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Thamba consistently propels team pg. 6

Collen does it her way, preps for Bear victory

MARQUIS COOLEY
Sports Editor

The Baylor women's basketball program, its players and all of Baylor Nation were shocked in spring 2021 when Head Coach Kim Mulkey announced she was leaving to go coach at Louisiana State University.

"It definitely hurt, just cause I'm a very very loyal person," senior forward Caitlin Bickle said. "That's who I came here for, like I think a lot of people when Kim was here would say, 'I came to be coached by Kim Mulkey,' like that's what they came here for. It was just a known and a given."

While director of intercollegiate athletics Mack Rhoades sought the next leader of the powerhouse program, the senior trio of Queen Egbo, NaLyssa Smith and Bickle had to make a decision on what they would do in their final year.

"I remember once Kim left, we kind of all texted about it and were like, 'What are you going to do? How are we going to move forward?'" Smith said. "We all just came to the realization that we were just going to stay and just keep competing. And as long as we got each other, we can do anything."

Eventually Rhoades announced the hiring of Nicki Collen as the next leader of Baylor women's basketball, and the trio was happy in their decision.

"I was glad I stayed," Bickle said. "I was glad I stuck it out until they had found another coach because I ended up loving it."

However, it wasn't just current players that dealt with a different coach than the one they signed up for. Graduate guard Jordan Lewis had made the decision to transfer from the University of Alabama after five seasons to play her last under Mulkey. In the end, Collen was able to win her over and keep her onboard as well.



A lot of it was just living up to the expectations that were here and trying to do it authentically my way, to put my stamp.

NICKI COLLEN |
HEAD COACH

"Nicki actually was at Florida Gulf Coast when I was coming out of high school, and so a lot of people around the area and people that I have trusted knew who she was and knew what kind of person she was and heard nothing but good things about her," Lewis said. "She actually called me the night she got the job, and that means a lot for a head coach to call you and still wants you to know that she wants you here and wants you to play a big role on the team. That was a big step for me."

Coming in to take over a team that had set a precedent of being one of the best in the nation and had one of the best coaches in the nation was not easy. Collen said she knew the expectation was to bring championships back to Waco, and she has yet to shy away from it.

"When I took this job, I knew this was the expectation," Collen said. "Obviously, there's an enormous amount of pressure as a result of that. A lot of it was just living up to the expectations that were here and trying to do it authentically my way — to put my stamp. This is the only way I know how to coach. I feel things very deeply, I'm pretty emotional, I say what I think."

Collen initially won the fan base over with her introductory press conference, but it didn't take long for fans to start comparing what she was doing to what Mulkey had established. When the Bears were scraping out wins against teams they had blown out in years past, Collen heard about it. When the Bears were plagued with COVID-19 and were just 10-4 with an 0-2 conference record, fans were calling for her job on social media. They began to question if her pro-style system was good enough for Baylor and if her seven-player rotation was enough to make it through a full season. However, Collen never wavered and continued to try and prove she was the right person for the job.

MAKING HER MARK >> Page 7



Cole Tompkins | Photographer

BACK FOR SECONDS Baylor men's basketball looks to defend their national title, starting March Madness as a No. 1 seed.

Back to back: Bears hunt for national title

GIO GENNERO
Sports Writer

Championship and No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

The hunger for a national title remains inside of the Bears as they look to go back-to-back in the NCAA Tournament for just the eighth time in NCAA history and the first since 2007.

On April 5, 2021, head coach Scott Drew and Baylor men's basketball cemented their legacy as they captured their first national championship in program history, beating the University of Gonzaga 86-70. Going into the current season, the defending champions were immediately focused on climbing the NCAA mountain once again.

"We've talked with our team; we have a unique opportunity," Drew said. "So few schools have been able to go back-to-back, and we have an opportunity to do something that only [University of] Florida and Duke have done since the John Wooden days."

Baylor began the season on a tear, winning its first 15 games and picking up exactly where the team left off. The effort was enough to earn the top rank in the nation before multiple key players suffered injuries, causing them to drop some games as well as spots in the rankings. The Bears haven't been able to get back to full health since, but they were able to get back on track and rally to end the regular season with five straight wins, helping them earn their second straight regular season Big 12

Championship and No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

"Anytime you lose, it's a chance to hit the reset button," Drew said. "It refocuses everyone; nobody likes the feeling of losing. From that, players practice harder, coaches are more dialed in. We'll be ready to put our best foot forward come tournament time."

Baylor's season has been plagued with injuries, with many rotation players missing multiple games at a time. Junior forward Jonathan Tchanwa Tchatchoua — Co-Defensive Big 12 Player of the Year — suffered a season-ending knee injury, highly recruited freshman guard Langston Love (ACL) didn't make it to the regular season and sophomore guard LJ Cryer (foot) also missed a significant amount of games.

