Baylor Football Head Coach Matt Rhule
Weekly Press Conference
October 28, 2019

***Opening Statement*** “Appreciate everyone being here, thank you as always for covering us. Obviously, very excited for the game this Thursday night, to play at home in front of our students, in front of our family and friends and fans and hopefully a lot of people here in the community of Waco. Excited to play West Virginia, I think Coach [Neal] Brown is one of the great coaches in college football, the job he did at Troy was absolutely fantastic, he’s a good man to get to know and he and his staff are doing a great job right now with building that team, that young football team, they’ve got some tremendous players on their defensive front, it’s going to be a tremendous challenge for us, our offensive line, which has not always been our strength versus a veteran defensive line, I think their interior pressure, I think their edge pressure is really going to be one of the matchups of the game, They’re, I think their 11 sacks, right now, 3 in the conference and one of the top teams in the country in terms of sacking the quarterback. Their offensive line has done a tremendous job of protecting their quarterback, [Austin] Kendall’s a veteran, he’s played a lot, we know that they have some other guys that can go in there and play, Trey Lowe, and we’re preparing for any and all of them, a dynamic young receiver that’s going to be one of the best players in the Big 12 in the next couple years is 13 [Sam] James and they do a great job of keeping you off balance with screens and all kinds of swings and verticals and really trying to keep you off balance so we’ve got to do a great job of stopping the run so we can concentrate on those things and to try to go play our best game so with that I’ll take whatever questions you have.”

***On being undefeated…***“I think, I look at every week we play, someone’s going to, someone’s trying to beat us and so nothing about us being undefeated, I just think more, you know, when we were 0-7, you know, people could probably beat us with their base and I think what our kids have experienced the last couple weeks is we prepare for one defense, we prepare for something on offense, we get something different, well that’s part of it, right, that’s part of being a decent team, being a good team is you’re going to see different things and you have to adjust, what we say is you prepare all the way through the game, like you don’t know how the game’s going to go until the end of the game so we want to prepare on Friday night, we want prepare Saturday, we want to prepare Saturday during the game and, you know, I’m saying Saturday, it’s on Thursday, but that’s how my brain works, prepare all the way through the game and just keep adjusting, keep learning, keep adapting to the things that are happening and if you do that, that’s a sign of a good team.”

***On if the players had a reaction to the rankings…***Yeah, I mean, I asked the team, got a lot of guys texting me about the things that happened this weekend and I think what the message was very simple, like, like I said ‘What did you guys learn this weekend?’ They said ‘Well, special teams matters.’ You know, you saw games come down to special teams, I said ‘What matters?’ Third down really is important. Yeah, third down is really important. You can’t play this game looking at the score board, you know, you have got to just go play and I think those messages that we say all the time, they were just reinforced by the games that happened this weekend and not just Big 12 games, I mean, they watched Auburn-LSU, I mean I stayed up till 1:30 watching Oregon-Washington State and what you realize is if you want to win games you better play well and that’s the only thing you can control so I think our team is a team that’s focused hopefully on trying to play as well as we can Thursday night cause we’ll have to.”

***On the play of Terrel Bernard…***“Yeah, I thought Terrel [Bernard] played really well in the game, we’re unhappy with how we played on defense just simply because of our tackling, we’ve been a good tackling team and in the last two weeks, last two games we haven’t tackled quite as well, now, in fairness, you got to give a lot of credit to the guys that were tackling, Chuba Hubbard and some really good players there, but we did not tackle well in the last game and I think part of it was tired coming down the stretch and guys are playing a lot of football, we were playing about 60 snaps on defense last year, we’re playing in the 80s so we’re playing a lot more snaps on defense right now and that’s for a lot of reasons, right, offense, our offense has been a little more big play oriented, they’re scoring quicker, the defense is having to be out there longer, defense hasn’t been as good on third down, offense hasn’t been as good on third down so there’s some things that we’d like to correct, but we’re playing a lot more snaps then guys are getting a little bit worn down going into that last game, but we didn’t tackle real, real well so to me, it’s about everyone tackling well and you tackle, not just the art of me tackling you, but also of us running the proper angles and leveraging the football properly, their big, big, big explosive play, the 70 yard touchdown that was a result of two missed tackles and so I think everyone on defense has to play better and tackle better, I think everyone on offense has to block better so there’s, to me, it’s just an aggregate of us all doing our job a little bit better when you lose a great player like Clay Johnston.”

