Bears face Vanderbilt in the Texas bowl

ADAM GIBSON
Sports Writer

Baylor football is headed to its eighth bowl game in the last ten years as it travels to the Academy Sports + Outdoors Texas Bowl at 8 p.m. on Dec. 27 in Houston to face Vanderbilt.

Head coach Matt Rhule leads the Bears to a 7-5 record over his first two years as Baylor’s football head coach and has turned the program from a win-less team into a bowl contender. Rhule said going to a bowl game for the season is something the class deserves and is a great way to end their time with the team because of how they worked hard.

“I can’t understand everything that they’ve been through. This is a tough group of people. Time and time again, you can see that they are head up and excited. They did that. And they earned it. They did that through hard work. If you take a lesson coming out of our program, it’s that hard work itself pays off. If you want something to be the case, you have to earn it. For us, it’s just a part of the game. We get to go to games.”

Facing an SRC team is never easy and that is exactly what the Bears will have to prepare for going into the multi-cycle weeks of bowl preparation. Vanderbilt, the Bears will face three out of their four previous games, ending its season with a 30-1 vic in the Texas Bowl. Vanderbilt senior quarterback Kyle Shurmur threw for a season high of 466 yards and 367 yards, completing 31 of his 35 passes for a completion percentage of 88.6 percent, all season highs. With all three touchdowns going to different receivers, Shurmur knows how to spread the ball around.

Now that Rhule and the Bears know what they are dealing with, they can utilize that in the scheme and it doesn’t matter who they face because it is something out of their control and they know they have to get ready to face a solid team every week.

“The respect I have for Vanderbilt and coach [David] Morrison, they had so many guys that were really good, two really good QBs. They went out and normal this. They’re going to be tough. We’re going to have to play. Rhule said, “Wein playing one of the best quarterbacks in the country. They know how to play defense. I think all those things will really be really big in middle of the game. We need to go out and defend a really good quarterback. We need to see what we’re doing differently. This year we have a really good SEC defensive line.”

Baylor is dealing with a couple players who are out with injury, beginning with senior punter Joe Giblin who has his All-11 season followed.

Senior offensive lineman Patrick Lawrence said securing bowl eligibility in his senior season was “a real huge deal. Almost an indescribable feeling on the field being able to get the younger players to understand how important it is and how encouraging this is for the program playing Vanderbilt in the Texas Bowl, Blackmar said.

Going from 10 wins in 2015 to one win in 2017, the seniors have experienced up and down seasons. They have a chance to go to one last victory in a Baylor uniform when they face Vanderbilt at 8 p.m. Dec. 27 in the Texas Bowl in Houston.

IN STRIDE
Baylor junior wide receiver Denzel Mims runs past the Texas defense for a touchdown on Oct. 13 in Austin. The Bears accepted an invitation to the Academy Sports + Outdoors Texas Bowl to face Vanderbilt at 8 p.m. Dec. 27 in Houston.

BEN EVERETT
Sports Writer

When the current senior class entered on Baylor’s campus their freshman year, the Baylor football program was in a much different place.

The Bears had won back-to-back Big 12 Championships and were looking to add to their trophy case, taking the No. 1 ranking in the pre-season Associated Press poll and hopes for a CFP run. It hasn’t been the case.

Things quickly changed.

Senior offensive lineman Patrick Lawrence said he feels great. Almost an indescribable feeling on the field being able to get the younger players to understand how important it is and how encouraging this is for the program playing Vanderbilt in the Texas Bowl, Blackmar said. "We were all able to see the things we did last year. It’s a great feeling."

Senior receiver Jalen Hurd had multiple lingering injuries before graduating.

"We’ve made a ton of progress and big NFL future ahead," he said. "But this guy is a guy who needs to feel the pressure and I want them to practice in order to be successful.

"They are recruiting sit down and I thought that would be a dream. He just knows how much he can do. They need to practice in order to be successful."

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Senior offensive lineman Blake Blackmar is a big reason for the team’s defensive front four.

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The offensie side of the football is becoming extremely important, especially in today’s game.

Look at Oklahoma. They’re the fourth-ranked defense in the country and will be representing the Big 12 in the College Football Playoff. Their offense is one of the best in the country according to S&P+, ranking 30th in points per game. Tyler Shough, the quarterback for the Sooners, has led the high-powered Sooners to an 11-3 record this season. In those games they scored below 40 points.