During the injury-riddled season, players have had to step up from their previous roles to help the team continue to win. Players such as senior forward Flo Thamba and junior guard Dale Bonner have done their best to fill that void.

With Cryer, Baylor's leading scorer (13.5 ppg), missing 11 of the last 12 games, other guards have had to elevate their game to make up for the missing piece. Senior and junior guards James Akinjo and Adam Flagler have alternated playing the hero in different games when needed. The backcourt duo is averaging 13.4 points per game each,

ON THE HUNT >> Page 7

NaLyssa Smith gives Baylor her all one last time

MARQUIS COOLEY
Sports Editor

NaLyssa Smith, widely considered the No. 1 pick in the upcoming WNBA draft, has done everything imaginable at Baylor, from winning championships to breaking records. While the 6-foot-4-inch forward from Converse is excited for the future, Smith's focus is on having fun and enjoying the moment as well as what she's been able to do as a Bear.

"It was definitely a crazy, crazy four years here at Baylor. I loved it, though," Smith said. "It was a lot of trials and tribulations, a lot of adversity and changing. A lot of fun times too — I mean winning a national championship my freshman year, a lot of people can't say that. Winning four Big 12 championships, a lot of people can't say that, too. I've loved it here at Baylor. Even though the coaches have changed, the staff has changed, players have changed, we still rose through adversity and we're here today to keep playing."

However, of all the banners Smith has helped hang up in the Ferrell Center, there's a couple that stand out to her more than the rest.

"This last one, it means the most to me," Smith said. "I probably say the national championship and this conference championship have been my proudest moments at Baylor. Just because we started 0-2 like, you don't hear that a lot at Baylor University. Then so many people were just like, 'Oh, they are not like the other people. They're not as good anymore.' And I just felt like we kind of took that chip on our shoulder and we were like, 'All right we are going to make it happen. We have to turn the whole season around.' So going from 0-2 and winning a conference championship, it's just something that sticks with me."

Before her domination in college, Smith made a name for herself in the San Antonio area as well as nationally. Smith was selected to the 12-member 2018 USA Basketball Women's U18 National Team and helped the USA win a gold medal over Canada. In high school, Smith earned multiple awards and honors playing at East Central High School, where she averaged 23.4 points, 13.7 rebounds and 3.4 blocks per game as a senior. However, Smith said when she really honed her skills was playing with SA Finest, an Amateur Athletic



Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

LEGACY Senior forward NaLyssa Smith has been an essential player throughout Baylor's season and is considered to be the WNBA's top pick by breaking records and setting her name in place.

Union basketball organization known for its collection of the best women in high school basketball in San Antonio.

"It helped a lot actually," Smith said. "Being on such a superior program where you're playing around great players, it helps you go into college with confidence and just knowing the game of basketball. It also helps you off the court because they teach you kind of how to be a woman, how to grow up, your image and everything like that. So I feel like playing for SA Finest helped me be the person I am today."

Despite being a five-star recruit out of high school, Smith still felt there was a lot she could learn when arriving on campus.

"A lot of people come into college

just thinking, 'I'm ready to play, I need to be in the game, put me in now,'" Smith said. "I feel like when I got here, it was more like I need to learn from Lauren Cox. I need to watch Kalani Brown, see if she's posting up, see where she's getting the ball."

The All-American's constant desire to learn has helped her grow in a variety of ways, and her teammates have taken notice.

"Freshman year we were kind of in a shell almost, especially I would say her; she was growing into herself," senior center Queen Egbo said. "We saw glimpses of greatness — obviously — within her. She has always been that go-to player, but I feel like between freshman year and senior year, NaLyssa

has grown as a leader. She has grown in different aspects of her game. She's really taken on the challenge of being that leader and being somebody we can depend on. Every year she came in and got a little better. She just got better throughout the whole year, so it wasn't a surprise to me because knowing who she is, she's not a complacent person. She always wants to be better in some way. You've definitely seen that in her offensive game. She's added a lot of different things to her arsenal and I feel like now she's really ready for that next level."

Another person who has been with Smith since the beginning of her collegiate career and has seen the constant growth is senior forward

Caitlin Bickle, who has been one of Smith's biggest supporters.

"She's incredible, and people don't get it," Bickle said. "You see great players in the league and things like that, but I have never seen someone so versatile. I look at every single game and I'm like, 'Did you really have that much?' Is this just normal now? Is this just a regular thing?" Just being there from freshman year to now and actually getting to see that development and see her thrive and just grow, I just know that's going to continue in the league."

Smith's development has led to her achieving some amazing feats and putting her name in the record books, becoming just the eighth player in program history to reach the 2,000-career-point milestone and one of seven Bears to have 2,000 career points and 1,000 career rebounds. She also holds the record for most double-doubles in a season with 24 and a chance to increase it in the NCAA Tournament. But Smith doesn't want to be remembered for just her stats.

