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PREVIEW

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Vibes are high:

Team focuses on culture following lackluster season

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Editor

Baylor football is in a much different spot entering the 2023 season than it was in last year. In 2022, the Bears were a top-10 ranked team with sky-high expectations for a repeat as Big 12 champions.

But things didn't go as planned for head coach Dave Aranda and his squad, as they were out of the Associated Press Top 25 just six weeks into the year after sitting with a 3-2 record. This fall, Baylor no longer has that preseason pressure as it looks to bounce back from an underwhelming 6-7 campaign.

Now that the sting of last year's results has eased a bit, junior wide receiver Monaray Baldwin said the squad is motivated to have a stronger season.

"It does [motivate us], because in my eyes it was a disappointment, because we were way better than whatever record we had last year," Baldwin said. "I don't even remember what it was, but we were way better than that. And I feel like the work we put out in the spring, through the summer and through fall camp is going to prove that, and we're just getting better every day."

Even with two early season losses in 2022, Baylor had a chance to turn it around. The Bears went on a three-game winning streak that included tough road wins at Texas Tech University and the University of Oklahoma. Sitting at 6-3, Baylor controlled its destiny moving forward in terms of reaching the Big 12 Championship game again.

It all came crashing down when then-No. 23 Kansas State University rolled into Waco and obliterated the Bears 31-3 in front of an impressive "blackout" crowd. Baylor then lost its final three games, including a 30-15 loss to the United States Air Force Academy in the Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl.

While finishing the year on a four-game skid wasn't the plan, it's been a major motivational spark for the team throughout spring and fall camp.

"Everyone just has that chip on their shoulder," senior tight end Drake Dabney said. "I think last year obviously didn't go the way we wanted, and it was tough. But we learned from it, and we definitely have something to prove this year, really to ourselves and to our fans and people watching. So I think just the extra motivation to get back to that championship, it's just pushing us."

Molding the disappointment into something positive begins with the established team culture. Aranda has brought several new faces to the coaching staff, and he's forced himself to embrace the transfer portal more than he was previously willing.

As the days count down until opening kickoff on Sept. 2, Aranda said he feels "really good" about the state of his program.

"It feels good just being around the team, being around the coaches," Aranda said. "The way that you know there's always going to be

adversity. Adversity is always going to come. But the way that we're approaching it and taking to it and handling it is kind of what you want. It's not a half [effort]. It's not a bunch of, you know, talking by me to kind of get to it. It's just kind of happening now, which is way cool."

Setting the vibe for the spring and fall took some time coming off the bitter bowl loss, according to redshirt junior quarterback Blake Shapen.

"We have a better culture this year," Shapen said. "I think we have guys that want to do better than what we did last year, and nobody wants that to happen again. So building that culture, building that standard — that's what we've been doing. Guys are working really hard, and we're just going to take it one day at a time and one game at a time."

One thing Aranda does to promote a positive culture is meet with his athletes one-on-one throughout camps and the season. He said the energy of these meetings compared to last year's has been night and day.

"A lot of talk of how this is the most fun camp they've ever had, and they love playing football, and I give all of that [credit] to the coaches and the connection that the coaches have with those players and just the chemistry that they fostered within their group," Aranda said.

Aranda reiterated the necessity of a

heightened focus on maintaining the team attitude because things can spiral out of control once the season is underway.

"What ends up happening is that, 'Hey, this guy got beat out for that job. This guy is getting reps, and this other guy is not getting any reps. This guy is traveling; this guy has not traveled,'" Aranda said. "All of that, we have to handle the right way, and in a way that really sees the player and honors them. I think if we do that, all of those things can make us stronger. I think if we don't do that, I think we [will] create cracks."

Redshirt sophomore wide receiver Josh Cameron said turning that culture into success on the field starts with the offense. Cameron said the goal on that side of the football has been to mimic what the 2021 squad looked like.

"I would just say our intensity, getting back to that really just the RVO, that reliable violent offense," Cameron said. "Kind of like [what] you saw in that 2021 season — everybody basically in unison running off the ball."

Shapen said the goals remain the same for the squad, and the team is "taking it day by day right now."

"We want to win a Big 12 Championship and go to the College Football Playoff," Shapen said. "That's the goal every year for us, to be able to set those guys and have those standards and be able to raise them."

Caleb Parker (47), Chateau Reed (21), AJ McCarty (19) Roundup file photo

Hall, Franklin to take charge of new-look defense



Assoah Ndomo | Photographer

ON THE DEFENSE Senior defensive lineman Gabe Hall (95) celebrates with fifth-year senior defensive lineman TJ Franklin (9) against then-No. 23 Kansas State University on Nov. 12, 2022.

JACKSON POSEY
Sports Writer

Defense wins championships — that’s as true in Waco as anywhere else in the country.

Baylor bulled its way toward a Big 12 title in 2021, largely on the back of a top-10 scoring defense that forced 26 turnovers. After a rough 2022 season, head coach Dave Aranda made some changes by replacing defensive coordinator Ron Roberts with familiar face Matt Powledge and bringing in five defensive transfers.