Offenses kept getting better and to keep up, you have to have a great quarterback and an excellent supporting cast. This season, Baylor did just that.

After a disappointing 2017 campaign when the Bears went 5-7 under head coach Matt Rhule, knowing that he needed to improve his offense and all started with the quarterback position. Rhule started the season with a competition between sophomore Charlie Brewer and graduate transfer Jalan McClendon. After three games, it was apparent who Rhule favored.

"This guy did it," Brewer told the Associated Press as he stood before the season about Brewer. "Last season, he was a true freshman laughing and telling me to calm down.

The trust Rhule had in Brewer paid off. Brewer finished the season with 2,635 yards, 17 touchdowns, and a completion percentage of 57. He initially battled against McClendon for the starting QB position and it was clear that he won the job when he started the game against the Kansas Jayhawks in the season opener.

After the Kansas game, Rhule said the Bears did everything he asked in order to stay on the field for the Bears. "I think he did," Rhule said. "He moved the ball the second quarter. Third quarter, he's got a big game more production, so he's the starter. The ball was out there and that's what we needed."

Another key factor for Baylor this season was the wide receiving core. "I really believe in the quarterback and the wide receivers," Rhule said. "It's not just one guy. Whatever the defense does, we have to adjust."

The Bears faced Vanderbilt at 8 p.m. Dec. 27 at the Texas Bowl in Houston.

STOP THE RUN

The Baylor defense kept Texas quarterback Charlie Brewer balled up behind the Texas defense on Oct. 13 in Austin. The Bears held Texas to 23.17 points per game, a five-point improvement from last year.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma State's defense allowed 3.26 points per game in 2017. The Bears allowed 4.12 points per game.

Rhule's defense allowed 35.9 points per game in 2018 and 31.2 points per game in 2017.

Rhule said that before the season started, "We have emphasis that we have a chance to go professional."

The Bears averaged a full 24 more points per game this season than they did last. "Baylor will not do offense to try to win the game," Rhule said. "We want the game to come to us and that's what we were able to do tonight.

Brewer finished the season with 456.9 yards per game and 413.8 yards per game.

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Even though only one offensive player, Jalen Hurts, received Big 12 offensive honors, Lovett said he's still proud of his team.

"You have to be happy for these guys right now," Lovett said. "And we came a long way and we're happy for them."

The 2018 Baylor offense compared to the 2017 Baylor offense improves and founds better. "The Bears averaged a full 24 more points per game this season than they did last. "Baylor will not do offense to try to win the game," Rhule said. "We want the game to come to us and that's what we were able to do tonight.

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Road to The Bowl

Sept. 1: Abilene Christian
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Jalan McLendon - 173 yds, 2 touchdowns
- Top Rushing: RB John Lovett - 115 yds, 12 carries, 3 touchdowns
- Top Receiving: WR Denzel Mims - 80 yds, 3 receptions
- Top Defender: S Chris Miller - 7 total tackles

Moment of the game: Linebacker Terrel Bernard intercepted an ACU pass to run the ball back to the ACU 16 yd line.

Sept. 22: University of Kansas
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Charlie Brewer - 221 yds, 3 touchdowns
- Top Rushing: RB JaMycal Hasty - 60 yds, 6 carries
- Top Receiving: WR Josh Fleeks - 65 yds, 5 receptions, 1 touchdown
- Top Defender: S Verkedric Vaughns - 7 total tackles

Moment of the game: Freshman wide receiver Josh Fleeks caught his first career touchdown on a 34-yd pass from QB Charlie Brewer.

Oct. 6: Kansas State
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Charlie Brewer - 296 yds, 1 interception
- Top Rushing: RB Tre'Von Ebner - 100 yds, 17 carries,
- Top Receiving: WR Jalen Hurd - 135 yds, 8 receptions
- Top Defender: S Chris Miller - 8 total tackles

Moment of the game: Kicker Connor Martin brought home the victory with a 29-yd field goal in the last eight seconds of the game.

Nov. 3: Oklahoma State
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Jalan McLendon - 102 yds, 1 interception
- Top Rushing: RB John Lovett - 104 yds, 6 carries, 1 touchdown
- Top Receiving: WR Jalen Hurd - 96 yds, 7 receptions, 1 touchdown
- Top Defender: LB Clay Johnston - 7 total tackles

Moment of the game: Wide receiver Denzel Mims snatched the ball in the end zone for the last minute touchdown, putting the Bears ahead with just seven seconds left.

