OH SUGAR, SUGAR!
Bears to face Georgia in first Sugar Bowl since 1957

BOWL ISSUE 2019
BU defense focuses on growth, ‘next man up’ mentality

JESSIKA HARKAY
Sports Writer

The 2019 Baylor Bears’ defense has etched its name into the program’s history book. In head coach Matt Rhule’s third year, a name that isn’t often mentioned in his defensive coordinator’s Phil Snow. Snow, who not only has spent the last three years developing the Bears’ defense we see today, but has also helped work hand-in-hand with the head coach for over seven years to foster successful football teams. “We’ve been a head coach for seven years and... Phil Snow, Mike Stoops, we’ve all been here for seven years,” head coach Matt Rhule said before the championship matchup this weekend. “It’s our third championship game in seven years.”

Snow, who is known for his coaching experience and, in his four seasons at Temple, he led a program that was ranked third nationally in total defense and 11th in scoring in 2016. And just like he established a defense from that was near impossible to move against, he’s creating the same foundation at Baylor.

“The game understanding now that you can’t evil do with the game plan on Thursday. You’ll do it with the game plan when the clock strikes zero,” Rhule said in early November. “You’re learning through the game. Phil Snow was saying that to the team in 2017: ‘It just took until now for the guys to understand that we’re not just learning through the game. We’re going to adjust to the things that happen in-game if we want to get better and better and better.’ That’s where I think the maturity of our team is showing.”

Snow knew the type of team he wanted to establish in the Bears’ set two important goals prior to the season — to understand the importance of turnovers and generate big plays against the Baylor defense.

The Baylor Bears will have time to grow before their next matchup. Heading to the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans on Jan. 1, to face the Georgia Bulldogs, the Bears will have nearly a month to prepare to continue their defensive dominance.

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Sports Writer

You have to be a different kind of leader when you serve as a captain in the Big 12 Championship and you haven’t played since October. You have to be another type of leader when you inspire from a sideline, instead of on the field. But when you’re a special leader when your presence does influence all those around you.

The 2019 season was a huge year to a young leader against Texas Tech in early October, linebacker Clay Johnston has been one of the biggest defensive pieces that contributed to Baylor’s 11-2 season. Prior to his injury, the defense may have lost the team with 56 tackles, averaging 2.1 per game, in just six games.

Despite being a junior (5’10” 230 lbs) for a less-experienced team, Johnston has become a leader on the team. After being a senior leader against Oklahoma State in 2018, Johnston was leading the way to the team’s success against Arizona State, and even credited second round back Allen 11-2 losses during his tenure as captain. But Johnston’s presence wasn’t just dominant on the field; his leadership became bigger than being a defensive captain.

“I think the most important thing Clay is, Clay will be able to lead our team,” Rhule said after the season-ending injury. “He’ll be able to coach, he’ll still be able to assist. All he needs to learn is what kind of distraction can you be.”

A distraction is the last thing Johnston became as his teammates could account for his influence with the captains during the coin toss.

“We didn’t want to play with only 15 guys, we wanted to play with 20 or 30, or 40,” Rhule said. “Clay’s role is not to replace Johnston — it was up to the entire unit to help Johnston,” he said. “I think the maturity of our team is showing.”

Their secondary had 17 interceptions in 2019, including at least one takeaway in 15 straight games and 30 overall in 2019. It doesn’t just stop there. Defenses under Rhule have forced two or more turnovers at 37 of 88 career games coached, including 33 takeaways in 15 games at Baylor.

The loss of the senior forced Baylor’s defensive unit to work as a team and make up for his absence. Sophomore linebacker Terrel Bernard stepped up as a starter in Johnston’s place. Since his Oct. 19 start against Oklahoma State, the sophomore tallied 77 tackles, four sacks, and a forced fumble. Bernard stepped up as a starter in Johnston’s place.

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“Mature and sure the only way the defense has been developed. It had the most important part was shifting down opponents’ offensive momentum. The defense unit only allowed 306 yards per game, big plays against the Baylor defense.

For Phil Snow, who is known for his coaching experience and, in his four seasons at Temple, he led a program that was ranked third nationally in total defense and 11th in scoring in 2016. And just like he established a defense that was near impossible to move against, he’s creating the same foundation at Baylor.

