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Photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics

DEFEND THE DEN Baylor’s secondary will look much different after losing multiple players to the NFL draft, but the returners remain hungry and focused to secure a successful season once again.

New ‘robbers and jackers’ motto to force turnovers

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Editor

In 2021, Baylor football used a “take three” mentality on defense that was started by former associate head coach Joey McGuire. The basis of the mindset was that if the Bears forced three turnovers in one game, the odds of winning were greatly increased.

McGuire’s greedy approach proved effective, as Baylor finished third in the nation in turnover margin last season on the way to a 12-win campaign. With McGuire now being the head football coach at Texas Tech University, the 2021 Big 12 champs have a new gimmick to fire themselves up.

“We have a new little saying: robbers and jackers,” fifth-year safety Christian Morgan said. “Coach C.Y. [linebacker coach Caleb Collins] came up with it for turnovers, and it’s going to be good for us. We want turnovers to be real high.”

Junior linebacker Will Williams gave his best description of the new mantra the defense is using to help take the football from the opposing offenses.

“If you take something from somebody, you’re going to go to jail,” Williams said. “It’s like, we’re going to take the football. We’re like jackers and robbers. So [we’re] really motivated.”

The motto started late in fall camp and is still a new concept, but sophomore defensive back AJ McCarty said it’s a way defensive players can be more amped up to force turnovers.

“I think that’s really cool because it just makes us want to attack the ball more and more aggressively, so it’ll carry over to the game,” McCarty said.

Even though it’s a fresh mindset, the coaches give out small prizes to guys on defense who take the football from the offense in camp. Those small gifts have already increased motivation for the athletes.

“Of course there’s a prize after,” Williams said. “Every time you get the ball out or you get a pick or interception, [we get] candy or we’re going to get T-shirts and bracelets. That brings out more competition.”

Williams does have a favorite prize so far, even though they aren’t as lucrative as they might be later on in the season.

“The prizes haven’t really been established, but I’ve gotten candy already,” Williams said. “I do enjoy the candy.”

Along with this, he said having a mantra like robbers and jackers has instilled new life and motivation to the defense.

“When you give yourself jackers and robbers, it makes you look forward to doing something new,” Williams said. “You focus on just wanting to hit the ball [or] trying to get the

ball out.”

In the 2021 Big 12 championship game, the Bears intercepted Oklahoma State University’s offense four times. Despite the game coming down to literal inches, the group most likely would not have been in a spot to win had the defense not stepped up.

Months later, the team still embodies making those splash plays in order to give possession back to the offense.

“We take a lot of pride in that,” junior safety Devin Neal said. “Forcing turnovers is really what gets everything going. We have a wonderful offense, and we’d do anything to get the ball back in their hands.”

The secondary will look a lot different this year after losing JT Woods, Jalen Pitre, Kalon Barnes, Raleigh Texada and Jairon McVea to the NFL draft. It’s not easy to replace those positions, but Morgan played alongside those guys and is returning for his fifth year.

He saw firsthand how those guys approached practice and games, and he knows it won’t be easy to replicate similar success. To him, having a strong work ethic will put them in the best position to reach their goals.

“I feel like these two groups are completely different,” Morgan said. “Last year’s group really came in every day and we worked ... So no, I’m not going to say this group is going to be better. We have to come in [and] we have to

work every day, because we have high standards that we want to achieve.”

McCarty, who played behind the other cornerbacks, is confident in this year’s secondary unit.

“We have guys that are just as capable to do the same thing that we did last year, maybe even better,” McCarty said. “Especially if we can all connect as a team, everything will just be more smooth.”

Keep an eye on the Baylor sidelines this season, as there may be some sort of prop, dance or gesture indicating the robbers and jackers gimmick. It’s all part of what Williams described as the Baylor culture.

“When I think of culture, I think of family,” Williams said. “We built our own family here at Baylor University where we keep pounding the rock [and] we have the jackers and robbers. We find our own little things to motivate ourselves, [and] it continues to push us to get a Big 12 championship or national championship.”

If the gimmick works like “take three” did, Williams said robbers and jackers has the potential to stick with Baylor football for a long time.

“Jackers and robbers, I feel like that’s going to be staying around with Baylor as long as [Coach] Caleb is here,” Williams said.

ARANDA from Page 1

every player.

“I think for there to be enough trust and love, really, where guys make themselves available to each other,” Aranda said. “Whether you’re not pretending or performing or trying to be what you think a coach wants you to be or what you think a position group wants you to be, but for you to really be yourself. When you do have that feeling, to kind of put it out there under the lights and all of it, take the praise and the criticism and know that that’s what you did — that’s not who you are.”

That genuineness is something that has positively struck Aranda’s players.

“Coach Aranda has always been 100% real with me,” sophomore wide receiver Hal Presley said. “He’s the realest coach I’ve ever met.”

When Aranda joined the program in 2020, he didn’t have the smoothest start with the green and gold. The team went 2-7 in a shortened season that was obstructed by the pandemic.

It would have been easy for the team to be discouraged and not buy into what the new head coach was trying to build. However, sixth-year

senior wideout Gavin Holmes said what Aranda preached spoke levels to the squad and thus led to future success.

“We all bought into Coach Aranda, and we all believed, we all believed in each other,” Holmes said. “We had great relationships on the team, with our coaches, and I think that’s just carried on to this year. And now, we can keep that tradition going.”

Even seventh-year quarterback Luke Anthony, who’s new to the program, sees the culture Aranda has built. Anthony transferred from Louisiana Tech University after spending three seasons with Abilene Christian University.

Anthony has been all over, but the 24-year-old said if he could do it all over again, Baylor would be his choice.