Consistency is king, and Baylor’s longtime defensive linemen — senior Gabe Hall and fifth-year senior TJ Franklin — are leading their unit through an offseason of transition. Franklin said he feels a responsibility to get the defense headed in the right direction.

“Honestly, it’s been weighing pretty heavy on me, because on those bad days, I feel like I take it worse than anybody, because I can notice it and I can feel the energy,” Franklin said. “Sometimes I feel like I haven’t done enough or like I haven’t helped somebody or asked somebody to help me with the defense. A lot of those times, I could be the one to be blamed for it.”

Franklin doesn’t bear that weight alone. He named Hall, fifth-year senior offensive lineman Clark Barrington and redshirt junior quarterback Blake Shapen as players he leans on when he’s being too hard on himself.

“Whenever those things happen, I just reach out to people and ask them for help, tell them I’m feeling a little down,” Franklin said. “We’re a brotherhood, and we take care of each other.”

Hall especially has stepped up in leadership alongside Franklin, who highlighted Hall’s “intensity” as uniquely important to the team’s dynamic.

“He’s like the enforcer,” Franklin said. “If I ask him to do something, he’ll always do it. If we need him to get the team going, he’ll set the tone to get the whole team rolling.”

Meanwhile, Hall described Franklin as more of a “rah rah” guy.

“[He’s] just a vocal dude,” Hall said. “He’s played a lot, so he has a lot of experience, and when you have somebody like that on the field, you look up to him and want to know his wisdom. So when you talk to him, they listen, and it’s good for the team to have experienced people.”

Despite losing several starters from last year’s team, Baylor will have plenty of veterans this season. Its five newest defensive transfers bring a combined 17 seasons of college football experience. Among them is fifth-year senior linebacker Mike Smith Jr., who played three seasons at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College before spending last season at Liberty University.

“When you have a veteran leader like Mike Smith, we have more leaders on the team [and] more people to

step up,” Hall said. “It makes it easier because you always have somebody holding other people accountable and holding you accountable as well.”

After years of grinding his way to the Power Five level, Smith said he’s ready to take the next step — beginning on the practice field. He named Franklin specifically as another key leader on the defense.

“Me and TJ, we just accept the role that coach [Aranda] puts on us,” Smith said. “We know we have to show up and show out and try to lead the way for our defense and stuff. So we know when we step on the field, it’s the standard, and we’re just trying to play to the standard every time we’re on the field.”

The Bears open the season at 6 p.m. Saturday against Texas State University. They should receive their first significant challenge the following week against No. 14 University of Utah, which ranked 11th nationally in scoring offense last year. But the Bears have the personnel to cause problems for their future conference-mates. Hall earned a spot on the Bronko Nagurski Watch List for the best defensive player in the country, and five other defensive players earned preseason All-Big 12 nods.

“Personally, I feel like we’re in a good place,” Franklin said. “I feel like our defense is headed in the right direction, and the offense is in a good place. So if we stay on this track we’re on right now, we should be able to have a big [impact come] first kickoff.”

Reese, Richardson set to split running back workload

FOSTER NICHOLAS
Sports Writer

Sophomore running back Richard Reese jumped onto the scene to produce the single greatest freshman rushing season in Baylor football history. In 2023, he has the chance to take even bigger steps with a newfound confidence, all thanks to a friendly rivalry.

It wasn’t smooth sailing for Reese heading into spring camp after breaking Baylor’s freshman rushing record (972 yards) only a few months prior. While the consensus remained that Reese would be the starting running back in 2023, there was new competition that appeared stiff.

Junior tailback Dominic Richardson transferred from Oklahoma State University during the offseason. During his time at OSU, Richardson cooked Baylor’s defense to the tone of 277 rushing yards and five touchdowns in just four games. Most of that came when Richardson had a career day against the Bears in 2020, his true

freshman season. Richardson amassed 169 yards on 23 carries to pair with three touchdowns.

With the arrival of Richardson in 2023, there was another capable bell cow running back, and a friendly rivalry ensued.

“We push each other every single day on the field and off the field to check in with each other on play calls and make sure we’re on the same page,” Richardson said. “It’s been friendly, man. On the field, it’s competition, [and] we’re going to try to beat each other. But it’s been like, ‘Come on man, I’m going to pick you up if you fall, and you come pick me up if I fall.’”

As camp shifted from spring to summer and from summer to fall, head coach Dave Aranda said he saw growth from each tailback. With Reese’s work ethic and drive tested daily, Richardson’s push brought out more star potential from the true sophomore.

“Dominic Richardson’s been the best thing for [Reese with] just the push,” Aranda said. “I mean, if Richard was going to get in an ice tub, Dom’s going to be right there trying to take his spot, really. I mean, they fight for everything, and it’s pretty cool to see. It’s a friendly fight, but it’s a fight nonetheless ... I can see Richard, he just gets so much better off of that, and then Dom too. We’re excited for both of them, but Richard’s confidence, from a guy who started, and he’s always had an inner strength to him, but it’s sketching out now to be a swagger, and so it’s cool to see. Guys are following him.”