“You have to be another type of leader when you inspire from a sideline, instead of on the field. But when you’re a special leader when your presence does influence all those around you.”

Senior linebacker Clay Johnston takes down Texas Tech quarterback Jett Duffey in Baylor’s 33-30 overtime win on Oct. 12 at McLane Stadium.

In this file photo from Monday, December 9, 2019, the Baylor Bears will have nearly a month to prepare to continue their defensive dominance.
BOWL

REDEMPTIVE SIC 'EM
The Baylor sideline, featuring head coach Matt Rhule, celebrates with plenty of sic'ems as the Bears push the Big 12 Championship game versus Oklahoma into overtime.

Will the season have a sweet ending?
Bears prepare to take on Georgia in Sugar Bowl

MATTHEW SODERBERG
Sports Writer

After selection Sunday, No. 7 Baylor football is set to take on No. 5 Georgia in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day. The Bears are seeking their first win against the Bulldogs, having lost the previous four.

With both the SEC and Big 12 champions heading to the College Football Playoff, the second-place finishers take their automatic bids into the New Year Six bowl. It's Baylor's first trip to the Sugar Bowl since 1957, a loss to Tennessee.

The final game of the season is also Baylor's third BCS/New Year's Six bowl in program history, after losing the Fiesta Bowl to UCF in 2013 and the Cotton Bowl to Michigan State in 2014. The 11-2 Bears are also in search of their first 12-win season in program history.

While Baylor has been the insurgent into the national conversation this year, Georgia has been at the top of the polls for years. The Bulldogs also played for the chance to make the playoff this week as the No. 4 team, but instead, they lost to No. 2 LSU and fell out of the playoff picture.

Georgia plays a southern brand of smashmouth football, with a hard-nosed offensive line and strong play in the backfield. RB D'Andre Smith leads the team with 1,216 rushing yards on average 6.2 yards per carry.

The offensive line has also only given up 12 sacks this season. Georgia head coach Kirby Smart said in his press conference after the LSU game that they define their team by the guys they have.

"You have an offense that's built around the players you have," Smart said. "Do you take the players you have, and you use your strengths. With the players we have, we have certain strengths. We usually have good pass protection. We've got a good offensive line. We've got good backs."

In the SEC Championship game, the Bulldogs managed to gain just 286 yards, nearly 200 less than the Tigers gained. Georgia was also held to just 61 rushing yards and a 2.4 yards average on the ground. Smart said it was the fault of the scheme that lost the game Saturday.

"One ability to run the ball has not been consistent this year… It's not a matter of what is your offensive philosophy. It is what is the best way to win the game. I honestly think that's what we're trying to do."

Last year, Georgia played in the Sugar Bowl against Texas, and the Longhorns went to New Orleans and stole the game from a higher-rated Bulldogs squad that had also missed the playoff. Many speculated Georgia may have been less focused going into the game, and Baylor head coach Matt Rhule said during a teleconference today there wouldn't be that issue with his team.

"Where we came from in the past three years ago to where we are now, I know our guys are going to play their best game and give our best effort. After going 1-11 just two years ago, the Bears on the verge of their best season in the history of the program. Rhule said despite the loss to Oklahoma, the team can still make a lasting mark this season.

"Whatever bowl people ask us to play, let's go play one more game together, let's finish as a top-10 team, and let's get to 12 wins, which has never been done," Rhule said. "And more importantly, we'll be back."

What to do in New Orleans:

Parade!
Time: 2:30-5 p.m. on Dec. 31
Where: Elvission Fields Ave. and Decatur Streets, proceeds through French Quarter, past Allstate Fanfest, ends at Canal Street
Cost: FREE!

Zoo Year’s Eve
Time: 10:30-12:30 a.m.
Where: Audubon Zoo
Cost: Free w/ zoo admission

Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve
Time: 9-12 a.m.
Where: Jax Brewery, 620 Decatur Street
Cost: FREE to gather outside

Redemptive Sic ’Em: Sunday’s celebration, featuring head coach Matt Rhule, celebrates with plenty of sic’ems as the Bears push the Big 12 Championship game versus Oklahoma into overtime.
Bowl

2019 Season Recap: Year of the Bear 2.0

The Bears made it really tough for Oklahoma to win its fifth straight Big 12 title. Baylor was one play short of breaking the Sooners' championship streak. Without their starting quarterback, the Bears threw in redshirt freshman Gerry Bohanon to put Baylor ahead 13-10 at half-time. But Bohanon had been banged up all week and had to be taken out as well. Enter third-string true freshman Jacob Zeno. Zeno launched an 81-yard pass to junior running back Tresten Ebner to cut OU's 10-point lead down to three. Then he followed it up with a 78-yard pass to senior wide receiver Chris Platt to set up a game-tying field goal, which led to Baylor's third overtime of the year.