“They’ve established a great culture, and these guys have been awesome,” Anthony said. “I’ve told everyone this is the place that if I had the opportunity to play here the whole time, I would’ve never passed up to begin with. I think Coach Aranda’s done a great job cultivating a positive culture, and the guys really care

about each other, and the coaches care about the players.”

The Dallas native said the positive environment is one of the reasons the Bears transitioned from a 2-7 finish to a 12-2 finish in just one year. He said the family-type bond makes it seamless for any player to fit in.

“I feel like that’s why this program’s made a huge leap in the last year, just based on what I’ve heard being around here a short time,” Anthony said. “I think guys just buy into that mission. Kind of less of just a ‘meat market’ and a little more like, ‘Hey, we care about you, and we’re going to make you the best player possible.’ It’s easy for guys to buy into that.”

Baylor hopes to utilize that bond in order to find success when it opens the season against the University of Albany. The contest is set for 6 p.m. Saturday at McLane Stadium and can be watched on Big 12 Now on ESPN+ or listened to via ESPN Central Texas 1660 AM radio.

SPIRIT from Page 1

Alley, I find that brick and make a point and take a moment to just remember Frank,” Morris said. “That’s a real highlight of every home game.”

In addition to the spirit squads and the audio booth, there is the usually unseen marketing and fan engagement department of Baylor athletics.

Erin Bean, assistant athletic director for strategic marketing and fan engagement and a former athlete herself, said she understands the importance of telling the stories of student-athletes, communicating with a fanbase and creating an overall exemplary fan experience on game days. In her first year here, she was a part of events such as ESPN College Gameday and FOX’s Big Noon Kickoff.

“If fans just understand the impact that they play on the competition, it makes such a huge difference,” Bean said. “There are just so many opportunities to be a fan, whether you are a student or whether you are just John Doe walking down the street.”

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Football Preview

Emerging leader: Doyle steps up his game

ANNAGRACE HALE
Sports Writer

Defense wins championships, and Baylor football knows this from experience. Look at Dec. 4, 2021, when Jairon McVea stuffed Oklahoma State University’s offense on the goal line to win the Big 12 Championship. This season, fifth-year senior linebacker Dillion Doyle looks to continue defensive success by stepping up to command the Bears’ defense as a leader, mentor and teacher.

Now that prominent Baylor names like Terrel Bernard, JT Woods and Jalen Pitre have left Waco to embark on their NFL journeys, Doyle has taken on a larger role. The defensive unit now looks to the Iowa City, Iowa, native for guidance.

“Having that teacher’s mindset once you know the



Baylor University Photography Database

LEADER IN THE MAKING Dillion Doyle (5) is stepping into an increased role after losing wingman Terrel Bernard.

material and helping everyone around you [is important],” Doyle said. “I got that from Jalen Pitre, I got that from Terrel Bernard. That’s kind of the culture we’ve built at Baylor, and I’m just really proud to be a part of that and to be a part of that servant

leadership mindset that Coach [Dave] Aranda preaches.”

Doyle came to Baylor as a sophomore in 2020 after playing in the Big Ten for the University of Iowa. Since then, he has found success on both sides of the football. He finished last season recording

91 tackles — the second-most on the team — coupled with two touchdowns as part of the offense. Doyle has received numerous honors while at Baylor, including All-Big 12 honorable mentions in 2020 and 2021.

A veteran player among the linebackers, Doyle has become the quarterback of the defense, not only learning plays for himself but also teaching them to his teammates.

“Dillion makes time to make his own cuts; he studies it,” Aranda said. “We talked about, ‘You get all this information. You’re collecting dots, putting it together.’ Being able to teach it is the connection of the dots. He does that. What a valuable lesson for some of our younger guys. He is being a mentor to them, and I think he is well on his way to having a really good season.”

Even seasoned players, such as junior linebacker Matt Jones, continue to learn from Doyle. The linebacker group this year is big, but Jones said with size comes depth and talent with Doyle at the front.

“He’s done a great job of taking charge, being a leader, getting to know every single one of the inside linebackers,” Jones said. “He’s real good at bringing everyone together, and he’s teaching me a lot.”

Additionally, Doyle has gained respect outside of the linebacker group, and other defensive players look up to him.

“He’s been one of those people who has been a vocal leader and one of those people who lead by example every day,” senior defensive lineman TJ Franklin said. “He gets everywhere on time beforehand. He comes and does extra work after practice. He’s one of those players who

lives what he talks.”

Doyle heads this defensive corps with a relationship mindset, being open and willing to help.

“I would say it is a responsibility, but I think it is just serving the guys around me,” Doyle said. “It’s asking what they need. It’s asking if I can help them do anything to learn the defense better, if I can help them with a technique here or there.”

The Bears’ defense will be tested in the season opener as they guard McLane Stadium against the University of Albany on Saturday.

“McLane is a special place to all of us,” Doyle said. “When we step on this turf, everything is intentional, and we want to really put our brand on tape and make sure we are playing Baylor football and being intentional, focused and driven in all that we do.”

Students meet the Bears ahead of Baylor season

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Editor

Baylor’s faithful had the opportunity to meet the Bears on Saturday in the athletic department’s annual event at McLane Stadium. All Baylor sports that weren’t traveling were in attendance, and it gave Bears fans the chance to meet the athletes they root for on a daily basis.

Students were able to show up for a two-hour window and get autographs while quickly chatting with their favorite players.

Harriman, Utah, freshman Patrick Swanson said he heard about the event through email and that it felt nice to see McLane Stadium.

“I just thought it’d be kind of cool just to come see the stadium [and] get to know people,” Swanson said.