Nov. 24: Texas Tech
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Charlie Brewer - 308 yds, 3 touchdowns, 1 interception
- Top Rushing: RB John Lovett - 125 yds, 28 carries, 1 touchdown
- Top Receiving: WR Chris Platt - 134 yds, 6 receptions
- Top Defender: LB Clay Johnston - 12 total tackles

Moment of the game: Baylor became bowl eligible by holding off Texas Tech, 35-24.

Sept. 8: University of Texas San Antonio
Game Highlights:
- Top Passing: QB Charlie Brewer - 326 yds, 3 touchdowns
- Top Rushing: RB John Lovett - 47 yds, 9 carries
- Top Receiving: WR Jalen Hurd - 136 yds, 1 touchdown, 8 receptions
- Top Defender: LB Terrel Bernard - 7 total tackles, 1 sack

Moment of the game: Charlie Brewer stunned with a trick play where he caught a pass for a first down in the second quarter.

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Texas Bowl — Dec. 27 @ Houston vs Vanderbilt University
get VANDY with it

Commodores ready to go bowling after 6-6 season

BAILEY BRAMMER
Broadcast Managing Editor

Baylor is all set to go bowling in Dec. 27, in Houston, where the Bears will play on the Vanderbilt Commodores in the Texas Bowl. Both teams went 6-6 on the season, and neither has made a bowl game appearance since 2016. The Commodores are led by head coach Derek Mason, who finished sixth overall in the SEC-East, winning three of their last four games on the road to the bowl.

"They had to win their last two games to be bowl eligible," said Baylor head coach Matt Rhule. "They went out and earned it, they're going to do what we do to play. We're playing one of the best quarterbacks in the country and they know how to play defense. All those things will be really good for our team. We need to go out and defend a really good quarterback and we need to see if we can play really good up front versus an SEC defense here."

Senior quarterback Kyle Shurmur has passed for 2,484 yards this season and finished the all-time career passer record by passing for 9,754 yards. "I thought it was really cool for Memphis to come out on top," Mason before, "It's a tremendous accomplishment for Coach Rhule and Mason coached the Commodores in 1954. The Commodores are preparing to face the Bears in a 4-1-3 all-time bowl record.

Ira Lewis, senior, defensive tackle

Vanderbilt and Baylor have played each other twice, and the Bears won both matches, the Commodores winning three of their last four games on the road to the bowl. "They had to win their last two games to be bowl eligible," said Baylor head coach Matt Rhule. "They went out and earned it, they're going to do what we do to play. We're playing one of the best quarterbacks in the country and they know how to play defense. All those things will be really good for our team. We need to go out and defend a really good quarterback and we need to see if we can play really good up front versus an SEC defense here."

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Vanderbilt quarterback Kyle Shurmur passes against Tennessee in the first half of a game on Nov. 24 in Nashville. Vanderbilt beat Tennessee 38-13 and will face Baylor in the Texas Bowl on Dec. 27 in Houston.

The Commodores and the Bears take the field at 8 p.m. on Dec. 27 in Houston.
Bowl bid a major step in the right direction for Matt Rhule

Bowl bid a major step in the right direction for Matt Rhule

Success erases doubt. At least for some time. Baylor fans will now spend their holiday season planning around watching Rhule and his team compete in a bowl game for the first time since he was hired as the Bears’ lead man. If they win? Icing on top of a spectacular redemption story cake. If they lose? It’s a young team and its only Rhule’s second year at the helm. Give them some time.

One thing is for certain, however: Rhule needed to reach this point. He put some unnecessary pressure on himself by declaring before the season even started that this team would reach a bowl, but with the talent this team has, missing out on postseason play would have been underperforming.

Quarterback Charlie Brewer is a stud. JohnCox is an NFL-caliber wide receiver. Denzel Mims is one of the most talented receivers in the Big 12. The offense is laden with experience. James Lynch is an All-Big 12 defensive force. Clay Johnston could be the Big 12’s best linebacker once he plays a full season. The secondary is experienced and versatile.

Don’t get me wrong. This team doesn’t have the level of talent the 2013 and 2014 Big 12 Champions had. It’s not particularly close. But this roster is set up for success. A large part of that is due to Rhule. He went and got those talented freshmen and sophomores. He convinced Hurd and cornerback Derrek Thomas to spend their final seasons of eligibility wearing green and gold.
Texas Bowl
Baylor vs Vanderbilt
Dec. 27, 2018
NRG Stadium, Houston