The two players themselves also noticed the growth from confidence to “swagger” coming from the rivalry.

“Dom keeps pushing me every day and making me a better player,” Reese said. “And I look at two players, Jacoby [Clarke] and Jordan [Jenkins], they’re pushing to get better every day ... And B-Wash [Bryson Washington], when he comes back, he’s going to push to be better too. So I feel like in our running back room, everybody’s pushing to be better and learning more to get better each day.”

The duo has impressed in camp, and with the thrilling potential, fans can look back on the 2021 Big 12 Championship season in which the Bears were led by a two-headed giant in the backfield. Although it’s hard to live up to Abram Smith and Trestan Ebner’s legacy, Baylor once again bolsters two starter quality running backs in a run-heavy offensive scheme.

“They both want to be the starter,” Aranda said. “They’re so talented, and I think our ability to maximize that particular talent

has really grown throughout the spring to summer to now, that we can use them in similar but sometimes real different ways that can really benefit them individually. I think there are going to be lots of opportunities for touches, carries, catches and all of it. I look at that as a tandem.”

The running back tandem fueled by friendly competition has the entire offense ready to go to battle. With Reese and Richardson sharing touches, each running back will assume the role of playing fresh and playing hard.

“The running backs we have behind us, they’re just as good as the guys that I’ve played with before,” fifth-year senior offensive lineman Clark Barrington said. “And so, Rich, Dom [and] that whole backfield, they know how to hit the hole, and they know how to run over people. But also, they have speed to get away in the open field as well.

So I’m excited to block for those guys.”

With kickoff looming on the horizon, the question has changed from “Who is the starter?” to “Who wins the rivalry each game?” While camp has concluded, the competition has just begun for Reese and Richardson as they set their eyes on having one of the premier rushing attacks in the Big 12.



Photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics



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Football Preview

Blake Shapen leads comeback campaign for Baylor football

FOSTER NICHOLAS
Sports Writer

After a season in which Baylor football fell short of expectations, redshirt junior quarterback Blake Shapen said he had to self-reflect and take film study to another level.

Shapen was once again handed the keys to the starting job in the spring after beating out redshirt sophomore quarterback Sawyer Robertson. Despite his struggles as the starter last season, head coach Dave Aranda took most of the blame for Shapen's shortcomings.

"I feel like we probably coached him to be perfect, and shame on me for that," Aranda said. "We didn't have the weapons that we have now, so when it's framed in that way, it was a real high uphill climb."

As the 2022 season came to a close, Shapen looked in the mirror and figured out what he could do to improve. He came into spring camp carrying the weight of the disappointing prior season and put in the work with frustration as fuel.

"Anytime that you don't have the season that you want to have, and [aren't] able to perform like we did the year before, was kind of tough," Shapen said. "That was nobody's goal — what happened last year. And yeah, the season was long, and it was tough. I think that it was good for me to be able to grow from it, see what it looks like going through a whole season, experiencing some losses and things like that. I'm just looking to take things from that year and the year before and be able to keep moving forward."

The redshirt junior slinger put an

emphasis on adding muscle to better sustain hard hits such as the ones he constantly took during 2022. Shapen said he's up 15 pounds since his 200-pound weigh-in a year ago.

"Last year, my body kind of took a toll a little bit on some of the hits that I was taking," Shapen said. "So I think that it's going to help [to] be able to wear some of those hits down a little bit. I feel like I can move the same and things like that, so it's been good."

One of the other many road bumps last season was leadership, and Shapen said he has evolved in that department even more.

"I think I've grown a lot in that area," Shapen said. "If things weren't going right or somebody needed to step up and say something, I wanted to be that guy. It's tough being that guy sometimes, especially if you don't talk a lot or you're more to yourself. But I've had to step out of my comfort zone a little bit and grow in that area."

Shapen isn't the only one who has noticed his greater vocal presence on the field in camp. Coaches and teammates also echoed the idea that the soon-to-be second-year starter has taken a leap as a captain.

"On the times where there was a struggle, you're hearing him," Aranda said. "[It's] really cool to see. I think he's in a groove with leadership and all of it. He knows what he wants, and he's right in front."

Redshirt sophomore wide receiver Josh Cameron added that Shapen has "taken a huge step forward" as a vocal leader.

"He's definitely been working



SHAPEN UP TO BE A GOOD SEASON Blake Shapen (12) scrambles up the middle during a non-conference contest against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium.

Roundup file photo

in the offseason, working on his reads and all that stuff, but I'd say the main thing would definitely be his leadership role," Cameron said. "He's being more vocal, moving guys around, and I think that's a huge improvement. I'm just noticing the improvement for sure."

Last season, Baylor's offense sat in the bottom half of the Big 12. All things considered, Shapen statistically was an above-average conference quarterback with fewer flaws than many may think. Unfortunately, some of those miscues stuck out like a bad sore. Shapen's 10 interceptions were the second most in the league, and he only averaged just over 200 yards passing a game, even though he completed the third most passes in

the conference (233).