Not all students knew about the event in advance, such as Cypress freshman Kayla Hetmaniak. She said her first-year community leader informed her, thus igniting the decision to make the trip across the Brazos River.

Hetmaniak went to Line Camp and said she loves all of Baylor’s traditions. She said the addition of Meet the Bears was the cherry on top.

“It’s just different because I wasn’t expecting this whenever I came in,” Hetmaniak said. “Just all of the traditions that we had on top of this already, it’s really exciting to have.”

Some students knew athletes beforehand and used the event as an excuse to joke around with their friends. This was the case for Katy junior Rueben Pimentil, as he enjoyed tapping into his current friendships, as well as making new ones.

“Most of my friends are on the track and field team,” Pimentil said. “I get to get their autograph and just mess around with them, meet other athletes as well. It’s a cool environment.”

Pimentil said his Saturday experience gave him a glimpse into the atmosphere of his dream career.

“I want to work in college athletics after I graduate, so just trying to get my feet wet,



Assoah Ndomo | Photographer

BEARY EXCITED Baylor students rushed at the opportunity to “Meet the Bears” this year.

and just kind of get out in the environment,” Pimentil said.

A week ahead of the Baylor football home opener against the University of Albany, students got fired up knowing

they’d be in a packed McLane Stadium soon.

“I’m so excited,” Hetmaniak said. “I want to run the Line for it.”

Pimentil said he is ready

for week one, and he expects the Bears to handle the Great Danes with ease.

“I’m so excited,” Pimentil said. “We’re going to get it on, we’re going to get business taken care of.”

Baylor will play Albany 6 p.m. on Saturday at McLane Stadium.

Check out the LTVN coverage below!



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The question of the hour:

Students weighed in on this season’s potential — here’s what they said

Bloomington, Ill., junior Jonah Kramer

Hardest game: Oklahoma
Why: I’m torn between the road game in Salt Lake City and the game in Norman. Oklahoma is definitely a better team than BYU, but playing the Cougars in week two at night will be a tough early test for the Bears. Overall, though, I think Oklahoma’s talent makes them the tougher draw, especially since Baylor has only won in Norman once out of 15 tries all time.

Wylie sophomore Matthew Cox

Record: 11-1
Why: [Our] tough road schedule and having to travel to BYU, OU and UT will be difficult and will leave little margin for error. Oklahoma State at home may end up being the most difficult game of the year. Baylor won a lot of close games last season, and it seems hard to believe they can continue to scratch out close wins at the rate they did last year. That said, the team is returning a lot of starters, and Baylor can absolutely go undefeated if everything goes right. I tend to think there will be at least one slip-up along the way though — which is not necessarily damaging to a playoff bid. How quickly Shapen steps into the offense will be key to how the season plays out, especially in balancing a solid rushing attack from last year with a more consistent passing offense.

Temecula, Calif., sophomore Jacob Haddadin

Hardest game: Oklahoma
Why: Baylor hasn’t won in Norman in years! And it will be seen how strong Oklahoma football is around the week we are playing them. They either could be the strong Oklahoma they have been in the past or a team that is rebuilding. Dillon Gabriel will have a great year, but whether those pieces around him and that defense stays strong will have to be seen. Baylor has some rough road games this year in hostile environment. West Virginia on a Thursday is going to be a crazy environment that hopefully can be controlled by a dominant Shapen performance. BYU in Provo is also a tough game as it will be a 7:30 p.m. kick-off, and BYU will be ready to target Shapen as it will be his first real start, as the Starting QB.
I have total faith in this coaching staff, and there are no games that are bona-fide losses in our schedule. In every game this year we are the favorite. Baylor football better be ready to be hunted by BYU and every other Big 12 team.

