Baylor men set high goals despite losing key players

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
October 4, 2016

One of the Big 12’s all-time leading rebounders is gone along with an NBA lottery pick and the starting point guard.

But the Baylor men’s basketball team believes it has enough talent and depth to win its first Big 12 title and make some noise in the NCAA tournament.

The Bears not only bring back capable scorers like Johnathan Motley, Terry Maston, Al Freeman and King McClure, former Miami point guard Manu Lecomte is eligible to play this season.

Coming off last year’s 22-12 season, Baylor has experience and plenty of motivation after two straight first-round exits in the NCAA tournament, including a 79-75 loss to Yale last season.

The Bears opened practice Friday in preparation for the Nov. 11 season opener against Oral Roberts at the Ferrell Center.

“For sure, we’re definitely hungry,” Freeman said. “We’ve still got a bad taste in our mouth from that (Yale) game. We want to do everything we can to put ourselves in a good position for the tournament by winning every game during the year. And when that time comes, we’re going to be ready, we’re going to be focused. You don’t really forget stuff like that, especially when you worked hard all year to prevent that from happening.”

The Bears might come into the season under the radar. Rico Gathers, who finished as the Big 12’s third-leading all-time rebounder, signed with the Dallas Cowboys as a tight end. Leading scorer Taurean Prince, who was picked 12th overall in the NBA draft by the Utah Jazz and then traded to the Atlanta Hawks, is also gone along with starting point guard Lester Medford.

Baylor is counting on Motley to emerge as one of the Big 12’s premier big men after he averaged 11.1 points and 5.1 rebounds while shooting a Big 12-high 61.4 percent from the floor last season.

“It starts with Johnathan Motley, somebody who has played a lot of minutes and has started before,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “He’s somebody who has had some really good games and has really shown flashes of brilliance. We just need more consistency out of him this year.”

Joining Motley inside is Maston who averaged 6.1 points and 2.5 rebounds off the bench last season. Seven-foot center Jo Lual-Acuil has been cleared to play after missing last season with a heart issue, and should be a defensive presence around the basket.

“Coaches love having those big rim protectors because eventually defenses break down at times,” Drew said. “We’ve had some great shot blockers in the past. So Jo has a blueprint for following some of the best. In practice he has definitely improved his activity level and his blocked shot capability, so hopefully he continues to do that the next two years.”

Nuni Omot, a 6-9 forward, should make an impact after averaging 12.2 points and 5.4 rebounds for Indian Hills (Iowa) Community College last season.

But the biggest addition will likely be Lecomte who redshirted at Baylor last year after averaging 7.9 points and 1.8 assists as a part-time starter for Miami two years ago. Lecomte is a superb shooter who continued to develop his point guard skills during his redshirt season.

“It was probably the longest year of my life,” Lecomte said. “But it was a good experience because you can see a lot from the sidelines. I had to learn, kind of be like a coach. I’m a scoring point guard, so I like to score first, but I like to pass because I have great teammates, a lot of talent this year. So I’m going to have to get everybody involved.”

Lecomte has plenty of gifted shooters surrounding him in the backcourt. Freeman is Baylor’s top returning scorer after averaging 11.3 points and shooting 38.2 percent from 3-point range last season.

McClure shot 37.7 percent from 3-point range coming off the bench last season while Jake Lindsey showed a knack for contributing in a lot of areas as a freshman.

Wendell Mitchell is another solid long-range shooter who redshirted last year, and freshman Tyson Jolly is trying to get in the backcourt mix after averaging 20.3 points at Putnam City West High School in Oklahoma City last season.

Freshman Mark Vital, a 6-5, 230-pound forward, has already earned the nickname “Baby Rico” for his tough, physical style of play.

As the only senior on the squad, Ish Wainright is one of those “glue guys” coaches love. He’s a 6-5, 235-pound forward who can rebound and pass, and improved his outside shot last season.

“He’s one of the best all-time teammates that we’ve had here at Baylor,” Drew said. “He never worries about his points, his numbers. He’s just worried about helping the team win and he gets excited for guys who do well. You love to have a leader and a teammate like that.”
Baylor men face Vandy in closed scrimmage

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
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Baylor men’s basketball coach Scott Drew celebrated his 46th birthday with a family reunion and a scrimmage.

On Sunday, the Bears faced Vanderbilt in a closed scrimmage in Nashville, Tenn. The Commodores are coached by Drew’s younger brother, Bryce Drew, who took over the program this season after five seasons as Valparaiso’s head coach.

“I got to see my family,” Scott Drew said. “My mother, father and sister and her family were there, and it was my birthday, too. It was great for our players to go against a high major team.”

Baylor and Vanderbilt had originally scheduled a regular season game on Dec. 3 this season that was canceled after Bryce Drew accepted the Vanderbilt job.

Bryce Drew told the Nashville Tennessean in June: “I just think (a game) would be really hard on our families for the most part.”

The Bears beat Vanderbilt, 69-67, last December at the Ferrell Center.

Scott Drew was particularly excited that players like Miami transfer guard Manu Lecomte, redshirt freshman guard Wendell Mitchell and junior forward Jo Lual-Acuil got to play in the scrimmage.

“‘It was a good chance for them to get game experience and go against different people,” Drew said. “Manu has a splint on his (left non-shooting) hand but he’s OK. I think we got better as a team.”

Drew said both Mitchell and senior guard Ish Wainright were hot from the field, but he believes a lot of players benefited from the scrimmage. The Commodores have several veterans returning from last year’s NCAA tournament team including 7-1 center Luke Kornet.

“When you’re playing against yourself every day you don’t always see areas you need to work on,” Scott Drew said. “You know each other’s tendencies and moves. A scrimmage like this allows you to see different offenses. It also gives you an idea how guys are going to react when the lights come on.”

The Bears open the season against Oral Roberts on Nov. 11 at the Ferrell Center before facing powerhouse Oregon on Nov. 15. Scott Drew liked scrimmaging against a major college team instead of playing an exhibition against a lower division team.
Under-the-radar Baylor men optimistic for season despite losses

Waco Tribune-Herald  
By: John Werner  
November 10, 2016

Despite three straight NCAA tournament appearances, the Baylor men’s basketball team comes into the season unranked and well under the radar.

It’s easy to see why the Bears are getting little preseason respect: They lost NBA lottery pick Taurean Prince, all-time Baylor rebounder Rico Gathers and starting point guard Lester Medford.

But the Bears have a lot of talented players returning including preseason all-Big 12 forward Johnathan Motley, promising forward Terry Maston and shooting guard Al Freeman. After sitting out last season, Miami transfer point guard Manu Lecomte is expected to make a major impact.

The Bears will open the season against Oral Roberts at 6 p.m. Friday at the Ferrell Center.

“On paper, you’d think it would be a down year when you only have Friday at the Ferrell Center. But the Bears have a lot of talented players returning including preseason all-Big 12 forward Johnathan Motley, promising forward Terry Maston and shooting guard Al Freeman. After sitting out last season, Miami transfer point guard Manu Lecomte is expected to make a major impact.

The Bears also have plenty of motivation after two straight first round exits in the NCAA tournament against lower seeded teams. Last year, the fifth-seeded Bears dropped a 79-75 decision to No. 12 Yale in Providence.

“You don’t really forget stuff like that, especially when you worked hard all year to prevent that from happening,” Freeman said. “We’ve still got a bad taste in our mouth from that (Yale) game. We want to do everything we can to put ourselves in a good position for the tournament by winning every game during the year.”

A rugged nonconference schedule should prepare Baylor for the NCAA tournament. Not only will the Big 12 be loaded again with strong teams, Baylor hosts No. 5 Oregon next Tuesday before hosting No. 7 Xavier on Dec. 3. The Bears could also face No. 12 Michigan State in the second round of the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament in the Bahamas on Nov. 25.

Drew likes the versatility and potential scoring ability of this year’s team. It starts up front with Motley who averaged 11.1 points and 5.1 rebounds and shot 61.4 percent from the field last season.

After coming off the bench early last season, Motley started nine games when Gathers came down with an illness. Motley will be suspended for the season opener for violating NCAA rules by playing in a summer league game, but he’ll be a go-to player this season.

“Rico led the conference in rebounding a number of years, so I have some big shoes to fill,” Motley said. “I’ve been working on a little bit of everything, definitely outside shooting, handling the ball more and getting stronger.”

Motley played some of his best basketball last season when Maston was in the game as they exhibited excellent inside passing to each other. Maston will play a bigger role after averaging 6.1 points and 2.5 rebounds while shooting 56.9 percent last season.

“Both are unique in a day and age when they say there’s not a lot of good low post scorers,” Drew said. “Both can score down low and are a handful. At the same time, both can face up and do things on the perimeter. They’ve shown they can score, but now they need to show they can also rebound night in and night out.”

After sitting out last year with a heart issue, Jo Lual-Acuil should be a defensive presence with his 7-0 frame. Before arriving at Baylor, Lual-Acuil averaged 20.1 points, 11.2 rebounds and 4.7 blocks as a sophomore at Neosho County Community College in 2014-15.

“You can’t teach 7-0 and physically he got better with the year out,” Drew said. “He spent the year gaining weight. The Big 12 is such a physical league and you’ve got to be able to handle the pounding. Jo’s one of the better shot blockers and now has the strength to withstand the physical play in there.”

Mark Vital, a 6-5, 230-pound forward from Lake Charles, La., should add some muscle in the paint as a freshman after playing the last two seasons at Advanced Prep International.

“We call Mark Baby Rico,” said senior forward Ish Wainright.

Wainright is the only senior on the team and showed considerable improvement last season by averaging 5.9 points and 4.3 rebounds while shooting 40.6 percent from 3-point range. His leadership is invaluable to the team.

“Ish is one of those guys that for anyone who knows him is one of the best all-time teammates that we’ve had here at Baylor,” Drew said. “He really cares about his teammates. He never worries about his points, his numbers. He’s just worried about helping the team win and he gets excited for guys who do well. You love to have a leader and a teammate like that.”

With Lecomte becoming eligible for his junior year, the Bears will have a point guard who can score and pass at a high level.

Lecomte averaged 7.9 points and 1.8 assists for Miami two years ago, but he’ll play a much more prominent role for the Bears.

“I’m a scoring point guard, so I like to score first, but I like to pass because I have great teammates, a lot of talent this year,” Lecomte said. “So I’m going to have to get everybody involved. I had to sit out last year, so I worked on my game watching from the sidelines. It was probably the longest year of my life. But it was a good experience because you can see a lot from the sidelines.”

Freeman had a breakout sophomore year as he averaged 11.3 points and 3.4 rebounds while shooting 38.2 percent from 3-point range. King McClure is another good outside shooter while Jake Lindsey has playmaking ability in the backcourt.

“Both Freeman and King can score and have worked on their passing and ballhandling,” Drew said. “They have size, strength and athleticism and they’re capable of being very good defensive players as well as skilled offensive guys. Jake is a fundamentally sound player, a tough player. He’s not intimidated by anything.”

Following last year’s redshirt season, Wendell Mitchell will give the Bears another shooting threat in the backcourt. Freshman Tyson Jolly is a talented guard while forward Nunu Omat from Indian Hills Community College will sit out the first semester due to academic transfer issues.

Despite their absence from the preseason Top 25, the Bears believe they’ll make the NCAA tournament for a school record fourth straight season. But this time they want to stay a little longer.

“We want to win the Big 12 and go farther,” Wainright said. “We’ve been bounced in the first round the past couple of years, and it won’t happen again.”
MEDICA CLIPPINGS

Baylor men begin season with 76-61 win over Oral Roberts

By: John Werner
November 12, 2016

For Baylor to make a school-record fourth straight NCAA tournament berth, newcomers like Manu Lecomte and Jo Lual-Acuil will have to play significant roles.

Lecomte collected 13 points and 10 assists while Lual-Acuil finished with 12 points, nine boards and four blocks as the Bears eased to a 76-61 win over Oral Roberts in Friday night’s season opener at the Ferrell Center.

Lecomte redshirted at Baylor last season following his transfer from Miami while Lual-Acuil redshirted due to a heart issue after he transferred from Neosho County Community College. Both players came up big against the Golden Eagles.

“Obviously, I haven’t played in a year and a half, so I was a little nervous,” said Lecomte who didn’t commit a turnover in 35 minutes. “But 10 assists, I have the best teammates. I can make good passes, but they have to finish. They did a great job.”

The 7-0 Lual-Acuil was Baylor’s best player in the paint since junior forward Johnathan Motley served an NCAA suspension in the opener for playing in a summer league game. Lual-Acuil led Baylor’s defense with four blocked shots, and also stepped outside and drained a pair of 3-pointers.

“It was a relief,” Lual-Acuil said. “After the first minute, I was acclimated and I was good. I just do my job. I know If I’m not having a good night, I know somebody else will. If I’m having a good night, that’s great for me.”

Baylor coach Scott Drew envisioned Lual-Acuil as a rim protector and superb defender. He limited Oral Roberts big man Albert Owens to eight points on three of 14 shooting. Golden Eagles guard Jalen Bradley also struggled as he hit three of 12 shots.

“I give Baylor a lot of credit especially on the defensive end,” said ORU coach Scott Sutton. “They held two of our best players to 6 for 26, and you’re not going to beat any good team on the road when Albert and Jalen shoot like that.”

Guard Al Freeman finished with 16 points and Ish Wainright hit 11 as the Bears shot 44.4 percent. The Bears came out hot by shooting 55.6 percent in the first half, including six of 15 3-pointers.

Lecomte drilled his two 3-pointers in the early minutes and also scored on a layup as he hit eight of Baylor’s first 12 points. But the Golden Eagles managed to keep within striking distance of the Bears at 14-12.

With a 17-3 run, the Bears opened up a 31-17 lead. Freeman and redshirt freshman Wendell Mitchell started it with 3-pointers before Jake Lindsey drove for a layup. Lual-Acuil and Mitchell followed with 3-pointers.

The Golden Eagles sliced into Baylor’s lead, but Lual-Acuil ended the half with a dunk to open up a 38-31 edge.

By the midway point of the second half, the Bears began to pull away as Lecomte nailed a jumper for a 56-42 lead.

“That’s something where when you play guards, hopefully they make those 3’s,” Drew said. “We had some good looks. I thought the second half, we did a better job of getting to the paint and getting to the free throw line.”

Baylor outrebounded the Golden Eagles, 36-33, but Drew wants to see improvement in that area against No. 5 Oregon on Tuesday at the Ferrell Center. However, Drew liked seeing the Bears play strong defense on the perimeter by holding ORU to three of 13 3-pointers.

“I thought last year defensively, we struggled at the 3-point line,” Drew said. “And I thought we were pretty good tonight, gave up 23 percent. Rebounding, that’s an area where we’ve still got to do a much better job.”
Bears down No. 4 Ducks, 66-49, to make statement about ranking snub

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
November 16, 2016

The Baylor players have been clamoring for weeks that they feel disrespected by being shut out of the Top 25 poll.

But after Tuesday afternoon’s riveting 66-49 win over No. 4 Oregon, the Bears probably won’t have to campaign for a national ranking any longer.

The Ducks were the highest ranked team Baylor has ever beaten in a nonconference home game. If the Bears beat Florida Gulf Coast on Friday night at the Ferrell Center, they will be difficult to overlook when Monday’s new poll is released.

“I think nationally we’ve been ranked nine years in the Top 25,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “This year, we haven’t gotten a single vote. So I think people out there will know that we’ve still got a pretty good team. Now you’ve got to deal with handling some success. And we know that’s harder than being disrespected, but we’ll take the win.”

The Bears (2-0) beat the Ducks (1-1) behind a superb defensive effort led by 7-0 junior center Jo Lual-Acuil who collected seven blocked shots and 14 rebounds. Following his transfer from Neosho County Community College, Lual-Acuil sat out last year due to a heart issue.

The big man has a chance to be Baylor’s best interior defensive player since Ekpe Udoh guided the Bears to the Elite Eight in 2010. Lual-Acuil has already blocked 11 shots in two games and was particularly excited to play against a tall Oregon team.

“This is the highest ranked team we’ve had in the Ferrell,” Lual-Acuil said. “This is what you live for. If you’re not going to be excited about this you should be doing different things. It was really fun. I enjoyed every minute I played. The crowd was great and we were all playing hard.”

With Lual-Acuil’s presence in the middle, the Bears limited the Ducks to a 32.8 shooting percentage and won the rebounding battle by a 41-30 margin. Oregon hit just three of 21 3-pointers as the Bears avenged a 74-67 loss last year in Eugene.

The Ducks played without preseason All-America forward Dillon Brooks who is out with a foot injury.

“Last year we gave up the highest percentage from 3 in the Big 12, so we’re excited about holding them to 14 percent,” Drew said. “When they step on the floor, regardless of what they do on the offensive end, they’re committed and making that effort on the defensive end.”

Lual-Acuil was complemented inside by junior forward Johnathan Motley who collected 17 points, seven rebounds and a block. Motley was suspended for Baylor’s season opening 76-61 win over Oral Roberts for playing in a summer league go, so he was excited to play.

“I was pretty fired up,” Motley said. “It’s really hard watching your teammates play, you’re so eager to get out there. I was glad I got a chance to get out there and play with my brothers.”

Point guard Manu Lecomte showed his versatility as he nailed four of five 3-pointers and finished with 18 points and seven assists.

“Manu is never off,” Drew said. “He might not make them but he’s always around that rim. He’s kind of like Brady Heslip. When you get him good looks they’re going in more than not. We expect that from Manu.”

With a passionate crowd of 5,891 on hand for the afternoon game, the Bears played inspired basketball from the tipoff as they surged to an 8-3 lead behind Lecomte’s 3-pointer and a pair of Motley baskets.

After the Ducks cut the lead to 15-14, the Bears went on a 10-0 run that featured Lual-Acuil’s slam on an inbounds pass from Lecomte and 3-pointers by Al Freeman and Lecomte.

The Bears took a 33-23 halftime lead but the Ducks quickly made it close by going on a 9-0 run that ended with Chris Boucher’s dunk to open the second half.

But the Bears quickly responded as Lecomte stole the ball and passed to Ish Wainright for a layup. Freeman drove for a basket, drew a foul and hit the free throw to complete a three-point play.

The Bears continued to stretch their lead throughout the rest of the game. Motley led an 8-0 run that featured Lual-Acuil’s slam on an inbounds pass from Lecomte and 3-pointers by Al Freeman and Lecomte.

“The Bears took a 33-23 halftime lead but the Ducks quickly made it close by going on a 9-0 run that ended with Chris Boucher’s dunk to open the second half. But the Bears quickly responded as Lecomte stole the ball and passed to Ish Wainright for a layup. Freeman drove for a basket, drew a foul and hit the free throw to complete a three-point play.

The Bears continued to stretch their lead throughout the rest of the game. Motley led an 8-0 run with three baskets that featured a pair of dunks as Baylor pushed its lead to 56-42 with 6:32 remaining.

“A lot of times, you play in big games and you play out of character, you’re too nervous, you’re too excited,” Drew said. “We’ve played against a lot of good Big 12 teams in the top five that have beaten us. And I think we did a good job of staying poised, and when they made a run, we answered.”
Baylor men survive Florida Gulf Coast’s hot shooting, 81-72

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
November 19, 2016

Dunk City became 3-Point City on Friday night.

During Florida Gulf Coast’s surprising run to the 2013 Sweet 16, the team earned the nickname Dunk City.

But in Friday night’s game against Baylor, the Eagles were burying 3-pointers from all over the court as they nailed 10 of 19.

The Bears survived Florida Gulf Coast’s long-range shooting barrage to pull off an 81-72 win, but they had to sweat it out until the final minutes at the Ferrell Center.

“We expected a dogfight for sure,” said Baylor guard Al Freeman. “Playing against high level teams isn’t anything new for them. They went to the (NCAA) tournament last year. They have experienced guys and they weren’t going to come in here and back down or fold when adversity hit them.”

With their 3-0 start that included Tuesday’s 66-49 blowout of No. 4 Oregon, the Bears are well positioned to make next week’s Top 25.

After limiting the Ducks to 32.8 percent shooting, Florida Gulf Coast (1-2) shot 47.3 percent. But the Baylor players said there was no hangover from the big win over the Ducks.

“I think we came prepared,” said Baylor guard Manu Lecomte. “We knew this team was going to play hard the whole game. They win 25 games every year to go to the tournament. They shot the ball very well today, but overall we came back well.”

The Bears got solid games from Lecomte with 19 points and Freeman with 18, while 7-0 center Jo Lual-Acuil once again delivered a tremendous all-around performance with 12 points, seven rebounds and five blocks. Lual-Acuil has now blocked 16 shots in three games.

Though the Bears shot 52.1 percent overall, they hit just four of 17 3-pointers. But Baylor made a point of pounding the ball inside, especially later in the game, and hit 27 of 31 three throws.

