



Baylor Defense Press Conference December 30, 2021



COACH RON ROBERTS: Obviously, we're very excited to be a part of the historic Sugar Bowl. Got a great opponent. I think Ole Miss has been very explosive on offense, got some great players. It's a huge challenge in front of us, but it should be a great ballgame.

Q. What do you see for Matt Corral, and what's the defense going to have to do to maybe contain him a little bit?

COACH RON ROBERTS: Yeah, Matt has a live arm. He's athletic. He can extend plays; he can create plays. I think sometimes he's got eyes on the sides of his heads. He sees receivers, I don't know how he sees them sometimes. He's a very impressive quarterback.

So one of the things we've got to do is make sure -- we have to make him a little uncomfortable. We're going to have to pressure him. We've got to have an effective rush because, if he sits back there and has time to go to a second and third progression and do that stuff, he's dangerous and keeps the sticks moving.

So we've got to get an effective pass rush. And the biggest thing is keep him in the pocket is another thing, not let him extend plays, get out of the pocket and find those receivers down the field.

Q. I believe you were Coach [Dave] Aranda's first hire when he took the job at Baylor. How long have you known him? What's that relationship like? And what was it that led to you saying yes so quickly to joining this staff?

COACH RON ROBERTS: I guess I've known him for about 20 years. Yeah, probably goes back to around '99, 2000. It's -- I think one thing is just the -- it's been a relationship that's kind of been built off the fact that we're both kind of football junkies, love talking, love studying the game.

And then, obviously, the opportunity to get back with him was huge. I mean, it was a no-brainer at that point for where I was at to be around him. I know what type of person he is and how he's going to treat players. And he's a very genuine person. He's one of the true nice guys in this profession. And I was very excited about the opportunity. So, to me, it wasn't even a second thought. I said yes before he told me even the salary. How about that one? (Laughter.)

Q. When you sort of look at stopping this offense, what are sort of the principles that you guys follow as a defense to slow down the spread?

COACH RON ROBERTS: First of all, like any other time, it's about stopping the run. The one thing they do have is they have incredible running backs. [Jerrion] Ely and Snoop [Conner] are really good football players. So they have a running back corps that's pretty outstanding, and it starts with running the football.

So you've got to do that. And then with him, it's a lot about -- they go so fast. So the biggest key is really make sure you get your cleats in the turf and get lined up. So many times there's a tempo to their



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game. It's so much faster than anything you're seeing. Even flip on the game film, and so many people can't get lined up. A lot of explosives are coming off of that. And then they wear people out just because of their tempo, guys getting tired and not rushing the quarterback, and letting the receivers get open.

That's going to be huge. I mean, it really is. But it's adjusting to the tempo of the game, realizing how fast it's going to go. And then you want to stop the run and get us into situations where we know he's going to run the football. We can tee it up. We can go after him. And then we'll have a much better chance at that point to have some rush integrity and be able to keep him in the pocket and protect the quarters and make him throw the ball in tight windows.

Q. You talked about the pass rushing stuff. At any point -- or did it just take time for that defensive line to really develop and become what they've become?

COACH RON ROBERTS: Yeah, I mean, we're fairly young up front, you know? And then, obviously, great players. We had talent; we knew that. I think Coach Johnson has done a tremendous job with them, obviously developing them. I think what they have developed into goes to, one, how hard they work. It's not just a bunch of talented guys -- they are talented, but they've done a tremendous job of working at their technique and fundamentals on a daily basis and have really kind of went into mastering their craft. And that's been huge. That's been really huge.

Q. You got Christian Morgan back as well as Kalon Barnes back for the Oklahoma State game and the Big 12 championship. Played limited, but they still played for you. And the fact that you've got them a month later, are they pretty much healthy that they can give a full game, or what can you expect from those two?

COACH RON ROBERTS: I think they both can give a full game. I think they're capable of that. Christian [Morgan] probably would be the one that we would have any concerns about. How much he goes, how long he goes is really kind of a lot of what situations he gets into. So I think they're both healthy and they're both ready to play. There's a chance, [Jairon] McVea stepped up and had an outstanding football game in the championship game. So I think they're both available and they're both ready to go.

Q. Jalen Pitre has made such a big impact on this defense. I was wondering if you could give some insight into what's made him so successful this year. Is there something technically that he's really improved on? And just what kind of an impact does he make on this defense?