Fate senior freshman Jenna Patterson

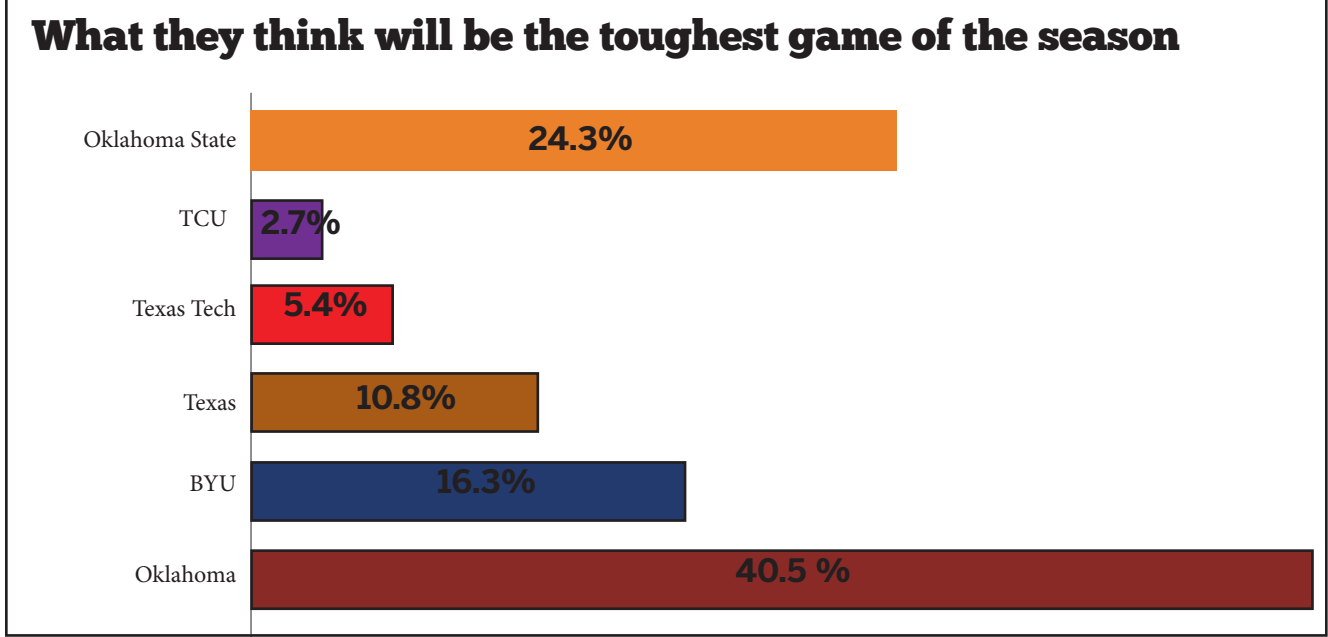
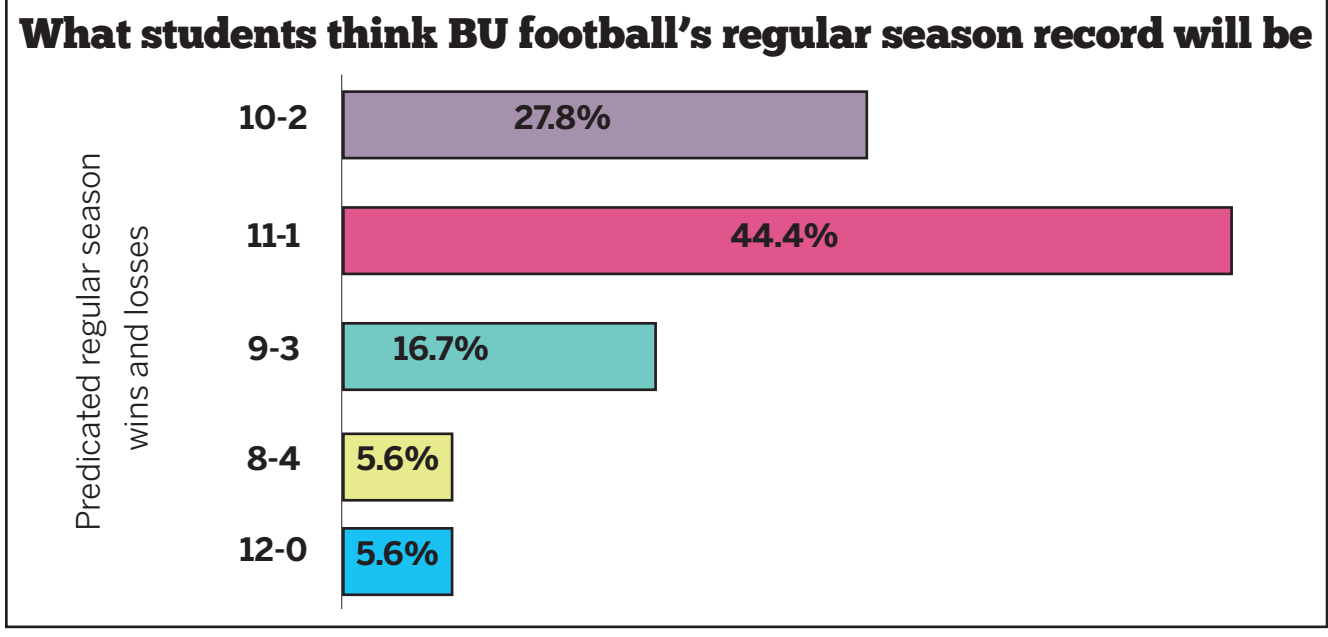
Record: 10-2
Why: I have full confidence in our team being amazing this year, despite losing a lot of talent. That being said, we struggle on the road at times, and I don’t see us winning out on the road, especially with some tough road atmospheres like BYU, Oklahoma, Iowa State and West Virginia. I think we have the talent and potential to go 12-0, but realistically I think we will drop a couple of road games.

Bakersfield, Calif., Evan Apple

Hardest game: BYU
Why: It’s only week two, and we might not have everything figured out. It’s a night game in a rowdy environment, and its quarterback Blake Shapen’s first real road test of his career against a BYU team that won 10 games both of the last two years.



GREEN HOT Baylor football players run out of the tunnel prior to kickoff.



Both graphs are based on 36 responses to Lariat social media polls



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BAYLOR FOOTBALL


2022

Home Games

WHAT ARE YOUR PREDICTIONS?















SEP 3 - VS UALBANY

SEP 10 - VS BYU

SEP 17 - VS TEXAS STATE

SEP 24 - VS IOWA STATE

OCT 1 - VS OKLAHOMA STATE

OCT 13 - VS WEST VIRGINIA

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FINAL RECORD

What’s in store for 2022?



Josh McSwain | Baylor RoundUp
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SCHEDULE

Big 12

OUR TOP PICKS?

	BAYLOR	OR	OTHER
OCT 22 - VS KANSAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
OCT 29 - VS TEXAS TECH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
NOV 5 - VS OKLAHOMA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
NOV 12 - VS KANSAS STATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
NOV 19 - VS TCU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
NOV 25 - VS TEXAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

Illustration by Olivia Havre | Photographer

Then the Lariat sports desk gave their responses and predictions too

Michael Haag, Sports Editor

Feedback: It’s hard to believe that after going 2-7 in 2020, here we are contemplating if Baylor can be back-to-back Big 12 champs. I noticed that the road schedule kept getting brought up; that is my biggest concern. The Bears have most of their toughest games on the road this season, which will make it even harder to replicate successes seen last season. Most of Baylor’s close wins against the best Big 12 teams came from the comfort of McLane Stadium, really adding pressure to the group in the coming year. Lastly, several responses noted that Baylor lost some key players. While this is true, look through the current depth chart. Even after losing lots of standout athletes, the Bears are three-deep at several crucial positions. This is a reassuring thing to hear after losing six guys to the NFL.