“The free throw coach deserves a raise, whoever that was,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “But we needed to hit them because we weren’t hitting the 3’s. With them doubling and clogging the paint, we had some good looks, too. It was a good job getting a win when you shoot 23 percent from 3.”

The Bears appeared in ideal position to win comfortably when they opened up a 42-32 halftime lead.

But the Eagles nailed their first seven shots of the second half to quickly cut Baylor’s lead to 50-48.

Christian Terrell, who hit four of six 3-pointers, and Brandon Goodwin both drained treys during the surge.

“That’s twice in a row we’ve come out with 10-point leads and had them evaporate,” said Drew. “Defensively, we thought we were sluggish coming out against Oregon in the zone, so we just said let’s come out in man and get them going. They made their first seven, so that didn’t really work either. So I don’t know what defense we’re going to come out in the second half next time.”

After Lecomte buried a trey for the Bears, the Eagles answered with a 10-2 run to open up a 58-55 edge with 10:18 remaining. Goodwin ended the stretch with his third 3-pointer of the game.

Baylor responded with a 9-0 run and never trailed the rest of the game. Terry Maston made a spin move inside, drew a foul, and hit the free throw for a three-point play to tie the game.

Ish Wainright then stole the ball and hit a free throw. Lecomte followed with a drive for a basket before Wainright scored on a putback and hit a free throw to give the Bears a 64-58 lead with 6:24 remaining.

The Eagles cut the lead to 68-67 with Zach Johnson’s tip for a basket but the Bears came back with another 9-0 run to put the game away.

Lual-Acuil followed a rebound with a dunk and Lecomte did the rest as he scored on a drive, buried a trey and hit a pair of free throws to give the Bears a 77-67 lead with 37 seconds remaining.

“I thought we guarded with a different level of intensity and attention to detail, especially in the last four minutes,” Drew said. “The crowd helped with that and the upperclassman and the leadership helped with that, too.”
PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas (AP) — Baylor couldn't get Johnathan Motley going early, Manu Lecomte was fighting his shot and the 20th-ranked Bears found themselves trailing for one of the few times this season.

Their response? Cut down on turnovers, frustrate VCU defensively and grind out the tough baskets, a formula that helped Baylor hold off the Rams 71-63 on Wednesday in the opening round of the Battle 4 Atlantis.

"When you're shooting well and the game's coming easy on the offensive end, it's easy to have that carry over on the defensive end," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "It takes the mentally tough players when they're not making shots they normally make to make sure it doesn't carry over and affect that on the defensive end."

Motley scored 14 of his 19 points after halftime. Al Freeman scored 15 points, hitting three baskets during a critical second-half sequence for the Bears (4-0).

In addition, Lecomte shook off a rough shooting game to finish with 16 points, including a hanging layup while being knocked to the ground for a three-point play to go with several key free throws in the final minute.

"You needed toughness to play in this type of game," Freeman said.

JeQuan Lewis had 21 points for the Rams (3-1). They went without a basket for roughly 6 1/2 minutes during the second half.

VCU used a late-half burst to lead 36-28 at the break and shot 58 percent in the opening half, but it cooled in the second half as the Bears' defense tightened. VCU shot just 35 percent after halftime.

"I think we played really well for about 25 minutes," VCU coach Will Wade said. "It got away from us the last 15 minutes."

BIG PICTURE

VCU: The Rams just couldn't find someone to step up and make a big basket as the empty possessions mounted during the critical second-half stretch. That included a run of six straight misses with a few turnovers during that field-goal drought.

"We have to play a full, complete game to be beat the best teams on our schedule," Wade said. "We weren't able to do that today."

Baylor: Drew could at least feel good about his team's response after falling behind late in the opening half and then trailing through the first 9 minutes of the second half, especially with how it had just five second-half turnovers after committing 11 in the first 20 minutes. Baylor had led for 94 percent of game time through its first three games.

"I liked the way we fought back," Motley said.

POLL IMPLICATIONS

The Bears entered the AP Top 25 this week after upsetting Oregon at home last week. Baylor could only help its standing in the three-games-in-three-days event, especially with No. 10 Louisville and No. 24 Michigan State lurking in the bracket.

LECOMTE'S DAY

Lecomte had made just 2 of 11 shots before that three-point play with 51.1 seconds left.

He also went 10 of 11 from the line, including a 7-for-7 effort in the final minute.

"I was struggling shooting so my job was just to find the hot man ... and they did a great job finishing," he said.

FREEMAN'S FINISHES

Freeman, a 6-foot-3 junior from Charlotte, North Carolina, hit a driving shot then followed with a big 3-pointer off a crosscourt feed. His third big basket came when he drove by Jordan Burgess for a score to push the lead to 60-53 with 3:07 left.

UP NEXT

VCU: The Rams will play St. John's, which lost to Michigan State, on Thursday on Day 2 of the three-day tournament.

Baylor: The Bears will play No. 24 Michigan State in the semifinals on Thursday.

This story has been corrected to show the first name of Motley is Johnathan, not Jonathan.
No. 20 Bears beat No. 24 Spartans 73-58 in Battle 4 Atlantis

Associated Press
By: Aaron Beard
November 24, 2016

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas (AP) — Baylor dominated Michigan State inside with its size advantage, got out in transition and kept knocking down shots.

The result was a second lopsided win against a ranked team in 10 days, along with the No. 20 Bears earning a trip to the Battle 4 Atlantis championship game.

Johnathan Motley scored 20 of his 26 points in the first half and the Bears shot 55 percent after halftime to beat the 24th-ranked Spartans 73-58 on Thursday.

Jo Lual-Acuil Jr. added 14 points and eight rebounds — nearly all in the second half — for the Bears (5-0), who sprinted out of the break with a 12-2 run on the way to shooting 55 percent in the second half. That quickly turned a 33-30 halftime deficit into a double-digit lead against the cold-shooting Spartans (3-3).

"We were able to get stops and we were able to get some transition buckets," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "And when we're able get in transition with some easy ones, that loosens things up."

The Bears did a lot of things well. They controlled the boards. They had 24 assists on 30 baskets. They scored 19 points off turnovers.

The Spartans just weren't able to mount much of a pushback. They went 7 minutes between baskets spanning halftime as Baylor made its push, while the Spartans' thin front line was no match for the 7-foot Lual-Acuil and 6-10 Motley.

"We were bigger than them in the paint and we think we're tougher," Motley said, "so we just used that to our advantage."

Freshman Miles Bridges scored 15 points for the Spartans, who shot 39 percent after halftime — including 1 for 10 on 3-pointers — in a demanding opening month of the schedule that has them crisscrossing the country.

"We were moving the ball and really playing well I thought through the first half, and we quit doing that," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said. "I just think we looked awfully tired. I can accept that that's my fault, not theirs."

BIG PICTUR

Baylor: In their first two games in the Bahamas, the Bears have notched a tough win against VCU and now a rout against the Spartans in the span of 24 hours — about as good of a start as Drew could've hoped to see.

Michigan State: The concerns about the Spartans' injury-depleted front line showed up in a big way in this one. Motley went just about anywhere he wanted in the first half, while Lual-Acuil led Baylor's effort on the boards. Izzo said Wednesday there would be some growing pains while this group sorted things out — and this performance illustrated it perfectly.

POLL IMPLICATIONS

The Bears vaulted into this week's AP Top 25 after beating then-No. 4 Oregon last week and could be ready to climb after beating VCU and Michigan State, depending on their finish Friday. As for the Spartans, they've slid from their No. 12 preseason perch and could be set to fall all the way out despite — or maybe because of — that schedule.

IZZO'S APOLOGY

Michigan State has already lost to Arizona in Hawaii and Kentucky in New York. The Spartans travel to Duke next week in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

Izzo said he did a terrible job putting together a schedule that has left little time to practice and try to develop his team.

"I actually apologized to my team," he said. "And yet, I've always played a tough schedule. ... You know what? You can take it as an excuse, you can take it as the truth, I don't give a damn. I'm telling you what I did. This ain't on them. It's on me."
No. 20 Baylor rallies to beat No. 10 Louisville in Bahamas

Associated Press
By: Aaron Beard
November 25, 2016

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas (AP) — Little had gone right for No. 20 Baylor when it headed to the locker room in Friday's Battle 4 Atlantis championship game, trailing at halftime for the third straight day — though this time by a big margin.

Maybe that made it easier for the Bears to shrug all that off and respond with a whopper of a comeback to claim the title.

King McClure scored all 15 of his points in the second half and Baylor rallied to beat No. 10 Louisville 66-63 after trailing by as many as 22 points late in the first half.

Baylor had trailed by eight at halftime in its Atlantis opener against VCU and by three to No. 24 Michigan State on Thursday before taking over each game in the second half. This time, the Bears trailed 39-24 at halftime, by 20 early in the second half and by 54-42 with 10:07 left.

"We've been a second-half team all tournament," Bears coach Scott Drew said, "but that one I guess took it to extremes."

After getting shut down early, the Bears (6-0) shot 65 percent after halftime, a total boosted by the fact they got some easy baskets in transition and scored nine points off turnovers.

They got strong play from their bench, something the Cardinals (5-1) just didn't have. McClure, a 6-foot-3 sophomore, had scored three points in the first five games but went 5 of 8 from the field with two 3s and two free throws with 1.1 seconds left to make it a three-point game.

"I saw it in their legs," Pitino said. "Anytime a team doesn't get in the right defense, the right press, you know it's mental and physical fatigue. You see it right away. But I didn't make the substitutions.... It's my fault. I saw they were fatigued. I was just hoping the timeouts could overcome it but it didn't."

BIG PICTURE

Louisville: Pitino had a clear takeaway: he'll have to use bench players more.

"It's my fault that we lost this championship," Pitino said. "It's bitter. But that being said, we'll learn from it, and I'll learn from it as a coach to play these guys whether I think they're good enough or not."

Baylor: Drew's team is 3-0 against ranked opponents. Hard to ask for much more in November.

"Makes my job harder making sure they stay focused," Drew said. "I think the great thing is those are great quality wins. I know when we started his season we knew we played great teams early and had chances to get off to a great start. But we've got bigger goals."

POLL IMPLICATIONS

Expect Baylor to climb in next week's AP Top 25 after beating No. 24 Michigan State and No. 10 Louisville on consecutive days, not to mention last week's win against then-No. 4 Oregon. The Cardinals could slide a bit.

BENCH PLAY

Baylor's bench strength included Terry Maston scoring 10 of his 12 points after halftime, while Jake Lindsey had steal-and-layup conversions on consecutive plays during the 21-5 run that gave Baylor its first lead.

The Bears finished with a 36-18 advantage in bench points.

"It's tough to admit that you're tired," Mitchell said, "but at the end of the day, we just didn't make enough plays at the right time."

UP NEXT

Louisville: The Cardinals host Purdue on Wednesday night in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

Baylor: The Bears return home to face Sam Houston State on Wednesday night.
Hoop Thoughts: The Good And The Bad For Each Team During The Battle 4 Atlantis

CampusRush.com
By: Seth Davis
November 28, 2016

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas — There are worse ways to spend Thanksgiving, that’s for sure.

Last week, for the sixth consecutive year, I had the pleasure of being courtside on this lovely island for the Battle 4 Atlantis while working as a color analyst for AXS TV. Besides taking place in a spectacular setting, this tournament has quickly become one of the premier events of Thanksgiving week. This year’s Battle 4 Atlantis featured another stellar field as Baylor walked off with the first-place trophy courtesy of its championship game win over Louisville.

Here’s something for college basketball fans to be thankful for: In this sport, a team is not eliminated from the national championship chase just because it drops a couple of games in the first month of the season. All eight teams were able to play three games in three days. That was a golden opportunity for the players and their coaches to learn important things about themselves, the kind of things you can only learn by grinding through a back-to-back-to-back gauntlet against quality competition.

After watching these teams up close for three consecutive days (four if you count the practices on Tuesday) and visiting with their coaches, I am here to report on what they learned—the good, the bad, and everything in between. It’s a rough job, but someone had to do it. Herewith, in order of how they finished:

Baylor
(Defeated VCU, 71–63; Defeated Michigan State, 73–58; Defeated Louisville, 66–63)

The good: You find out a lot about a team when it faces deficits, and the Bears were behind in all three of their games. They trailed VCU by eight points late in the first half; Michigan State by 10 points midway through the first half and by three at halftime; and Louisville by three points late in the first half. Those are three pretty remarkable comebacks. In the title game, the Bears were rescued by their bench, which outscored the Cardinals’ reserves by 36–18. Thirty-three of those 36 bench points came in the second half.

Baylor demonstrated that it’s not enough just to have talent and depth. The pieces have to fit well, the players have to like each other, and everyone has to be unselfish. So give this team high marks for its intangibles. “I thought coming in that we had good chemistry, but you don’t know until you’re in the fire,” Baylor coach Scott Drew told me after the win over Louisville. “They defer to each other out there, and even if they weren’t getting shots or scoring, they were happy for their teammates who were, and they were continually feeding the hot guy. That’s something that a team either has or it doesn’t.”

Junior forward Johnathan Motley was named the tourney’s MVP following his 15-point, six-rebound performance against Louisville, but this was hardly a one-man show. With so many players to choose from, Drew could experiment with multiple lineups and try playing different ways. For example, much of Baylor’s success early this season has been due to the play of 5’11” junior point guard Manu Lecomte, but when Lecomte struggled in the first half against the Cardinals, Drew leaned more heavily on 6’5” sophomore Jake Lindsey, who finished with five assists and zero turnovers to go along with eight points. Baylor also got a huge lift off the bench from 6’3” sophomore guard King McClure, who played just four minutes in the semifinal win over Michigan State but had a team-high 15 points in 19 minutes the next day. And while the Bears are known for their intimidating 2–3 zone defense, Drew went almost exclusively with man-to-man against Louisville. He told me afterwards that while he might have a general idea of what type of defense he will use entering a game, he basically decides on the fly once the game begins. “Whichever is working better, we go with that,” he said.

The bad: If you’re a believer that quality guard play is paramount in college basketball—and I am—then there was cause for concern. The Bears committed 16 turnovers in the opener against VCU, and although they tightened that up as the week wore on, they never did find an outside touch. In the three games, they were 9 for 38 from three-point range. Lecomte was 1 for 8, and he is converting just 30.0% on the season. Lindsey has a better outside touch, he is not quite the playmaker that Lecomte is, especially in the open floor.

It’s great that Baylor was able to pull this thing off, but Drew knows this team can’t keep relying on comebacks. More efficient production from its backcourt would make such dramatics less necessary.
Baylor basketball is a strong sleeper again, in Big 12 and NBA Draft

Sporting News
By: Sam Vecenie
November 23, 2016

The race for second place in the Big 12 behind Kansas was expected to be wide open. And with West Virginia, Texas and Iowa State all ranked near the tail end of the preseason polls, it seemed likely the top challenger would come from that group.

Baylor fell just outside of that group in the national consciousness. The Bears received zero votes in the preseason Associated Press poll — a surprise given that the program had found itself ranked at some point during each of the previous nine seasons. Still, the Bears had lost starting point guard Lester Medford, rebound-hoarder Rico Gathers and, most importantly, star small forward and No. 12 overall NBA Draft pick Taurean Prince.

However, coach Scott Drew’s bunch has already rectified that lack of respect — and those absences. The team picked up its first win in Waco over a top-five opponent in school history by throttling then-No. 4 Oregon 66-49 and enters the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament as a dark horse in a field that includes Louisville and Michigan State. This looks to be a much more potent Baylor team than last year’s, largely thanks to two newcomers and one returning star who has a chance to become Drew’s eighth draft pick since getting to Baylor.

Johnathan Motley is one of the most skilled returning big men in all of college basketball and has a pretty real chance to go in the first round of the NBA Draft with a strong junior season that improves upon the less refined aspects of his game.

Let’s start with the good for Motley. The 6-foot-9 big man looks poised for a leap forward this season after averaging 11.1 points and 5.1 rebounds a game last season on Big-12 returnee-leading 25.4 PER. How is he so effective? To start, he has a massive 7-foot-3-plus wingspan that he uses to great effect on the offensive glass and defensively. Take a look at this showcase of that size:

Motley isn’t a traditionally explosive raw prospect like former Bears Quincy Acy or Cory Jefferson. He is more floor-bound, with below average leaping ability. Instead, Motley gets by with terrific fluidity and body control for a player possessing a 9-foot-3 standing reach. He’s a skilled player with good footwork, great touch, and soft hands, as seen here:

He’ll occasionally use a slow but solid post game, and his ability to run the floor in transition is without question. However, the most interesting place Baylor has begun using him in the early portion of this season is as a pick-and-pop, mid-range scorer. Against Oregon, Motley went 4-4 from outside of 10 feet, knocking down both shots off the dribble and off of the catch with a smooth, silky release.

Motley only took 16 jump shots last season, but he should blow past that output in his junior year. And realistically, knocking down these shots consistently is critical both for Baylor’s spacing and for his NBA stock. The Bears’ offense runs best when it has big men who can step away from the basket, and Motley himself needs this shot to compensate for his athleticism at the next level. He profiles best currently as a 5 due to his lack of explosiveness, and being able to take 5s away from the basket is an important market inefficiency within the NBA right now due to how it can affect the slashing abilities of the rest of an offense.

To take that leap from consistent role player to leader and first round pick though, Motley will need to show growth in a few areas. He sometimes struggles with simple tasks. He’ll muff a relatively simple catch or take too many steps and travel or just lose control of the ball. That indicates that he needs to work on his awareness and coordination.

Overall, Motley has posted nearly a 19 percent turnover rate thus far in his collegiate career, a number that’s just too high for a forward without a crazy usage rate. Take a look at these mistakes, which will need to be corrected at the next level:

There also are concerns about what Motley’s role on defense could look like. Where Motley currently plays best is as a rim protector inside, but the Bears have a better one, which will force Motley to play quite a few minutes on the outskirts of Baylor’s many zone looks. He typically has soft feet on the outside, but isn’t a game breaker there and may struggle against smaller guys.

Any sort of added awareness that he can show defending outside beyond being long and rangy could really help his team and his stock, as it would make his defensive rebounding struggles a bit easier to swallow.

Motley had just a 16.7 defensive rebounding rate last season, a number far too low for a center at the next level. He profiles best currently as a 5 due to his needs this shot to compensate for his athleticism at the next level. There’s an argument that Gathers did steal some looks from other players due to his proficiency there, but Motley does often flash poor mechanics when going up for the ball.

These weaknesses point to a player with tremendous physical tools who is growing into his game. Motley missed the season opener against Oral Roberts has shown growth in the many areas he’s needed to since. He’s slowed down, made simpler plays, and even dished out three assists against Florida Gulf Coast. And
Baylor basketball is a strong sleeper again, in Big 12 and NBA Draft
defensively, the Bears are giving up just 93.3 points per 100 possessions and rank 32nd in KenPom’s defensive efficiency metric. Individually, Motley is averaging 14.5 points and 6.5 rebounds in the very early going, and looks ready to be one of the breakout front court stars in college basketball.

Motley has help — and two transfers are catching everyone’s eye. Miami transfer Manu Lecomte has taken over for Lester Medford in the backcourt and given the Bears an added dimension offensively. While Medford was a solidly average point guard with good vision and playmaking ability for others, he was an inefficient scorer that could also occasionally get turnover prone.

Lecomte, the Belgian national who made the All-Tournament team at the U-20 European Championships in the summer of his transfer year, gives the team a better, more polished scorer in the backcourt who also limits mistakes. Check out No. 20’s playmaking on display:

He has the ability to break down a defense and get into the middle of the lane, as well as knock down shots off of both the catch and dribble. That diversified offensive game gives the Bears a greater threat from the lead guard when he’s on the ball in half-court settings. Lecomte should allow the Bears to continue their five-season streak of finishing in the top-20 of KenPom’s adjusted offensive efficiency metric.

However, the key for Baylor teams often resides on the defensive side of the ball. In two of the three seasons that the Bears have been top-50 in KenPom’s adjusted defensive efficiency metric under Drew, Baylor has gone to the Elite Eight. This is where Jo Lual-Acuil Jr. comes in. The Australia native is a high-level JUCO transfer who, like Lecomte, was on the roster last season but was unable to play.

The 7-footer gives the Bears something they haven’t had since Isaiah Austin was in town: a potentially elite rim protector. Watch his length in action:

Gathers put up mammoth rebounding totals that often overshadowed some of the negative aspects of his game, such as his inability to finish around the rim offensively or defend. Lual-Acuil will allow Baylor to maintain a defensive presence while at least replicating a large portion of the extra possessions that Gathers’ offensive rebounding ability gave the Bears. He’s also hit a pair of 3s, in the early going, but the jury is out as to how consistent a threat this can be.

If Motley continues Drew’s run of lower tier recruits developing into NBA players and the newcomers keep improving, the Bears have a good chance to make some waves this year. Add in the transfers along with solid role players like Ish Wainwright, Al Freeman, and T.J. Maston, and Baylor should keep pushing toward the top of the Big 12.
Unranked and disrespected in the preseason polls, Baylor has become the hottest topic in college basketball with its 6-0 start.