"Someone that just gave their all, all the time," Smith said. "My main focus this year was consistency, and I just feel like I'm doing good in that aspect. I just want to continue that, whether it's rebounding, whether it's points, whether it's leadership; I just always want to lead my team in a positive way. That's how I want to be remembered."

Head coach Nicki Collen said she's grateful that she gets to coach the "ultimate chess piece," given that Smith could have left Waco when Kim Mulkey moved on to Louisiana State University.

"I feel lucky, I feel blessed," Collen said. "I think she believed in me and how I could help her personally as a basketball player, and how I could help prepare her for what's next for her. NaLyssa Smith could have gone anywhere in the country, and she chose to stay."

While Smith has acknowledged how much Collen has helped take her game to the next level and helped prepare her to go professional, she still has some unfinished business to take care of.

"I want to make a run for the national championship, of course," Smith said. "It's my last year so I feel like I'm going to leave it all on the court, go hard every game and just enjoy my moments that are left here at Baylor."

Freshman one-two punch of Brown, Sochan has become key to success

GIO GENNERO
Sports Writer



Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

MOVING FAST Against the University of Texas freshman forward Kendall Brown drives it to the rim on Feb. 12 at the Ferrell Center.

Baylor men's basketball is looking to make a deep run in the NCAA Tournament. A big reason it has had so much success this season is the play of the freshman forward duo of Jeremy Sochan and Kendall Brown.

"They've done a great job. I love both of them," head coach Scott Drew said. "That's been the thing we've been most pleased with, just how they've picked up the scheme and how they've been able to be effective and efficient on the defensive end."

The one-two punch has combined for 31 games in which at least one of them has scored in double figures. Brown leads the team in double-doubles on the season with three, and Sochan was awarded the Big 12 Sixth Man of the Year award. This season, Sochan is averaging 8.8 points and 6.2 rebounds on 47.9% shooting, while Brown is averaging 10 points and 4.9 rebounds on 59.5% from the field.

"They both came in so elite," senior forward Matthew Mayer said. "They've been working steadily all year. They're more comfortable. They've had the talent since the day they stepped on campus. They know what they need to do in their exact role and what they want to do. It's been fun playing with these guys all year."

The pair has also contributed in ways that don't show up on the box score. As a result of injuries, the two

have been pushed into different situations than they were expecting. There have been many times late in the season where the wing players have had the impact on the game for Baylor, sharing center duties on both ends of the floor.

"That's what we do," Sochan said. "We don't look at the past. We just try and stay in the present and just do our thing. Stay as a team, stay as a group, stay as a family and play as a family."

The athleticism of 6-foot-8-inch Brown and the length of 6-foot-9-inch Sochan allow the Bears to run a small ball lineup that has proven effective. Their physical capabilities help them defend every position on the floor skillfully.

However, no matter the performance or effect on a game, the two are quick to credit their teammates for their success.

"We have a lot of advantages with a lot of players," Brown said. "We have great players, and we know what they can do. We just try to give them the opportunity, and they go and make the play."

Drew has been emphatic about the growth of what he named the "roommate connection" as the season has progressed. He said he believes their conference play has set them up to perform well in the NCAA Tournament.

"With both of them, if you watch the film in the beginning of conference play, they are good players, but they're much more battle-tested and a lot more physical now," Drew said. "They've gone through the rigors of the Big 12 and are better because of it."



Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

TAKE THE SHOT Freshman forward Jeremy Sochan goes up for a jump shot against Kansas State on Feb. 26 at the Ferrell Center.

Cover by Baylor Photography & Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

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March Madness

Caitlin Bickle: Heart, soul, glue of WBB

MARQUIS COOLEY
Sports Editor

Every winning team has a player who does the little things to help the team win. Often known as the glue player that brings the team together, they do the unglamorous things fans may not pay attention to, such as playing tough defense, drawing charges and diving for loose balls. That's exactly what senior forward Caitlin Bickle does for Baylor women's basketball, and she couldn't be happier.

"I love that," Bickle said. "We have plenty of scorers on our team. That's not something that I'm like, 'Yeah, I need to get mine. I need to do that.' I will do whatever these girls want me to do. I will do whatever my coaching staff wants me to do, and I absolutely thrive and love that."

The Cave Creek, Ariz., native

has always been a jack of all trades, even back in her days at Cactus Shadows High School.

It took some time for her abilities to fully manifest at Baylor.

"When you're a freshman, you're kind of just starstruck," Bickle said. "You're in a new place doing all these things. Freshman year, I feel like I was just there. It was like, 'Oh, this is fun. I'm just along for the ride.'"

The 6-foot



By Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

forward said she's matured a lot since her freshman season, where she averaged just 5.8 minutes per game.

The main way in which Bickle feels she's grown is her IQ on the defensive side of the ball.

"I will be the first to say I'm not as athletic as a lot of other people. I have been through two knee surgeries, which I think slowed me down a little bit for a while," Bickle said. "I think at the end of last season, I kind of started figuring out charges and positioning wise for me, especially because I'm not as quick as other people."

