Baylor Football Head Coach Matt Rhule
December Signing Period Press Conference
Dec. 20, 2018

***Opening Statement***“Appreciate you guys being here. Very pleased to announce that nineteen young men who signed with us yesterday in the early signing period are all outstanding football players and even better people. They come from outstanding families and great programs. Fifteen are from Texas and we are excited to welcome them into the Baylor family. I think as important as anything, nine of them will be here at the semester turn and be here in the spring with us. It is very important as we replace a great group of seniors and continue to develop as a team. We will enter into the January period with room to add maybe a couple more depending on our current roster. We will go out and try to find a couple of difference makers, but these nineteen guys are exciting and I’m glad that they made the decision to come here.”

***On the balance/challenges between bowl prep and recruiting…***“Well it is pretty brutal. It’s hard, a lot harder than it was. But it is such a benefit for these young men. They now can relax and know that they have a home and they can enjoy the holidays. They also now can enjoy that the recruiting craziness is over. For us we know we have nineteen guys and can go into January with a better idea of knowing where we are as a team. You don’t ever want to short your team. That is why we don’t do in-season visits. It’s not really my thing. This has been a lot of work in a short amount of time. We had to grind, and we had a lot of coaches who really wanted to do it. I think the operation here ran smoothly while we were out on the road. It has been challenging and it has been fun, but now we can turn all of our focus towards the bowl game and reconvene in Houston on Sunday.”

***On why you think the early signing period wasn’t done before now…***“It is funny, this morning, Mike Siravo turned to me in the locker room and said, “can you believe we haven’t been doing this forever?” It is crazy knowing that we normally would still be making calls on Christmas eve and now it’s much nicer to send a text that says, “Merry Christmas, glad you are a part of the family.” I think the recruiting process for the players is fun, but at some point, it gets to be a little bit much. We are already talking to guys for next year and they are putting their phones down and are getting overwhelmed by it all. I think some guys are just relieved to have it over and have made a choice. I know we have talked about doing this for years and years, but now we are here, and the kid can make the choice to either sign or not sign. If he doesn’t like his options, he has one more month to make a decision.”

***On recruiting majority of defensive players…***“Number one we are losing some really good defensive linemen and we wanted to bolster that group and recruit to that group. We have also found out over the years that if you recruit safeties, they are either great or they need to grow and towards the end of the years we started to play more with three safeties on the field. We just tried to find guys who are versatile and love the game. I always go back to Blake Lynch. He has done everything here and I think he has found a home. I think if you find guys who are grateful, humble and just want to play ball eventually they will find a home. Winners win, and good players find a way to get on the field and make an impact. A lot of these guys came to our camp. The thing about being a great recruiter is not about the ability to sell, it is the ability to evaluate. If you miss a great player and he beats you once a year. If you take a bad player, he beats you every game. We have to find the right guys. We are developmental and evaluation oriented. A lot of these guys came to our camp and we said, “Man we can do something with that guy”. Will Williams showed up at camp and within three minutes I was trying to figure out how to get him on the team. I think camp has played a big role for us. Especially with close to 2000 kids coming through camps. Versatile people are huge. If you get a kid who comes in to play defensive line, but he isn’t athletic enough we can move him around and he will play offensive line. Seeing where people can have the most impact for us is huge in this stage.

***On the bowl game helping recruiting…***“Everyone has been excited, and it has gained a lot of positive momentum. Having bowl practices during the visits has been huge. We try to get people here by noon on Friday, so they can see campus moving around and get a feel for what it is like. One of the assets here at Baylor is that the campus is beautiful. I want the recruits to see that. Allowing them to be able to see practice is huge as well. We don’t change how we practice when recruits are here, we want these kids to see how things are done around here. It is always valuable for me to see who is on the phone and who is invested in the drills. Hakeem Vance is a guy who is from Mississippi, who I’ve met a few times and he was able to come for a visit. He was asking the older players questions during the drills and that’s when I knew he was going to be one of us. The bowl practice and the mood around everybody is that we are trending in the right direction.”

***On recruiting Will Williams…***“I think Mike Siravo, early on, saw his film and really liked it. He is a guy who came to camp and ran a 4.4 and two hundred pounds. He is dynamically quick. He runs well, he can change direction on a dime. He can hit, and he can play safety as well as linebacker. He is a hardworking and humble kid and he has been incredibly loyal to us. A lot of people probably wondered who he was and tried to convince him to go to their camps, but he stayed loyal to us. He comes from a great family and I think he is going to be an incredibly special player.”