***On the Thursday game and its effect on the schedule…***
“The hardest thing is just dealing with classes, you know, like we met this morning at 7:30 and then we’re going to practice tonight from 8:00-10:00 at night, you know, that’s not ideal, but it is what it is, you know, if that bothers us then we are not a good team. Monday we have a lot of labs and we’re never going to allow someone to miss anything academic for football so we’ll come in and we’ll practice after everything’s done. I thought the bye week was good for us in that we were able to get our young guys a lot of reps, you know, and then we were able to focus on West Virginia. We had the same situation last year against West Virginia and we treated last week like a bye week and tried to do the game this week and we got our face kicked in last year and so I take that personally because it’s my job to get the team ready and there wasn’t a game last year that I thought the team wasn’t ready except for Duke and West Virginia so I put those two games on me. Duke was early, we learned from it, West Virginia was late, you know, I’m from the east coast, I went back home and saw a bunch of family and friends came to that game and you know, they were kind enough to sit through it and we didn’t play well so I think attacking the schedule, attacking the mindset, like we didn’t go out recruiting last week, you know, we didn’t do those things, we worked on this game and I think that’s a mindset that comes out of last year’s experience.”

***On the turnaround of the program starting vs. West Virginia in 2017…***“Yeah, I mean, we put Charlie [Brewer] in cause, you know, what was unique about that game was, it was, I think it 10-10, it was 10-10 right before the half and we hit a pass, it went down and we’re driving to maybe take the lead, I think it was 10-10 and we give them the ball on the three yard line with a minute and they go 90 yards and hit a seam ball to go up 17-10 then they came out after halftime, they scored another touchdown in two plays so it went from 10-10, we’re in the game to 24-10 and all of a sudden we lost hope and we just, we kinda gave up and we put Charlie in and then [Trestan] Ebner hits a big play, Ebner goes in the game and we just kind of start playing frantically and playing loose and made a bunch of plays, Gavin Holmes was out there running around, so a lot of those guys that were out there playing, now they’re veterans and I think the thing that we’ve learned is, you know, we have to stop worrying about everything else and just play football, play free and play loose and play relaxed and that was one of those games where, you know, you get behind, when you’re young, you don’t have to worry about, when it’s 17-17 and you’re playing, you’re worried about making a mistake that can cost the game, when it’s 38-17, you’re just playing and we found a way to get back in that game.”

***On Brewer’s journey…***
“Well, you could see it that game, I think we kinda said that all along when he first got there that spring. I remember we went to Kansas State, I think that was game five and we put him in, I remember a lot of people asking me in this press conference after ‘Why’d you blow his redshirt year for four or five plays?’ and I just think we felt like hey, this guy’s a football player, you know, and we gotta get him in the game, then he went to Oklahoma State and he got in a little bit more, I can’t remember if it was West Virginia, I can’t remember how that went, but, he got in and finally it was this hey, this is his time, let’s let him go play. I think the biggest thing about Charlie is always, he loves to play, he doesn’t let adverse conditions, adverse things affect him, if he throws an interception, if he gets sacked, he doesn’t come off and act, you know, crazy, he just says alright let’s go and goes right back out and keeps playing so it’s easy to coach a guy like that.”

***On all the upsets in the Big 12 last weekend…***“Well, I mean, I think it says about the Big 12 that there’s great parody, that’s what I said all along, you can’t have just 10 teams and have them all play each other that there’s not going to be a lot of familiarity, right, so just like, you know, hey, we play this team every year, we know them, well they play us every year, they know us, right so it’s like being in the NFL, it’s way harder. I think part of it too though is that you recognize that there’s great, great coaches you know, Kansas had a great upset you’d say and Kansas State had a great upset. Well those are two national championship coaches, they’ve both won national championships, they’ve done this before and great teams, to me, get better as a season goes on. Lot of people can look great in September, early October, what do you look like in October and November? And you see those two teams getting better and better and better each and every week and so I think it just says that this is a really tough week, there’s no easy out, there’s no hey, we got that team. You have to show up and play each and every week. As I was watching, I’m just a fan of college football, I mean, I watched Columbia-Dartmouth the other night as long as I could until the score got out of hand. I watched Houston-SMU, I love watching football, Colorado-SC, I just love watching college football. I watch all those games and I try to take a little something away from all of them.”