Bickle said another reason

for her growth is the faith head coach Nicki Collen has had in her since coming to Baylor and working with her over the summer.

"I love her. I really do," Bickle said. "I'm extraordinarily grateful for her and this staff, the confidence that they've given me, the trust that they put in me. The things that I would never have thought about doing on and off the court, I would have never done and now I'm capable of that. They really allowed me to do that this year."

Collen has asked more of Bickle this season than former head coach Kim Mulkey did in the past, often referring to Bickle as the sixth starter. Bickle is playing a career-high in minutes, averaging 23.1 per game, and has seen an uptick in stats.

"She's just such a good utility player," Collen said. "We need the energy that Caitlin brings; she's like a

quarterback. When we're on defense, Cait is an orchestrator. She's back there telling people when to switch and where she's at in help side, and she's just such an amazing communicator that she lifts everybody. People listen to her because she speaks so effectively and loudly."

Collen has also called Bickle a warrior, saying nobody plays more for the name on their chest than her, which Bickle prides herself on. Although Bickle said the last few years have been a roller coaster, she has committed to coming back for one more year.

"It's just home," Bickle said. "I know I'm from a different state and lived there my whole life, but this is definitely home for me ... I love Baylor with all my heart."

"I would not want to be representing any other school besides this school."

Mayer stresses defense, looks ahead to NBA future

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Writer

Senior forward Matthew Mayer has become a staple for the No. 4 Baylor men's basketball program, and he has grown over the years into a national champion and potential NBA prospect.

Coming off a 2021 national title run, Mayer was in a key bench role, expected to inject energy into every game. Thrust into a starting role this year, the 6-foot-9-inch forward knew he had some things to work on to help not only his team, but also his future.

"I was considered a bad defender last year, but I was good at offense," Mayer said. "[I was in the] second round on draft boards, and I was like, 'If I get that defensive tag, one, that will help the team, and two, that'll just boost my draft stock. That was the main goal, and I think I'm doing pretty well right now.'"

Head coach Scott Drew has been there for his entire journey and said Mayer has shown much improvement.

"He's a lot tougher, a lot stronger than he was," Drew said. "His shot's a lot more consistent. His mechanics are a lot better. Defensively, knows

our system better, rebounds better, and his passing has really improved. He's become more consistent with that. Matt's somebody that each and every year, he's become more consistent and bigger, better and stronger."

Looking at film during Mayer's freshman year, Drew didn't recognize the forward anymore, showcasing how far Mayer has come.

"You watch film as you prepare for other games and you look back [to] his freshman year — I was watching Oregon, and I didn't even recognize him out there," Drew said. "Physicality goes in not only playing defense, but holding your position and being able to fight for rebounding. That means he's put in the effort on and off the court in the weight room."

For Mayer, the growth over his four years at Baylor has come in ways outside of personal performance.

"Coming out of high school, I was labeled as talented but not a winner," Mayer said. "It just feels good to be able to prove to myself that I'm gritty and I can help my team win when I play a lot of minutes."

Junior guard Adam Flagler hyped up Mayer's defense, saying the best one-on-ones in practice

are between Mayer and senior guard James Akinjo.

"Matt takes a lot of pride in shutting things down," Flagler said. "He's a really good defender." Those practices end up being intense, healthy competition for the teammates, as Akinjo likes to single Mayer out among others.

"We have a thing called 'Brady' and [in the drill], you pass it to the mismatch," Mayer said. "He calls 'Brady' on me, which doesn't make any sense because I lock him up. I led the country in steal percentage last year. What do you not understand? I'm not a 'Brady.' He always does it on me, and then we just talk trash, but it's good fun."

Drew said he has also noticed the defensive improvements and intensity from Mayer over time.

"[He's] practicing hard, making the right plays, defensively putting in the effort to get better," Drew said. "It's like parenting: As kids get older, you expect better behavior, performance, execution, maturity. I think Matt's somebody that defensively, there's no doubt he's been a lot more solid and done a much better job."



By Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

March 30 - April 1



Wednesday, March 30th

3:30 p.m. Student Literary Awards, Armstrong Browning Library

6:00 p.m. Poetry Reading by [Todd Hearon](#), Bennett Auditorium

Thursday, March 31st

3:30 p.m. Virginia Beall Ball Lecture in Contemporary Poetry by

[Chad Bennett](#), Armstrong Browning Library

6:00 p.m. Poetry Reading by [Vievee Francis](#), Bennett Auditorium

Friday, April 1st

3:30 p.m. Panel discussion, Armstrong Browning Library

6:00 Poetry Reading by [Ilya Kaminsky](#), Bennett Auditorium

The Beall Poetry events are free and open to the public.
The evening events qualify as Creative Arts Experience credits.