The Bears vaulted from No. 20 to 9 in the Associated Press poll by beating VCU, Michigan State and Louisville in the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament in the Bahamas last week.

Now they want to continue to prove their ranking when they host Sam Houston State at 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Ferrell Center.

“It’s nice to be awarded with recognition but we’re still the same team no one wanted to give votes to at the beginning of the year,” said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey. “So that’s the mindset we keep.”

The Bears have delivered great performances across the board while showing tremendous depth.

Forward Johnathan Motley leads the Bears with a 17.8-point average while grabbing seven rebounds per game. Point guard Manu Lecomte is averaging 13 points and 5.8 assists while guard Al Freeman is averaging 11.7 points.

Jo Lual-Acuil as been a defensive force with 7.5 rebounds and 4.2 blocks per game, and forward Ish Wainright has pitched in a lot of places by averaging 5.7 points, 6.3 rebounds and 4.3 assists per game.

But Baylor’s bench has been a major factor in the hot start. In the 66-63 win over then-No. 9 Louisville, guard King McClure hit a pair of 3-pointers and scored 15 points while forward Terry Maston added 12 points and five boards. Jake Lindsey finished with eight points, five assists and two steals.

Most of the production of Baylor’s bench came in the second half to spark a rally from an 18-point halftime deficit.

“The bench is amazing,” Wainright said. “Jake came in and took over the game. King didn’t play as much in the beginning of the year, but he stepped up and won the game for us. Terry stepped up too. Coach (Scott Drew) told everybody we’ve got depth and it shows anybody can play at any time.”

Drew credits the team’s unselfishness for the Bears’ torrid start.

“We’ve definitely gotten out to a start that’s better than expected by most people’s standards,” Drew said. “I think that’s attributed to the guys being all about the team and using our strengths and our depth and being able to bring out the best in each other. Being down in the last three games at halftime and being able to come back and win all three games is impressive.”

The Bears will face a Sam Houston team that’s off to a 4-2 start behind the scoring of guard John Dewey with a 13-point average and guard Dakarai Henderson who is averaging 11.5 points. Forward Torry Butler is averaging 9.5 points and 8.3 rebounds.

“Sam Houston State has six seniors and four that will start,” Drew said. “They’re picked to win their conference. So our guys should be able to know and realize just how tough a game it’s going to be. Being an in-state school, a lot of our guys are familiar with their program and the players that have played there.”

With Top 25 wins over Oregon, Michigan State and Louisville, the Bears are a confident team. But they don’t want to get complacent, especially with No. 7 Xavier coming Saturday at 2:30 p.m. to the Ferrell Center.

“Confidence can’t become cockiness or complacency,” Lindsey said. “Hopefully everyone can put aside egos. When you have depth you want to make sure it doesn’t want to make people hunt numbers or look for themselves. You want depth to contribute to winning. That’s our biggest focus.”
No. 9 Bears take down another top-10 opponent, down No. 7 Xavier, 76-61

By: Brice Cherry
December 4, 2016

Bill Murray may be an Xavier fan, but even the Caddyshack star could probably appreciate the Cinderella story the Baylor Bears are crafting.

Behind a sizzling outside-shooting performance from Manu Lecomte, the No. 9 Bears gunned down No. 7 Xavier, 76-61, before a loose, partying crowd of 9,684 on Saturday at the Ferrell Center. It marks the fourth win over a ranked foe and the third Top 10 victory for Baylor (8-0), which opened the season unranked and gathering no votes in the AP Top 25.

“I think we just go out and play hard every day. Rankings don’t matter,” said Baylor forward Johnathan Motley, who scored 17 points and pulled down eight rebounds. “We’re just going to step between those lines and handle business. Whatever rankings say, that’s what they say. I guarantee you every day, every game, we’re going to come out with the same intensity.”

In addition to a season-best turnout of Baylor fans, the matchup also attracted a couple of celebrity luminaries. Murray, the A-list movie star whose son Luke is an assistant coach for Xavier, watched from behind the Musketeers’ bench, while one-time presidential candidate Rand Paul sat next to Baylor’s interim president David Garland.

Baylor coach Scott Drew said his team plugged into the crowd’s energy.

“I thought the crowd was tremendous today,” said Drew, who grabbed the public-address microphone after the game and thanked the fans. “They gave us a lift, especially in the second half. I thought that really helped with our defense.”

Buoyed by a bevy of second-chance opportunities, the Musketeers (7-1) built a 34-31 halftime lead. The Bears threw up a couple of air balls and in-and-out shots from the perimeter in the first half, and were limited to 37.5 percent shooting.

After the break, however, the Bears started patiently working the ball around for open shots — and their shooting heated up as a result. Lecomte sank a career-high six 3-point shots on nine attempts, finishing with a game-high 24 points.

“We just had to get in rhythm. We struggled a little bit in the beginning,” Lecomte said. “We just kept shooting, kept finding each other. That’s what we’re all about.”

Baylor more than doubled up Xavier in assists — the Bears tallied 17 to the Musketeers’ eight — with some sweet big-to-big finds and timely kickout passes to the perimeter for outside shots.

The score remained tight throughout the first 30 minutes, but Xavier suffered a costly blow when its leading scorer, bruising guard Trevon Bluiett, picked up his fourth foul with 10:32 to play. Lecomte knocked in a pair of free throws after the foul, then swished in a 3-pointer from the top of the key about a minute later, and the Bears were off and rolling.

Including that trey, they outscored Xavier 24-10 the rest of the way.

“Trevon Bluiett going out (with foul trouble) really hurt our team,” Xavier coach Chris Mack said. “We weren’t the same offensively.”

Bluiett led the Musketeers with 23 points, while Edmond Sumner added 19, showing a nice ability to knife through the defense for scoops and layups.

Xavier helped its cause by attacking the offensive glass with abandon. The Musketeers outrebounded the Bears, 47-34, including an 18-8 edge on the offensive boards.

Baylor, however, kept things from getting out of hand in the first half with a steady display of hustle plays. In the first couple of minutes of the game, senior Ishmail Wainright twice scrambled to fire the ball off an Xavier player and out of bounds, setting the tone for Baylor’s effort. Jo Luai-Acuil again proved to be a formidable back-line anchor on defense, blocking six shots.

“The crowd deserves a lot of credit because our guys are going to play hard, but it’s easier to play when you’ve got a packed house cheering you on,” Drew said.

The teams were tied at 8 after the first four minutes of play before Xavier put together a 13-4 run to extend to a nine-point lead.

Baylor responded with an 11-2 run, tying the game at 23 when Wainright pressured Xavier’s Quentin Goodin near midcourt and came up with a loose-ball steal, then flipped the ball ahead to Al Freeman for a breakaway dunk.

Freeman scored 10 points, hitting 4-of-5 from the foul line, and Acuil had 12, giving the Bears four players in double figures.

Baylor will now take an 11-day break as the players go through final exams. The Bears will return to the court Dec. 14 at home against Southern. They have a prime chance to run through the nonconference schedule undefeated, with only four more games, including three at home, and none against ranked opponents.

Obviously the Bears have already gnawed their way through the meat of the nonconference schedule in impressive fashion. The day before the Xavier game, Drew said that it was “harder to win the lottery” than to schedule two top 10 home games, as Baylor had done with Oregon and Xavier.

So, what does it mean winning those games?

“I need to start playing the lottery,” he said, laughing. “We’re very blessed and fortunate to get two wins because just because you play someone doesn’t mean you’re going to win. I think in both games we’ve played well, competed and put ourselves in a position where, RPI-wise, the rest of the year you can benefit from it.”
How Baylor has emerged as this season's biggest early surprise

Yahoo! Sports
By Jeff Eisenberg
December 5, 2016

Having lost his leading scorer to the NBA, leading rebounder to the NFL and starting point guard to graduation, Baylor coach Scott Drew wasn't sure how good his team would be this season.

Only after the Bears began stacking quality wins like pancakes the past few weeks did Drew gain confidence that this year's team could be special.

"We felt good about our group, but some teams play better when the lights come on and some teams don't play as well when the lights come on," Drew said. "We've had a group that has showed great maturity when the lights have come on. Normally with a lot of newcomers and underclassmen, you get a lot more inconsistency, turnovers and bad plays. We haven't had that, so I've been very pleased so far."

Baylor is on pace to surpass the accomplishments of last year's 22-win team despite the departures of Taurean Prince, Rico Gathers and Lester Medford. The unbeaten Bears (8-0) have climbed from unranked before the season to No. 4 in the latest AP poll by defeating five opponents in the top 50 of Ken Pomeroy's ratings, an achievement no other team in the country has come close to matching.

They pounded preseason top-five Oregon by 17 points in Waco on Nov. 15. They won the Battle 4 Atlantis Tournament just 10 days later with impressive victories over VCU, Michigan State and Louisville. And then on Saturday, they handled previously unbeaten Xavier 76-61 in the weekend's only matchup of top 10 teams.

"When you lose a lottery pick in Taurean Prince, you lose a senior point guard Lester Medford and you lose the school's all-time leading rebounder in Rico Gathers, that means you have a lot of unproven pieces," Drew said. "Our guys deserve all the credit for how they've responded. They've practiced well and played well in games."

Whereas Drew landed at least one McDonald's All-American in his 2010, 2011 and 2012 recruiting classes, he has won more recently by developing less heralded prospects. There's not a single Rivals top 50 prospect on Baylor's current roster. Most of the Bears' best players are guys who went unnoticed by the nation's elite programs.

Junior forward Johnathan Motley, Baylor's leading scorer and rebounder this season, was best known as an AAU teammate of the highly touted Harrison twins when he chose the Bears over Clemson, SMU and Houston early in his senior year of high school. Junior point guard Manu Lecomte, the Bears' second leading scorer and starting point guard, is a Belgium native thought of primarily as a spot-up shooter when he transferred from Miami two years ago. Seven-foot senior Jo Lual-Acuil, the nation's second leading shot blocker, is a junior college transfer who chose the Bears over LSU.

The formula for Baylor's success has changed a bit this year even though the Bears still favor a traditional two big man lineup, still play at a glacial pace and still rely heavily on zone defense.

No longer is bludgeoning opposing teams on the offensive glass the backbone of their offense. They make up for slippage in that area by taking better care of the ball, scoring efficiently at the rim and getting to the foul line more frequently.

Baylor's most potent weapon is Motley, an athletic, powerfully built forward who has performed with the consistency he lacked in previous years. Motley is averaging 16.3 points and 8.1 rebounds, signs he is becoming more comfortable in a go-to role after years of deferring to Gathers and Prince at Baylor and to the Harrisons and Wesley Iwundu on his star-studded AAU team.

"He's always been a really good player, but he was just inconsistent," Drew said. "He had a talented team around him in AAU, so he didn't have to be a consistent scorer. He didn't have to perform night in, night out. When he had good games here, then people would key on him a little bit. He had to learn how to handle double teams and to learn how to be a marked man."

Lecomte's transition from shooting guard to point guard has also been key for Baylor. Not only is the 5-foot-11 Miami transfer averaging 13.9 points per game and hitting 39.5 percent of his 3-pointers, he's also attacking opposing defenses off the bounce, making good decisions with the ball in his hands and tallying nearly three times as many assists as turnovers.

Maybe the most unexpected difference maker for Baylor has been Lual-Acuil, who sat out last season due to a heart issue but has since been cleared by doctors.

Lual-Acuil's presence as the anchor of Baylor's trademark zone defense is the biggest reason the Bears so far have a top 15 defense for the first time in Drew's tenure. In addition to averaging 4.4 blocks per game, Lual-Acuil allows the Bears' perimeter players to trap more often and to contest shooters more aggressively because they have an elite rim protector lurking in the paint.

"He gives us that presence inside that he erases mistakes," Drew said. "Whenever you have somebody getting as many blocks and altered shots as he does, that really improves your defense."

Baylor's early success has raised some high-stakes questions. Can the Bears remain a top 10 team all season? Can they threaten Kansas' 12-year reign atop the Big 12?

Drew isn't making any promises, nor is he putting any limits on what this team can achieve.

"We can accomplish everything we've set out to accomplish," Drew said. "At the same time we might not win another game too. We've just got to stick with the recipe that's allowed us to be successful up until this point."
How Baylor has come from nowhere to be one of the nation's best teams
Scott Drew talks about the Bears' rise from unranked to looking like a title contender.

Nearly a month into the college basketball season, Baylor has the best and most convincing resume.

Scott Drew's bunch has already beaten three top 25 teams by double-digits — Oregon, Xavier and Michigan State — plus knocked off another in Louisville in the championship of the Battle 4 Atlantis.

"Everyone's gotten off to a great start and it's real early in the season," Drew told FOX Sports. "So it's a race to see who gets better during the course of the season and as far as right now, we couldn't have asked for a better start, especially with the strength of schedule we played."

But this wasn't expected. The Bears — now 8-0 — started the season ranked outside of the AP Top 25. They debuted two weeks ago at No. 20, shot up to No. 9 last week and reached No. 4 (receiving six of the 65 first-place votes) on Monday on the heels of the Xavier win. While Drew knew they were better than given credit for, even he wasn't sure it would show this early.

"You always hope for the best, but on paper you understand why no one gave us a Top-25 vote going into the season cause you lost your senior point guard (Lester Medford), you lost a lottery pick (Taurean Prince), and you lost the school's all-time leading rebounder (Rico Gathers)," Drew said. "When you lose that and you only have one senior, Ishmail Wainright, you understand why people didn't expect much."

Not only did the Bears lose a lot of production, but their roster wasn't filled with top 100 recruits. In fact, just two players on Baylor's current roster were ranked in the top 100 coming out of high school, which means Drew and his staff deserve credit for finding undervalued talent, developing them and molding them into a top 10 team.

"I think first and foremost, when you're scouting a player, you can never scout the heart and how much time they put in and how much they're going to develop," Drew said. "I mean, nobody knows. It's really up to them and we all try to figure who is a gym rat, who has high character, go from there."

"I think our staff, our strength coach, our assistant coaches do a great job with guys but I also think since we've been here now for 14 years, a lot of our past players come back every summer and they're all connected with the program, and I think they do a great job mentoring the young guys."

The alums mentoring the current players have credibility too. Since 2010, Baylor has had five players drafted that weren't ranked as five-star prospects — Prince, Pierre Jackson, Cory Jefferson, Quincy Acy and Ekpe Udoh.

Perhaps the player that's learned the most the past two seasons is junior big man Johnathan Motley, who leads the team in scoring and rebounding at 16.3 points and 8.1 rebounds a game.

"With him as a freshman, he was good but just inconsistent, and that's what you get when you're 18 years old," Drew said. "Now that he's older, more experienced, and then he's had the advantage to go against Isaiah (Austin), Cory, Rico and Taurean Prince and people like that in practice for the last couple of years."

While Motley certainly has earned his share of ink, Drew is quick to point out that Wainright and his leadership qualities are among the reasons Baylor's group is playing so well.

"Ish is one of those special types of teammates and leaders. We all talk about selfless leaders, and he is really, really a gifted leader and I think he's done a great job helping," Drew said. "We've had a lot of games where we've been down at halftime. We look at VCU, Michigan State, Louisville and Xavier — we're down at half. His ability to keep everybody together, united, where if you don't have that player leadership when you get down or hit adversity, that's when you can fall apart, and I think he deserves a lot of credit for that."

Baylor next plays Dec. 14 vs. Southern.
Why Baylor has the best NCAA Tournament resume but isn't the No. 1 team
The Bears have a perfect record featuring three wins over currently ranked schools

CBSSports.com
By: Gary Parrish
December 7, 2016

People keep asking what I think. And I have an opinion. But late Tuesday night, while watching Duke start to look scary good in an easy win over Florida, I decided to ask Scott Drew what he thinks.

So I asked Scott Drew what he thinks.

I asked if he thinks his Baylor Bears should be ranked No. 1. And this is how he answered that question: “I definitely could see someone voting us No. 1 based on our No. 1 RPI -- and on who we have beaten thus far. But, at the same time, I know arguments can be made for other schools as well.”

That is the safest and most diplomatic answer Drew could’ve provided. I applaud him. But it’s also basically right, which is worth noting in advance of Baylor’s Wednesday night game with Southern. Barring a result that’s statistically improbable, the Bears will improve to 9-0 with five top-45 KenPom wins -- including victories over the schools currently ranked 11th (Louisville), 13th (Xavier) and 24th (Oregon) in the Associated Press poll.

Baylor’s resume, at this moment, is college basketball’s best resume. But that doesn’t necessarily mean Baylor is college basketball’s best team or should be college basketball’s top-ranked team. Like Drew said, there’s a sensible argument to be made for the Bears. But it’s just as sensible, and I’d actually argue more sensible, to go with Villanova or UCLA, and the reason is because the nation’s best resume in early December rarely belongs to the nation’s best team.

To be clear, we’ll get there.

Absolutely, there will come a point, as the calendar turns, when the team with the best resume will also be ranked No. 1, and basically everybody with a brain will see it that way. But that point is usually closer to early February than early December because, in early December, some teams that project as elite still haven’t had many opportunities to record signature wins, and ranking schools with better resumes above them strictly because of that will eventually have you looking stupid.

Bottom line, here’s my opinion (previously stated over the weekend): I do think Baylor has the nation’s best resume and can reasonably be ranked No. 1. But I don’t think Baylor actually is the nation’s best team. And, it’s worth noting, the Bears today would still likely be underdogs to around 10 schools on a neutral court.

But to argue about this is to totally miss the point.

Because the point should be this: How amazing is Baylor’s story?!

It really might be my favorite story in all of college basketball because it’s a story about a coach who was once unfairly labeled by dummies just stacking quality win after quality win despite having zero top-50 prospects on his roster. As I pointed out two Saturdays ago, Drew has little more than an OK roster based on where his players were ranked coming out of high school, and yet he already, this season, owns wins over Hall of Fame coach Tom Izzo and Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino.

Such an awesome deal.

Where it goes from here, I can’t say for sure because this is college basketball and little is guaranteed. But could Baylor record a top-two finish in the Big 12 and perhaps even challenge Kansas for the league title? Sure, that’s possible. And could the Bears make the NCAA Tournament for the fourth straight year and maybe bounce into the Final Four for the first time since 1950? Yeah, I guess I could see that, too.

Simply put, no dream is too big.

Baylor is off to an incredible start that’s exceeded all expectations. So whether the Bears are ranked first or fifth or anywhere in between, the important thing for their fans is to enjoy it. Because basically everybody has Baylor ranked first or fifth or somewhere in between, and that’s not anything anybody saw coming.
Scott Drew's unprecedented success at Baylor

As we dip into the college hoops Twitterbag, you will notice a theme that ran through my mentions during this week’s edition of Twenty for Tuesday:

Baylor a legit [threat] to dethrone Kansas this year in the Big 12? — Nick Rocco (@Rock_Piece)

Baylor’s start: Sustainable or an apparition? — David Hornbeak (@davidhornbeak)

Should I be scared of Baylor ending the streak? — Jeff Moyer (@JeffreyOMoyer)

Does Baylor have a real chance to dethrone Kansas? — Sam Williams (@sambo2084)

You might say that Scott Drew is having his moment. I might say it’s about time.

This has been a running joke for me on Twitter. When Baylor gets a big win, I will often write, “Another bad day for the ‘Scott Drew can’t coach’ crowd.” Because it amazes me how many people are in this crowd—or at least, used to be until this season, when Drew has the Bears off to an 8–0 start and ranked No. 4 in the AP poll. Even more remarkable, half of those eight wins came over teams that are either currently ranked or were at one point this season: Oregon and Xavier at home; Michigan State and Louisville in The Bahamas.

And no, this is no one-year wonder. During the last nine years, Drew has put the Bears in the NCAA tournament seven times. That includes two trips to the Elite Eight and an additional Sweet 16. In two of the three years Baylor failed to make the NCAA tournament, it still reached the championship game of the NIT, which it won in 2013. That is just about as good a record as any coach in the country, but it is even more impressive when you consider the following:

1. Drew is not doing this with a bunch of elite recruits. Yes, he has had a few marquee signees like Quincy Miller and Isaiah Austin over the years, but mostly Drew has accomplished this record with second-tier recruits who have developed under his watch. Its current best player, 6’7” junior forward Jonathan Motley, is projected to be a second-round NBA draft pick by draftexpress.com and was not even ranked among the top 150 of his high school class by rivals.com. Its second-leading scorer, 5’11” junior Manu Lecomte, transferred from Miami because he couldn’t beat out Angel Rodriguez at point guard. During his entire tenure at Baylor, Drew has had exactly three players who were chosen in the first round of the NBA draft, although Austin couldn’t beat out Angel Rodriguez at point guard. During his entire tenure at Baylor, Drew has had exactly three players who were chosen in the first round of the NBA draft, although Austin most likely would have been a first-rounder had he not been diagnosed with a serious illness.

