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Q. Hey, D.J. Obviously, this season has been completely different for you guys defensively from a production standpoint. I know there was a game early in the season against Arkansas where you gave up 676 yards and 51 points. And then after, that some of the guys talked about they felt like things kind of came together, and there was a turning point. I'm curious, from your perspective, where did things sort of change in a positive way over the course of this year?

COACH DURKIN: Yeah, I mean, obviously you look at it numbers-wise and points and all that. From that point on, after that game, we have really played well. I thought we played well at the start of the season as well. Obviously, that game was not our best by any means. The week before that, we were in some tough spots and struggled a little bit. But, really, overall, when you look at how we started the season, I think, to answer your question, this goes back to something we really built in the off-season. It was really a matter of taking ownership and pride in what we're doing. Knowing that we have to improve and play better. Our players, total credit goes to them. They have really bought into that and bought into playing together. We did a lot of things. It was about the team. There are certain things scheme-wise and different players. All those things help. But, really, the number one thing was about just playing for one another, being part of a team. And so that was big throughout the off-season. And I think after that game you just spoke of, we really leaned hard on that. We really went back to the things we had talked about and built on and said, Man, we put a lot into this thing. We're not going to let it slip away. Again, to our guys' credit, they responded the right way and I think played very well.

Q. D.J., what's your feel, especially from the older guys on this team, of what it means to have the season you guys have had and be on the doorstep of a really big year and to be in the Sugar Bowl?

COACH DURKIN: Obviously, for those guys, the coolest thing about coaching, I think, is to see the look on the young men's faces when they experience success. I think it's such a confidence builder for life. And, ultimately, that's what we're all here for. And so these guys, to this point in their career, they never won more than six games in a season, never been part of all these things and Sugar Bowl and all the great things we've accomplished at a team. I think that's really stuff that you can always draw back to and build on as you go and have a family and go do life's work, whatever that is for you. And so it's been really cool. It's been enjoyable. It's been a great thing to be a part of. I totally feel like we've seen, you know, guys just change their day-to-day, how they feel, how they operate, what they do. And I think that has a lot to do with it.

Q. D.J., going back to that Arkansas game you were talking about earlier, it seems that you guys have brought pressure more often, have blitzed more after that game. Is that correct? And if so, how did you all arrive at that as something that you wanted to do?

COACH DURKIN: Yeah. I'm sure, again, if you look at the numbers, that would be a true statement. We're just trying to create negative plays. We're trying to get offenses off track, which I think is a key fundamental of defense. Again, I'll give credit to the players on that. We have guys doing a great job winning one-on-one. And so our sack number has gone way up, and negative plays have gone way up. I think when you create those explosives -- we talk about limiting the explosive on offense. When you create defensive explosives, which is negative plays and turnovers, I mean, those are the things that really do change the game. So we have certainly focused on that. We work hard at it, both not



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just scheme-wise but execution and technique and fundamentals and effort and all those things. It has certainly helped us during this run throughout the season.

Q. All the things you talked about getting better on, how satisfying is it, as a coach, when you push the buttons and they work?

COACH DURKIN: Yeah. I mean, again, I'll just say it's fun to be part of a team when the guys are bought into the team and playing together and then experiencing success. That's what it's all about. Really work hard. I think we coach and play the ultimate team sport. I think it's one of those things that's getting lost amongst our society and everything we do and being part of something bigger than yourself. And so, you know, when all that's going on in the world and we can get a group of guys together and really buy into that and believe in being a part of something bigger than themselves, being accountable to the guy next to them, it's fun. It's rewarding. It's a cool thing to be a part of. And so, obviously, with the success we've had so far -- and we certainly want to go and play our last game the right way -- it's fun to go through that with your guys and just see how that has an effect on them in their daily demeanor. The positive attitude they have.

Q. Hey, Coach. Just in terms of the Baylor offense, especially with Gerry Bohanon under center, what just stands out to you about what they're able to do on that side of the ball?