Starting five players

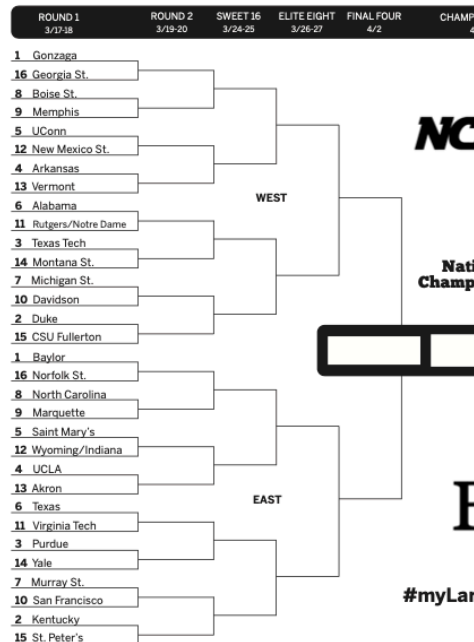
- 1. Sarah Andrews - "The Silent Assassin"**
13.4 points, 5.7 assists, 2.1 steals
- 2. Adam Flagler - "Hot Shot"**
13.4 points, 3.1 assists, 1.1 steals
- 3. James Akinjo - "The Maestro"**
13.4 points, 5.7 assists, 2.1 steals
- 4. Jordan Lewis - "Ms. Dependable"**
11.7 points, 3.6 points, 5.3 assists
- 5. NaLyssa Smith - "The Chosen One"**
22.5 points, 11.5 rebounds, 1.2 blocks
- 6. Kendall Brown - "Freshman Phenom"**
10 points, 4.9 rebounds, 1.9 assists
- 7. Queen Egbo - "Your Highness"**
10.9 points, 8.3 rebounds, 1.8 blocks
- 8. Ja'Mee Asberry - "The Sniper"**
9.8 points, 2.8 rebounds, 1.3 steals
- 9. Matthew Mayer - "Air Mullet"**
9.4 points, 5 rebounds, 1.2 steals
- 10. Flo Thamba - "The Rim Protector"**
6.2 points, 5.6 rebounds, 1 block



NORFOLK STATE

- Going up against the men at 1 p.m. on March 17 at Dickies Arena in Fort Worth
- Won nine of their last 10 games, including six consecutive
- Only played twice in history, Baylor is 2-0
- 24-6 record, 12-2 in the Mid-Eastern Athletic
- Second straight NCAA Tournament appearance, third overall
- Pulled off one of the biggest upsets in tournament history when they beat No. 2 Missouri as No. 15 in 2012
- 1-5 all-time against Big 12 teams
- Senior guard Joe Bryant Jr. leads team in points (16.8) and assists (3.3) per game

FILL IN YOUR OWN! 's MARCH

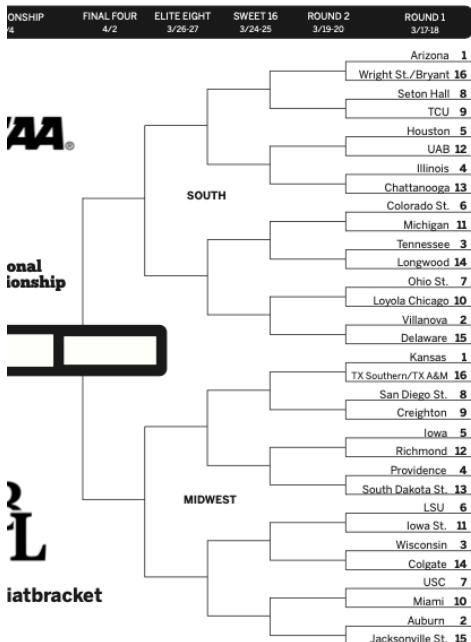


Scan here to compete with the Lariat bracket picks:



MADNESS BRACKET

The Baylor Lariat



HAWAII

- Going up against the women's team at 3 p.m. on March 18 at the Ferrell Center
- First Rainbow Wahine team to win both the regular season and tournament titles in the same season, spanning more than 35 years of conference play
- It's UH's third Big West Tournament title and first since 2016
- 20-9 overall, 20-3 in the Big West
- Won 14 of their last 15 games, dating back to Jan. 29
- Graduate student forward Amy Atwell leading scorer (17.4 points per game) and rebounder (6.7 per game)
- Baylor is 2-0 against UH in its history, the most recent matchup a 77-42 win on Nov. 18, 2012

Ol' Reliable: Thamba sustains dependability for No. 4 MBB

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Writer

Reliable and dependable are the two words used to describe No. 4 Baylor men's basketball senior forward Flo Thamba, who started all 30 games in the 2021 national championship run for the Bears. The four-year journey has been a learning experience, with Thamba playing behind some stellar talent and waiting to anchor down the big-man position.