***On Jaylen Ellis signing…***“First of all, he is fast and dynamic. He was going into the eleventh grade and was running 4.3 or 4.4. Obviously, Shawn Bell recruited him. I tell kids, if he wants to go on a visit then he should go. Someday when my daughter wants to go visit schools, she isn’t going to go to the first place. She is going to check out multiple schools and find her best fit. Just like I told Jaylen this summer, go check out other schools. Take official visits and look around and only come to Baylor if you think this is the right place for you to be. In the end Baylor was the place for him. His loyalty was huge and it’s great to keep a central Texas player in the state. We like to have fast receivers and he falls into that mold. He has great body control and hands. He is super humble and fun to be around.”

***On recruiting in West Texas…***“I was excited to go out there. I am glad we were able to recruit some guys from out west. We put David Wetzel out in west Texas and he made a whole swing through that region and Jeff Nixon did a great job in Amarillo. We are the type of program that doesn’t just have one coach recruiting a kid. We try to have every coach build a relationship with the player, his family and his high school coach. In the case of a coaching change the player has a relationship with more than one coach on the staff. West Texas became part of that and we found some great players out there. I think the thing about recruiting Texas is that so many schools are playing good football and so many good players to get recruited. We feel really good about how we are spread out throughout the state of Texas.

***On the departure of Fran Brown…*** “Fran left Friday, so he went on the road with me. We landed on the plane Thursday night because he and I were together in west Texas and then Friday morning he came in and said he had made the decision to leave. The thing about Francis is he’s such a great person and he did it all the right way. People at Temple were great, they gave me the option to leave him here until after Signing Day. Francis is a tremendous human being, he said he’d coach the bowl game. But, I just can’t live in a world, you’re going to see a lot of coaches make moves today, I just can’t be that guy. And our program can’t be that way. If a kid doesn’t want to come to Baylor anymore because Fran left or any coach leaves, they deserve that right to know. So, I told Fran to go ahead not to come to the visit on Friday, to get to Temple and get started on what he’s going to do there. We let the kids know. Fran had an amazing ability to build relationships with people. So that was a shock to some. I think he did a great job on his way out telling guys hey, you went to Baylor for Baylor. Our coaches picked it up right from there. If you’ve been recruited by Fran, you also got recruited by Joey [McGuire]. You also got recruited by Shawn [Bell] and by Phil [Snow]. If you want to come here and play defense, play defensive back, Phil Snow is really the architect of everything that we do. I love Fran and it was hard to see him go, but it was also like one of your kids. Fran played for me, I recruited him. He was working out of football, I got him in football at Temple. I got the head coaching job and made him full time. Just watching him grow to this point, it was time for him to go and be a co-DC or whatever he’s going to do. It’s kind of like your kids when they move out of the house and spread their wings. But he left the right way. You don’t really want that four days before signing day. But I hope the kids in Texas and the high school coaches respect the fact that we just wouldn’t lie to them. We said this is what it is, if you don’t want to come I understand. He’s a great person, he did a lot. As proud as I am of this signing class, if you could only have imagined what we did in the first year here, the first year’s recruiting class we started today. Anyone that was here that first year, I’m grateful for them because that’s why we’re able to be where we are now.”

***On plans for the coaching staff in the bowl game…***“Phil [Snow] went over to the corners. He’s coached corners forever and taught Fran the way we wanted to coach corners. I just moved Coop [Evan Cooper] back to safeties. Frank [Okam] has done a great job with the defensive line, I think they’ve really grown, so he just took the whole D-Line. And then coach [George] Deleone who’s gotten a cleaner bill of health, I put him back on the field. He’s been off the field and grinding, I just thought it would be fun to have him back on the field. So, the offensive line has to deal with him and Shawn [Bell] now, it’s awesome. That’s just to get through this game. I always expect attrition on our roster and I always expect in college football there could be attrition on our staff, so I’ll wait and see if anyone else takes off or what else happens. I’ve had multiple coaches already turn down job offers. I think we have a good staff; people will come and try to hire them away. I’ll wait, I’d hate to make a move and have something else happen.”

***On the junior college signees making an immediate impact…*** “We’re hoping so. Niadre [Zouzoua] watching his film, especially with the loss of Greg Roberts and Xavier Jones, we knew we needed someone to get here and get here now. We thought Niadre had that capability. Once he gets here, the coaches at Monroe College do a great job, but he doesn’t eat the way we eat so we think he’s just going to flourish and get to 260 [pounds] and be a dominant player. Same thing with Blake [Bedier], he’s a late starter in football. He’s up to about 285, 290 pounds. We’re anxious to get him here as we try to replace Josh Malin gone, Christian Beard gone, Blake Blackmar gone and Pat Lawrence gone. That’s four pretty good players. We want to make sure we get him in. And getting Davis DiVall as a prep school player. He’s 285 pounds. He’s got five years of eligibility. We get him here now so we can get started. Two mid-year offensive linemen, I couldn’t have dreamed of that happening. That’s really hard to do. And two guys we feel really good about, same thing with Niadre.”