***On how he keeps the guys focused…
“***What I learned a long time ago is I can’t keep them from getting distracted. I can’t keep their attention. I put a process in place and I keep reminding them of that. I think our guys have done a good job. Sometimes when you start winning guys start retweeting a lot of pictures of themselves on social media and I want them to have fun, don’t get me wrong, but if you are not going to retweet when you are 0-7, then you shouldn’t retweet when you are 7-0. You should just live the same way all the time. But I think at the end of the day it just comes down to work. If they show up to work then so be it. And they have been showing up to work. Now, we need to show up and play really really well on Thursday night and we will see if we can get them to that point. But that is what is good about having a lot of veterans, they have been through a lot of things and our seniors have never beaten West Virginia so I think they understand. Not only have they never beaten them, they had a heartbreaking loss at the end of the season in 2016 at West Virginia, we had a heartbreaking loss here at the end of 2017 that we just talked about. 2018, we got our teeth kicked in, so all the other stuff is all the other stuff like Halloween. To me, it comes down to football. And we have not played better football than West Virginia since 2015 and that has to change. That happens on the practice field and in the meeting rooms and so far they have done that at a high level. We have guys banged up and other guys are stepping up and I have been pleased with the football. We will know Thursday with how we play.”

***On the key to blocking all the field goals and punts on special teams…
“***We’ve always blocked field goals and punts at a high level. And that goes back to our time at Temple. I think we led the nation a couple times or over the aggregate of a couple years. We don’t do anything special. We just line up and go after it and expect that our guys are going to do it. I think we are good at it because we put good players there and they take it seriously and we practice it. Not a lot of teams do live field goal vs. field goal blocking in season. They are afraid of getting guys hurt. I think if you are going to do it in games then you might as well do it in practice once a week. I think the biggest difference from last season to this season is we did a total mind shift because I am one of those head coaches who doesn’t love special teams meetings or special teams periods. I am like an o-line guy and I want to go down there and do o-line stuff. We made an emphasis to change our attention to detail on special teams. It started with meetings. Mike Siravo has done an amazing job running meetings with everyone in there. I think if you asked anyone on our team, they could install punt for you, from our offensive line to our quarterback, even if they are not on it, they have all been invested in it. I think we have done a great job with the practice, the amount of time we spend on it and the way we do it. But the biggest thing is the players. The players have completely bought into it and bought into it on a high level. So, when JaMycal Hasty rips off a 74-yd run and then runs down there on kickoff, no one is doing that. Let me say this, some people are doing it. You watch those great Alabama teams, those running backs are all running down. We have our two starting tailbacks running down, that tells people it’s important. We have starters all over our special teams. Chris Platt is out there, he is on the punt team, they are doing all these different things for us. It really has been the players just buying into it. But as I looked at the job I did last year and said where can we improve, we dropped a punt of a kick off return every game last year. We said we are not going to do that again, so we put a lot more time an attention into it, so it shows up on the blocks, but we don’t beat Texas Tech or get going against Texas Tech if we don’t have that great kickoff return. Obviously, last week it bothered us that they ran the fake punt on us, so we are going to change some of what we are doing there. I just like our guys’ attention to details.”

***On how big it would be to get a win over West Virginia…***

“People keep asking, what does it feel like to be 7-0, 7-0, 7-0? Well, I’d really like to be 8-0 and I really would not like to be 7-1. That’s literally how I said it to the players: You guys like 7-0, you like having seven wins? How would you like to be 7-1? To me, it’s just about this week. I bring up the point of last year, because we realized, ‘Hey, we have not out-footballed them. We’ve not played better than them.’ So, what we’re going to focus on this week is the football, right? The game, to me, is going to come down to nothing more than can we block 91 (Reuben Jones)? Can we block 55 (Dante Stills), 56? (Darius Stills)? Can our O-line protect against this D-line? I don’t know that. I believe they can, but we’ve got to go do it. Can we cover 13 (Sam James)? Can we handle the quarterback run game? To me, it’s always just trying to get them to come back to the football, the football, the football. Because when you watched the games on Saturday – you guys asked about the games – what you realize is guys won or lost not based upon their ranking, not based upon anything else, not what uniforms they won or who’s in the crowd. They won or lost based upon one thing and one thing only, whoever played better. So, if you have four turnovers, you’re probably going to lose. It’s just always trying to get our guys’ minds to go back to the football. Go back to the football.