Yet somehow, a narrative developed that Drew’s teams have underachieved. If anything, they’ve overachieved. This one looks to be doing the same.

2. Baylor had zero winning tradition before Drew got there. The school had been to just four NCAA tournaments in its entire history before Drew’s arrival. Four! And it had made just one tournament since 1950. Even if Drew had gotten his team in to the tournament every other year and never won a game, that would have been a serious upgrade. What Drew has done at Baylor is absolutely astounding, especially when you consider that.

3. He took over a program that had been destroyed by one of the worst scandals in college basketball history. It’s hard to believe that 13 years have passed since Baylor forward Patrick Dennehy was murdered by his teammate, Carlton Dotson, who was in the throes of mental illness. That tragic sequence, which made national news, led to the unearthing of major NCAA violations under then-coach Dave Bliss. Baylor got rid of Bliss, but it still had to deal with massive penalties. The worst of those was a prohibition against playing any nonconference games during the 2005–06 season.

Here’s the one detail people forget about this: That season with no nonconference games was Drew’s third year at Baylor. So he had already been there for two seasons, scraping and clawing and trying to rebuild, and then he had to deal with waiting until January to coach his first game. You can imagine how challenging it would be for any program to rebound from something like that, much less one that had so little basketball tradition to build on. Yet, Drew has managed that adversity and brought the program to new heights, where now we routinely see Baylor near the top of the rankings and Big 12 standings and don’t blink an eye.

That Drew would still be subjected to fan sniping is actually high praise. It is the type of criticism that only the really good programs get, because once you get to be really good, it is never quite good enough until you win at all. I also suspect some of the criticism has come from Drew’s personality. He is always polite and positive and ready with a smile. People wonder if he’s for real, or whether there’s a sneaky Eddie Haskell streak lurking below all that good cheer. Drew also did not help his cause early in his tenure when he was caught sending a flier to prospects with the question “Which one of the Big 12 coaches has signed a McDonald’s All-American?” There was a red X through the other two pictures. That led to then-Texas coach Rick Barnes calling Drew out publicly for his recruiting tactics.

We should keep in mind that when Drew took over the Baylor job he was 33 years old and had exactly one year of head coaching experience. That was at Valparaiso, where his father, Homer, had been the head coach for 22 seasons. Drew’s brother, Bryce, played at Valpo, coached there and is now in his first year as the coach at Vanderbilt. So Scott was raised in a basketball family, but there is no way he could have been fully prepared for what awaited him in Waco. And there is no way any of us could have expected that he would have built this program to where it is today. Yes, the basketball program’s ascent has benefited by a steep commitment by the university to invest in athletics, which has led to its football program becoming a national power—and which is now finding itself wilting under the hot spotlight of scandal.

But any way you look at it, Scott Drew’s work at Baylor has been not only remarkable, but also unprecedented. It’s nice that he is finally having his moment, because I suspect there will be many more such moments to come.
Rising Bears: Baylor unranked to No. 4 in less than month

Associated Press
By: Stephen Hawkins
December 8, 2016

WACO, Texas (AP) — Baylor coach Scott Drew certainly gets why the Bears were overlooked going into this season.

"On paper with us losing our senior point guard, a lottery pick, the school's all-time leading rebounder, with us having only one senior this year, you understand why people weren't voting for us in the Top 25," Drew said.

The Bears (8-0) are getting plenty of votes now after an impressive start with three wins over top 10 teams, propelling them from not a single vote less than a month ago to their highest AP ranking in six seasons.

"The fact that we've been able to win these games against quality teams has given us the recognition and attention that the players have earned," Drew said.

Initially, it was easy to discount the Bears' 66-49 win over then-No. 4 Oregon the first week of the season since the Ducks were playing without injured preseason All-America forward Dillon Brooks. But the next week, after getting into the poll at 20th, the Bears won the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament in Bahamas with come-from-behind wins over No. 24 Michigan State and No. 10 Louisville. After Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino's Cardinals jumped out to a 25-5 lead in the title game, and still led by 18 at the half, Baylor rallied to win 66-63.

And then last weekend as the No. 9 team, former Miami transfer guard Manu Lecomte scored 24 points and the Bears rallied in the second half to beat then-No. 7 Xavier 76-61 at home. It was the first time Baylor has ever won a matchup of top-10 teams.

"Rankings don't matter," said junior forward Johnathan Motley, their leading scorer and rebounder (16.3 points, 8.1 rebounds per game). "We're just going to step between those lines and handle business."

The Bears, with three wins over top 10 teams in the same season for the first time ever, are in an extended break during final exams before playing at home Wednesday against Southern. They will be overwhelming favorites for all four games remaining before their Big 12 opener Dec. 30 at Oklahoma. That includes a game at Fort Hood, the second year in a row playing for soldiers at one of the nation's largest Army posts only about an hour from their campus.

After their third consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance last season, the Bears lost three seniors — Taurean Prince, the 12th overall pick in the NBA draft; Rico Gathers, the career rebounding leader now trying to become an NFL tight end on the Dallas Cowboys' practice squad; and two-year starting guard Lester Medford.

Lecomte, who was born in Belgium, practiced with the Bears and ran with the scout team last season. He is now averaging 13.9 points a game, with 42 assists and only 17 turnovers.

"Normally during a sit-out year, a transfer year, players tend to look really good. That's because they have no pressure, they get to run scout team, they get to get all the shots, coaches aren't yelling at them," Drew said.

"So we always temper expectations and thoughts on those players until they show it in games, and Manu's definitely proving what we saw in practice was reality.

Jo Lual-Acuil, a 7-footer who also sat out last season after transferring from a junior college, is averaging 9.4 points and 7.8 rebounds for Baylor. Nuni Omot, a 6-9 junior college transfer, could make his Baylor debut during the Christmas break after being academically ineligible during the fall semester.

Lecomte insisted that he didn't hear the "We want Kansas!" chants from the home fans during the closing minutes of the victory over Xavier. Baylor doesn't play the third-ranked Jayhawks until February.

"We know what you did doesn't define what you're going to do," Drew said. "We know it's a race to improve each and every day, and be at the best at the end of the season. Hopefully we're staying humble and we're staying hungry."
Baylor men roll Jackson State at Fort Hood, 82-57

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
December 18, 2016

FORT HOOD – Baylor considers it a privilege to play for the soldiers at Fort Hood and wanted to show them what the No. 4 team in the country looks like.

The 2,500 fans at Abrams Gym had to wait until the second half, but they eventually got to see the real stuff.

With Jo Lual-Acuil dominating inside and Al Freeman burying a career-high five 3-pointers, the Bears powered to an 82-57 win over Jackson State before an appreciative crowd Saturday night.

It marked the second straight year the Bears played at Fort Hood after romping to a 104-59 win over Hardin-Simmons last year.

“It’s a real cool experience to be the focus of the entertainment for them and their families,” said Freeman, who scored a season-high 19 points. “I was pretty excited when I heard we were going to come down here again. I like the gym. I like the atmosphere, it reminds me of high school or AAU to be honest.”

The Bears (10-0) went into halftime clinging to a 37-32 lead before opening the second half with a 21-6 run. Scott Drew liberally substituted his players, which should benefit the Bears since they’ll turn around and play again Sunday at 3:30 p.m. against John Brown at the Ferrell Center.

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The experience meant a lot to our players and the whole Baylor administration felt good about it,” Drew said “They felt it was a great event. With all the things they do for us this is the least we could do.”
Baylor men keep intensity, cruise past John Brown, 107-53

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
December 19, 2016

Early in the second half of Sunday afternoon’s 107-53 blowout of John Brown, Baylor’s Johnathan Motley let out a big roar as he jumped over everybody for a dynamic follow-up slam.

Even though the Bears were playing an NAIA team a day after Saturday night’s 82-57 win over Jackson State at Fort Hood, Motley’s energy said a lot about the intensity his team brought to the Ferrell Center in an obvious mismatch.

The No. 4 Bears shot 59.1 percent and dominated the boards by a 51-15 margin win as they improved to 11-0 heading into their final nonconference tuneup against Texas Southern on Wednesday night before opening the Big 12 against Oklahoma on Dec. 30 in Norman.

“Everybody just wanted to play basketball,” said Motley, who led the Bears with 20 points, nine rebounds and five assists. “The best part of the season is playing games, so we try to have as much fun as possible. We looked at them as another team that we have to come out against and do what we do. We had to make sure we do everything we can that got us to this point and get the W.”

Baylor scheduled the game against the Siloam Springs, Ark., school due to coach Scott Drew’s connection with John Brown head coach Jason Beschta and assistant coach Ty Beard. They were both formerly graduate assistants on Drew’s staff.

“We got the win, nobody got injured, we played hard for back-to-back days, and it was great having Ty Beard and Jason Beschta back,” Drew said. “Both of them were part of our program, did a great job for us, and I’m really happy that they’re both so successful at John Brown. I know they’re going to keep being competitive and doing a great job as long as they’re there.”

Despite the lopsided loss, Beschta appreciated the opportunity to play against a powerhouse NCAA Division I team like Baylor. Beschta was a graduate assistant at Baylor when Drew first arrived in 2003.

“It’s fun to be able to get back and see what (Drew) and the staff have done to this program and see how the school has grown and changed,” Beschta said. “It is exciting for a small school to be able to come into this kind of environment. For our guys, this is probably a once in a lifetime thing.”

John Brown (9-5) is the only non-Division I school on Baylor’s schedule, and the talent differential was glaring. The Golden Eagles didn’t have any player standing taller than 6-8, which made it easy for Baylor’s big men to dominate in the paint.

While Motley enjoyed a superb all-around game, Jo Lual-Acuil contributed 11 points, five rebounds and three assists. Terry Maston recorded 10 points, seven rebounds and three assists. Nuni Omot finished with six points, four boards and a block in his third game for the Bears after gaining academic eligibility following his junior college transfer.

Baylor’s guards also enjoyed some good moments, as Al Freeman nailed four of six 3-pointers and scored 16 points a day after hitting five 3-pointers and scoring 19 points against Jackson State. Wendell Mitchell scored a career-high 13 points and dished out two assists.

“I just want to defend and do as much as I can to help my team,” Mitchell said. “Just allow myself to not come in and try to do too much, just get my teammates in better position to score.”

After John Brown’s Jake Caudle hit the game’s first points on a 3-pointer, the Bears scored the next 11 points. Motley got inside for a basket and nailed a free throw for a three-point play and came back with a 3-pointer after Freeman went deep. Manu Lecomte then found Lual-Acuil for a slam to finish off the early run.

The Bears kept going inside and extending their lead. Lual-Acuil scored, drew a foul and hit a free throw for a three-point play. Omot and Maston both scored in the paint and King McClure drove for a layup. Mitchell stepped outside and nailed a 3-pointer as the Bears opened up a 27-7 lead.

By halftime, the Bears stretched their lead to 53-28 as they shot 64.7 percent.

“I thought it was really good coming off the game Saturday night,” Drew said. “Our guys did a great job signing autographs (at Fort Hood) for a long time after the game.

“Getting back, having the cold front come in, and being able to get up today and be effective was good.”
No. 4 Bears playing loose, together as holiday break arrives

Waco Tribune-Herald  
By: Brice Cherry  
December 21, 2016

There’s bubbly, and there’s Scott-Drew-just-before-Christmas-with-an-undefeated-team bubbly.

All the champagne bottles at all the New Year’s parties in all the world couldn’t match the bubbliness that Drew has going. And why not? Entering Wednesday’s home game with Texas Southern, Drew's Bears are 11-0 and ranked fourth nationally, one of just six undefeated teams left in Division I basketball.

Even as much as the wins, Drew likes his team’s chemistry.

"Definitely it's more enjoyable than the other way," Drew said. "But I think what's been most exciting is how everybody's stayed (together). Some games some people play a little bit better than others, and it's always been team-first. I think Ish (Wainright) has done a great job with that leadership, and the upperclassmen."

The Bears are clearly enjoying themselves on and off the court. Wainright broke into a chorus of "Jingle Bells" at a press conference on Tuesday, and junior forward Johnathan Motley flashed a toothy grin as he described an off-the-backboard alley-oop pass he threw to Jo Lual-Acuil in Baylor's last win over John Brown.

Nothing beats playing though, the Bears said. Wednesday’s game will be Baylor’s fourth in an eight-day span. That seems like a relatively rigorous schedule, but the players don’t mind it at all.

"It's the best part of playing basketball. Practicing gets old, especially through that long month of October," Motley said. "So you really don’t even want to practice anymore. You’re just ready for the games. Now that they’re here, you kind of don’t want them to stop. You want them to just keep coming."

Like Baylor, Texas Southern (4-8) has maintained a busy schedule of late. The Baylor game will be the Tigers’ fourth in nine days, and Mike Davis’ team clearly doesn’t back away from a challenge. The Tigers haven’t played a home game yet this season, and have already faced the likes of Arizona, Louisville and LSU.

"It definitely gets your ready to play a team like that with the style of play that Baylor plays," said Davis, who took Indiana to the Final Four in 2002. "It’s similar to what Cincinnati plays. In our conference (the SWAC), we have a lot of teams that play zone, not quite like Baylor would play, as good as them. That’s one of the reasons I like playing Baylor, just because of the style of play."

Texas Southern features one of the top rebounders in the country in sophomore forward Derrick Griffin, who Drew compared to former Baylor star Rico Gathers. The 6-foot-7 Griffin played football as a wide receiver for Texas Southern until being dismissed from the team this year. He averages 11.6 points and 11.1 rebounds for the Tigers, though Davis said it’s possible Griffin might sit out the Baylor game with some soreness after getting banged up in a Sunday loss to TCU.

Following Wednesday’s game, Baylor’s players will break for four days for the Christmas holidays. They’ll return to practice on Dec. 26 as they prepare for the Dec. 30 Big 12 opener at Oklahoma.

They want to keep the good vibes going into the break. The only way to do that is keep winning, they emphasized.

"Coach made a point to us, not just this year but every single year, we want to have a merry Christmas," Wainright said. "We don’t want a Christmas, we want to have a merry Christmas. A merry Christmas is a win."

Bear Facts: Baylor’s game against Texas Southern isn’t the end of nonconference play for the Bears. They’ll take a break from Big 12 action on Jan. 28 to play Ole Miss in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge in Oxford, Miss. … Baylor has won 42 straight home games against nonconference foes, the second-best streak in the country to Duke (132 games). … If the Bears defeat the Tigers, they’ll open Big 12 play undefeated for the second time in Scott Drew’s tenure. In the 2011-12 season, the Bears won their first 17 games and ended up making the NCAA’s Elite Eight by season’s end.
No. 4 Baylor basketball sizzles Ferrell Center with a 89-63 win over Texas Southern

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: Brice Cherry
December 22, 2016

On the 125th birthdate of the first college basketball game, the Baylor Bears continued to show that they’ve gained a certain proficiency in James Naismith’s invention.

Fourth-ranked Baylor shot 69 percent in the second half in cutting down visiting Texas Southern, 89-63, on Wednesday at the Ferrell Center in the Bears’ final game before the start of Big 12 play next week. Baylor (12-0) remained perfect on the year and will start conference play undefeated for the second time in the Scott Drew era, joining the 2011-12 Bears with that designation.

“That’s how we wanted to go into Christmas, with a good feeling,” Drew said. “College basketball, it’s hard to be on-point every night with the parity and competition. That’s why there’s only six undefeated teams. In NBA, you get 4-of-7. In college, you get 40 minutes. Ish (Wainright) has done a tremendous job, and our upperclassmen, of making sure we’re focused and on-point.”

The Bears kept the nets popping throughout the game, but especially in the second half. They shot 69 percent from the floor after the halftime breather, and hit Texas Southern (4-9) especially in the second half. They shot 69 percent from the field and they were shooting 75. Every time we tried to force them to do something, they made the shot.”

Baylor’s combination of latitude and longitude often had the Tigers lost on defense. The Bears’ frontcourt players present such problems for teams in the paint that it creates open-shot opportunities from the outside for BU’s guards. Baylor connected on 5-of-7 long-range bombs in the first half and 8-of-14 for the game, often on wide-open looks.

“They were a good team last year, but this year they counter everything you do,” Texas Southern coach Mike Davis said. “We came out in the second half and I think at one point we were shooting 60-something percent from the field and they were shooting 75. Every time we tried to force them to do something, they made the shot.”

Baylor led 7-6 after the first four minutes, then seized control with an 18-1 run over the next seven minutes. Again, the Bears kept the Tigers scrambling defensively, with shooters like Manu Lecomte and King McClure bombing away from downtown while Jo Lual-Acuil (14 points, 10 boards, 3 blocks) crashed the boards for tip-ins.

Texas Southern actually entered the game with a well-earned reputation as one of the better rebounding teams in the nation. The Tigers were averaging 14.4 offensive rebounds per game coming in, which ranked 14th nationally.

Though the Tigers managed to still give themselves some extra tries, snatching 17 offensive boards, they finished with only 16 second-chance points compared to Baylor’s 20. Drew was especially pleased with the effort his bigs made in keeping forward Derrick Griffin pinned off the glass. Griffin, who had a 26-rebound game earlier this year against Louisville, finished with nine total boards and five on the offensive end in 38 minutes.

“That guy’s a monster,” Drew said. “So I thought to hold him to five offensive rebounds – he averages six – we’re doing all right.”

Texas Southern 6-foot-4 guard Kevin Scott was the most active player for the Tiger in the first half, continually coming up with loose balls and open shots. He scored 15 first-half points, but Baylor still held a comfortable 14-point edge at intermission.

The Bears maintained that gap through the midpoint of the second half, as the teams traded net-ripping baskets. Maston proved particularly effective on the pick-and-pop play with Lecomte, who scored 12 of his 14 points after halftime.

Baylor stretched the lead past 20 in the final seven minutes of the game, wearing the Tigers down with their waves of depth.

Davis, whose team has played games against Arizona, Louisville, LSU and TCU this season, all on the road, called Baylor “the best team we’ve played.”

“I thought last year the talent was better, but the team this year is unbelievable,” Davis said. “Coach Drew is doing an unbelievable job coaching these guys.”

Demontae Jefferson and Marvin Jones scored 10 points apiece for Texas Southern, but Jefferson was just 4-of-18 from the floor and 1-for-9 from 3-point range.

Al Freeman scored 10 for Baylor, all in the first half.

The Bears will now disperse for the holidays before returning to game action in the Big 12 opener Dec. 30 at Oklahoma.

“Now it’s a new season. Like Ish said in the locker room, it’s 0-0 now,” Lecomte said. “It’s a new season, it’s completely different. We’ve got to come back and be ready to play those conference games.”

Bear Facts: Baylor improved to 3-0 against SWAC teams, with wins over Southern and Jackson State before Wednesday’s win over Texas Southern. … McClure injured his wrist on a hard spill to the floor in the second half, and left the game. … The Bears have won 43 straight home games against nonconference opponents, the second-best mark in the country behind Duke (132 games).
No. 4 Baylor men leave no doubt in romp over Oklahoma, 76-50

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
December 31, 2016

NORMAN, Okla. – With the Oklahoma football team’s Sugar Bowl date coming up Monday, the Lloyd Noble Center wasn’t close to full for Friday’s Big 12 basketball opener.

But it wouldn’t have mattered if the arena was packed to the rafters.

No. 4 Baylor continued to prove it’s ready to face anybody anywhere as it opened up a 19-point halftime lead and cruised to a 76-50 win over the Sooners before an estimated crowd of 7,267.

The Bears improved to 13-0 and looked like a team eager to build on its impressive nonconference success that included wins over top 10 teams Oregon, Louisville and Xavier.

Though the Bears hadn’t played since an 89-63 blowout of Texas Southern on Dec. 21, they dominated from start to finish against the Sooners (6-6). While Baylor played three games in the Bahamas and another at Fort Hood, this was its first game on an opponent’s home court.

“I thought we did a great job coming off the break,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “You’re always worried the first game back that your team is not going to be as sharp. But I thought we were really good for most of 40 minutes. We never really had any letdowns, so we’re very excited about that.”

The Bears controlled the boards by a 46-30 margin and played riveting defense by holding the Sooners to a 32.7 field goal percentage. Baylor allowed the fewest first-half points in a Big 12 road game in Drew’s 14 seasons as it soared to a 36-17 halftime lead.

Lon Kruger, who guided the Sooners to the Final Four last year behind national player of the year Buddy Hield, suffered his worst home loss in six seasons as Oklahoma’s coach.

“I thought Baylor played great,” Kruger said. “We obviously didn’t offer the resistance we need to or wanted to. We could do a lot of things better on both ends of the floor. Credit Baylor with causing us a lot of trouble. They’re rangy across the back line and have good activity across the front.”

Johnathan Motley led the way for the Bears with 19 points, 13 rebounds and three blocks. Manu Lecomte drained four of five 3-pointers and scored 14 points while collecting four assists and two steals and not committing a turnover.