Record: 9-3

Why: Part of me wants to say 8-4 or even 7-5, but I’m going to give head coach Dave Aranda and the group the benefit of the doubt in some of those tough games. I don’t expect Baylor to lose any home games for the second consecutive season, but the road slate is just brutal. I bet the Bears will lose against Brigham Young University, the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas this season. Despite the daunting road test that 2022 brings, I think Baylor will learn a lot from a week-two loss to BYU. That loss will prepare the group for conference play and allow them to win some of those coin-flip matchups.

Hardest game: University of Oklahoma

Why: Everything in me wants to say the BYU game, but we all know the pressure cranks up when the real season begins. As much as the non-conference slate matters, when the green and gold roll into Norman, Okla., it’s game on. The Sooners will be ready for revenge after last season, and it will be a very tough environment to succeed in. The Bears have a really bad track record against OU, easily making this the toughest game of the year.

Gio Gennero, Sports Writer

Feedback: I love seeing that our fans are still riding high after the historical season the Bears just had. What more can be said that hasn’t already been said: Baylor’s first 12-win season, along with a Big 12 championship and a Sugar Bowl win. This year is going to be a very interesting one because even though we lost key players, we have a lot of key returners to mix in with hungry newcomers. All of this mixed with the cemented leadership of head coach Dave Aranda and his seasoned coaching staff can easily lead to another successful season for Baylor football.

Record: 9-3

Why: The schedule is not made for this to be a cakewalk for Baylor. They have so many road games against good teams that are even better on their home-fields. However, after a road loss or two, the Bears will get back on track and likely go on a mid-season win streak to get back into Big 12 conversation. If the Bears can keep the Big 12 race close, I believe they will close out the season strong and come through in games where Big 12 championship appearances are on the line. It took a lot of stars perfectly lining up for Baylor to achieve the things they did last season; I believe we’ll be just as good of a team but won’t have the same story.

Hardest game: University of Oklahoma

Why: Normally I’m quick to say TCU will be the toughest matchup of the season, simply because no team loves giving Baylor unnecessary problems like TCU. With that being said, Oklahoma on the road is a crazy tough game. It isn’t an impossible game, and I don’t think Baylor will get blown out, but I don’t see many scenarios where the Bears come out victorious. However, there is a chance that with Lincoln Riley leaving OU, they won’t be the same high-level program they have been.

AnnaGrace Hale, Sports Writer

Feedback: Pretty much the overall consensus is that road games for Baylor will be tough, and I agree. This season, big teams like BYU and OU are hosting the Bears, and those matchups will be challenging, even if they were at McLane. Claiming their only two losses on the road last season, the team will have to put the past behind them and come into road games with confidence. Additionally, the Bears lost a few key defensive players to the NFL draft, so the D-line will have to step up against these big opponents.

Record: 9-3

Why: Coming from the approach of which games Baylor will lose this season, I’m thinking BYU, Texas and either OU or Oklahoma State. All these games are on the road, which will be a challenge within itself. The BYU game is in a completely different time zone with a late start time. Texas is scheduled the day after Thanksgiving in Austin. I don’t think the Bears will fall to both OU and Oklahoma State, but probably one of the two. OU will be back looking for revenge after the upset last season, and Oklahoma State will be back with a vengeance after being humiliated on their own goal line in the championship. Other than these four or five games, if Blake Shapen can show what he can do and the defense stays solid each week, the season will be good.

Hardest game: BYU

Why: Although this game will be a good physical battle for Baylor, mentally the matchup will be tolling. BYU is the second game of the season, and the Bears will still be settling into season play with some new faces in the green and gold. The game will kick off at 9:15 p.m. CST — a rather late game time, which could cause some sluggishness. Additionally, Baylor will be in a new environment surrounded by rambunctious Cougar fans. If each player gets past the mental barrier of this game, they may be able to secure a win.

Unproven but not untested: Shapen learns to be a leader

GIO GENNERO
Sports Writer

For the third straight year, Baylor football finds itself with a new player under center. Sophomore Blake Shapen was named starter back in April, following yet another offseason battle for the quarterback spot. After one of the best seasons in program history, all eyes are on Shapen.

Although unproven as the full-time starter, the 6-foot, 200-pound slinger is not untested. In the 2021 Big 12 Championship, Shapen stepped in for an injured Gerry Bohanon and caught the attention of everyone who watched. Shapen came out of the gates with guns blazing, with a record-setting 17 straight completions to start the game — enough to take home the Most Outstanding Player award.

Shapen acknowledged his unique position and said he and the team are improving overall.

“We’re all learning together,” Shapen said. “I’m still technically inexperienced, and I still have something to prove, and so we’re all going out there together to do that. I’m glad I get to do it with these guys.”

Following his big game and his performance this spring, Shapen was able to win over head coach Dave Aranda in order to get the starting position. Aranda said he is seeing good things from the new leader of the offense, and the team is seeing it too.

“Blake’s been really impressive,” Aranda said. “There were a couple throws where the zip is on the ball, the placement, where it’s at, the anticipation, the timing. We’ve got a fair amount of guys — Ben Sims was one of them — where after a throw, he would

come up to Blake and go, ‘Man, that was awesome! Great throw!’”