The Bears addressed the lack of an offensive threat in the offseason by bringing in junior wide receiver Ketron Jackson Jr., who transferred into the program after a pair of seasons at the University of Arkansas. In camp, the transfer wideout has been impressed with Shapen's arm and thinks this season could have the mantra of "bombs away."

"Blake has a great ball; I'll be just staring at the ball [in awe]," Jackson said. "I just feel like he's very accurate and he's very decisive in all his passes. Having a quarterback that's willing to take shots deep, that's really good too."

Shapen will be looking to emulate the success he saw during his limited

starts in 2021, hoping to have a breakout 2023 season. With a strong ground game already established, the man under center has the opportunity to lead the offense to more than just the end zone.

"[He has] a lot of confidence — no second guessing where anybody is," senior tight end Drake Dabney said. "He's making great decisions. If he sees something, he's taking it and being aggressive. I love that in him, and I think he's going to be very special this year. I know what he's capable of, and I think everyone knows he's been a great leader. I'm looking forward to going out there on the field and going to battle with him."

Baylor Athletics promotes 'This is Bear Country' slogan for 2023 football season

ZACH BABAJANOF-RUSTRIAN
Intern

Baylor's football season is rapidly approaching. With a program-record eight home games, this season is appropriately appointed with the slogan "This is Bear Country." The Baylor Athletics mantra is being reintroduced to promote unity among students, alumni and local fans.

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Football Preview

THIS IS BEAR COUNTRY



READY TO RUN Bruiser stands in front of the Baylor Chamber members as they hold off Baylor students that prepare to run the line before the football team's home opener against the University of Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium. Roundup file photo



TOSS & TWIRL One of Baylor's baton twirlers shows off during halftime against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium. Roundup file photo



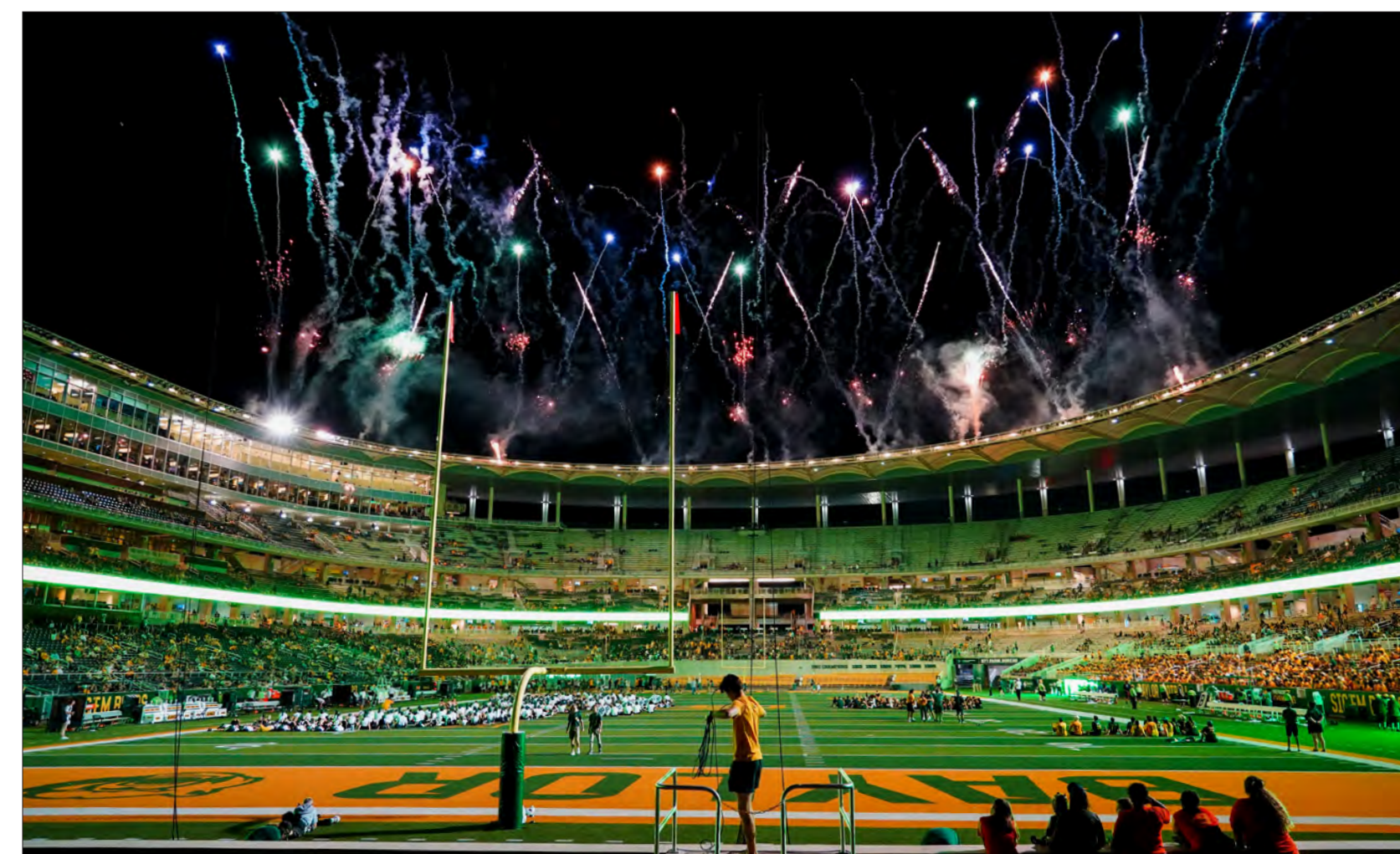
SIC 'EM The Baylor Spirit Squad amps up fans during the football team's home opener against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium. Roundup file photo