2019 Dr Pepper Big 12 Championship
Baylor vs Oklahoma
Dec. 7, 2019
L, 30-23 (OT)

Stat of the game: James Lynch breaks the all-time career sacks record after taking down Texas QB Sam Ehlinger twice.

Baylor vs Texas
Nov. 23, 2019
W, 24-10

Note of the game: College GameDay returned to Waco for a primetime matchup to McLane's largest crowd ever (50,223).

Baylor vs West Virginia
Oct. 31, 2019
W, 17-14

Note of the game: The Bears snapped a three-game losing streak to WVU with a super close Halloween win.

Baylor vs Texas Tech
Oct. 12, 2019
W, 33-30 (OT)

Stat of the game: JaMycal Hasty rushed for 139 yards and two TDs, including one a 73-yard catch and run.

Baylor vs Oklahoma State
Oct. 19, 2019
W, 45-27

Baylor vs Iowa State
Sept. 28, 2019
W, 23-21

Play of the game: With 21 seconds left in the game, John Mayers kicks the game-winning field goal.

Baylor vs Kansas State
Oct. 5, 2019
W, 31-12

Note of the game: Baylor wins its first road game since 2017 and only the third win in Manhattan.

Baylor vs Kansas
Nov. 30, 2019
W, 61-6

Note of the game: With this victory, Baylor made history, becoming the first Power Five program to go from 1-11 to 11-1 in two years.

Baylor vs Texas
Nov. 23, 2019
W, 24-10

Note of the game: College GameDay returned to Waco for a primetime matchup to McLane's largest crowd ever (50,223).

Baylor vs West Virginia
Oct. 31, 2019
W, 17-14

Note of the game: The Bears snapped a three-game losing streak to WVU with a super close Halloween win.

Baylor vs Texas Tech
Oct. 12, 2019
W, 33-30 (OT)

Stat of the game: JaMycal Hasty rushed for 139 yards and two TDs, including one a 73-yard catch and run.
Junior quarterback Charlie Brewer left the game in the second quarter to be evaluated and didn’t return to the game.

Junior runningback Treystan Ebner cuts into the Oklahoma lead with an 81-yd touchdown from freshman quarterback Jacob Zeno in the fourth quarter. Ebner’s teammates celebrate with him in the end zone after the major score.

Sophomore wide receiver Tyquan Thornton comes back to the ball to make a catch in front of a waiting Sooner defender just before halftime.

Sophomore wide receiver Tyquan Thornton hauls in a 78-yd pass from freshman quarterback Jacob Zeno to put the Bears in field goal range in the fourth quarter.

The Bears suffered their second loss of the season to OU by falling short in overtime, however, Baylor’s spirit at AT&T Stadium was in full supply.

NOT OVER YET The Bears end their first-ever Big 12 Championship game appearance with an overtime loss, however, head coach Matt Rhule said in press, “We’ll be back.”

Finally into the end zone Sophomore wide receiver Tyquan Thornton reels in a 33-yd pass from redshirt freshman quarterback Gerry Bohannon for the Bears first touchdown of the day.

65,191 football fans filled AT&T Stadium to cheer on their team during the Big 12 Championship game.

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The regular season is over, and all across the map, not a crimson was stirring, not even a blackshirt. Not a Bear, either. After the loss to Oklahoma, Baylor fans were left to hope for Coach of the Year in their own backyard. Everyone speculated for a week about what would have to happen for Baylor to get in the College Football Playoff, or for what kind of chaos would have to come to make the weekend fun. Mathew Soderberg, and the weekend was just about as predictable as a college football could be.