COACH DURKIN: I think Bohanon is a really talented quarterback. He's a guy that can just throw the ball and run it. I think what stands out the most from their offense is their ability to run the ball. They're very well coached. They're sound at what they do. You know, they have a scheme that's -- they know what they want to do, and they're consistent about it. And they certainly want to establish the run game. You know, I think really what stands out as well are the shots they take down the field. They hit some big plays and play action shots. [Tyquan] Thornton stands out down the field. If they put that ball up to him, he'll go run and catch it. And he's got great speed and ball skills. And so it's a challenge for us. We've got to make sure that we come ready to play physical and stop the run game as well as, you know, limit those shots down the field that I think are the big game-changers when you get the big plays.

Q. D.J., if you can think back with the 3-2-6, just what was the original spark of inspiration, if you remember, for trying that out, and what kind of kept you guys sticking with it through some of the growing period at the beginning of the season?

COACH DURKIN: I just think, as a coach, it's always about how do you get your best guys on the field? What's best for the personnel you have? As opposed to saying this is our scheme, this is our system, and just go plug it in, and whatever guys you have, make them go do it. I really think, as a coach, that's our job, to find the best answer. And so it was something we actually played around with a little bit at the end of last year. I thought we played -- look at our bowl game last year, some of the games later in the year where we played better, it was something that we dabbled with. It started right there. And then the off-season, it became, okay, let's really, really get entrenched in this, involved in it. We studied a lot of film, several different teams and also ourselves, and said, Where do we need to be better? Where can we help ourselves? It's never just one thing. It's never, Hey, we just got to recruit better or we got to go get transfers or we got to change our scheme. The guys we have, we got to help them as coaches. How do you do that? You help develop them in the off-season with



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technique fundamentals, weight room training, all that stuff. All right. Let's give them the best scheme we have that gives us the best chance to win and go coach it like crazy. So that's -- you know, it started around that time, but it was a full deal the entire off-season to really get it right.

Q. Hey, D.J. I don't think we've talked to you since before the season started, but Sam Williams has obviously had an all-American caliber season. Did you see that coming from what you saw over the summer? And just what has his presence meant to this defense this season?

COACH DURKIN: Probably not a guy you could be more proud of. And I know, obviously, that the stats speak for themselves and the type of year he had. And that's all good. It's outstanding. But really the transformation he's made as a person in his life and just being accountable both on and off the field, really buying into the team, I talked about that earlier. Talk about a guy that really bought into the team, and it's such a great example for his teammates to say, This guy truly just entrenched himself in the team. What can I do to be a great teammate? And you look at all the individual things that came from that.

Ultimately, we all understand, we know you got to do -- you want to do what's best for you and extend your career. That happened because a guy really, you know, just bought into the team concept totally. And so it's been more of a transformation in Sam in his life than just as a football player. And that's what I'm most proud of and most excited about to watch Sam as he continues on through his football career and life.

Q. Hey, Chris. Just wanted to get your perspective on a couple of guys in particular, what Chance Campbell has meant as a new addition to this defense this year and, also, what you've seen from Sam Williams since you guys got here last year, year before last, you know, in terms of his on-the-field and off-the-field growth.

COACH PARTRIDGE: Yeah, absolutely. First off, I'll address the first one, Chance. I mean, he's been everything to this team. He's come in and just showed who he was as a person, to get integrated so fast and win the starting spot with his leadership. I mean, he was viewed day one as a leader on this team and a competitor. He leads with actions, right, not as much words. So he's a worker. He's a film watcher. He loves the game. And he brings guys along with him to really show them the way on how it's supposed to be done. So, I mean, it's hard to put into words what he's meant to this team. He's really been incredible for us.

Sam, obviously, it's been awesome. It's hard not to love him. You know, he's really, really bought into the football team over the last two years and got away from himself and really just put in the work ethic on and off the field to really change his life. It's been pretty special. He had a son along the way, which I think puts a lot of things into perspective. He's really the guy that you're going to root for hard going forward, obviously, in this game and moving forward. But those two guys you just mentioned are a big part of the reasons we were able to get this thing going and win 10 games this year.

Q. What do you feel like it's meant to the guys on this team, especially the older guys, to experience the kind of success that they've had this year when that hadn't been the case, you know, for the last -- for a lot of these guys, most of their careers here?