One of the question marks surrounding Shapen being named starter was the idea that Bohanon was a more natural leader who had earned the respect of the team. However, Aranda said he is noticing Shapen step into his role as leader well, as he has become more communicative with and thoughtful of his teammates.

“Blake, with all of it, is continuing to kind of stay attached to kind of the day-to-day process and is bringing guys along with him in terms of ‘This is how I study; this is what I do,’” Aranda said. “I think that’s a big stretch for him. He’s a very private dude, and I think he’s doing it in a really great way.”

Shapen commented on his new leadership role and said it has been one of his main focuses as he prepares for the season.

“I’m not a backup quarterback anymore, so I have to take full control of everything that’s going on on the field,” Shapen said. “I learned a lot of things being the backup, so stepping up into a leadership role and things like that is key for me right now.”

Shapen has not only impressed Aranda; seventh-year quarterback Luke Anthony and junior tight end Drake Dabney both sang high praises when talking about the new starter’s throwing ability.

“He’s got exceptional twitch, you know,” Anthony said. “You see guys like Aaron Rodgers and Zach Wilson where they can kind of just throw it from any angle — you know, different arm angles, lightning quick release and a lot of velocity. It’s not necessarily like a power throw or like some of these guys that you’ve seen in the past, but just a really good, twitchy thrower.”

“He can spin it for sure,” Dabney said. “He’s going to put it on you. He’s got it. He has a real good touch, and he knows just where



Josh Wilson | Baylor Roundup

LEAPS AND BOUNDS Blake Shapen rushes toward endzone at the Big 12 Championship Game against Oklahoma State University on Dec. 4, 2021.

to put the ball.”

The Shapen show begins soon as Baylor football kicks off the season at 6 p.m. Saturday against the University at Albany in McLane Stadium.

Bears aren’t complacent after historic 2021 season



Josh Wilson | Baylor Roundup

ARMS UP Baylor football gathers on the sideline of the field to celebrate its Big 12 Championship victory.

GIO GENNERO
Sports Writer

Last season, Baylor football saw tremendous success. Its 12-win season culminated not only in a Big 12 title but also in a Sugar Bowl victory. Its triumphant season caught many by surprise, and now one question remains: How will the reigning conference champions follow up arguably the best season in program history?

“Last year we took everybody by surprise, but this year it’s no surprise,” fifth-year senior cornerback Mark Milton said. “Every game is

going to be their Super Bowl ... It’s not really any added-on pressure, because if they knew or didn’t know, we were going to do the same thing.”

It can be easy to get comfortable after a historic season, but that doesn’t seem to be the case with the Bears. Senior wide receiver Gavin Holmes said despite the success last season, the team remains focused and hungry, especially with a new target on their back.

“We’re just all juiced up, but we’re all humble and we’re ready,” Holmes said. “We have something to prove. Working hard on not being complacent,

knowing that there’s always another game, there’s always more to accomplish — that’s our mindset.”

With the season just around the corner, preseason polls have Baylor ranked No. 10. Despite the high praise, senior defensive lineman Brayden Utley said the team does not pay attention to things like this throughout the season; he said they are more focused on playing to their best ability.

“We just keep doing our thing,” Utley said. “We just keep working, keep playing the way we are and keep playing as a team. That’s the best way we can combat anything coming

from the outside in terms of pressure or expectations.”

During the offseason, the team lost multiple standout athletes, including six players who were selected in the NFL draft. With the departure of so many seasoned vets, there are big shoes to fill for the Bears lacing up their cleats this year.

Junior linebacker Garmon Randolph gave one solution to handle the nerves of stepping into those roles.

“We have to raise the bar,” Randolph said. “Everybody that’s coming back — we have to make up for our guys that’s gone. We’re going to do it, too.”

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Football Preview

Baylor football’s three-headed monster

Three elite players, one D-line, one problem

ANNAGRACE HALE
Sports Writer

Three-headed monsters are no longer a myth. In fact, one lives in the trenches of Waco; it’s called the Baylor defensive line.

Defensive linemen Siaki “Apu” Ika, Gabe Hall and Jaxon Player merge together on the line of scrimmage to create quite the trio for opposing offensive coordinators to deal with. Each head has a unique role, but joined, they serve to wreak havoc for opposing offenses.

For 2022, Baylor football’s D-line is composed of experienced upperclassmen who know their way around the sport.

“We haven’t had a lot of older guys like this,” Hall said. “With this many older people, we can all put our input in and get each other better. You can study film and be like, ‘I think you can do this. I think you can do that.’ It’s like a brotherhood, and it just makes us really strong.”

One of these notable seasoned players is Salt Lake City junior Siaki “Apu” Ika.

The Utah native played under head coach Dave Aranda’s defensive system as an LSU freshman in 2019. He transferred to Baylor in 2020 and immediately made an impact on a

“

I just like to win. I try to do my job – do what’s asked of me. As long as we win, that’s all that matters to me.

SIAKI “APU” IKA | JUNIOR DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

conference-wide level.

In 2021, he claimed major awards, such as Big 12 Defensive Newcomer of the Year and AP All-Big 12 First Team. Additionally, he just received 2022 Preseason Best Defensive Lineman in Texas from Dave Campbell’s Texas Football publication.

Despite the accolades, Apu only has one thing on his mind.

“I just like to win,” Apu said. “I try to do my job — do what’s asked of me. As long as we win, that’s all that matters to me.”

Pounding the rock alongside Apu is Waller junior Gabe Hall.

An absolute athletic unit, he has not only size and strength but also agility. He can maneuver around offensive lines and hunt down quarterbacks, recording three sacks against Kansas State last season. Hall said this season’s group is unlike any other.