Jo Lual-Acuil delivered another strong all-around performance with 12 points and eight rebounds but didn’t register a blocked shot for the first time this year.

“Everybody was locked in, we knew the scouting report, and made sure we executed that to the fullest,” Motley said. “Everybody was just playing with a lot of energy, flying around, making them do the things they don’t want to do. They like to shoot a lot of 3’s, and we were just trying to make them put it on the floor and make them finish over our bigs.”

The Sooners were shorthanded with leading scorer Jordan Woodard out with an undisclosed medical condition. But even with their superb guard they would have trouble beating the talented Bears, who opened up a 34-point lead in the second half.

“I know they weren’t at full strength,” Drew said. “Anytime you take out a leader like that, it has a big impact on the game. Woodard is a heck of a player, one of the best in the Big 12, and he does so much for this team on the court and off the court.”

Opening up an 11-2 lead in the early minutes, Motley got things rolling by scoring on a putback and nailing a 3-pointer before Lual-Acuil and Lecomte followed with 3-pointers.

The Sooners briefly stopped the momentum with a pair of baskets but the Bears answered with a 10-0 run to open up a 21-7 lead.

Motley scored inside on a pass from King McClure before Lual-Acuil scored on a slam and a putback. Lecomte followed with a short jumper and Jake Lindsey rebounded and scored.

There wasn’t much the Sooners could do to stop the Bears as Terry Maston scored inside and Motley got inside twice for baskets.

After Lecomte nailed a 3-pointer, the Bears finished the first half with baskets by Maston, Motley and Lindsey. At halftime, the Sooners were shooting 25.9 percent.

“They had a couple of great shooters, so we had to make sure we closed out on them and make sure they don’t get hot,” Lecomte said. “I think we did a great job.”

The Bears continued to dominate in the second half as Lecomte drained a pair of 3-pointers. Freeman, Lual-Acuil and Wendell Mitchell also drilled treys to stretch the lead to 63-30 with nine minutes remaining.

The Bears are only 5-22 against the Sooners in Norman, but this was one they’ll never forget.

“I remember a lot of trips up here that didn’t go very well,” Drew said. “This is a tough place to play. They’ve always had great players, great coaches. I have a lot of respect for Coach Kruger and his staff.”
Baylor men glad about No. 2 ranking, but not too excited about it

Waco Tribune-Herald  
By: John Werner  
January 4, 2017

Baylor’s No. 2 national ranking is the highest in program history, but the players and coaches didn’t throw a party when Monday’s Associated Press poll came out.

They see it as just one more signpost on a journey they hope leads them to their first national championship.

“All it is is people’s opinions,” said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey. “The games get settled on the court where people’s opinions really don’t matter. At the end of the day, we have four seasons to take care of. One of them (nonconference) we took care of, we’re in the middle of the second one, then you have the conference tournament and the NCAA tournament. You want to make sure you take care of business in each one, and you can’t let them bleed into the others.”

After opening Big 12 play with an eye-popping 76-50 road win over Oklahoma, the Bears will play their conference home opener against a traditionally strong Iowa State team at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Ferrell Center.

Baylor improved to 13-0 with its blowout of the Sooners but the upperclassmen made sure the younger players understand that most Big 12 games won’t be so lopsided.

“We have enough veteran guys in the locker room to let them know that’s not a typical conference game,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “I thought we had great focus and great energy. We played really well and OU was missing a couple of players. I wish I could say every Big 12 game was like that but it’s not.”

After reaching the Sweet 16 in his first season, Steve Prohm has guided the Cyclones to a 9-3 record this season. They opened Big 12 play with a 63-56 win over Texas Tech on Friday in Ames that was keyed by guard Naz Mitrou-Long’s 19 points and point guard Monte Morris’ 14 points and six assists.

All five Iowa State starters are seniors with Mitrou-Long averaging 15.6 points and Morris averaging 14.6 points and 5.8 assists. Guard Deonte Burton is averaging 12 points and 7.6 rebounds while guard Matt Thomas is averaging 11.8 points and 5.3 rebounds.

The fifth starter is forward Darrell Bowie who is averaging 8.3 points and 6.3 rebounds. As usual, the Cyclones shoot a lot of 3-pointers as they rank third in the Big 12 by making 105.

“They’re one of the better offensive teams,” said Baylor point guard Manu Lecomte. “They have a lot of guards. They play fast in transition, and they have two or three very good shooters. They have a great point guard (Morris) that makes plays. We’re just going to have to slow them down, get stops, and then do what we do.”

With the Cyclones starting four guards, the Bears should have an advantage in the paint with 6-10 forward Johnathan Motley and 7-0 center Jo Lual-Acuil.

They’ve both ranked among the premier players in the Big 12 as Motley is averaging 16.3 points and 9.1 rebounds and Lual-Acuil is averaging 10.8 points, 7.5 rebounds and a league-high 3.8 blocked shots.

They’ve helped the Bears become the Big 12’s best defensive team with opponents averaging a league-low 58 points while shooting 37.3 percent. Baylor’s guards love having a security blanket like Lual-Acuil protecting the rim.

“We make mistakes, and guards drive by us sometimes, and Jo is just there to block shots,” Lecomte said.

Lecomte was named the Big 12 newcomer of the week for the second time after hitting four of 5 3-pointers and dishing out four assists with no turnovers as Baylor handed Oklahoma its most lopsided home loss since 1963. Motley also enjoyed a big game with 19 points and 13 rebounds with three blocks.

But the Bears realize Iowa State will bring one of the fastest paced offenses in the Big 12 to the Ferrell Center.

“They’ve been one of the best offensive teams in the country the last couple of years and they have most of their guys back,” Drew said. “To beat them you’ve got to score points because you’re not going to shut them out. We’re just going to try to limit how many they get.”

The Bears will host Oklahoma State on Saturday before heading to Morgantown to play West Virginia on Jan. 10. Drew can’t underestimate the importance of winning at the Ferrell Center, and hopes a big crowd will be on hand even though spring classes haven’t begun.

“If you look at Kansas’ resume as to why they’ve won so many championships in a row, they don’t lose at home,” Drew said. “We’ve been as good as them on the road, we just haven’t been as good as them at home. At the end of the day we need to win our home games, and hopefully we can do it.”
Baylor’s Drew ready for No. 1 ranking if it arrives

Fort Worth Star-Telegram
By: Jimmy Burch
January 5, 2017

Baylor men’s basketball coach Scott Drew, whose second-ranked Bears (14-0) are one of two remaining undefeated major-college teams this season, acknowledged Thursday that he would welcome the No. 1 ranking in the weekly polls if it is bestowed on the Bears next week.

Top-ranked Villanova (14-1) fell to Butler, 66-58, on Wednesday night to clear an opportunity for the Bears to take the top spot for the first time in program history if Baylor wins Saturday’s game in Waco against Oklahoma State (10-4). The new polls are released Monday.

“Every coach would tell you they’d rather be ranked No. 1 than 351,” Drew said during Thursday’s conference call with Big 12 coaches. “But everyone realizes the fluidity of college basketball and is more interested in where you are at the end of the season. We’ll be happy to be recognized by whatever comes. But the end-of-the-year polls are more important.”

Baylor, at No. 2, already holds the highest ranking in the history of its program. The last team from Texas to hold the top spot in the men’s basketball polls was Texas, which climbed to No. 1 in consecutive polls released Jan. 11, 2010, and Jan. 18, 2010, before posting a 23-8 finish.

No. 5 Gonzaga (14-0), the nation’s other undefeated team, is scheduled to face San Francisco in a late game Thursday night.

Baylor’s start is its second-fastest to any season under Drew, now in his 14th year at the school. The Bears were 17-0 in 2012 before suffering their first loss that season.
No. 2 Bears find way to win, down Iowa State 65-63

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
January 5, 2017

With a chance to ascend to No. 1 for the first time in school history, No. 2 Baylor left all the drama out on the court in its Big 12 home opener Wednesday night.

Manu Lecomte drained a high arcing shot over Matt Thomas with eight seconds remaining to lift the unbeaten Bears to a 65-63 win over Iowa State before a boisterous crowd of 7,582 at the Ferrell Center.

When Iowa State's Monte Morris missed a baseline jumper at the buzzer, the Baylor players stormed on to the court to celebrate with their teammates on the floor. The Bears improved to 14-0 overall and 2-0 in the Big 12 the hard way.

With No. 1 Villanova's 66-58 loss to Butler earlier Wednesday night, the Bears can move to No. 1 if they can beat Oklahoma State on Saturday at the Ferrell Center. But Baylor coach Scott Drew and his players said they had no idea that Villanova had lost.

"I had so many people in my ear that was the last thing I was worried about was that game," Drew said. "You're so focused on your game. It would be nice to be ranked No. 1. But at the end of the year, No. 1 means a lot more and that's what we're trying to work for."

The normally hot shooting Lecomte had hit just two of nine field goals before his game winner.

With the game tied at 63-63, Lecomte drove toward the basket and pulled up for an 8-foot fade away jumper that dropped through the net.

"That was a tough shot," Lecomte said. "They played good defense and I was struggling a little bit. The whole game I couldn't make shots but my teammates kept believing in me. Coach Drew kept me in the game, so I just had to keep shooting."

The Bears shot just 44.1 percent but dominated the boards, 47-28. Johnathan Motley recorded his second straight Big 12 double-double with 13 points and 12 rebounds while Jo Lual-Acuil finished with 15 points and eight boards.

With a huge size advantage, Baylor knew it had to attack the Cyclones inside.

"We definitely took advantage with our size with me and Jo and Terry (Maston) coming off the bench," Motley said. "They did a good job of protecting the paint and it left our guards wide open to shoot. That caused mismatches on the rebounds for us."

The Cyclones (9-4, 1-1) nearly pulled off the upset behind their 10 for 22 3-point shooting. Naz Mitrou-Long hit three of six 3-pointers and scored a game-high 17 points, but Morris was off as he hit just four of 18 field goals.

The Bears have found different ways to win all season, and Wednesday's game was no exception.

"That's the leadership of the upperclassmen on the team and the guys just believing in one another and doing their part to help encourage and be positive," Drew said. "Because at the end of the day, that's why we're where we are now. We've stayed together, we've been positive, worked together, different people stepped up every game. And that's what you need to be a successful team."

The Cyclones opened up a 61-55 lead as Deonte Burton drilled a 3-pointer and Morris drove for a basket and hit an outside shot. But the Bears scored the next six points as Motley rebounded and hit a basket, Lual-Acuil nailed a pair of free throws and Jake Lindsey scored the gametying basket with a drive with 2:52 remaining.

After Burton got inside the paint for another basket, Ish Wainright hit Lual-Acuil for the game-tying basket with 2:05 remaining.

"If you look at any successful team, I think the big thing is they've won close games," Drew said. "Because if you're a good team, you win close games. You're going to lose some, but you need to win to get confidence as well."

Leading 37-36 at halftime, the Bears came out cold in the second half and the Cyclones took advantage of it by grabbing a 52-47 lead with 10:37 remaining.

Mitrou-Long was the driving force as he gave the Cyclones a 39-38 lead on a layup. After Motley scored inside for the Bears, Mitrou-Long drove for a basket and Darrell Bowie also scored inside.

Mitrou-Long kept scoring for the Cyclones as he drove for a pair of layups. With Morris nailing a 3-pointer, Iowa State opened up a five-point lead.

The Bears took a 53-52 lead after Al Freeman hit a pair of free throws and Maston scored inside on a pass from Motley.

But Burton gave the Cyclones a 57-53 lead as Burton drained a trey and scored on a drive.

The Bears opened the game hot as they grabbed an 11-3 lead as Lual-Acuil got loose for a pair of slams and King McClure scored on a 3-pointer and a steal.

But the Cyclones quickly got back into it with an 11-3 run to tie the game at 14-14.

With the game tied at 17-17, the Bears answered with a 9-2 run that featured a pair of baskets by Lual-Acuil in the paint. The momentum swung Iowa State's way as MitrouLong drained a pair of treys to give the Cyclones a 36-34 edge with 1:02 left in the first half.

Lindsey drilled a 3-pointer to lift the Bears to a 37-36 halftime lead.
Uncharted territory: Baylor men poised for first-ever No. 1 ranking after 61-57 win

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
January 8, 2017

As No. 2 Baylor closed out a rugged 61-57 win over Oklahoma State, a packed house of 10,627 fans at the Ferrell Center began chanting “We’re No. 1.”

All those fans should get their wish when the new Associated Press poll is released Monday.

With Johnathan Motley recording 13 points and 10 rebounds and Manu Lecomte hitting 17 points, the Bears improved to 15-0 overall and 3-0 in the Big 12 by winning a brutal, physical game Saturday night against an Oklahoma State team that did everything it could to slow down the pace.

A No. 1 ranking would be the first in Baylor men’s basketball history after currently top-ranked Villanova opened the door with a loss to Butler on Wednesday night. The Bears didn’t get a single Top 25 vote in the AP preseason poll.

Oklahoma State coach Brad Underwood has marveled at the rise the Bears have made since Scott Drew took over a scandal ridden program with only a few scholarship players in 2003.

“They’re going to be No. 1 on Monday,” Underwood said. “Remember where they were when he got here, and they shouldn’t take that lightly. Let’s not forget the remarkable job he’s done. That team wins because they’re very close, they’re very old and nothing rattles them.”

Drew was thrilled when he heard the fans chanting at the end of the game and understands what a milestone a No. 1 ranking will be for the Bears.

But he knows the Bears face a difficult road ahead with road trips to No. 7 West Virginia and Kansas State coming up in the next week.

“As I shared with the players, not many people get a chance to be ranked No. 1 and that’s a great honor,” Drew said. “Baylor Nation deserves it because they helped us get here. We’re glad to make them proud and happy and it gave them something to be excited about. But big picture, we know no one is going to remember who is ranked No. 1 the first week of January.”

The Cowboys (10-5, 0-3) made it difficult for the Bears as they went into halftime with a 30-25 lead and opened up a 38-31 lead early in the second half.

But Terry Maston helped the Bears rally by nailing three shots to pull into a 40-40 tie. Maston delivered a tremendous performance off the bench with 11 points and five rebounds.

“We’ve been down by more and come back,” Maston said. “We knew what to do, so we came out and executed and got the W. I tried to rebound my best. I tried to get as many offensive boards as I could. We needed to get some more second-chance points and that was the difference in the game.”

The Bears finally grabbed a 50-48 lead when Al Freeman nailed a pair of free throws with 6:29 remaining. Motley then found Maston inside for a basket and Lecomte hit a free throw to give the Bears a 53-48 lead with 5:36 remaining.

Cameron McGriff pulled the Cowboys within one by nailing a 3-pointer, but Jake Lindsey buried a 3-pointer for the Bears to take a 56-52 lead with 3:55 to play.

After Mitchell Solomon committed an offensive foul for the Cowboys, Motley drilled a pair of free throws for the Bears to stretch the lead to 58-52 with 3:26 remaining.

“We had better rhythm in the second half,” Drew said. “We were able to get some stops and bring the ball downcourt and we were able to figure out how to attack. Credit them for making everything hard for us to get into. Coach Underwood’s style is to take you out of what you feel comfortable with.”

The Cowboys kept charging as McGriff nailed a pair of free throws with 52 seconds remaining to cut Baylor’s lead to 58-56. But Lecomte delivered several big plays for the Bears in the final minute.

He hit a free throw with 34.7 seconds remaining and then grabbed a rebound after Jawun Evans missed a shot. Lecomte drew a foul and hit a pair of free throws with 19.6 seconds remaining to help seal the win for the Bears.

The Bears shot 52.6 percent in the second half after hitting 40 percent in the first half. They were outrebounded, 35-30, by the smaller Cowboys but were much more aggressive on the boards in the second half.

While the Bears can’t wait to see Monday’s rankings, they know how rugged the schedule is beginning Tuesday against West Virginia in Morgantown.

“It’s a great feeling to be ranked No. 1,” Lecomte said. “But again, we’re still the underdog. That’s how we’re going to keep winning, because we’re going to play our game like it’s our last. So we’re going to go back tomorrow and it’s 0-0 and we’re ready for West Virginia.”
Acuil takes hard, circuitous route to Baylor

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
January 7, 2017

Baylor center Jo Lual-Acuil plays with a certain fearlessness and freedom as one of the top shot blockers in the country.

College basketball is like a playground to Lual-Acuil. Swatting away shots and protecting the rim is a great release for a guy who ran for his life to escape war as a child in Sudan.

With Sudan embroiled in a civil war in the late 1990s, Lual-Acuil and his family left everything behind to find safety in Uganda.

Lual-Acuil and his mother, sister and two brothers literally escaped their native country with just the clothes on their back. He was only 3 years old at the time.

“It happened and it was not safe there any more, so everybody just had to leave their things and flee,” Lual-Acuil said. “I was able to eat, but I’m sure it was hard for my family. My mom and dad always found a way to be able to help me. I was so young and I just remember a little bit because I was moving around so much.”

While Lual-Acuil’s father stayed behind in Sudan to work for the government, the rest of the family moved to a refugee camp in Uganda for five years before relocating to Perth in Western Australia. His mother was able to find a job and help put her children through school with help from his father.

It was during prep school at Kingsway Christian College in Darch, Australia when Lual-Acuil played basketball for the first time in 11th grade.

That led Lual-Acuil to a basketball scholarship to Neosho County Community College in Chanute, Kan., and finally to Baylor.

After sitting out last year due to a heart issue, the 7-0 Lual-Acuil’s presence in the middle has been a big reason why the Bears are 14-0 and No. 2 in the country heading into Saturday’s 6 p.m. game against Oklahoma State at the Ferrell Center.

Watching Lual-Acuil star for one of the best teams in college basketball, it’s easy to forget that he’s only played the game for five seasons.

“He makes a huge difference and not just because he’s 7-0,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “He not only blocks shots, but the shots he alters as well have a great impact in the game and that gets us in transition. It gets us easy baskets on the other end and allows us to be more aggressive on the perimeter knowing you’ve got a real good shot blocker on the back side to protect things.”

Lual-Acuil takes a lot of pride in being Baylor’s last line of defense at the rim. Baylor’s guards know they can extend farther out on the perimeter to defend teams because Lual-Acuil is such a factor in the paint.

Lual-Acuil ranks third nationally with 3.57 blocks per game and has put up his best numbers in the Bears’ biggest games. He recorded seven blocks in Baylor’s win over then-No. 4 Oregon, and six apiece against No. 9 Louisville and No. 7 Xavier.

While his first goal is to make opponents change their shots, he gets a thrill out of blocking them.

“Most of the time it’s not about blocking the shot, it’s about protecting the rim and trying to change the shot,” Lual-Acuil said. “As many shots as I block, there are as many as I change. I want our guys to be able to count on me to pressure guys more so they can play defense more relaxed knowing if they do break down I have their backs and I can help them out.”

Lual-Acuil takes it personally when someone scores over him.

“If someone scores on Jo at the rim you can see it hurts his soul,” said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey. “He gets mad. That’s a good thing.”

While shot blocking is Lual-Acuil’s most visible contribution, he’s also become a productive scorer who is averaging 11.1 points per game and ranks second on the team with 7.6 rebounds per game. His 62.5 field goal percentage ranks second in the Big 12, and he isn’t afraid to occasionally shoot outside as he’s nailed four of 10 3-pointers.

“Jo is an offensive threat and a defensive threat, and he provides rim protection that allows them to extend their zone,” said Oklahoma State coach Brad Underwood. “Jo has helped them in both man and zone, and gives them a different look. It’s very difficult to score on them and he’s a big reason.”

Lual-Acuil has come a long way since he showed up at Neosho County Community College four years ago. Coombs has brought in numerous players from Australia over the years and could see the big man had potential.

“You can’t teach size and length, and he looked very skilled to me,” Coombs said. “He definitely had the ability, but the difference between him and other guys is his work ethic. You could definitely tell Jo was a motivated young man who was always in the gym. Sometimes it would be just me and my two boys and Jo in the gym working out.”
Acuil takes hard, circuitous route to Baylor

Lual-Acuil was living in Melbourne, Australia, before moving to Chanute, Kan. It was a major culture and climate shock.

“Neosho is in a small town of about 5,000 people and Melbourne has about 4.6 million,” Lual-Acuil said. “The biggest thing was me leaving Australia in the summer, and when I got to Kansas and it was snowing. Of course, I had never seen snow before. I was shocked. It was really cold.”

Weighing just 185 pounds, Lual-Acuil put on 20 pounds after getting to junior college. Though Lual-Acuil possessed a good outside shot, Coombs convinced him that he needed to use his height inside.

“He was a typical big guy who wanted to be a guard and liked to shoot the 3,” Coombs said. “He figured out he could be pretty damn good if he moved to the 5, and had two great years with us.”

