Baylor Football Head Coach Matt Rhule
Weekly Press Conference
September 16, 2019

***Opening Statement***

“Great to see you guys. Appreciate you guys being here especially after the bye week. I think our team is healthy, recovered, very focused. We had a great bye week last week getting ourselves better and then obviously got started last night for this Rice game and I really liked our focus and maturity of the team as they showed up yesterday. So, excited to get on the road. One of our challenges coming out of the last few years is really two-fold, winning after a bye, which we have not yet done, and then winning on the road. And winning on the road is its own entity, has its own process, it requires maturity, it requires the toughness to go into someone else’s building and we’re going to work hard at that this week. Rice is a good football team. Rice is going to present challenges to us in many ways, both physically, they’re a tough, rugged group. You watch their effort on special teams, you watch their punt return, you watch their kick return, you watch their run defense versus a really good Texas team, versus a really good Army team that took Michigan to overtime, versus a really good Wake Forest team. They’ve had a tough road to go in terms of their opponents and you see a really physical group that will present a lot of challenges. And offensively, we’re not used to seeing a lot of this offense, multiple personnel groupings, multiple formations so I think it provides our guys with a lot of challenges. They have to be mentally locked in to make sure we don’t give a free one up by lining up incorrectly and I like the way our team’s approached it so far so we’re excited to go back to Houston. Last time we were there we had a great experience. You know a lot of our guys are from Houston, chance to come home, play in front of family and friends, and most importantly, I think when you go on the road it’s a chance to continue to grow and develop as a brotherhood, as a team and I hope that we take full advantage of that this week. So, with that, let’s go with questions you guys have.

***On what the team worked on during the bye week…***

“Yeah, I think, you know continuing to work on running the football, you know we had a lot of yards so sometimes guys start walking around feeling like you know the offensive line starts thinking hey well we’re really blocking guys well but sometimes the back reverses field and runs for fifty yards you know, sometimes Gerry [Bohanon] comes in the game and gives us a hundred yards rushing which maybe we didn’t earn so trying make sure we’re way more precise in the run game especially up front, trying to make sure, as we talked about, our protection game and making sure that our drop back you know we haven’t really had to use the drop-back passing game and so as a result it was getting a little rusty and so kind of trying to breathe new life into that and I think that our timing and really that comes down to practice you know you’re a receiver, you get a little tired, start going three-quarter speed in practice, quarterback you know is going against maybe a scout team, kinda lazy with the ball and getting us to go out there and rip the football and get open, get out of breaks, catch the football those things are really, really important. So, I’ve seen that so far and then defensively you know we’re still not creating a lot of turnovers and Rice is not a team that’s going to turn the ball over, you know they’re not going to get penalties, they’re not going to give you the game, they don’t beat themselves and so working to make sure that we are dominating contact and trying to knock the ball out. We have some guys like Chris Miller that are playing really hard and you know my challenge to the rest of our defense is why is every person that watches our tape, why is every scout that comes through talking about how hard Chris Miller plays? Like, you play the same position as him, like they should be saying boy your safeties play really hard not boy Chris Miller plays really hard so trying to challenge our entire group to go out there and stand out on film by being physical so those are the areas and then just some little things on special teams, our kickoff return we’re just trying to bring that along and I like their approach to that.”

***On the motivation behind seniors’ role on special teams…***

“I think that’s been them, I would give complete and total credit to them. I think Mike Siravo’s done a really good job of, since day one, every special teams meeting he has the whole team in there and so I bet you if you took Xavier Newman and asked him how to be a frontline guy on punt, which he will never do, I bet you he could go through it and I think what that did is it showed the whole team how important it is that we’re going to take the entire team and teach them how to play our special teams and at some point guys realize you know what this is just fourth down . Like if I said hey it’s fourth and one, who wants to be on the field, every guy on offense, every guy on defense is like I want to be out there for fourth and one. That’s all special teams play is, it’s a fourth and one play and so we’re getting the big plays right now, we’ve blocked a punt, we’ve blocked a kick, we’ve had a punt return for a touchdown, we’ve had however many touchbacks, we had one good kickoff return, and we got a turnover so we’re making the big plays but as we continue to get that energy and because we missed some ones as well, we’ll continue to get them and I think if you’re a senior and you’re in great shape, cause our team’s in really good shape I think, you’re saying why would I not go out there and play I mean it’s just playing football and so that’s to me it’s been a great job by Mike but it’s also been a really, really impressive job by our seniors.”