PUMP IT UP A member of the Golden Wave Band plays the trombone during a game against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium. Roundup file photo



CHEERS A member of the Baylor Spirit Squad starts a chant during the football team's home opener against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium. Roundup file photo



LIGHT THE NIGHT Fireworks shine in the sky at McLane Stadium following the football team's non-conference contest against the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022. Roundup file photo

The Baylor community reacted to league realignment

Karen Mix, Office Manager for Sociology at Baylor

Conferences are not only about football, and the conferences only looked at money in this realignment. Other student athletes will be affected, and I fear their mental and physical health as well as their academic performance will be negatively impacted due to the increased travel

they will experience. Football travels the least out of all the sport programs and some teams play multiple times during the week during their season, which leads to less time recovering their bodies. I believe conferences should be held by region, not how much money schools can potentially receive.

Houston senior Josh Farish

I think it can be good to bring together more competitive teams. I worry about managing all of the teams and the distance between the schools. Overall, I'm happy the Big XII came out of it strong and Baylor doesn't need to find a new home.

San Marcos freshman Acascia Mata

All of the additions and departures of programs from our conference has been very confusing, intimidating and frustrating. I have a feeling that without knowing all the changes, there are going to have a huge impact on our football program and performance.

Melissa senior Nathaniel Lambert

It's been great because it opens more doors for the conference moving westward. There's definitely teams that I wish we could've thrown into the conference, like getting UConn for basketball or SMU for fan loyalty

and regional rivalry (the enemy of my enemy is my friend), but I know what we did get is amazing. I think I expect a friendship with ASU, and I think BYU is the next rivalry that students dig into because of the religious competition.

We heard your feedback, so here's The Baylor Lariat Sports Desk's responses and analysis as we prepare for the 2023 football season

Michael Haag, Sports Editor

Record: 6-6
Why: As compelling as the odd-year magic debate is, I have to keep it real. This Baylor football team has the makings of a great team, and the vibes are seemingly higher than ever. However, I can't ignore the fact that there are two major question marks entering the season. It starts with the offensive line, which head coach Dave Aranda seems very optimistic about. Personally, though, I don't see this group turning heads and dominating since it lacks starts at the green and gold. Bringing in fifth-year senior offensive lineman Clark Barrington and junior offensive lineman Campbell Barrington from Brigham Young University was huge, but it's hard to imagine that those two are going to be enough. Offensive line coach Eric Mateos and offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes are strong O-line coaches, but the players have to execute at the end of the day, and I don't think this current group will do that in 2023.

The secondary is the other spot on the depth chart that should have Baylor fans biting their nails. There are high-character athletes in that room that appear to have strong instincts and potential, but their youth could be their demise. Guys like Devin Lemear, Alfonzo Allen and Bryson Jackson will rise to the top of the ranks, but it's not going to be enough. Growing pains are to be expected with this group, so it could be a big concern as the Bears defend some of the top offenses in the Big 12. You can't teach experience, and this squad really lacks it. I've been proven wrong on my record prediction before, so I'm definitely open to other takes that you may have, but I'm not sold on this unit just yet.

Foster Nicholas, Sports Writer

Record: 7-5
Why: I thought I was a hater, but a winning record seems oddly optimistic. It's hard to look past easier schedules across the Big 12 and a front-loaded schedule. For the Bears to be competitive this year, they need to be at least 4-2 after week six and I just don't buy it. This Baylor team is young and could be lacking on-field leadership if redshirt junior quarterback Blake Shapen isn't able to step up on the big stage. I love the depth in the running back and tight end rooms, but I'm struggling to see stars on the outside other than junior wideout Ketron Jackson, who, as a transfer, shouldn't have wide receiver No. 1 expectations. Overall, the offense seems very similar to the group put out last year and the success will hang on the shoulders of Shapen. If Baylor's quarterback play is a strength, this offense has all the firepower necessary to be a league leader, but yet again, the most important position on the field is the one I have the least confidence in.

However, despite what I think about the offense, head coach Dave Aranda is a defensive head coach who will live and die by what happens when the ball isn't in his hands. The front seven is once again loaded for this team, but a lacking secondary and inconsistent pass-rushing could leave a lot to be desired.