"I've learned a lot about myself," Thamba said. "One of the biggest things I learned was just my ability to be a leader on this team. This has basically been in the works in just being here for so long and also looking at all the predecessors who were in the past, from Freddie [Gillespie] to Mark [Vital], from Davion [Mitchell] and even all the way back to my freshman year with King McClure and Jake Lindsey. I've been blessed to be a part of different teams and also just have an opportunity to learn a lot from them."

Junior forward Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua suffered an ACL tear on Feb. 12, a massive loss for the Bears. This was a big hit to the size and depth of the team, leaving Thamba to take over the reins and step up into an even bigger role.

For head coach Scott Drew, the key adjustment for Thamba was to limit fouls to ensure he could stay on the court and give Baylor more options.

"I think this thing all of us shared with him is he just has to be wise about foul trouble," Drew said. "When you have a two-headed monster and you have Jon and Flo, it allows you to be ultra aggressive. If you pick up an aggressive foul or careless foul, it's not the end of the world. But now we need Flo to make sure when he fouls, it's appropriately at the right time and not things that put us in jeopardy."

The adjustment went well for the 6-foot-10-inch forward, who has shifted to a less aggressive approach in order to do what's best for the team.

"I've been working with the coaching staff in just pointing out key areas to where I can stay out of foul trouble," Thamba said. "But without, I'd still be very much impactful to the game — my physical presence, especially on the defensive side and also on the offensive side and offensive rebounding. I've always been aggressive but with Jon being out I have to be more cautious



Brittany Tankersley | Photo Editor

TOO MUCH FLO Senior Flo Thamba leads the team to a number one seed in the March Madness Tournament, stepping through the injury of Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua.

about getting to certain areas where I can easily pick up easy and quick fouls. But I feel like I've done a great job at that and also just trusting the coaching staff."

Another area Drew thinks Thamba has become better at is finishing around the rim. Drew is not only happy for Thamba to be doing so well, but glad to see that success being fueled in some way due to Everyday Jon's absence.

"He's done a good job catching and finishing. He's been working hard on that," Drew said. "I know Flo and Jon are really good friends. I know Flo really wants to pick it up and represent Jon out there. I'm really happy for Flo because he's worked really hard."

Thamba likes to reward himself after cleaning up the offensive glass, something extra the coaching staff tells him to do.

"I consider myself an elite offensive rebounder, so [I] just crash the glass and finish

my breakfast," as Coach likes to say," Thamba said.

The forward from the Republic of Congo has spent his entire collegiate career away from his family, not seeing his sister until Baylor's recent senior night. Thamba's parents will also see him play in the green and gold for the first time at 1 p.m. Thursday in Fort Worth at the Dickies Arena for the Bears' first-round matchup against Norfolk State University.

"My sister, that was the first time she had seen me play [since I was a kid]. Similarly, going to be the same thing with my parents," Thamba said. "The last time my parents actually saw me play was senior night back in high school, and ever since then, they've just watched highlights here and there. This is actually the first time they'll be in attendance and watch me play an actual college game."

While not being around his family is

undesirable, Thamba isn't emotional about it and knows how proud his mom is going to be to see her son succeed in the sport he loves.

"I'm not really the type to be emotional like that, but it's just a good feeling," Thamba said. "More so for my mom because she's always supported me in a lot of ways. Just seeing her ... and just seeing the fruits of the labor [of] being away from each other for so long. Seeing how special it is to us like, 'Man, we get to celebrate this thing as a family.'"

Thamba's career at Baylor is now one less away from coming to a close. He said he is grateful to Baylor for his four years as a student-athlete and believes he is a better leader as a result of it.

"I've learned a lot from the stuff done on the court and then just being a better leader off the court," Thamba said. "I just feel like I've grown a lot; four years is a long time."

Queen of the court: Egbo's final reign

ANNAGRACE HALE
Sports Writer

After cutting down the nets on March 6 to celebrate a Big 12 regular season title, it was evident this 2022 Baylor women's basketball squad is a force to be reckoned with. Baylor's program has continued to excel in the Big 12 despite the recent change in coaching staff and slow start to the season. However, it's clear this year has been special, especially for the seniors.

Senior Queen Egbo, a center out of Houston, has been helping the Bears on the court for the last four years. Egbo said this program has allowed her to find growth and consistency in her game.

"I feel like between freshman and junior year I was kind of stagnant," Egbo said. "I had games where I was really good, but then I had games where I wasn't so good. So, it's just kind of hard finding that rhythm. Even though I did start off the season a little slower, I feel like I definitely found my groove now."

Despite a few stumbles earlier this season, the multitude of awards throughout Egbo's collegiate career has displayed her prominent presence in and around the paint. Freshman year, she aided the Bears in winning the 2019 NCAA Championship, and in 2020, she received the Big 12 Sixth Person of the Year Award. This year, as well as last, she was named an honorable mention for the All-Big 12 team.

