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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