Ultimately, this team will be highly competitive and fight through tough games, but it's hard for me to envision Baylor pulling off as many upsets as would be necessary to sneak into the Big 12 Championship. Football season is back, but the Bears may not be back in contention for the national spotlight.

Jackson Posey, Sports Writer

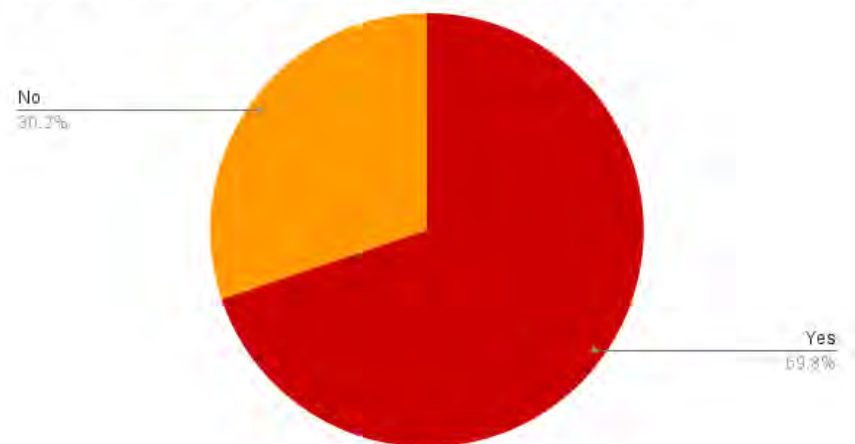
Record: 8-4
Why: Baylor's football schedule is exceptionally easy this year. With eight home games, the Bears have plenty of opportunities to build momentum behind a somehow-improved rushing attack. Richard Reese and Dominic Richardson should provide the perfect thunder-and-lightning complement to one another out of the backfield, and another year of experience under Blake Shapen's belt can only make the offense run more smoothly.

It is a front-loaded schedule, with early games against Utah and Texas, but the seas get a lot smoother after that. A three-game run against Cincinnati, Iowa State and Houston should provide the Bears a much-needed midseason boost before traveling to Manhattan, Kansas and Fort Worth.

The big thing to look forward to is a potentially revamped defense, which brought in a ton of new talent under new defensive coordinator Matt Powledge. Leading that charge will be Mike Smith Jr, a Liberty transfer with a knack for sniffing out rushers in the backfield. If he gets free reign to rove, expect to see a lot of slow-developing runs blown up ahead of schedule.

There's a lot of excitement offensively, too, with a number of new weapons - Richardson and wide receiver Ketron Jackson among them - coming in to buff up the skill positions. With what should be an improved offense and defense, Baylor's absolute floor this season is 6-6. If they're worse than that, I've publicly committed to eating a raw onion live on stream. Coach Aranda ... please don't let me down.

Are students sad to see Texas and Oklahoma leave?



Has conference realignment been good or bad?

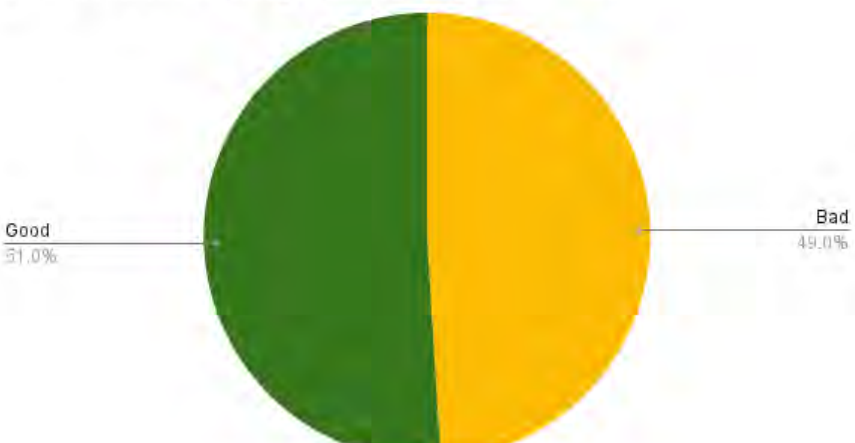




Photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics

TURN UP Seventh-year senior safety Bryson Jackson celebrates forcing and recovering a fumble during a regular season game versus the University at Albany on Sept. 3, 2022 at McLane Stadium.

Seventh-year senior Bryson Jackson pivots into new role for final season

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Editor

Most athletes don't get a chance to play college football for seven years. Some people don't even stay at the same job for seven years, let alone play the same sport at the same institution.

Insert seventh-year senior safety Bryson Jackson, who has seen it all in a Baylor football uniform. From the aftermath of a sexual assault scandal that shook the university to a program-record 12-win season in 2021, Jackson has witnessed more than the average athlete, given that he has nearly double the eligibility experience.

The seventh and final year of Jackson's time at Baylor will look a little different, as he made the switch to the safety spot back in the spring. Rather than being slotted in the box as a linebacker, Jackson will take on a role deep in the secondary for the Bears in 2023.