***On the California legislation that would allow players to get endorsements and be paid…***

“I would say for me, I am not sure I understand the issue. I am going to give a long-winded but also honest answer. I think on the surface it makes sense to me that a student-athlete should be able to make money on their name. It’s like I can make money on my name, image and likeness, so why couldn’t a student-athlete. So, on the surface I see that. I would err on the side of the NCAA who has said that we need to study this. Because what I don’t want to happen is us to go down this path and then we find out we need to eliminate 12 other sports to play for football and basketball. There are always unintended consequences of everything so I think it is going to take some really diligent people to say this is what happens if we go down this path. If it was hey I am a really good athlete, I should be able to do a Campbells commercial, that makes sense to me, but is it going to be schools saying hey if you come here, our boosters are going to pay you $100,000 for your autographs to get you to come here. Is it going to become that, I don’t know those things, so for me, I err on the side of it makes sense, but I would like someone to really figure it out and tell me what it will result in because I love football. Other than my family, I love football. My time is spent doing football. But I really respect and appreciate the Olympic sports. I am a supporter of our tennis team. I support our acrobatics and tumbling team. I support our volleyball team, our soccer team. What I don’t want is for this to be something that everyone thinks is a really simple issue and all of a sudden we look up and every school has like five sports. So, this is where I would want someone to really explain it to me.”

***On the strong play by the Big 12 the first few weeks of the season…***

“I think you see a strong league. I think you see a lot of parity. I think you see a changing league. You see Kansas goes to Boston College and they run the football and play good defense and you see Kansas State go to Starkville, Miss., run the football and be multiple, so you are seeing a league that was once all spread being very multiple and very versatile. Even the games we lost, Iowa vs. Iowa State was a great game, Texas Tech vs. Arizona was a great game, Texas vs. LSU was a great game. So, I think you are seeing great offenses, but versatility and teams committing to playing defense. TCU goes and gets a Big 10 win over Purdue. So, my message to our team has always been every team we play can beat us and every team we play we have a chance to beat. We can’t worry about them so let’s control us and control our preparation and how we play in the game and know that every game is going to come down to who makes more plays.”

***On if decisions have been made on who to redshirt…***

“We are getting closer to that. Some guys played in the first two games, some guys only played in one. Some guys we would like to save for later in the year. Solomon Turner has only played one game and as he continues to develop if we need him we need him, if not can we only play him in one game. We have Jalen Pitre as an older guy who we are trying to redshirt, so if we play him in four games then we have seven extra games from another linebacker. So, we are kinda looking at those type of things. Those are always hard conversations to have with those guys because they want to play. I always tell them, if you went back to high school right now and played high school football how would you do and they say, ‘coach I would be pretty good.’ So, your fifth year here will be a lot better than your first year, so just bear with it. There is some good maturity and guys understanding, but it’s still early, so we still have to see if we can afford to redshirt him or not.”

***On what having a healthy Grayland Arnold means to the team…***

He is one of our best players. The game makes sense to him. He has been unselfish in that he has been willing to change positions to help the team. He plays on special teams, his work as a punt returner has been special. I had a player shoot me a text on Saturday, when I was at home with my family watching games and hanging out and it looked like he catching punts from our punter with his helmet on on an off day. His level of work ethic and dedication has just skyrocketed. He is a guy the team just listens to. When he speaks they listen. We have tried to convince our guys, and it’s hard in the age of cell phones and iPads, that being an avid notetaker is one of the best things you can do to be a good football player. And we can show them Ray Lewis saying it and Ed Reed saying it and we have guest speakers coming in and saying it, they say every revolution started with the power the pen, but Grayland sits there every day with Jameson Houston and they sit there in the second row and write down everything that is said in the team meeting. Coach Teaff came and talked to the team last night in a way only Coach Teaff could do it, life, football, chapel, everything and they are taking notes. That impact in what Grayland has done is important. I know guys who want to be on the punt return team right now because they know that Grayland has a chance to take it to the house and they want to make sure that they do a great job. No one has had more of an impact on the culture of our team in the last year than Grayland Arnold.”