“I’ve never played with a stacked defense like this, especially the defensive line,” Hall said. “We push each other a lot, more than I’ve been pushed in my life, and it’s very exciting because it makes everybody better on the team.”

While Hall said he is being pushed by his teammates, his companions are looking up to him to set the standard.

“One guy that has been standing out obviously has been Gabe Hall,” sixth-year senior defensive lineman Chidi Ogbonnaya said. “He’s just been doing some crazy stuff all around.”

During fall camp, the offensive and defensive lines got to compete against each other at the line of scrimmage during practice countless times.

“I go against Gabe Hall and Apu every single play,” sixth-year offensive lineman Jacob Gall said. “Those two guys are amazing I think. Obviously, both are two of the best in the nation.”

With the anchor of Apu and the strength of Hall, fifth-year senior Jaxon Player steps in to complete the beast.

A transfer from the University of Tulsa, Player is the new guy on the block — but



BIG DAWGS Siaki “Apu” Ika (left), Jaxon Player (middle) and Gabe Hall (right) worked hard during fall camp as they look to continue dominance and high production from defensive line.

Photos courtesy of Baylor Athletics

only slightly. Waco is his hometown, and the Midway High School graduate has returned to play for the green and gold.

“I’m very comfortable with the defense now,” Player said. “I’ve got the hang of things. I have great teammates that help me learn every day ... Anything I need, they help me with, so it’s been a smooth transition.”

Player had some dominant seasons in the American Athletic Conference, as he claimed two First Team All-AAC awards in 2020 and 2021. Player stepped up in big games, forcing a fumble against No. 2 University of Cincinnati and recording tackles for losses against No. 9 Ohio State University and Oklahoma State University.

Player joined a group that has lots of depth, but that didn’t deter him from his decision.

“He is not scared of competition,” Hall said. “He’s going to go out there, he’s going to push himself and he’s going to get better. He doesn’t care how stacked we are, how many people there are. He’s just going to come out here and play his hardest and get better every day.”

As Apu, Hall and Player take the field this season, their goals align to make one animal, ready to shift the tide of a game.

“The mission is the same,” Apu said. “We are pounding the rock every day, getting ready for


“

One guy that has been standing out obviously has been Gabe Hall. He’s just been doing some crazy stuff all around.

CHIDI OGBONNAYA | SIXTH-YEAR SENIOR DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

week one.”

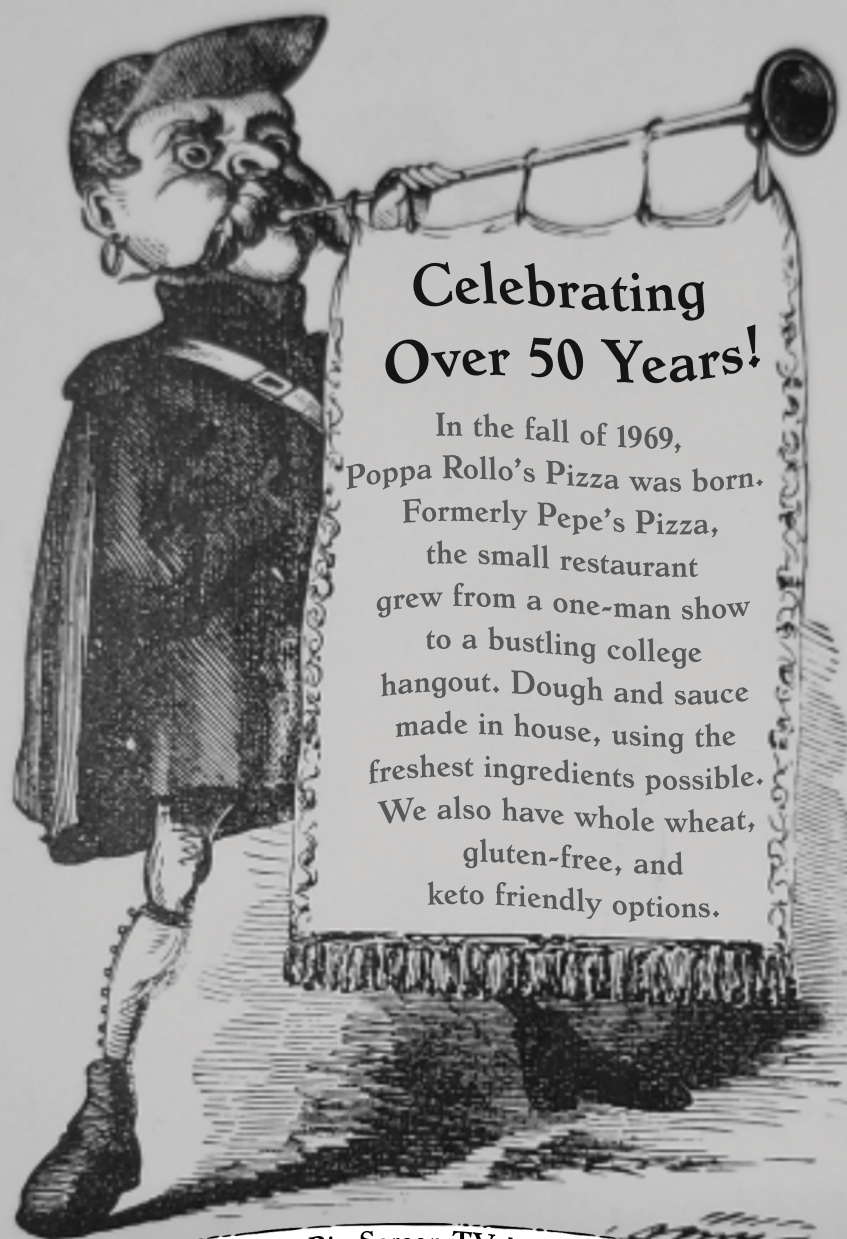
This three-headed beast will come to life against the University of Albany at 6 p.m. on Saturday at McLane Stadium.