COACH RON ROBERTS: Well, my first thought is Jalen, obviously, is a really good football player. He's got natural ability and all that stuff. The thing that makes Jalen what he is and such a good player is his work ethic, his habits. He's got a tremendous football IQ, but he puts the time in for that. That guy is in our office every night watching film. I mean, every night. He's there every night for a couple of hours, and he's watching film.

He's got a tremendous football IQ. When somebody lines up on an offense, motioning a guy or cut a split from a wide receiver, he knows where the play is going. And the biggest value he brings to us is that



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he's telling everybody else what's going to happen, tremendous communicator on the football field. X cuts to split inside the numbers, and he's yelling out the routes, telling the corners what's coming, where they've got to get to.

So it's his leadership ability, but his football intelligence has really been able to share that with the other football players on the field. That's what allows us to elevate our level.

Q. You were talking earlier about working with [Coach] Dave [Aranda]. You were his boss; now he's your boss. How has that kind of relationship been? How much leeway -- if that's the right way -- does he give you at directing the defense because now he has head coaching responsibilities?

Also, on [Jalen] Pitre, so many guys opting out for bowls. He came back. He's playing. What does that say about him, and how much of an example has that set for the rest of the team?

COACH RON ROBERTS: The first one, I think the relationship is good. Again, he's got a lot of things on his plate, obviously, sitting here as a Power Five head football coach as far as where most of his focus is on our players and recruiting. He does a tremendous job of recruiting, but probably does a better job actually with our football players, our current team, just making sure on a daily basis that he's putting them first. He has a lot of daily meetings with our players and stuff. So he's a very busy person.

Obviously, I'm thankful for that, the amount of trust he's put in me to lead the defensive side of the ball. And, obviously, I'll say it all the time, that I wish he was in our meetings more. I enjoy talking football with him. That's obviously one of the things I love doing.

So when you look at Jalen, his ability to not opt out. I don't know if that was ever a question with him. The kid, he loves football. So I think if you put the ball down in the park and said on Sunday afternoon at noon and said that there was going to be a pickup game at the park and there was going to be some pretty good players, let's go see what we can do, I think he'd turn around and play again on Sunday.

Q. Earlier this week, Coach Grimes had talked about how the experience of the defense actually made it pretty difficult in the beginning for them to sort of dive into that offensive turnaround. Then there was a moment when they kind of caught up. And, obviously, we've seen that this season. How do you feel like that group has been elevated, the defense, the rest of this season?

COACH RON ROBERTS: I think they've done an outstanding job. Again, not just on daily practice habits where iron sharpens iron and as they get better, they make us better. There's that part of it. But there is a true confidence I think it gives a defensive player when they go out on the field when he's seeing an offensive line run the football, when he's seeing Abe Smith breaking tackles, or Trestan [Ebner] making guys miss and moving of the football. That energy and that confidence is contagious. And I think it's allowed us to feed off of them.



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Q. It was kind of an offensive wholesale change after last season. But during spring ball, during fall camp, you mentioned that the defense is pretty much just picking up where you guys left off. What did you guys see during that 2-7 season that you liked so much defensively that you were able to build on to get to this point?

COACH RON ROBERTS: There wasn't a lot of things I saw in a 2-7 season I liked, but no -- (Laughing.)

No, what I saw there, obviously, that was a tough year, a tough year for the players, a tough year for the coaches. It's just tough to go through that, to have people to believe. There's a lot of questions that are open. I'll say this, I'll give all that credit to Coach [Dave] Aranda for keeping this group together and keeping them focused. His tremendous job of putting the players first allowed us probably to recover from that 2-7 season.

What I did see from the defensive side is our kids had a -- I loved our work ethic; I loved our intelligence level. I think we've got to use that as our benefit. Baylor is a great academic -- is an unbelievable academic institution and then the character of kids we get, we've got to use that to our advantage So that was one of the things I talked about is that, hey, we've got to put more on their plate. Our kids can handle it. Let's use one of the best assets they have is their minds.

So we do a lot more checking at the line of scrimmage by alpha formations and situations, and I'm putting a lot on their plate. And why? It's because they can handle it. That's a lot of fun to do as a football coach, is that it opens the door up to put you in a lot of really good situations because your kids are intelligent enough to handle it and they did a good job of communication across the board.

So I saw the work ethic, the attitude, the intelligence factor, and just tremendous character of our guys is what I leaned on. And it's just a great place to coach and a great group of young men to have.