***On how does facing an old rival like Rice translate with players who’ve never played them…***

“That’s one of the reasons why we brought Coach [Grant] Teaff in. From the time that I saw him this summer, he was talking about playing Rice. For me, it’s to have a chance to go to Rice Stadium, to know the history, to know the Super Bowl was played there, to know that President Kennedy gave a speech there, to know all those things, that to me as a fan of college football is really, really important. And I think for our guys, they know a lot of guys on their team. A lot of our guys went there in 2016. A couple of them didn’t play real well, and they’ve told me about it. They’re excited to go back and redeem themselves from that game. And then always going to Houston, I think, is important. What I want our guys to do, and what I think they’re doing, is turn on the tape of their receiver, No. 10, (Austin) Trammell, and then you’ get excited about how you have to prepare. Then, go turn the tape on of them running the football, running “22” personnel power. Put on the tape of their special teams, put on the tape of their defense. Sam Ehlinger played a great game on Saturday, but stopping the run and doing some different things, you’ll get excited about that game. But, I think the history of it is why we brought Coach Teaff in. I thought he was amazing. It’s amazing that he gets up there and it’s just BANG, and you have 130 people sitting in the team room just mesmerized at his every word. I thought he really breathed life into the history of this game.”

***On if the Texas-Rice game also gives you an idea of how you will match up with Texas…
“*** We see all the teams in the league all year, so you kind of get a feel for them. We don’t play Texas till the end. What we all look like at the end of the year is usually a lot different than what we look like now. I think for me, just going back and watching Rice, really to see who Rice is I go back and watch the Army game. Because it takes grit and toughness to play them. We played them when I was the head coach at Temple, and we were 16-point favorites and they beat us. And they beat us because we didn’t really want that. We said we wanted it, but we got out there in the game, and they were cutting us and they’re hitting us and punch us – football-wise. And we’re sitting there like, ‘We don’t want this tonight.’ I know what it takes to go play the academies. We played Army many years, we played Navy many years. And it’s hard. Rice went out there, and they loved every second of it, and they had a chance to win the game. They got a holding call, brought them back from a big play, and had a chance to win it. I love playing against teams that I respect, and I respect Rice and who they are and with coach [Mike] Bloomgren. But just kind of watching how they play, it will be a battle. So, we’re preparing for that right now.”

***On if you take anything from Rice playing against Texas…***

“Absolutely. Texas lines up in a lot of the same sets that we line up in. Rice played Wake Forest one way and then they played Texas a little differently. They went out against Texas, they played man, they overloaded the box to take away the run. They put pressure on the quarterback. Offensively – Texas, being more of a three-down team like us – they ran a ton of outside zone. So, I think it was really good for us to get a picture of some of the things that they did versus a team in Texas who at least structurally is built the same way we are. I thought it was good for us to get that picture. Wake Forest is a four-down team, us being three-down, so maybe Army and Texas were better films for us to watch.”

***On if they did anything differently this time to change it up for the bye week…***

“The bye week the first year was probably a different entity. Lenoy [Jones] and Taylor Young were claiming that we did some hard things that week that I don’t remember doing. Last year was one of those 10-day bye weeks that we have against West Virginia this year, so that’s truly a bye week. This year, it being after Game 2, we just tried to be really smart about what we did. We tried to make it very structured. We have a way, way, way more mature team than we did, so there really weren’t any points to be proven. There wasn’t anything like, ‘Hey we need to work on our work ethic.’ Those guys are working. We had a 7:30 a.m. practice on Tuesday morning, those guys were on the field at 7:15, and they practiced at a high, high level. So, then we say, ‘All right, guys, we’ll see you tomorrow.’ I was really pleased with the maturity of the team. Again, you come out of that Game 2 last week, you score some points and everyone feels good. You turn the tape on, there are things that are wrong. The first week I had that approach, and the team looked at me like, ‘Why is he upset?’ After Game 2, I think our guys came in and said, ‘We’ve got to fix that, that, that and that.’  If they do that, then I can be the fun coach. If they’re not doing that, then I have to be the bad guy. And they were clearly focused on the things that we have to improve upon, which again is the maturity of the football team. Now, we’ve got to keep that maturity up another week. But, I thought last week’s bye week was a really mature, focused team. So, we didn’t have to go overboard. We could do the minimum, effective dose of work, which was good.”