combined for 80 receptions, 1,379 yards, and 14 touchdowns.

On the ground, the Tar Heels have also been great. Running back Elijah Hood has run for 1,345 yards and 17 scores. The backfield of Williams and Hood has been almost unstoppable for UNC and their balanced attack.

The Tar Heels field a below average unit on defense, ranking 79th in the nation in terms of yards allowed per game. While the Tar Heels rank 26th in passing yards allowed per game, they are one of the nation's worst on the ground. The Tar Heels surrender 216.8 yards per game on the ground, good for 100th in the nation.

While junior running back Shock Linwood has been held in check the past four games with an injury, Devin Chafin and Johnny Jefferson have been tremendous in relief.

The duo have rushed for 568 yards and seven touchdowns with Linwood hobbled by injuries. Linwood should be healthy for the bowl game, which would be great news for the Bears. Linwood has had a great season this year, rushing 196 times for 1,329 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Along with a healthy Linwood, the Bears could also get back a healthy Jarrett Stidham. After suffering a broken ankle against the Oklahoma State Cowboys, Chris Johnson took over the reigns of the offense.

Against Texas, Johnson himself went down with a concussion, leaving the Bears with no quarterbacks for the rest of the game. While Stidham remains questionable, Johnson will most likely be the starter for Baylor.

While the Bears have been plagued by injuries all season, they might finally be almost to full strength against the Tar Heels. If the Bears can successfully run the ball against the spotty UNC defense and can in turn stop the rushing attack of Williams and Hood, the Bears should win their first bowl game since 2012.

The Russell Athletic Bowl is scheduled for a 4:30 PM CT kick off on Tuesday, Dec. 29. ESPN will televise the game from the Orlando Citrus Bowl Stadium.

Associated Press

TAR HEEL FOOTBALL North Carolina running back Elijah Hood scores a touchdown during the second half of an NCAA college football game in Blacksburg, Va., Nov. 21.

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