“Jo did a lot of good things and was good for our system and what we do,” Coombs said. “We played zone and he was a 7-0 presence. So when people drove to the basket, they’d get nervous and he’d block the shot or alter them. He’s our all-time leading rebounder, but as a sophomore he was able to score the ball and take it to the basket.”

After signing with Baylor, Lual-Acuil hoped to make an immediate impact last season, but he had to sit out due to the heart issue. He used the year to strengthen his frame to 220 pounds and learned how to play against Division I players in practice.

“First of all he got a lot stronger with (Baylor strength coach) Charlie Melton,” Drew said. “When you’re around players like we have you’re going to improve in practice. When guys come back in the summer, when Isaiah Austin works out, you’re going against other tall players who are athletic and skilled. You’re also seeing the competitiveness and the energy and the crowds and all that goes into Big 12 basketball.”

Lual-Acuil was thrilled when he was cleared and emerged even more determined to have a big junior year.

“It was probably the toughest year I’ve had in my life,” Lual-Acuil said. “It was also a blessing in disguise. I could sit down and watch the game and have everything slow down for me. I could see what the Big 12 is like and get strong in the weight room and get better in different aspects of the game. Through my faith in God I was able to talk to the coaches and my family and my teammates helped me a lot. We prayed and I knew that God had a plan.”

Playing with great passion from the start, Lual-Acuil averaged 10.7 points, 10 rebounds and 5.3 blocks in Baylor’s first three games against Oral Roberts, Oregon and Florida Gulf Coast. He’s continued to deliver similar numbers to help Baylor go unbeaten through 14 games.

His teammates love the energy Lual-Acuil brings to the team and the playfulness and joy he brings to every practice.

“He likes to have fun,” said Baylor forward Ish Wainright. “I’ve never seen a player and a coach playfight as much as him and Coach (Jerome) Tang. Coach Tang will say something to him at practice and Jo will run at him and pick him up and put him over his shoulder.”

Lual-Acuil is a product of the journey that took him from Sudan to Uganda to Australia to Neosho County Community College and finally to Baylor. He’s taken a tougher road than most of his teammates but he’s happy to be a major factor for the nation’s No. 2 team.

“It’s very exciting playing with the guys,” Lual-Acuil said. “We love each other and it’s just fun being out there with them. Just being able to win with them is a great experience.”
High basketball rankings bring positive attention to Baylor

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: Brice Cherry
January 9, 2017

Kim Mulkey remembers well the cloud that hung over the Baylor University men’s basketball program in 2003.

When Scott Drew arrived as coach in August of that year, the program was in shambles. Baylor player Carlton Dotson had been arrested for the murder of teammate Patrick Dennehy — for which he was later convicted — and the ensuing NCAA investigation uncovered multiple violations, including improper payments to players from the previous coaching staff.

Fourteen years later, as the school now tries to pull itself out from under the cloud of a sexual assault scandal, the Baylor men’s basketball team is providing a ray of light, having ascended to the first No. 1 ranking in school history. It landed that honor in both the Associated Press and USA Today Coaches polls Monday.

As Mulkey considers the lengths to which Drew has taken the Bears, she can’t resist getting animated. She coaches her own highly successful basketball program at Baylor, but she’s a fan, too. “They’ve got to be proud, Baylor should be proud,” Mulkey said. “I know I’m proud of them, because I’ve watched that program at the lowest of lows. To see what they’re doing now is remarkable.

“It’s team chemistry. We’ve seen better individual players, probably, on Scott’s team. But it’s all about the team, and everybody seems to be playing their role. I’m proud of them.”

Lofty national rankings are nothing new for Mulkey, whose Lady Bears program is ranked No. 2 in both national polls behind the University of Connecticut, winner of its past 89 games and four consecutive NCAA championships. Baylor has won two national titles, in 2005 and 2012, under Mulkey and has been ranked No. 1 in the AP poll 38 different times.

Asked if she had any advice for Drew, Mulkey chuckled. “Don’t read your press clippings. Keep doing what you’re doing,” Mulkey said. “It’s just good to see, I told Scott the other day, ‘All that does is get you fired now. Everybody expects you to be in a national championship or be in a Final Four if you’re ranked that high.’ No, I’m just happy for those guys.”

Drew said he is grateful for the No. 1 ranking, especially considering his Baylor team didn’t receive a single vote in the AP’s preseason Top 25 poll in October. But he doesn’t want the No. 1 tag to become an anchor. After all, the 15-0 Bears face another tough game Tuesday, as they will take on 10th-ranked West Virginia in Morgantown.

“Big picture, we know no one is going to remember who is ranked No.1 the first week of January,” Drew said. “So we’re on to other things and trying to control what we can control.”

That’s essentially the mantra Baylor has adopted all year.

Early in the season, senior Ish Wainwright said, “We still suck,” at a press conference following the team breaking into the AP rankings for the first time this season. The idea being, the men haven’t accomplished their goals yet.

That phrase has become a rallying cry for the team, and fans have picked up on it — chanting it at games and using it as a hashtag on social media.

“It’s a great feeling to be ranked No. 1,” guard Manu Lecomte said after Baylor’s 61-57 win over Oklahoma State on Saturday. “But again, we’re still the underdog. That’s how we’re going to keep winning, because we’re going to play our game like it’s our last and we still suck.”

Still, Drew can appreciate the historical significance of the No. 1 ranking. Until this season, Baylor’s highest AP ranking had been No. 3 on Jan. 16, 2012.

Unranked to top spot

The Bears are just the fourth team in poll history to go from unranked in the preseason all the way to the No. 1 perch, joining Larry Bird’s Indiana State University team in 1978-79, the 1989-90 Kansas University Jayhawks and the 2009-10 Syracuse University Orangemen.

“As I shared with the players, not many people get a chance to be ranked No. 1, and that’s a great honor,” Drew said. “It’s a great day to be a Baylor Bear. There’s a lot of excitement over the rankings, and it’s a big deal, first time at No. 1. That being said, we’ve got a couple of Top 25 teams coming up this week, starting with West Virginia on Tuesday, and they can humble you real quick.”

High rankings don’t guarantee future victories or championships, but they do bring increased media attention. It’s the kind of exposure a school can’t buy, Baylor director of athletics Mack Rhoades said.

“I think it’s certainly great recognition for both programs, and a great moment for the men’s program, being the first No. 1 ranking in program history,” Rhoades said. “So we’re certainly happy and excited about how both teams are playing. But I also think both coaches know that while the rankings are satisfying (and) it’s nice to be ranked this high at this point of the season, it’s how you finish the season that matters most.”

Many of the headlines surrounding Baylor in the past year have centered on the school’s sexual assault scandal. An outside investigation by Philadelphia law firm Pepper Hamilton LLP found institutional failures in the way the school handled sexual assault cases, regents reported, which led to the firings of former President Ken Starr, head football coach Art Briles and the departure of athletics director Ian McCaw.

So, this type of news brings a breath of fresh air, Rhoades said.

“It probably does mean more (considering the climate),” Rhoades said. “I was talking to someone the other day, and I said, referring to the rankings, ‘I think this is good medicine for all of us, for Baylor Nation, the fans and for Waco.’ We realize all that’s been done. But that said, we’re still not where we need to be.”

For Drew, it’s been a long journey to the top. He noted that it may be harder to reach No. 1 in the AP poll than make the Final Four, although the latter remains one of those goals “we still haven’t scratched off yet,” the coach said.

“Being No. 1 is great recognition, it’s a great honor,” Drew said. “It’s humbling, and I’m appreciative of the past Baylor players and coaches who helped get us to this spot. But while we feel great about it, no one ever remembers who’s ranked No. 1 in the first week of January, but everybody remembers who’s No. 1 at the end of the season.”
Overturned: No. 1 Bears drop 1st game of season to No. 10 West Virginia, 89-68

Waco Tribune-Herald  
By: John Werner  
January 11, 2017

MORGANTOWN, W. Va. – Winning at WVU Coliseum is never easy under any circumstances, but it was especially challenging for Baylor with a No. 1 target on its back.

West Virginia’s overflow crowd of 14,632 was geared up for the top-ranked Bears and so was the “Press Virginia” defense.

Making a season-high 29 turnovers against No. 10 West Virginia’s vaunted press, the Bears had trouble establishing any offensive rhythm as the Mountaineers led from start to finish in an 89-68 blowout Tuesday night.

The Bears (15-1, 3-1) suffered their first loss of the season a day after earning their first No. 1 ranking in school history in both the Associated Press and coaches polls. They knew West Virginia (14-2, 3-1) would be one of their toughest games of the season, and it quickly played out that way.

“Press Virginia is for real,” said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey. “They do a good job executing and knowing our personnel and they come at you in waves. We didn’t do a good job handling the pressure. They played harder than we did and we got the results we deserved.”

Midway through the first half, the Bears had already committed 13 turnovers, including many that were self inflicted. The Bears’ turnovers were their most ever in a Big 12 game and just two less than the school record of 31 against Arkansas in 1991.

“We’ve come here and had success in the past,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “I have to say this team on film was impressive but in person this is the best pressing team Coach (Bob) Huggins has had. I think they’ve improved their press. They just make you feel uneasy and uncomfortable.”

Nathan Adrian made a big impact for the Mountaineers with 22 points with six rebounds while Jevon Carter scored 17 and Brandon Watkins and Tarik Phillip hit 11 apiece.

The Bears got unusually poor production from their starters with 41 points despite a double-double by Jo Lual-Acuil with 10 points and 12 rebounds. The Bears won the boards by a 41-32 margin but couldn’t overcome the plethora of turnovers.

It marked the second straight year the Mountaineers knocked off a No. 1 team at WVU Coliseum after beating Kansas last year.

“It’s disappointing but we knew it would be a tough game,” said Baylor forward Terry Maston who finished with 10 points. “We knew they would try to speed us up and ride off the momentum of beating Kansas last year. But I still believe in our team and we’re going to get ready to play Kansas State on Saturday.”

West Virginia grabbed a 15-4 lead in the first seven minutes as Watkins and Esa Ahmad scored on putbacks and Carter drained a 3-pointer. Teyvon Myers scored on a layup, drew a foul from King McClure and hit the free throw.

With Elijah Macon hitting a basket in the paint, the Mountaineers opened up their early 11-point lead.

Jo Lual-Acuil scored on a putback and a layup to cut West Virginia’s lead to 15-10, but the turnovers kept the Bears from taking the lead.

After Wendell Mitchell nailed a 3-pointer to cut West Virginia’s lead to 17-13, Myers answered with a 3-pointer for the Mountaineers.

Later in the first half, Macon drove inside again for a basket and Phillip drained a trey to push West Virginia’s lead to 37-28.

Baylor closed the lead to 37-32 before Adrian hit an outside shot for the Mountaineers to take a 39-32 halftime lead.

West Virginia continued to build its lead in the early minutes of the second half and eventually turned the game into a blowout.

Watkins got things rolling by scoring outside and then slicing inside for a basket. Daxter Miles drilled a 3-pointer and Ahmad scored inside. After stealing Manu Lecomte’s pass, Ahmad drove for a layup to stretch the lead to 50-37 with 15:50 left in the game.

The Mountaineers kept pushing as Adrian drained a 3-pointer and Carter stole the ball and passed to Phillip for a layup to open up a 60-45 lead.

Miles then stole the ball from Lecomte and passed to Carter for a layup. With Carter’s 3-pointer, West Virginia extended its lead to 65-47 with 7:30 remaining.

The Mountaineers stayed hot and stretched their lead to 76-50 with 5:30 remaining.
Lecomte helps No. 1 Baylor hold off No. 25 K-State 77-68

Associated Press
January 14, 2017

MANHATTAN, Kan. (AP) — Trailing midway through the second half, top-ranked Baylor suddenly surged to avoid a second straight loss.

Manu Lecomte scored 26 points despite early foul trouble, Ish Wainright and Al Freeman had key baskets down the stretch and the Bears outlasted No. 25 Kansas State 77-68 on Saturday.

Wainright and Freeman each had 15 points as Baylor (15-1, 3-1 Big 12) bounced back from a lopsided loss at No. 10 West Virginia in their first game as the nation's No. 1 team.

"We were able to get some stops and get into transition and get some good looks and make a couple of 3s," coach Scott Drew said.

Kansas State held a two-point lead with 10 minutes to go. From that point, Baylor outscored the Wildcats 32-21.

Johnathan Motley was held to seven points and nine rebounds before fouling out with 4:34 left and the Bears leading 62-55. But they managed to hang on down the stretch without their most dependable player.

D.J. Johnson had points to lead the Wildcats (13-4, 2-3), including two free throws after Motley fouled out to get within 62-57 with just over 4 minutes to go.

But the Wildcats were unable to make key stops the rest of the way, and the trio of Wainright, Freeman and Lecomte seemed to will the Bears to victory.

"They're good," Kansas State head coach Bruce Weber said.

"They're steady and smart. They executed, they made plays and we didn't have an answer for them," he said.

Freeman scored with just over 3 minutes left to make it 66-58, and Wainright had a putback with just over 2 minutes left that gave the Bears a 68-60 advantage.

Barry Brown finished with 13 points, Xavier Sneed added 12 and Kamau Stokes had 10 for the Wildcats.

BIG PICTURE

Baylor: Answered a lot of critics after its poor showing in Morgantown by beating the Wildcats on the road. The Bears have won six of their last seven against Kansas State.

Kansas State: Has lost three of its last four games, including a last-second defeat at No. 2 Kansas and a loss at Texas Tech where the Wildcats also led late.

Those defeats coupled with a weak nonconference schedule could haunt the Wildcats when the NCAA Tournament field is set.

UP NEXT

Baylor: Heads home to face Texas on Tuesday night.

Kansas State: Goes to Oklahoma State on Wednesday night.

POLL IMPLICATIONS: Despite being the top-ranked team, Baylor is virtually certain to fall because of its loss at West Virginia.
On a night when Baylor honored the Immortal Ten, Johnathan Motley delivered his most passionate performance in three seasons.

Playing with high emotion against longtime rival Texas, Motley amassed a career-high 32 points and 20 rebounds to lift No. 6 Baylor to a 74-64 win before 7,604 fans Tuesday night at the Ferrell Center.

The Baylor basketball players wore the names of the Immortal Ten on the back of their jerseys. Jan. 22 will mark the 90th anniversary of the 1927 crash when 10 basketball players, coaches and fans died when the Baylor bus was hit by a train in Round Rock en route to Austin where they were scheduled to face Texas that day.

“It was pretty cool to honor the people who came before us,” Motley said. “We did a good job doing that and getting the win. I wasn’t too happy with myself the last two games, I felt I was a better player than what I showed and I just tried to bounce back the best I could.”

Limited to single-digit points in each of the last two games against West Virginia and Kansas State, Motley nailed 12 of 19 shots on an array of dunks, pivot moves and flawless jumpers. He also hit eight of 11 free throws and collected three blocks.

Motley became just the fourth player in Baylor history to record 30 points and 20 rebounds in a game as he joined Jerry Mallett in 1957, Darrell Hardy in 1966 and Rico Gathers in 2015. It was the first 30-20 performance in a Big 12 game since 2009 by Oklahoma’s Blake Griffin.

“Anytime you get 30 and 20, I don’t care where it is or who you are, that’s really impressive,” said Texas coach Shaka Smart. “We don’t see that very often. I think the thing that he keeps getting better with is his motor, and that’s how he got a lot of those rebounds. He just stayed with them, kept fighting and went after them.”

After scoring nine first-half points, Motley erupted for 23 in the second half as the Bears improved to 17-1 to match the 2011-12 team for the best start in school history. His points were the most against Texas (7-11, 1-5) this season as the Bears improved to 5-1 in the Big 12.

“Statistically, Mot had a whale of a game,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “But his teammates did a great job of getting him the ball where he could be successful. We were going to sub him out, but his teammates were like, ‘No, we’ve got to keep him in.’ That shows their love for him.”

While Motley was clearly the star of the night, junior forward Nuni Omot played a big role off the bench with a career-high 14 points with five rebounds. Motley and Omot helped the Bears dominate the boards 41-29.

The Longhorns controlled the game early as they jumped out to a 12-4 lead. But Motley got inside for a basket and Omot scored on a tip-in to cut the lead to 23-22. After the Longhorns grabbed a 27-22 lead, the Bears scored the next nine points and never trailed the rest of the game.

Omot started the stretch with a slam before Al Freeman and Jake Lindsey buried 3-pointers. Motley’s free throw gave the Bears a 31-27 lead with 2:58 left in the first half.

Omot later drove for a basket and then got inside for a slam followed by a free throw to stretch Baylor’s halftime edge to 38-31. Omot, who missed the first eight games this season before he was cleared to play after transferring from Indian Hills Community College, was averaging 4.6 points and 2.3 rebounds in seven games.

“Honestly, when I got in, I just told myself I had to play as hard as possible,” Omot said. “My teammates obviously did a really good job of finding me. I was in the right spots, and I had to reward them by finishing when I was getting the ball.”

With Motley scoring on a drive and hitting an outside shot, the Bears quickly stretched their lead to double digits to start the second half.

The Longhorns stayed within striking distance when Motley got loose for a dunk, but he was nailed for a technical when he shoved Texas’ Jarrett Allen under the basket. Eric Davis hit both free throws to cut Baylor’s lead to 54-44 with 11:27 remaining.

But Motley threw his game into an even higher gear after the technical. He scored on a drive, drew a foul and hit the free throw to give the Bears a 60-44 lead with 10:43 remaining.

Motley drilled a pair of free throws and scored on a putback to stretch the lead to 70-49 with 5:05 remaining.

“We were more aggressive going to the glass in the second half,” Drew said. “In the first half, a lot of times were only getting one rebounder in there on missed shots and the second half we had a lot better effort with two or three rebounders.”
Coach of the year candidate Scott Drew turns Baylor's low-star talent into star team

USA TODAY
By: Nicole Auerbach
January 18, 2017

Baylor coach Scott Drew sure can coach 'em up. That sentence doesn't jibe with the image you see of him as simply an aggressive recruiter. It doesn't fit with the (unfounded) criticism you still hear of his in-game coaching.

But consider the number of top-50 recruits on this year’s roster: Zero.

The number of times Baylor has been ranked No. 1 in the country? One.

And, for good measure, the number of times Baylor had ever been ranked No. 1 prior to this season? Zero.

That speaks to player development, cohesiveness and chemistry. It speaks to leadership, which this team has. And most of all it speaks to the coach who has orchestrated one of the greatest turnarounds in all of college basketball during his 14-year tenure in Waco.

Often times, with little-known players who developed into future pros.

"Pierre Jackson (part of the 2012 Elite Eight team, and 2013 NIT champion squad) — when he came out, he had zero stars from Scout," Drew tells USA TODAY Sports.

"I thought everybody who played got a star," he deadpans.

It's particularly timely to pay this tribute to Drew in the midst of a season in which a group of overlooked high school players — Ishmail Wainwright is the highest-ranked recruit out of players, and he clocked in at No. 57 in his class, per 247 Sports — turned into the best team nobody expected to be any good.

The Bears received no votes in the preseason polls after losing the school's all-time leading rebounder (Rico Gathers) and a lottery pick in Taurean Prince.

"You understand why we weren't predicted, early in the year, to be successful," Drew says.

Yet they were, even so. They went undefeated through nonconference play, piling up wins against Oregon, Michigan State and Xavier all before Christmas because of a somewhat masochistic scheduling philosophy similar to that of Michigan State coach Tom Izzo. The strategy guarantees that a team will be challenged before the rigors of conference play, but it almost nearly always guarantees at least one loss.

"To play the teams that we did and not have an early season loss, that's hard to do nowadays," Drew says. "We've had unbelievable leadership with our upperclassmen, and great chemistry because of that. We have really good depth, and that allows different people to step up to win games."

Then, the Bears ascended to the No. 1 ranking by Jan. 9, a feat astounding on its own but even more so when you consider the Baylor men’s team had never found that perch before.

It was short-lived, though, with the Bears suffering their first loss of the season on the road at No. 10 West Virginia. The next game, a win at Kansas State, helped offset the lone bit of disappointment reached by becoming No. 1 and only getting to play with that label on the road, away from Waco. The loss dropped them from the top spot this week.

"Coaches understand the big picture, that no one cares who's ranked No. 1 in January," Drew says. "But to see all of Baylor nation fired up and excited, it was hard for our players not to get excited to be ranked No. 1 and achieve that for the first time in school history, for the past players who were texting, and all the students, the whole community."

It's a situation almost unrecognizable to the one Drew inherited back in 2003. When he took over a program reeling from the worst scandal in NCAA history — one involving a player murdering another player, and the lies that surrounded it.

So, yes, even a brief stint at No. 1 is a big deal. And 17-1 is a big deal, too, a record that includes five wins against top-25 teams and suggests that Bears could be capable of ending Kansas's 12-year streak of Big 12 regular-season championships. Another point worth making suggests consistency at a rather high level: Baylor has averaged 24 wins during the last six years, with two Elite Eight trips in the mix.