I love going back and watching. I always go back and watch old Baylor games against teams we’re playing. So, I go back and watch 2015. How did they beat them in 2015? Corey Coleman just ran by the guy and caught a touchdown and just did amazing things, and Seth Russell was playing beautiful football. So, to me, it’s like, OK, guys, you want to win? OK, here’s how you win. You have to play really, really well. How do you play really well? You prepare really well. How do you prepare really well? Well, you probably shouldn’t be talking about what happened last week. So, that’s my message to the guys is let’s focus on this week, let’s play well. What people have a tendency to say is, ‘Hey, let’s just focus on this week.’ I didn’t say that, I didn’t say just focus on this week. Because now you’re saying let’s not focus on . . . focus on this week. Because if not, then you’ll lose this week and you’ll say, ‘You know what, that was disappointing.’ So, focus right now on being elite. They were good this morning, we’ll see if they’re good tonight. We’re going to go tomorrow, we’re going to go tomorrow night. We’re going to practice and prepare for this game because it’s going to be an unbelievable challenge. It’s been a four-point game. Even Oklahoma, it was 28-14. Texas, it’s a four-point game at halftime. Kansas was a four-point game. They’re all tight games until the fourth quarter. So, this will be a war of attrition, and hopefully our guys will be ready to play in the fourth quarter.”

***On when defenses have taken away Denzel Mims, how big has it been to see guys like Tyquan Thornton and Josh Fleeks step up and how do you get Denzel more involved again…***

“We did it a couple times on Saturday (against Oklahoma State) where we said, ‘You know what, they might be playing man with a guy over top, but we’re still going to throw it to him.’ And he got two big pass interference calls, which it was zero blitz. Charlie was fearless. He stood in there and ran a slant and go, and he knew he was going to get hit, but he took the hit for the team and threw it up and Denzel made that play. It’s all the things you said. The other guys have to continue to make plays. I think you’ve noticed that when Charlie drops back, he’s pulling the ball and running a lot and getting a lot of huge plays. And that’s because if you put a lot of guys in coverage and you play a lot of man coverage, there’s really nobody for the quarterback. So, Charlies hurt them. Everyone else has to continue to hurt them, but I think we have to say . . . And Denzel’s been banged-up since the Kansas State game. He got hurt on that first out cut against Kansas State. Went down the first drive this past game, I thought he was done for the game. You talk about a guy I couldn’t be more proud of, in terms of his mental and physical toughness this season is at an all-time high. He’s doing things that inspire other people, because he’s playing when he’s not feeling right, he’s playing when he’s not 100 percent and he’s playing through it. I think the bye week was good for him, and I think we just have to say, ‘You know what, let’s throw it up to him every once in a while and let him go make the play,’ because he’s a great player.”

***On if he has a challenge for the crowd on Thursday…***

“I hope whoever comes is loud. I know it’s Halloween, and I know it’s hard for some people. I think if you’re a fan of this team, and you can come watch us play, just be loud. Some of the atmospheres we go into are really, really loud. Just continue to be loud. But, we appreciate everyone that comes. There’re no classes after like 11 (a.m.) on Thursday. That’s unbelievable. You don’t have class from 12 o’clock on, so I think it should be a great, great atmosphere.”

***On if Grayland Arnold or Trestan Ebner play…***

“Trestan’s available. He’s not 100 percent, but he’s available. And Grayland, not sure yet. I would say questionable. I’m hopeful. I know he’s not ready to start, so JT (Woods) will start. The goal would be to have Grayland available on some sort of limited capacity, but we’re never going to play them before it’s too early. We don’t want to do that to the kid.”

***On if West Virginia still run a 3-3-5 defense…***

 “They’re more of a four-down team, but they use some hybrid guys. They’re like the only team doing what they’re doing. So, on any given play, they can either be a 4-3 defense or a 3-4 defense. They have some guys kind of moving up and walking around. I don’t want to say they’re exotic, but they’re challenging in that every play is a different look. It’s got some of the previous tenants of the 3-3, mixed in with the four-down, so you’ve got to be prepared for it all.”