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COACH PARTRIDGE: It means everything. The fun is in winning; right? I think it means everything for them to stick it out and go through some highs and lows. It's life lessons as you go through this and you learn how to build a team and come from a defense that was laughed at to competitive on the football field, that can shut down anyone. I mean, for us, it's awesome to see, and it's awesome to grow young men. That's what we're in this for. You got to win football games, and that's where the fun is; but to see them grow and see the glow in their eyes and the excitement they have to go play this football game is what you look at, as a coach, and makes you happy and know that we've done it the right way. It's a special feeling for them.

It's funny. I was talking to Lakin Henry just before. And he said, Coach, I wore a mask around my own son over Christmas because this is the first time I get to go to a bowl game. And you realize last year, he missed because of COVID. So it's a special opportunity for these guys. Some of them, it's their first bowl game of their life. Other ones, it's from last year, but it's really the first big one. They're excited for it.

Q. Hey, Chris. I'm curious. You mentioned after last season and some of the seasons before, when the numbers weren't good and guys weren't exactly thrilled with the way the season went, when things didn't go well defensively against Arkansas in that game, how did you guys kind of hold it together? D.J. was talking about how guys, really after that, said, Hey, we put a lot of work into this. Let's apply it with each other. But how difficult was that to kind of keep confidence after 676 yards and 51 points against an SEC team?

COACH PARTRIDGE: It wasn't difficult at all because we didn't shy away from it last year. We hit it right in the mouth, and we believe in each other, and we believe in the process that we needed. And so we sat in here, and we watched it, and we were hard on ourselves and didn't shy away. So it was just something that we got to get back to work and we got to continue. There was really good moments in that game too. Shoot, I forgot the score at half-time, but we were playing pretty well. And then it kind of fell apart, and we just knew that we had to do some different things as coaches. We were asking guys to play 99, 100 snaps in a game. And we had to adapt and do some things -- different things. I think we all looked at ourselves after that game because we felt we had a pretty good defense. We all looked at ourselves after that game and pushed ourselves to get up and get better. So I don't think that's hard. I think that's part of this thing. Everyone wants to go into the season and shut everyone out, but that's not realistic. That's not real life. So if you're looking at attacking this like real life and overcoming things, then I don't think it's very hard at all.

Q. Chris, we've heard so much this year about how [Jake] Springer can sometimes be the engine of the defense. He's not exactly filling up the stat sheet. So from a coach's perspective, what is it that he does so well that allows you guys to play through him?

COACH PARTRIDGE: Plays as hard as he can. He's violent. He's aggressive. He'll take anyone's head off at any moment. You feel him on the field. So that's what he does, all the intangible stuff. Obviously, he missed those couple games in the middle of the year, and that was a tough loss for us because he was the engine. He was the leader. When he went out, we had to adapt and move some stuff around; but when he came back, he re-energized us. Sometimes the stats aren't always the telling truth, but what he does on the field and what he's able to, I guess -- what he's able to get these guys to feel out there is what the most important thing is.



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And he's awesome. He's one of my favorite people I've ever coached in my life because he'll do something wrong, and he'll be so angry at himself, and he'll want to fight you. It's fun. It's every day it's a fun deal. He has that about him.

Q. D.J. talked about Baylor and how they're unique in the fact they know they're going to run it against you, but they still have that sort of success. What's that difficulty in a team where you know they're going to run, but they still seem to pick up four, five yards a carry?

COACH PARTRIDGE: Yeah. They're really good at what they do; right? The way they run the ball, you know, they run stretch, and then they run it a lot of different ways. They dress it up. They'll hit it in all different spots. You got to be really, really sound in all the gaps. That's the front, the linebackers, the safeties. The edges, the corners at times, everybody's got to be sound because they hit it all over the field. I liken it a little bit to Mississippi State in the past game; right, where they only run a certain amount of plays, but they know all the issues with it, and they know where to hit it, where to put the ball. Baylor is similar in the run game. So it's something where we got to get negative plays. We got to knock them back, and we got to rally. We got to be gap sound, and we got to tackle and play sound, fundamental football and play hard. Get 11 guys running at the running back and hitting. It'll knock them back and force them to throw the ball down the field.

JOHN SUDSBURY: Thank you very much for your time this afternoon, Coach. We really appreciate it.