Bowl Game Prediction:
No. 1 Ohio State beat No. 8 Wisconsin. No. 2 LSU beat No. 4 Georgia.
No. 3 Clemson beat No. 21 Virginia for their first ranked win of the season. No. 6 Oklahoma beat No. 7 Baylor. The only upset was Oregon over Utah, but most people thought there was a healthy chance of that happening.

The only question for the committee was what school to put No. 1, and at 11 a.m. Sunday, it was announced that LSU will go to the No. 1 spot for most of the season. They have top-10 wins, including a win at Alabama while Tua Tagovailoa was healthy.

The Buckeyes had an argument. They’ve stomped every team by at least 10 points this season. They were, however, tested Saturday night. Down LSU 7-0 at the half, the college football world wondered whether their run was a fluke.

Ohio State handled Wisconsin in the second half of that game, but it proved the team wasn’t infallible, opening the hole for the Tigers to sneak through.

The other Tigers, Clemson, are now on a 28-game win streak that features a national title and another berth in the Final Four. Trevor Lawrence and his squad will take on the Buckeyes in Arizona for the chance to move onto the championship game.

Jalen Hurts and Oklahoma also climbed their way into the playoffs, and now have the chance to knock out LSU from their undefeated perch. It won’t happen. They almost lost twice to Baylor. To assume LSU and Ohio State will play in the championship game will come down to whether the Buckeyes’ vaunted defensive backs can defend LSU’s high powered passing attack.

Give me the Tigers for their third national championship this century.

For Baylor and Georgia, it’s reminiscent of ‘Touche’ game against the Bulldogs in last year’s Sugar Bowl. If Georgia decides to show up, the Bears will get killed. If they don’t, Baylor can stand up to them and take home the win like the Longhorns did last year when they declared themselves “back.” Give me Baylor by a field goal.

Friday, December 6, 2019
The Baylor Lariat

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for keeping up with us this semester. For picking up the Lariat every Tuesday and Friday and skipping straight to the sports section. For opening your Morning Buzz emails and clicking through our stories first (wink!).

This season of Baylor sports has been incredible to cover. To have four ranked teams this fall, as well as the rest of our programs competing at such a high level is amazing. The sports crew here at the Lariat is truly fortunate to get to witness and write about the process. It was high. I experienced it covering spring sports earlier this year and I realized pretty quickly that this year was going to require so much more from the Lariat Sports team. That still rings true after the conference championship game. The fact that we played two of the best teams in the country and made the weekend fun.

When I was a freshman, Baylor football had one victory and it wasn’t even a home win. Then the team went 10-3, and it was a different team running onto the field. They were, however, tested Saturday in Arizona for the chance to move onto the championship game. It will come down to whether the Buckeyes’ vaunted defensive backs can defend LSU’s high powered passing attack. Give me the Tigers for their third national championship this century.

To wrap this up, I want to thank Coach Rhule and Mack Rhoades as well as everyone at Baylor Athletic Communications for cooperating with us throughout the season, not just with the sports crew here at the Lariat but for their time and input and allowing us to tell their stories.

Most especially thank you to my fellow Lariat staff members for all the work and dedication they’ve put in this semester. I know it was hard. There was a lot of crying and not a lot of sleeping, but we pulled through.

The journey isn’t over yet, Bears. We’ll see you all in New Orleans!

Have a happy holiday and thank you for the bottom of my heart.

D.J. Ramirez
Sports Editor of the Baylor Lariat

A Letter From The Sports Editor
The Baylor Bear football team could accidentally go 11-1 this season. Obviously winning games is no accident, yet I find as better word in a year when the Big 12 could see more parity than the infamous 2007 season in which Kansas (yes, Kansas) finished 12-1 and defeated No. 1 Texas in the only BCS bowl victory in school history. While the conference as a whole may be more dramatic than the most recent installment of “The Bachelorette,” this year’s Baylor squad dethroned greatly from the 2007 team that was quarterbacked by Blake Szymanski, who threw a Big XII leading 18 interceptions and guided the Bears to a 5-9 record that assured a 14 year stretch without more than five wins in a single season.

This season’s group is not just exponentially better than the 2007 squad, but the Bears have the potential to ride a deadly five wins in a single season. To a 3-9 record that assisted a 14 year stretch without more than five wins in a single season.

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The Baylor Lariat
Monday, December 9, 2019

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