***On having four scholarship quarterbacks in the spring…***“I don’t ever look to the future in terms of, they’re all going to be in here and get trained at the quarterback position. Competition is king. We’ll prepare them. The great thing about Gerry [Bohanon] is he’s been able to get a rep here, a rep there, but still has four years of eligibility. Charlie [Brewer] has obviously played a ton. Jacob Zeno is tremendously accurate, great arm, has all the tools. And Peyton [Powell] is so versatile and dynamic so I think it gives us a ton of options at that position. We’re finally whole, we’ve been at three scholarship quarterbacks because of grad transfers. But we also have guys that can present a lot of different challenges. They can both throw and run. We don’t ever want to leave our best players off the field, so if Gerry’s not starting and he can catch a pass, maybe he’ll do that. I don’t know. But we want to train them at quarterback this spring. When you learn how to play quarterback, you learn the offense from the ground up, you learn defense, you learn the game. We want to make sure they’re all there and give them all a fair shot.”

***On the late addition of Peyton Powell…***“I think the great thing about Peyton is, he comes from a great family. Obviously comes from a great program. You can tell that he’s a leader, you can tell that he’s a winner. I think he ran a 4.3 at Nike this year, something ridiculous, he’s a tremendous athlete. Every time I’ve been around him, I enjoy being around him. That’s such a big part of this. We spend so much time together. For a highly recruited kid, he’s so humble and gracious and that goes a long way. If we have a guy like that, we can really develop him. Coming down the stretch to get him, to get Sam Snyder as a tight end at 6’5” who runs a 4.5, to get Jaylen [Ellis] to reaffirm his commitment to us, those were big gets at the end of the class.”

***On balancing bowl game preparation and having players enjoy the experience…***“The biggest key is, we just practiced six days straight. They saw the schedule and there were a lot of worried looks on their faces. I told them if we want to have fun at the bowl, we’ve got to prepare now. We did four straight days of Vanderbilt, as if we were playing them today, just like game week. We did that so now when we get down there, they know the game plan, they’ve been prepared, now we’ll go back through starting on Sunday. That allows them to have fun. When we go, we go. When we step on the practice field, I don’t care if you just got done visiting kids in the hospital, or just ate Christmas dinner, or just got in from being out, you’ve got to go. That’s what we’re looking for from our guys. The feeling around our program has steadily improved and during bowl practice it really has come to life. I think the guys are really enjoying being around each other. They all went and they bowled together and laughed and had fun. I think they’re going to enjoy the festivities around the bowl, but at the same time they know that we’re going down there to try to win a football game. They know that we’re facing an SEC team, a good football team that beat Tennessee the way they did to get to this game. They’ve worked really hard so far, and that allows them to have a little more fun while we’re down there, but we’ve still got to work while we’re down there.”

***On what he’s seen from the younger players during bowl practices…***“I thought our receivers, who have been a strength, just their ball skills, because we’ve practiced so much all year long, guys like Jared Atkinson and RJ Sneed who have had to go over on scout team, being a scout team receiver is tough, you’ve got to run rep after rep after rep. They’ve come back now to the varsity and they look like completely different players, in a positive way. They’re making dominant catches, so I see that development. I see guys trying different positions. We’ve moved Khalil Keith back and forth, Ryan Miller we let play a little bit of nose tackle, Tyler Henderson we let rush the passer where he looks like an absolute natural. We’ve moved them all back for bowl week, but it gives us an idea going into the spring of maybe this guy needs to go here. I thought we got a lot done. I thought it was really good for us. Everyone got better because of the reps and the good on good against each other.”

***On where the extra preparation puts the team moving forward…***“Immensely forward. Not even just in terms of the football part of it, but also the mentality and the closeness and the time spent together in practice. Literally, when we go to practice now, if we’re going good on good and I break it to go to something easier, they’re disappointed. They like to compete, they like to play against each other. That’s become so ingrained in them that I can see guys getting better. It’s that mentality as much as anything for me. And I think a lot of guys see what their weaknesses are, that they know that they have to improve on. If you’re not a great player yet, and you want to become a great player, and you know all I need to do is this, it might be hard to do but it’s easier. I think a lot of guys have been able to identify what they need to do to contribute next year at a higher level. That’s been valuable. I think our offseason will be very focused, and it will allow our spring to be much more competitive.”