But what's an even bigger deal is how Drew's doing what he's doing this year. Or, well, the way he's done it quite often in Waco, with the occasional one-and-done talent sprinkled in.

"The goal was always to go to Final Fours, win national championships, be ranked No. 1," Drew says. "But you don't always achieve what you set out to do."

This year's Baylor team is 1-for-3 so far. The other two remain possibilities, if the Bears continue to play the way they have with one of the deepest rosters in all of college basketball and more monster games from Johnathan Motley, who scored 32 points, grabbed 20 rebounds and blocked three shots Tuesday night against Texas.

"From the standpoint of leadership, chemistry and depth — it doesn't guarantee that we'll finish in the Elite Eight or the Final Four," Drew says. "But we have the potential, if we keep getting better each and every day, to do that.

"I would think this team's capable of beating anybody."
Experience not lacking for Drew’s team

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
January 20, 2017

Men’s basketball is unquestionably the most transient of college sports.

One-and-done NBA-bound players are common at powerhouses like Kentucky, North Carolina and Duke. With only five starting positions available on the court, transfers are also a major part of the culture.

All these factors make it difficult for coaches to put experienced teams on the floor.

But Baylor coach Scott Drew’s team is an exception. All five Baylor starters are upperclassmen including senior guard Ish Wainright, junior forwards Johnathan Motley and Jo Lual-Acuil, and junior guards Manu Lecomte and Al Freeman.

That abundance of experience is a big reason why the Bears reached No. 1 for the first time in school history last week. Now ranked No. 6, Baylor matched its best start in school history at 17-1 with its 74-64 win over Texas on Tuesday at the Ferrell Center.

While Wainright is the only senior on the squad, all four starting juniors have redshirted and are in their fourth season of college basketball. Both Motley and Freeman redshirted when they arrived at Baylor as freshmen in 2013 while Lecomte redshirted last year under NCAA transfer rules after playing two seasons at Miami.

Following his transfer from Neosho County Community College, Lual-Acuil redshirted last year due to a heart issue.

Redshirts are much more common in college football because gaining strength is so important for high school players stepping up to the next level. But having that extra year to put on muscle and learn the system can also benefit college basketball players, and it has certainly paid off for Baylor.

“The vast majority of recruits want to play major minutes right away,” said Texas coach Shaka Smart. “What Coach Drew has done is have frank conversations with his guys that development right now is the most important thing. You look at a guy like Motley. When he was a redshirt sophomore last year, he was way ahead of schedule. With guys redshirting and bringing in transfers, it gives them the opportunity to become an older team and have some continuity. The guys sitting out learn the system and know what goes into winning."

Drew remembers a conversation he had with point guard Tweety Carter, who starred for the Bears from 2006-10. Carter made an immediate impact for the Bears, helping them reach the NCAA tournament in 2008, the NIT finals in 2009 and the Elite Eight of the NCAA tournament in 2010.

“Tweety Carter said, ‘Why didn’t you let me redshirt my freshman year?’” Drew said. “You were a McDonald’s All-American. He’s like still you should have given me the option. From that point on our staff thought about it and said maybe we need to give guys options because that’s the fair thing to do."

While all-Big 12 forward Ekpe Udoh and guard Brady Heslip had to redshirt due to NCAA transfer rules, Drew redshirted Cory Jefferson during his second year on campus in 2010-11 because the Bears had an abundance of big men. The move paid off as Jefferson became an NBA draft pick in 2014.

Motley wasn’t thrilled to redshirt when Drew first approached him with the idea in 2013.

“I didn’t really want to hear that,” Motley said. “I was ready to play and come in and help the team. But I met with some people like my mom and I thought it would be a better thing for me to do. Just adding weight and going against guys like Cory Jefferson, Rico Gathers and Isaiah Austin every day prepared me for where I am now. Looking back on it I’m thankful I did it. I don’t know where I’d be if I hadn’t done it.”

Motley has seen the benefits as he’s become Baylor’s leading scorer and rebounder as a fourth-year junior and is among 25 candidates for the John Wooden Award as the nation’s top player. He’ll likely be picked in the NBA draft if he decides to forgo his senior year.

“Everybody wants to be in the NBA after high school and they’re upset they have to go to college,” Drew said. “After one year of college they wish they still could be in the NBA. So we don’t make anyone redshirt. We give them the options because at the end of the day it’s their final decision on everything."

Redshirting often isn’t practical for coaches since the NCAA only allows men’s basketball programs 13 scholarships. But Baylor should be well set up for the future by currently redshirting freshman guard Tyson Jolly and freshman forward Mark Vital while guard Wendell Mitchell redshirted last season.

Drew is reaping the rewards of his foresight to redshirt players, and he’s got a top 10 team to show for it.
FORT WORTH – Baylor has risen from a Top 25 outcast to No. 6 in the country by mastering the art of closing games.

After trading baskets most of the second half, the Bears outscored TCU 15-5 in the final five minutes to seal a 62-53 win before a packed house of 7,276 fans Saturday night at Schollmaier Arena.

Manu Lecomte led the way with 17 points and four assists and made numerous key plays in the closing minutes as the Bears improved to 18-1 overall and 6-1 in the Big 12. The Bears are 3-1 in Big 12 road games with wins over Oklahoma, Kansas State and TCU.

“I hope the fans enjoyed it because we’re worn out,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “It’s amazing how drained everybody is. But this was typical of a Big 12 game because it was hard fought. A lot of these guys know each other and those games tend to be closer.”

The Bears shot a season low 42.6 percent against a physical TCU defense. But Baylor held the Horned Frogs to 29.3 percent shooting and was especially good guarding the perimeter. The Horned Frogs hit just one of 12 shots from 3-point range in the second half after drilling five of 13 in the first half when they took a 28-26 lead.

Vlad Brodziansky collected a double-double with 19 points and 10 rebounds while former University High School star Kenrich Williams finished with 16 points and 12 boards for the Horned Frogs (14-5, 3-4). But no other TCU player scored in double figures.

Johnathan Motley delivered another strong game for the Bears with 15 points and eight rebounds while Jo Lual-Acuil picked up 11 points and five boards.

“They’re a good team that’s very physical and they play real tough,” Motley said. “That’s what we expected and they got the best of us in the first half. But we picked it up in the second half and got the W.”

The Horned Frogs grabbed a 48-47 lead when Williams rebounded and scored with 5:26 remaining.

But Ish Wainright answered with a 3-pointer for the Bears. Motley then rebounded and scored and Lecomte nailed an outside shot as the Bears opened up a 54-48 lead with 2:28 remaining.

“That was a big shot by Ish,” Lecomte said. “We had shot some airballs and the fans let us know about it. But the coaches kept trusting in me to make plays. In a game like this you’ve got to get 50-50 balls because we knew it would be close.”

After Brodziansky hit a pair of free throws, Lecomte came through with a big play when he grabbed an errant pass by teammate Jake Lindsey and rushed downcourt before dishing to Lual-Acuil for a slam.

Lecomte then found Motley for a dunk to extend Baylor’s lead to 58-50 with 56 seconds remaining. Lecomte hit four of five free throws in the final 45 seconds to finish off the win.

Despite hitting just 33.3 percent from the field in the first half, the Horned Frogs took a 28-26 halftime lead. Brodziansky and Williams nailed treys to close the half to give TCU the lead.

Baylor had a chance to take a big lead early as TCU hit just three of its first 17 shots. But the Bears couldn’t produce enough offense.

The Bears hit their first two shots as Lecomte drained a 3-pointer and Motley got inside for a basket. Lecomte nailed another 3-pointer to give the Bears a 9-5 lead.

Motley followed with another basket in the paint, Al Freeman scored on a layup and Lual-Acuil sliced inside for a tip-in to push Baylor’s lead to 18-12.

But the Horned Frogs finally began finding a groove as Brodziansky and Jaylen Fisher hit 3-pointers and Alex Robinson stole the ball and scored to give TCU its first lead at 20-18 with 3:36 left in the first half.

The Bears regained a 23-20 lead on Lecomte’s third trey of the first half and Nuni Omot buried a trey to push the lead to 26-22 before TCU hit the final two 3-pointers of the first half.

Baylor came out hot to open the second half by scoring the first eight points as Motley scored inside, Lual-Acuil and Wainright got inside for putbacks and Lecomte scored on a drive to take a 34-28 lead.

But the Horned Frogs answered with seven straight points as Williams nailed a trey.

From that point, the game went back and forth as there were 10 lead changes in the first 12 minutes of the second half.
No. 5 Baylor men spoil Red Raiders’ upset bid, 65-61

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
January 26, 2017

After watching Texas Tech storm into the Ferrell Center last year for a blowout win, Baylor knew just how dangerous this veteran team could be.

That knowledge didn’t make the Red Raiders any easier to beat in their return to Waco.

The No. 5 Bears needed a near flawless 26 of 28 performance from the free throw line to overcome the Red Raiders, 65-61, to earn a share of the Big 12 lead Wednesday night.

Following Kansas’ 85-69 loss to West Virginia on Tuesday night, the Bears pulled into a first-place tie at 7-1 with the Jayhawks. Both Kansas and Baylor will play games in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge Saturday before their showdown Feb. 1 at Allen Fieldhouse in Lawrence.

The Bears improved to 13-0 at the Ferrell Center but the Red Raiders (14-6, 3-5) made them earn it.

“You’ve got to win home games because that’s what Kansas does every year,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “Texas Tech really battled and we really battled. We made free throws and that’s about all we could make. We didn’t shoot well and made too many turnovers.”

Following their 84-66 win over the Bears last year at the Ferrell Center, the Red Raiders gave the Bears another huge scare. Despite hitting a season-low 35.4 percent from the field, the Bears’ superb performance from the free throw line saved them as they extended their program best start to 19-1.

Trailing 63-61 in the closing seconds, the Red Raiders had a shot to win when Keenan Evans attempted a 3-point shot. But Baylor’s Ish Wainright blocked the shot with 0.5 seconds to play.

But that wasn’t the end of the drama. The referees reviewed the play and called it an inadvertent whistle.

“Inadvertent whistle, does anybody know what that means?” said Texas Tech coach Chris Beard. “I just didn’t like the way the game ended. Tonight it was frustrating because it was a heated game. But for some reason the free throw differential was night and day. But Baylor beat us tonight. We got beat by a good team.”

Baylor sealed the game when Al Freeman hit a pair of free throws with 0.5 seconds remaining.

The Red Raiders shot just nine of 10 free throws. But the Bears held a huge advantage on the boards with a 35-25 margin.

Johnathan Motley delivered another tremendous game with 25 points, including 15 of 16 free throws, while collecting nine rebounds and two blocks. Manu Lecomte was the only other Baylor player to score in double figures with 10 points despite hitting just three of 11 shots.

“Coaches say don’t settle for the jump shot and I just decided I’d attack the rim,” Motley said. “I was living at the line. I made free throws and that kept working out for me.”

The Bears appeared in great shape when Motley drilled a pair of free throws for a 63-56 lead with 1:20 remaining. But Aaron Ross drained a 3-pointer and Evans hit a pair of free throws with 38 seconds left as the Red Raiders cut the lead to 63-61.

After Lecomte and Motley missed shots for the Bears, the Red Raiders had their one last chance to win that ended with Wainright’s block.

“Not many teams in the nation run motion, and they do a great job of moving the ball and screening,” Drew said. “That’s what makes the conference so good. Press Virginia is different than any team in the country and Texas Tech runs the motion which is different than most teams. He does a great job with them. It’s very similar to what Coach (Bob) Knight did with them.”

The Bears went into halftime with a 32-31 lead after making 16 of 18 free throws, including 11 of 12 by Motley.

Baylor dominated the early part of the game as it opened up a 12-2 lead as Freeman and Lecomte nailed 3-pointers. The Bears stretched their lead to 27-19 when Jo Lual-Acuil hit a pair of free throws with 10:22 remaining in the first half.

But the Red Raiders started slicing into Baylor’s lead when Anthony Livingston and Niem Stevenson drained 3-pointers.

After the Bears opened up a 27-19 lead, the Red Raiders responded with a 10-0 run as Justin Gray popped three outside shots. Ross hit Texas Tech’s first two free throws of the game with 2:29 left in the half as the Red Raiders took their first lead of the game.

Terry Maston scored on a putback with 31 seconds left in the half to give the Bears a 32-31 halftime edge.

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Terry Maston scored on a putback with 31 seconds left in the half to give the Bears a 32-31 halftime edge.

After Zach Smith took a pass from Stevenson for a dunk to cut Baylor’s lead to 42-41, Nuni Omot buried a 3-pointer from the top of the arc for the Bears.

Smith drove inside for another basket but Lecomte answered with an outside shot. Omot came back with a pair of free throws and then moved inside for a basket to push Baylor’s lead to 51-45 with 8:18 remaining.
OXFORD, Miss. (AP) — Baylor's Manu Lecomte caught the ball about five feet behind the 3-point line as the shot clock was winding down. For most guys, it wouldn't have been an ideal situation.

For Lecomte, it was perfect.

"I was deep," Lecomte said. "But I was open."

The 5-foot-11 junior drilled the crucial shot for his fifth 3-pointer, and it proved to be the difference in No. 5 Baylor's hard-fought 78-75 victory over Mississippi on Saturday night in the SEC-Big 12 Challenge.

Lecomte led the Bears with 17 points, and Johnathan Motley and Jo Lual-Acuil Jr. had 16 apiece.

Baylor (20-1) rallied from a 15-point deficit in the first half to win its fifth straight game. The Bears trailed 50-40 early in the second half, but pushed ahead to take their first lead at 56-54 with 10:25 left after Motley made a pair of free throws.

It was a close game from that point forward. Lecomte hit his decisive 3-pointer with 23 seconds left, making it 78-72 and sending many of the Ole Miss fans to the exits.

Lecomte shot 6 of 9 from the field, including 5 of 6 from 3-point range.

"We had some good looks and Manu is a good shooter and somebody who is capable of going 5 for 6," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "Whenever he shoots we think it's going in. We're blessed he made them today."

Ole Miss (12-9) dominated early on and jumped out to a 33-18 lead with 6:33 remaining in the first half. The Rebels used a 1-3-1 zone defense that bothered Baylor for a big chunk of the game.

But the Bears played much better in the second half, shooting 14 of 26 (53.8 percent) from the field.

"It was really the first time we've played against a zone like that, so it was kind of weird at first," Lecomte said. "But we figured it out."

Ole Miss was led by Sebastian Saiz and freshman Breein Tyree, who both scored 20 points. It was a career high for Tyree, who had 18 points in the second half.

But a few crucial Ole Miss turnovers in the final minutes — along with Lecomte's big shot — helped Baylor escape with the victory. The Bears were also dominant on the glass with a 37-27 rebounding edge.

"This is the second game in a row at home that we get destroyed on the glass," Ole Miss coach Andy Kennedy said.

BIG PICTURE

Baylor: The Bears struggled, especially when Motley was in foul trouble during the first half, but surged ahead late to escape Oxford with the win. Now they've got another tough road game at Kansas on Wednesday.

Ole Miss: It's a missed opportunity for the Rebels, who put a scare into Baylor but still leave with the loss. Ole Miss has now lost six of their last nine games.

BROOKS IS BACK

Ole Miss guard Rasheed Brooks scored two points in 14 minutes in his first game back after a seizure on Jan. 17. The 6-foot-5 senior was taken off the floor on a stretcher after the scary situation during a timeout, but less than two weeks later was back on the floor.

Kennedy said there was "never a specific cause" of the seizure, but that "all of the tests came back clear, which is a great thing, obviously." He said doctors have changed some of Brooks' medications and want to make sure he stays hydrated.

UP NEXT

Baylor travels to face No. 2 Kansas on Wednesday.

Ole Miss stays at home, where it will face Mississippi State on Tuesday.
No. 2 Baylor can’t hold on in Lawrence, falls to No. 3 Kansas, 73-68

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: Scott Chasen
February 2, 2017

LAWRENCE, Kan. — For 38 minutes, an upset more than a decade in the making seemed to be in the cards.

No. 2 Baylor blitzed No. 3 Kansas on the offensive glass in the first half and jumped out to an early lead. Even after the Jayhawks closed the gap, the Bears went blow-to-blow with the winner of the last 12 Big 12 regular season championships, hitting shot after shot in Allen Fieldhouse to keep the home side from pulling away.

But in the final moments, with a shot to take the lead and another chance to tie, the Bears (20-2, 7-2 Big 12) fell victim to a building that had shown them nothing but misery in the past. A 3 by Ishmail Wainright caromed for the backboard. A pass by Manu Lecomte flew out of bounds. The scoreboard showed 0s as the Bears walked off the court with a 73-68 loss.

“I thought we did a good job on the glass, first half, “ Drew said. “Second half we didn’t do as good.”

But the run was coming. Baylor did what it could to thwart the Jayhawks’ momentum, taking two timeouts during a Kansas 14-0 spurt early in the second half but at that point, the complexion of the game had flipped. Baylor was no longer protecting a lead but having to scrap to keep KU within reach, which it did all the way until the end.

Eventually, however, Baylor ran out of answers. Lecomte scored 11 points in the second half, but Motley was held to just one shot and two points. The Jayhawks mixed up their defenses, going to a zone and trapping the Baylor screens at the end of the game to force enough confusion to come away with a win.

“It was good defense, even on the ball screen,” Lecomte said. “The big did a good job of helping him and trapping me. They did a good job on defense.”

And as the players walked off the court, they knew they’d let an opportunity fall by the wayside.

Baylor held the lead with less than seven minutes to play. The game was tied three times after that, including with less than three minutes to go. But at the end of the game, it was the same story as all the other times in the past:

The Bears fell to 0-15 all-time in Allen Fieldhouse, 0-17 all-time against teams ranked in the top-2 of either the AP or coaches poll, and, perhaps most importantly, a game back of the Jayhawks in the league race.

“One day we’ll win up here,” Drew said with a half-hearted smile. “Just not this year.”

Baylor will return to action Saturday against Kansas State in Waco. Kansas and Baylor will rematch at the Ferrell Center on Feb. 18.
Unfocused Bears post monster rally, can’t overcome K-State in first home loss, 56-54

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
February 5, 2017

After an emotional last-second loss to No. 3 Kansas at Allen Fieldhouse, the last thing No. 2 Baylor wanted was to come out flat and unfocused back home against Kansas State.

The Bears finally woke up and nearly rallied from an 18-point second-half deficit, but the Wildcats hung on for a 56-54 win before 7,729 fans Saturday afternoon at the Ferrell Center.

The Bears (20-3, 7-3) had a chance to move into a tie for the Big 12 lead since Iowa State beat conference leading Kansas, 92-89, in Lawrence. But Kansas State (16-7, 5-5) handed the Bears their first home loss of the season after 13 wins, including four straight in the Big 12.

"Home losses are the worst," said Baylor coach Scott Drew. "At the end of the day, K-State punched us in the mouth and we didn’t respond until the last 10 minutes of the game. If you play against anyone in this league for 10 minutes you’re not going to win, and when games come down to one possession you’re not going to win them all."

The Wildcats took a 56-54 lead when D.J. Johnson hit one of two free throws with 10 seconds remaining.

After the Bears took a time out with 6.4 seconds remaining, Ish Wainright threw the ball inside to Johnathan Motley. Working against powerful D.J. Johnson, Motley missed his shot near the basket and the ball went out of bounds off the Wildcats.

"If I had gone up and dunked it, nothing could have stopped it," Motley said. "I was expecting contact and (Johnson) just backed off."

With 1.6 seconds remaining, Wainright threw the ball again to Motley, but this time Johnson blocked his shot as time expired.

"He’s a strong guy," Johnson said. "I wanted to play him straight and not give him anything easy, but not foul him in case we went to overtime with them. I wanted to be right there with him."

Those last two passes inside to Motley were exactly the plays Drew wanted.

"No question, Mott, front of the rim, we’re all taking that," Drew said. "That one play didn’t cost us the game. People are going to miss shots, and we have to control what we can control. That’s the offensive rebounding, it’s our turnovers, which again was a problem. We’re going to focus on those things."

The Bears shot just 38.5 percent and committed 16 turnovers. Motley was the only double figure scorer for the Bears, but he hit just six of 17 shots while grabbing 14 rebounds.

Kansas State had a much more balanced attack as guard Kamau Stokes hit 15 points, forward Dean Wade 12 and guard Wesley Iwundu 10. Johnson also delivered a solid game with nine points and six boards while leading the defense with three blocks as the Wildcats avenged a 77-68 loss to the Bears on Jan. 14 in Manhattan.

Neither team hit its free throws as Baylor was seven for 13 while Kansas State was four of 12.

The Bears seemed to still be reeling from their 73-68 loss to Kansas on Wednesday in Lawrence, and they came out playing uninspired against the Wildcats.

"Definitely we weren’t as energized as we’ve been to start games," Drew said. "So coaches will figure out what we could have done better and try to make sure we could have done something else. Obviously, we’ll change up whatever wasn’t working."

