

ON TO THE CHAMPIONSHIP

Baylor competes in Big 12 Championship for first time

Joshua McSwain | Sports Editor

They were just one play away from beating all the odds.

For the first time in program history, the No. 7 Baylor Bears made it to the Big 12 Championship, facing the competitively ranked No. 6 Oklahoma Sooners who had competed in and won the last four consecutive conference championships. The Bears fell to the Sooners in overtime 30-23 after a high-scoring second half comeback.

"I thought it was a great football game," said head coach Matt Rhule. "As I told our players while they can be disappointed, they certainly cannot hang their heads. They overcame adversity, and battled and fought and had a chance to win the game. We were one step away from winning the game maybe in regulation and credit to Oklahoma, though, they made the play that counted."

Though the Bears were rated as the underdogs for the match, they came back from two double-digit deficits both in the first and fourth quarters. Tensions were high as the neutral-field championship game was played just two weeks after Baylor's devastating loss to Oklahoma, with the Bears boasting a 21-point lead at halftime over the Sooners.

"Playing against OU is always a good challenge because we get to see how good we really are," senior linebacker Jordan Williams said. "The game didn't go the way we wanted to today and last time [we played Oklahoma], but I feel like that's a testament to what type of defense and what type of players and what type of coaching we've built here."

After injuries to junior starting quarterback Charlie Brewer and freshman quarterback Gerry Bohanon, freshman quarterback Jacob Zeno was sent onto the field with 9:41 left in the fourth quarter and the Bears down by 10 points. Zeno threw an 81-yard touchdown

pass to Trestan Ebner on his second play of the game.

"[We] turned to Zeno and for a guy that was running the scout team, he got in there for a big play and gave us a chance to go to overtime," said head coach Matt Rhule.

"It's just next man up," said Zeno, who passed for 159 yards in the fourth quarter. "Every game, I was preparing like I was the starter. My number just got called, so I stepped up. I was prepared the whole game, because I knew if it came down to it, I needed to be ready."

Like their previous game against Oklahoma, the Baylor defense held strong against the Sooners' conference leading offense. Baylor held Oklahoma to a season low 433 yards of total offense and quarterback Jalen Hurts to season low rushing yards. A major contributor to these statistics is junior defensive tackle James Lynch, who broke the single-season sack record (11.5) and had a forced fumble against Heisman finalist Jalen Hurts.

"I watched our last game three times on tape and tried to get a feel for how they block up front and what Jalen does," senior defensive end James Lockhart said. "I really just tried to study, study, study from a schematic standpoint and from a personal standpoint. I feel like I was able to play faster and read my keys a lot faster."

Though the Bears suffered from their first overtime loss of the season and second against Oklahoma, Rhule said he was confident the program will be happy with the season outcome and the future.

"Whatever bowl people ask us to play in, let's go play one more game together, let's finish as a top-10 team and let's get to 12 wins, which has never been done," Rhule said. "And more importantly, we'll be back."