Even only a few months into practice at his new position, Jackson's old linebacker teammates can see how smoothly the transition has gone throughout spring and fall camp.

"It's hard to look at B-Jack [Bryson Jackson] in a position and not say, 'Man, he's special.'" redshirt junior linebacker Brooks Miller said. "I mean, he gets anywhere on the field. He's 100 miles an hour, and he's just fun to watch, man. It's like a lightning bolt on the field. It's awesome."

Jackson was listed as a linebacker on Baylor football's roster from 2017 to 2022, but he played some safety in high school. The Mansfield native said being over six years removed from playing as a defensive back makes him nervous, but he's been receiving lots of help from those around him.

"I couldn't do it with a more special group than we have at the safeties and the defensive backs," Jackson said. "And the [defensive] coordinator, coach [Matt] Powledge, every day he's texting you, sending you motivational [messages]. He's not just cramming football, but he's pulling things from different places — from basketball, from baseball — and trying to make those connections so we can understand what it's like to play."

The impact is twofold, as Jackson has added his own helpful touch to those around

him. Sophomore safety Alfonzo Allen, one of Jackson's new position group teammates, said it's a blessing to have the seventh-year senior with the secondary.

"Bringing Bryson back, it brings growth, honestly, because we're a young group," Allen said. "So with Bryson being here, with his knowledge and his wisdom, he's pouring it into us. So we [are] just taking advantage of it each and every day."

It is, however, a rare situation for Jackson. He's one of the oldest players in the country, yet he's taking on a new role. He's had to balance being a new guy in the safety room with being one of the vocal veterans for the locker room as a whole. The younger safeties said he was treated like a veteran safety the second he made the position switch in the spring.

"The way he works and the way he studies film and just intentionally everything, you have no choice but to treat him like a veteran, because he goes out there, he knows what he's doing every play," redshirt sophomore safety Devin Lemear said.

The offense noticed that jolt of life given to the defensive back group throughout the fall too.

Junior wide receiver Monaray Baldwin said the competition among the wideouts, cornerbacks and safeties has only helped the team get better.

"I see those guys working hard every day," Baldwin said. "They're coming. They're bringing it every day. They're helping us get better. They're telling us things that we're doing wrong, that they see to give away routes or whatever ... We don't go out there and butt heads and try to beat each other; we're trying to learn from each other."

It's safe to say nearly everything about Baylor is familiar for Jackson. He'll likely never get lost on campus or need help with directions around town. His lone adjustment for 2023 comes in the form of a position change, in which he said he feels confident moving forward.

"I feel like I've been prepared, changing positions and being put in different roles," Jackson said. "But just having coach [Matt] Powledge, man, definitely with his energy and his critique and his detail and level of coaching — it's amazing. I just feel like everything we did previously this year has got us to this point, and I really feel confident in my position."

Baylor anticipates 'tough' test from Texas State in home opener

MICHAEL HAAG
Sports Editor

The months and weeks of waiting have dwindled away to mere days, and the Baylor football team is set for its season and home opener this weekend. After a "good" month of fall camp, according to head coach Dave Aranda, the Bears now welcome their first test with the Texas State University Bobcats.

Texas State is a familiar foe to Baylor fans, but these Bobcats are going to look much different than before. Their football program is now under the direction of G.J. Kinne, who led the nation's No. 1 offense at the University of Incarnate Word in 2022. Kinne, the second-youngest head coach at the FBS level (34-years-old), brought several of his Cardinal athletes with him and will be looking to carry over the success he found in the FCS.

"[I have] a lot of respect for our opponent," Aranda said. "[I] have played against their head coach, and [I have] a lot of respect for him and just his journey and who he is and the type of team that he is going to bring in here to McLane [Stadium]. We know it's going to be a tough and competitive one. We're just way looking forward to it."

Saturday marks the 10th meeting between Baylor and Texas State, a series that dates back to 1909. The Bears are undefeated in all nine previous contests, including the eight played in Waco. Baylor beat Texas State 42-7 in week three last year, and also brought home a 29-20 victory in 2021 in San Marcos.



Assoah Ndomo | Photographer

QB1 Redshirt junior quarterback Blake Shapen scores against Texas State University on Sept. 17, 2022 at McLane Stadium.

Seventh-year senior safety Bryson Jackson said the team is just "itching to get an opponent" after weeks of playing against each other in fall camp.

"But more importantly, we're a team that just wants to improve on a day-to-day basis, and I feel like during camp we had a lot of areas we had to improve on and get better at, and we did," Jackson said. "So, being able to have this week to be a true test to how we do things around here is awesome."

Redshirt sophomore wide receiver Josh Cameron mimicked Jackson's excitement and said he can hardly believe game day is almost here.

"It's just super exciting," Cameron said. "It's really

hard to put into words, kind of like this feeling. I've been feeling it in my heart, it's like 'ooh, game week. Football is back.' There's no greater feeling, honestly."