Many of these awards were earned under former head coach Kim Mulkey's system of play. When current head coach Nicki Collen started this season, there was some question as to whether or not the incoming seniors would stay with the Bears for their final year. For Egbo, the answer was clear.

"I knew my goal was to go to the league," Egbo said. "So with Coach Collen coming in, it really reassured me, 'OK I'm in good hands. I know I'm under a system that can propel me to get to where I need to be.' So there was no need to switch. I mean, how many college coaches do you know come from the WNBA back to college? You don't get that opportunity very often."

For the last three years, Egbo also played under Mulkey's structure and organization. As expected, some adjustments had to be made this year. With Mulkey leading the Baylor program for the last 21 years, the tradition of her system ran deep. With a sudden change, Collen's coaching style presented

some growing pains. The team started their conference play 0-2, falling to the University of Kansas and the University of Oklahoma. However, Egbo said those losses weren't discouraging.

"[Winning is] not going to happen overnight," Egbo said. "I feel like that's kind of what people were expecting with our new coaching staff and everything. They just saw a group of seniors and they saw leaders and they kind of thought, 'Oh well, they should have everything figured out by now.' We didn't even really get a chance to practice with the coaches or anything until the season started because of the coaching changes and everything going on, and so it definitely is going to take time."

Egbo said Collen's system of play is fast-paced with more movement around the court. Mulkey's old-school system was slightly slower, so Egbo said the change was good. In addition, the quicker system has allowed Egbo to prepare for future WNBA play.

Senior forward Nalysa Smith emphasized the positive impact of Collen's change in structure, especially regarding Egbo.

"[Collen] is expanding our game a lot more," Smith said. "It's helping us where I could play outside and Queen can have the whole paint to herself. I feel like that helps with her scoring a lot."

Smith also said she has seen some growth in Egbo throughout their four years together and thinks it could improve draft stock for the upcoming WNBA draft.

"Scoring around the rim for sure, and just falling in love with defense," Smith said. "You see her get these monster blocks every game, and I feel like it can help her stock grow a lot. Where like, a lot of people focus on offense, when you become that one player that focuses on defense, that could raise a lot of people's radar, and I feel like that could help her."

Egbo, Smith and forward Caitlin Bickle, are three seniors who have proudly worn the green and gold the past four years. Together, they've won four Big 12 titles, two Big 12 tournament titles and one NCAA Championship. Now, in their final year, Egbo is excited to finish her collegiate career with them.

"We've been through so much together here these last four years. I think we could write a book about all the stuff we've been through," Egbo said. "It's kind of a sisterhood here, and we know what we expect. We have just been through so much together, so I'm just excited to finish it out with them."



Grace Everett | Photographer

END OF A ERA Queen Egbo reaches her final season with four years of growth alongside the Bears.



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March Madness

New faces in green and gold guard legacy

ANNAGRACE HALE
Sports Writer

With a long history of guards transferring to Baylor, both the men's and women's basketball programs have collected players that demonstrate some of the top talent in the nation. Between these Bear squads, there are three new faces that have exemplified this high caliber of play: James Akinjo, Jordan Lewis and Ja'Mee Asberry.

A player out of Oakland, Calif., Akinjo has found himself at Baylor for his senior year. Previously playing for Georgetown University in the Big East and for the University of Arizona in the Pac 12, playing in Waco has allowed him to perform in the Big 12 for the first time in his career.

Baylor has given Akinjo a chance to not only compete at a high level, but also find victory within these competitions.

"One of the big things on my list [when transferring] was to be a winner. Wherever I went, I wanted to make sure that I showed that I can win," Akinjo said. "Playing with these group of guys — Kendall [Brown], Jeremy [Sochan] and everybody on the team, NBA caliber guys — just shows that I can play with them and win."

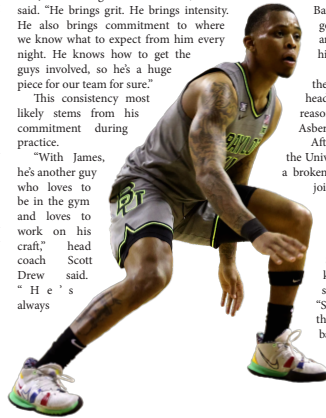
According to senior forward Flo Thamba, Akinjo has only elevated the Bears' game

on the court. His traits of commitment and versatility have made him valuable.

"James is a big tool for our team," Thamba said. "He brings grit. He brings intensity. He also brings commitment to where we know what to expect from him every night. He knows how to get the guys involved, so he's a huge piece for our team for sure."

This consistency most likely stems from his commitment during practice.

"With James, he's another guy who loves to be in the gym and loves to work on his craft," head coach Scott Drew said. "He's always



drenched coming into practice."

The coaching staff, including Drew, was one of the main reasons Akinjo came to Baylor. He said this team has been a good fit because of the coaching staff and ultimately has allowed him to be himself.