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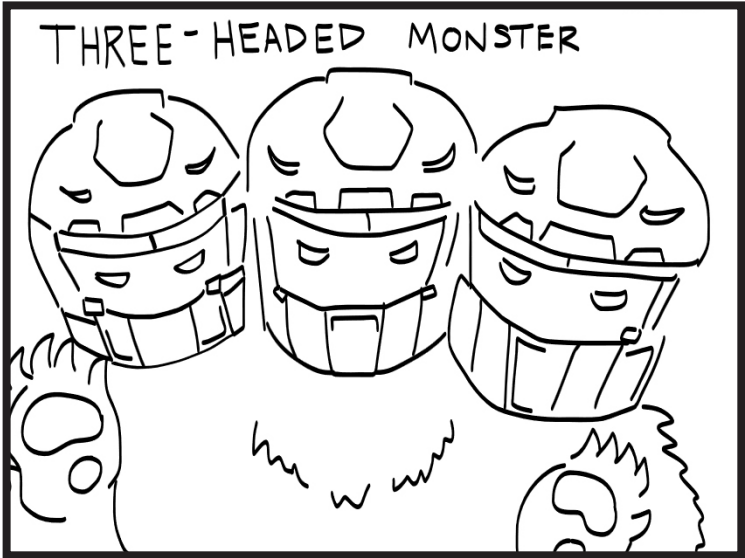
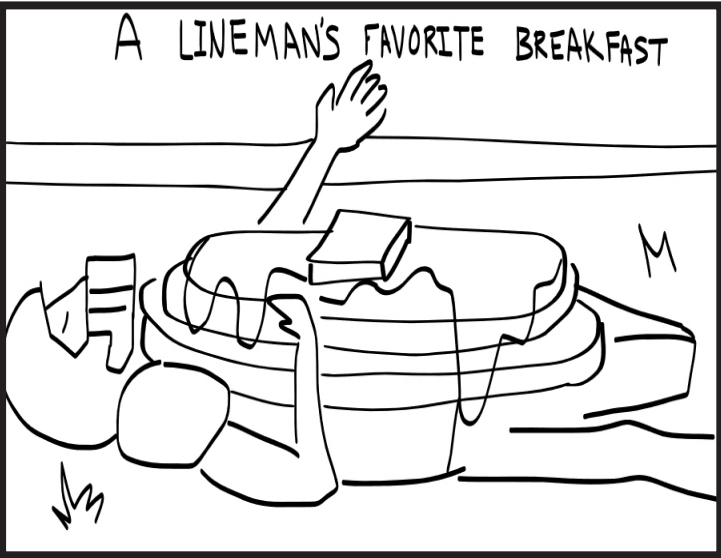
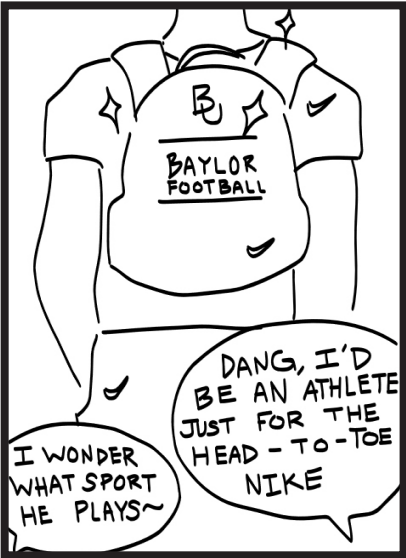
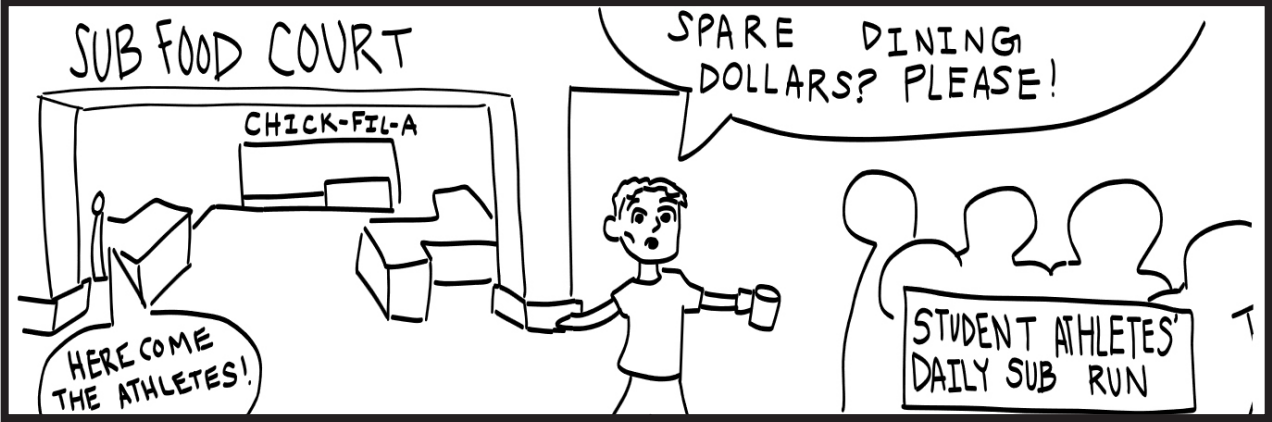
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