With Kinne taking over as head coach of the Bobcats, the Bears can't use game film from the last two years as part of their preparation. Aranda said his staff and athletes have resorted to watching what Kinne ran at UIW. Even though Baylor's focus is to prevent Texas State from executing what it wants to, Cameron said the message this week has been more internal.

"With Coach Aranda, he's basically been telling us [it's] 'us versus us,'" Cameron said. "Focus on being the best version of us and then the rest will take care of itself."



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Football Preview

Goodbye, Conference of Champions

Sports Take: Savor Pac-12 in final year

GEORGE SCHROEDER
LTVN Executive Producer

It's a cool Saturday night in November and your team won its game earlier in the day. You just got done watching a huge Big Ten matchup in the afternoon window, and you simply need more college football. You're in luck, because Oregon State University is taking on the University of Washington on ESPN2, and the game just started.

Maybe it's the late nights. Maybe it's the physical matchups, or maybe it's the Chip Kelly-inspired quick-tempo play style. Maybe it's just because I grew up a fan of the University of Oregon. Whatever it is, something makes Pac-12 football fun.

There's something to be said for the football conference, which extends beyond the Rocky Mountains. Call me a Pac-12 homer, but it's a shame we're losing the Conference of Champions.

Its history rivals any other, dating back over 100 years to 1915 and the creation of the Pacific Coast Conference. Since its birth, the conference has boasted 22 national football titles and 11 Heisman Trophy winners while holding a bowl win percentage of .508 (152-147-5) — and that's just in football alone. With a total of 553, the Pac-12 holds more NCAA titles than any other conference in America.

It's not just about history. From one of the most iconic college mascots — the Duck — riding a motorcycle into Autzen Stadium, to Ralphie's run on Folsom Field, to Washington State University's iconic crimson flag flying in the crowd on every episode of ESPN's College GameDay, there's been no shortage of tradition.

Unfortunately, schools have to follow the money. It's hard to even blame them at this point. Be honest, you know football programs support the entire athletic department. Programs had to leave for their own good, and however you feel about it, what led them to the point of departure isn't a story for this article.

Once the University of Colorado announced its move to the Big 12, I knew the Pac-12 was done for. Losing the University of Southern California and the University of California - Los Angeles was already a major blow to a conference that hasn't sent a team to the playoffs in seven years, but a "Pac-9" would have been totally unsustainable.

The Big Ten opened the door to the ultimate implosion of the Pac-12 during the summer of 2022. After the Trojans and Bruins jumped

ship, Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark made major moves to stabilize his conference, eating away the Pac-12 in the process.

You don't have to live in the Pacific Standard Time zone to understand two things can be true at once. In the wake of conference expansion, the Big 12 had the means, motive and opportunity to survive and advance. However, even someone affiliated to Yormark's league can feel the sting of the Pac-12's collapse.

"I think it's exciting and it's sad," Baylor football head coach Dave Aranda said.

Baylor's conference is about to be bigger, stronger and more competitive than it has ever been, and we're not even talking about the implications on basketball. It's an exciting time for the Big 12, but it's also sad that the Pac-12 had to be sacrificed to achieve conference stability.

"I remember going to the Rose Bowl," Aranda said. "I remember watching USC games with my dad. I remember when Washington went to the Rose Bowl. I remember when the Badgers beat the Bruins."

I'm going to miss those things too, and so is Baylor Bear Insider Jerry Hill, who's also the director of Bear Foundation Communications and the director of sports journalism at Baylor. He has been covering college sports for over 35 years.

"When you [think of] traditional football powers around the country, you think of USC, [and] to a certain extent, more recently, you think of Oregon with all flash," Hill said. "I'm going to miss that part of it, particularly with the tie-in with the Rose Bowl."

"A little old school" is Hill's way of expressing his sentiment, but you don't need decades of experience in sports media to appreciate the regionality the Power Five conferences captured. It's just as important as the history and tradition of the Pac-12.

"It was really that Pacific and Pacific Northwest Conference, you know, 'Pac-12,'" Hill said. "That's the part I'm going to miss the most."

It's going to take some getting used to not having that late-night fight on the Pacific gridiron. College football is so great, and there's just so much I'll miss about growing up in the era of the Power Five.

The Big 12 will soon span over 2,000 miles and three time zones, containing 16 teams. Meanwhile, the Big Ten literally extends coast-to-coast, stretching across four time zones and almost 3,000 miles, consisting of 18 teams. Good luck traveling to away games.



Gracie Speer | Cartoonist

So prepare for the era of the Power Four mega conferences, and — unfortunately — college football without a Pacific conference.

Who knows, maybe 20 years from now we'll be talking about the new West Coast Conference reviving the Conference of Champions and bringing "normal" back to college football.

As we move forward into a new and exciting time in the Big 12, taking our first step into wherever conference expansion is leading college football, don't forget the history, tradition and success of the Pac-12.

I'm not sure about you, but I'll be savoring it last year while looking forward to the strength of Baylor's revamped conference.

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