Similarly, on the women's side, the leading coaching staff, specifically head coach Nicki Collen, was a major reason guards Jordan Lewis and Ja'Mee Asberry decided to play for Baylor.

After playing the last five seasons at the University of Alabama and overcoming a broken wrist her junior year, Lewis has joined Baylor's team as she completes her graduate degree. She said she was welcomed onto the team and into Waco with open arms.

"She's made a huge impact. She's coming in with so much knowledge already from the game," senior forward Nalyssa Smith said. "She's played so many years, she has the experience, you trust her with the ball in her hands."

Finding success alongside Lewis, Ja'Mee Asberry, a junior transfer from Oklahoma State, embraced Baylor's program.

In an interview with Sic 'Em 365, Asberry said after she entered the transfer portal, Collen immediately reached out.

"I was like 'Yeah, [Baylor] is my dream school, so I'm down. You don't even have to tell me,' I was ready to be a part of this Baylor team," Asberry said.

For Collen, adding Asberry to the Bears' roster was important, especially after the guard's season at Oklahoma State. With the Cowboys, she had doubled her scoring average and led the Big 12 in a multitude of offensive categories. Collen said she saw her as a great offensive fit for this Baylor team.

As these three guards have taken the court for the green and gold this season, not only have these players aided Baylor to be the first school since 2013 to have both men's and women's basketball programs in the top-two seeds for the NCAA Tournament but also the Bears have allowed these players to experience elite wins.

"I've been really productive scoring and assisting at other programs, but I haven't had a chance to win a conference championship and really win at a high level," Akinjo said. "I am so thankful for the opportunity and so thankful to be in the position that I'm in with these guys and it means a lot to me."

Pictured: James Akinjo by Baylor Photography

MAKING HER MARK from Page 1

"Just getting to coach this special group of players, I didn't want to let them down as much as anything," Collen said. "As much as I know we caught some flack from fans, it was about the people in the locker room and the administration, that was our main focus. For me, it was doing a good job for them so that people could say I was the right person at the right time to take over this program."

And that's exactly what she did. After losing to the University of Oklahoma 83-77, Collen asked fans to trust the process and believe that their best basketball would come in March. So far that seems to be the case. The Bears went on to win 15 of their next 16 games to close the regular season out with a 25-5 record and a 15-3 conference record, good enough to win the Big 12 title outright. It seemed as if Baylor was getting better each and every game, going from nail-biting victories to the blowouts that so many Baylor fans were accustomed to. Collen said it was the adversity early on that made the team stronger.

"It brought us closer together," Collen

said. "It was like, 'This is our circle. These are our people. This is who we're doing it for, and we're going to do it for each other. We're going to do it because we believe in one another, because we believe in what we're doing.' We've come a long way and I'm just super proud of how far we've come."

Baylor carried that momentum into the Big 12 tournament as Collen became the first first-year head coach to reach the championship game since 1997. While the Bears ultimately didn't get the result they wanted, losing to the University of Texas 67-58, Collen convinced the doubters she could lead the program in the right direction.

"Going into such a big role at Baylor and having to fill that, a lot of people can be overlooked in that position," Smith said. "I feel like she's doing a great job, though. I feel like the world should know that, too."

While it took some time to get the fans back on board, it seemed as if she had won her players over instantly with the confidence and belief she instilled in them as they bought into her system and continued to express their

support for her.

"She has a very different approach," Lewis said. "First and foremost, she calls herself a player coach and she's 100% that. She trusts all of us and she challenges all of us. She gave us each [a] role to fulfill this year and we've had to adapt to that. Playing for her, she's always going to believe in you. She's going to be confident in you, but you have to first believe in yourself. Playing for her and her as a coach, she's an amazing person and she's always going to try to put you in the best position."

While the goal is and always has been to win a national championship, at the end of day, Collen wants her squad to appreciate everything they've accomplished so far.

"I challenged them that for us right now, I want to cherish every day I have with this group," Collen said. "I want them to cherish every day that they have together, to understand this might be the best team they ever play on. Hopefully it's not, but if it is, that they've really poured themselves into it and gotten a lot out of it."

ON THE HUNT

from Page 1

and Akinjo is averaging 5.7 assists, leading the Big 12.

"Even with a lot of injuries, we're still one of the best teams in the country," Akinjo said. "To have this No. 1 seed is a testament to how hard our guys have worked, and how well our coaches have kind of executed game plans throughout the year."

The Bears officially begin their quest for a second national title against Norfolk State University at 1 p.m. Thursday in the Dickies Arena in Fort Worth. Norfolk (24-6, 12-2 Mid-Eastern Athletic) has won nine of its last 10 games and enters the tournament on an automatic bid after winning the MEAC Tournament. Ten years ago, they were able to pull off a big upset against the second-seeded University of Missouri.

"Norfolk State is a team that's had tournament success before," Drew said. "They've had a history of winning and doing well, especially the last nine years."

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