After the Bears grabbed on early 8-6 lead on Manu Lecomte’s 3-pointer, the Wildcats answered with six straight points as Wade hit an outside shot, Stokes stole the ball and scored and Iwundu scored on a layup.

Kansas State led the rest of the game and opened up a 37-22 lead with a 15-0 run late in the first half. The Bears repeatedly committed turnovers during the stretch while Stokes nailed a pair of 3-pointers and Iwundu also went deep for a trey.

Trailing 46-28 with 13:36 remaining, the Bears finally found a spark when King McClure and Nuni Omot buried 3-pointers and Motley got loose for a pair of dunks to cut Kansas State’s lead to 51-42.

"We had more energy," Lecomte said. "We played great defense, our man to man defense was great and our bench stepped it up. King and Jake (Lindsey) did a great job. We got stops and buckets in transition."

The Bears kept pushing as Omot got inside for a basket and Wainright found Lindsey for a layup to cut Kansas State’s lead to 53-51 with 2:14 remaining. With Lecomte’s 3-pointer, the Bears finally cut Kansas State’s lead to 55-54 with 43.5 seconds remaining.

Baylor had a shot to take the lead, but Lecomte shot an off-balance airball with 10 seconds remaining.

Still a game behind Kansas in the Big 12 standings, Drew likes his team’s chances to win the title.

"This one will sting, but we’ll get a day off," Drew said. "We’ve got eight games to go. The Big 12 champion usually loses four games. We still control our own destiny and that’s what everybody wants."
No. 6 Baylor men build big lead, hang on against Oklahoma State, 72-69

Waco-Tribune-Herald
Staff Report
February 9, 2017

STILLWATER, Okla. – Baylor survived Oklahoma State’s vicious full-court press and pulled off a big road win Wednesday night.

With Johnathan Motley collecting 24 points and 11 rebounds, the No. 6 Bears sealed a 72-69 win over the Cowboys to break a two-game losing streak before 8,170 fans at Gallagher-Iba Arena.

The Bears (21-3, 8-3) nearly let a 13-point lead slip away when the Cowboys (15-9, 4-7) scored 12 straight points in the final minutes to pull within one.

Trailing 70-69, Oklahoma State had a chance to take the lead when Baylor’s Jo Lual-Acuil blocked Jawun Evans’ drive to the basket with 26 seconds remaining. Manu Lecomte nailed a pair of free throws to give the Bears a 72-69 lead with 13.7 seconds remaining.

The Cowboys had two chances to tie the game in the final seconds but Evans and Phil Forte missed 3-pointers as the Bears held on for their fourth Big 12 road win and fourth straight win over Oklahoma State.

The Bears remained a game behind Kansas (9-2) in the Big 12 standings as they snapped Oklahoma State’s five-game winning streak.

“Motley was huge and he finished much better with contact,” Drew said. “We took high percentage shots. Take out the last few minutes and we played about as well as you can on the road.”

Jeffrey Carroll led the Cowboys with 20 points while Evans hit 16 and Forte 11.

Oklahoma State tied the game at 34-34 early in the second half before Motley got loose for a dunk and Terry Maston scored inside to give the Bears the lead.

The Bears stretched the lead to 47-38 as Motley converted a three-point play with a slam and a free throw, and then hit Maston inside for a layup. Lecomte later found Lindsey for a fast break layup.

Baylor extended its lead to 57-44 when McClure drained a 3-pointer with nine minutes remaining. With McClure nailing another trey and Lecomte hitting a 3-pointer, the Bears led 70-57 with four minutes remaining.

But when the Cowboys went to their press, the Bears nearly let the game slip away.

Carroll and Evans both scored before Evans’ steal led to Forte’s 3-pointer to cut the lead to 70-64 with two minutes to play. After Carroll’s steal, Cameron McGriff hit a pair of free throws with 1:35 remaining.

Another Evans steal led to a layup as the Cowboys cut Baylor’s lead to 70-69 with a minute remaining.

“We were in control and doing great and then they started trapping us,” Drew said. “We did the worst thing possible and that was live ball turnovers. That got the crowd going and them more hyped. But at least we were able to finish it off.”

After shooting poorly in recent games, the Bears hit 54 percent of their field goals and 10 of 14 free throws. The Bears dominated the boards 36-25.

Motley picked up his 10th double-double of the season as he hit nine of 12 field goals and six of eight free throws. Lecomte finished with 15 points and four assists while Jake Lindsey had a superb all-around game with 10 points, six rebounds and four assists.

Making his second start of the season, King McClure nailed a pair of 3-pointers and scored 10 points. McClure started in place of Al Freeman, who didn’t make the trip due to a violation of team rules.
Baylor surprises walk-on Davis with full scholarship

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
February 11, 2017

The Baylor players reacted like they had just won the Big 12 title.

But what they were really thrilled about was that teammate and former manager Jonathan Davis had been put on scholarship.

During an afternoon chapel service before No. 6 Baylor’s 72-69 win over Oklahoma State on Wednesday in Stillwater, coach Scott Drew had Davis read an article about how good of a teammate superstar Steph Curry was to the rest of the Golden State Warriors.

But as the sophomore got near the end of the story about sacrifice and service, Davis read the surprising words that he would receive a full scholarship.

The reaction of the Baylor players was priceless as they yelled and jumped on Davis, and showed how excited they were that he was put on scholarship for this season. The video of the event has gone viral.

“I was shocked,” Davis said. “I went silent because I couldn’t believe the words I just read. Then my teammates jumped on me. That was awesome. I can’t explain why that is, but we’re a very tight family. Each of us treasures each guy on the team.”

The 6-6 Davis enjoyed a solid career at Argyle High School, making all-state as a senior in 2014-15 when he averaged 15.1 points and 8.1 rebounds.

He got a scholarship offer from Trinity University in San Antonio and received some last-minute interest from Texas State. But by that time, he had already decided to attend Baylor.

“Texas State wanted me and was going to start talking to me about a scholarship, but I didn’t get into details because I was going to Baylor,” Davis said. “I never thought God wanted me somewhere other than Baylor.”

When he arrived on campus, Davis’ main role was as manager of the men’s basketball team. But after he began playing pickup games with the Baylor players, the coaches put him on the team’s roster in November 2015 as the season began.

He spent much of his time last season playing on the scout team during practice last year, but didn’t suit up for games. The Bears were impressed how he stood his ground against bruising forward Rico Gathers, now a tight end for the Dallas Cowboys.

“Rico’s big and doesn’t really care about hitting people,” said Baylor sophomore guard Jake Lindsey. “He hit
No. 6 Baylor men use suffocating defense in 70-52 drubbing of TCU

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
February 12, 2017

After watching its home winning streak crash to an end last weekend, No. 6 Baylor was determined to leave the Ferrell Center in a much better mood against TCU.

Playing its usual suffocating defense and hitting an efficient 53.6 percent from the field, the Bears came out hot and never let up as they romped to a 70-52 win over TCU before 7,906 fans Saturday afternoon.

As the final minutes ticked off, the Baylor student section chanted “We want KU. We want KU.” They’ll get their wish when the Bears face the Jayhawks on Feb. 18 at the Ferrell Center.

The Jayhawks survived an 80-79 win over Texas Tech in Lubbock on Saturday to improve to 10-2 in the Big 12 and remain a game ahead of the Bears (22-3, 9-3). The Bears travel to Lubbock to face Texas Tech on Monday at 6 p.m.

The last time the Bears played at the Ferrell Center, they came out of the gate with little inspiration against Kansas State and dropped a 56-54 decision last Saturday. It was Baylor's first home loss after 13 wins this season.

"Coach (Scott) Drew really emphasized getting off to a good start because last time at home against Kansas State you know what happened there," said Baylor guard King McClure. "This morning we came in at 9 and dressed out and had a full shootaround, and as a result we played with energy and got off to a good start."

In their first meeting against TCU on Jan. 21 in Fort Worth, the Bears needed a strong closing stretch to pull off a 62-53 win. But it was a much different scenario this time as the Bears grabbed a 32-17 halftime lead and never gave the Horned Frogs (17-8, 6-6) a chance to rally as their winning streak ended at three games.

Baylor's first basket and then scoring on a putback. Motley began his brilliant game by slipping inside for Baylor's first home loss after 13 wins this season.

"I look forward to those really key matchups, especially when playing against a really good big guy," Motley said. "It's always fun to have that level of competition."

Manu Lecomte nailed three 3-pointers and scored 17 points while McClure hit five of six shots and scored all of his 13 points in the first half. McClure made his second straight start in place of suspended guard Al Freeman who didn't suit up due to violation of team policy.

"As a kid you grow up wanting to start for a top 10 team and I'm living out my dream and not taking anything for granted," McClure said. "I'm going out there playing hard and helping my team defensively and trying to lead my team to a victory. I was in a zone and Johnathan (Motley) had a few nice passes to me. He told me to keep shooting."

Motley began his brilliant game by slipping inside for Baylor's first basket and then scoring on a putback. McClure followed with three 3-pointers and Ish Wainright rebounded and scored to open up the early 11-point lead.

McClure continued his impressive first half by scoring on a pair of drives. Later in the first half, Lecomte nailed a trey and hit another outside shot before Jake Lindsey finished the half by scoring on a reverse layup to make it 32-17.

"King's been tremendous," Drew said. "He's healthy. He's been injured during the course of this year, and that's affected some of his play. But we have confidence in him. Why we've been successful is because we've had different guys step up and we've got a lot of parts. The good thing is it's very unselfish out there."

The Bears played with the same intensity to open the second half as Lecomte drained a pair of 3-pointers and Motley got inside for a pair of baskets. With Wainright's 3-pointer, the Bears opened up a 49-33 lead and kept playing with emotion throughout the second half to finish off the lopsided win.
Texas Tech upsets No. 4 Baylor men, 84-78

Waco Tribune-Herald
Staff Report
February 13, 2017

LUBBOCK — Baylor had created a history of strong finishes, but Texas Tech took over that role Monday night and beat the nation’s No. 4 team.

The Bears let a nine-point second-half lead slip away as the Red Raiders boosted their NCAA tournament resume with an 84-78 win at United Supermarkets Arena.

The Bears (22-4, 9-4) hoped to go into Saturday’s game against No. 3 Kansas at the Ferrell Center with a lot of momentum, but the Red Raiders (17-9, 5-8) made all the big plays down the stretch. Baylor remained behind the Big 12-leading Jayhawks, who played West Virginia late Monday.

Texas Tech fans stormed the court after the Red Raiders’ big come from behind win. It was a rare poor defensive effort by the Bears, who led the Big 12 in both scoring defense and field goal percentage defense coming into the game.

“We didn’t have a very good defensive effort by anybody in the second half,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew in his postgame radio interview. “We just didn’t guard well. They shot 61 percent from the field and shot 35 free throws in the second half. We’ve got to do a better job adjusting to the officiating.”

Keenan Evans led the Red Raiders with 23 points while Niem Stevenson scored 21 and Justin Gray collected 13 points and 10 rebounds. The Red Raiders shot 51.1 percent for the night and hit 30 of 43 free throws compared to 17 of 25 free throws for the Bears.

The Bears got a big game off the bench from Terry Maston who hit seven of 11 field goals and all eight free throws for a career-high 22 points. But season leading scorer Johnathan Motley scored just 11 points, all in the second half.

“They were doubling Mot really bad, so it opened up things for me,” Maston said. “My guards were getting the ball to me. I was definitely looking for the ball because I was feeling it. I just wish we could have had a better effort on the defensive end and the outcome would have been different.”

With the Bears holding a 59-56 lead, the key moment for the Bears came with 8:28 remaining when point guard Manu Lecomte got his fourth foul and then was nailed with his fifth foul when he was called for a technical. Lecomte had scored 16 points while nailing three 3-pointers.

“That was definitely a big turning point because he’s our floor general and he leads us on the court,” Maston said.

“It wasn’t the end of the world, but we tried to overcome it and we came up short today.”

Aaron Ross nailed a pair of free throws to pull the Red Raiders within one, but Maston answered with a basket for the Bears.

The Red Raiders went on a 14-2 run to open up a 72-63 lead, and the Bears couldn’t recover.

Texas Tech caught a break when Devin Thomas was originally called for charging against Baylor’s Jake Lindsey on a drive to the basket. But the officials reversed the call and awarded Thomas with a basket and Lindsey with a foul. Thomas’ free throw completed the three-point play as the Red Raiders tied the game at 61-61 with 7:04 remaining.

Evans followed with a free throw to give the Red Raiders the lead before Ross drained a 3-pointer and Gray drove for a basket. Ross followed with another drive for a basket.

After Motley scored for the Bears, Stevenson hit a free throw and then drove for a layup to push Texas Tech’s lead to 72-63.

“We made some mental mistakes that we normally don’t make,” Drew said. “Some of it might be the short turnaround because you’re fatigued and you’ve got to be stronger. When you’re not hitting the 3-ball and they’re doubling inside, it makes it tough. You get down nine or 10 points late, it’s tough to come back on the road. We’ll get some rest and hopefully we’ll have a better performance against Kansas.”

BEAR FACTS — Baylor guard Manu Lecomte was named Big 12 newcomer of the week for the third time, tying the school record. Lecomte averaged 16 points and three assists in Baylor’s wins over Oklahoma State and TCU last week.
Scott Drew had to clean up after one Baylor scandal, now he's doing it again

Football program's sins cast a pall over Baylor athletics, but basketball keeps on winning

CBSSports.com
By: Bill Reiter
February 16, 2017

WACO, Texas -- On campus, from the Ferrell Center to those on the periphery of the basketball program, the hushed tones and exchanged looks told the story. The men's basketball team, a stunning success story and legit March Madness contender, still couldn't escape the kind of scandal its head coach had saved it from 14 years ago.

Now, yet again, it was fallout from the Art Briles saga.

But when Scott Drew first arrived in this small, religious Texas city high on pride but low on basketball tradition, the men's team faced a much deeper and more devastating moral reckoning than poor on-court play. Player Patrick Dennehy had been murdered by one of his teammates, a horror that turned into a full-blown scandal involving drug use, NCAA violations and the kind of conduct by then-coach David Bliss that would be abhorrent anywhere, but particularly at Baylor, where faith affects everything.

Drew stepped into this quagmire and pulled off nothing short of a miracle, on and off the court. Since his arrival, Baylor has had nine 20-win seasons, made two Elite Eight appearances, won the NIT and earned six NCAA Tournament appearances. As the No. 4 team in the country heading into Saturday's showdown with No. 3 Kansas, the program has solidified itself as a Big 12 power.

It is also a different culture, the basketball program, where players return each year from NBA careers and other post-graduation endeavors to help raise up the next generation of Baylor Bears. A place that could not win basketball games, and that was an embarrassment to Waco, now wins routinely and has become one of Baylor athletics' saving graces.

"It would've taken John Wooden a while to right that ship," Kansas coach Bill Self told me this week.

So why bring this up at all? Why, with Baylor poised to again make another deep run come March, dredge up the old, ugly stuff here in Waco when my conversation with Drew could exclusively focus on basketball and what he's built?

Because the scandals for Baylor, and therefore unfairly but in a very real way also for Drew, have not abated with his success. The sexual assault scandal under former football coach Art Briles has again turned Baylor into a place where the worst side of college athletics were on gaudy, ugly display.

The judgment on that horror should have been swift and resolute, and in the end, at least, punishment has arrived. But it's also true that the football program's sexual abuse scandal has painted an entire campus and its other athletic programs with the same brush. Drew must now deal with rival recruiters eager to point out to parents what happened in Waco, and why even basketball would best be avoided. Reporters — including me — will and should ask Drew about it.

As with Penn State and the Sandusky nightmare, such awful things and their fallout are not contained to the guilty. The fallout is far-reaching and, at times, unfair.

So it was for Drew the week I arrived. The Big 12 had just announced it would withhold potentially millions of dollars from Baylor until the conference is convinced Baylor has adequately implemented the proper reforms following the sexual assault scandal.

So Drew, who I've known and liked for years, entered his own practice gym for a basketball conversation surely aware I would ask about the football scandal as well. Which I did.

"Well, I think what we've done is try to control what we can control," he said. "And what that means is each and every day we want to continue to get better as a team. We want to have a chance to be successful at the end of the year and reach our goals and dreams. And we've let everything we can't control stay out of the picture."

He acknowledged the football scandal has an effect, including on recruiting: “And that's where when recruits would ask about this it gives us an opportunity to talk about the changes and reforms, additions, what we've done at our university to make it better again with the goal to make it the safest university in the country,” Drew said.

It was a good, fair answer. But underneath it is the paradox of the situation for both Baylor and Drew: There is no denying that something rotten at Baylor, for whatever reason, has led to two of the worst and most disheartening scandals big-time college athletics has seen. Yet at the same time both scandals -- the one Drew inherited, and the one currently tarnishing his school's other major program -- are reminders that Drew has pulled off one of the most impressive success stories in sports.

He's winning despite all these obstacles, on and off the court.

I can remember, when Drew first started to have success, how many other college coaches did not like the man. It was weird, and I thought unfair. Drew is a really nice guy, funny and charming without having that overriding factor some big-time college basketball coaches have. There's an authenticity in its place.
Scott Drew had to clean up after one Baylor scandal, now he's doing it again

Football program's sins cast a pall over Baylor athletics, but basketball keeps on winning

Back then, I asked a Big 12 coach if Scott was a bad guy, if I was missing something -- I wanted some context in what is a pretty collegial fraternity of college coaches. And his answer was interesting: That Drew was indeed good people, and that his early success, at a program where no one expected anything, meant that coaches whose teams he beat early on could be fired for that loss.

Drew started to win games, and athletic directors who hadn't caught onto what was emerging in Waco held their own coaches accountable.

That'll make you unpopular. And that is also a mark of real success: Drew took a joke of a program that was in utter disarray and turned it around so completely people who should have known better still thought losing to Baylor said more about their own coaches' competence than Drew's emerging excellence. They just couldn't get their minds around Baylor basketball being something to fear, or respect.

"What I like the most in that is when we beat a team now someone's not being fired, because of it because it shows you that people respect our program and they know that we are one of the best in the country," Drew said. "That's 100 percent accurate there was a year where four or five coaches lost their job after losing to us. You feel bad because you know your team's good and you know you're getting better, and it's unfair for them because that's the parody in college basketball."

This is the crux of Drew's career at Baylor, a place he has pulled off one of the most impressive turnarounds in college basketball history, and also a job that includes off-court obstacles that have nothing to do with him.

So on Saturday, when Baylor hosts Kansas, enjoy the game. And don't let Baylor football off the hook for what happened under its watch. But also take in the Bears basketball team, and its coach, as a reminder of what a remarkable accomplishment that basketball program has become.

Sometimes the best of what we can be in sports exists right next to the worst.
No. 4 Baylor basketball loses hard-fought battle to No. 3 Kansas, 67-65

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
February 18, 2017

Go ahead and crown Kansas the Big 12 champion for the 13th straight year. It’s academic now.

With a chance to pull within one game of the Big 12 lead, No. 4 Baylor watched a six-point lead slip away in the final three minutes as No. 3 Kansas walked out of a sold-out Ferrell Center with a 67-65 win on Saturday afternoon.

Following their second win over the Bears this season, the Jayhawks (24-3, 12-2) took a three-game lead in the Big 12 race with four left to play. The Bears (22-5, 9-5) dropped their second straight game this week following an 84-78 loss to Texas Tech on Monday in Lubbock.

Now Baylor coach Scott Drew is setting new goals.

“We all want a conference championship, but I think everybody on our team definitely would rather have an NCAA Final Four or championship more,” Drew said. “So that’s what we’ve got to gear for and get ready for and look forward to that opportunity.”

The Bears grabbed a 65-59 lead when King McClure nailed a pair of free throws with 3:34 remaining. But with 10,021 fans raising the decibel level at the Ferrell Center, it all went downhill for the Bears from that point.

Lecomte finished with 16 points while Lual-Acuil scored 11 points but picked up just two rebounds. Devonte Graham stole Johnathan Motley’s pass and hit a pair of free throws after Manu Lecomte’s foul to tie the game with 2:16 remaining.

Mason led the Jayhawks with 23 points and eight assists while Jackson finished with 16 points and four blocked shots. Like Kansas’ 73-68 win over the Bears on Feb. 1 in Lawrence, the Jayhawks held a big advantage at the free throw line. Kansas hit 16 of 20 compared to Baylor’s nine of 11.

“They do an unbelievable job in drawing contact,” Drew said. “We worked on it all week, and we’ll keep working on it. Hopefully that will help us when we get in the NCAA tournament, where we keep getting better at getting to the free throw line by drawing contact. That will be a point of emphasis for us.”

Motley led the Bears with 19 points and nine rebounds but hit just eight of 21 shots and committed six turnovers. Lecomte finished with 16 points while Lual-Acuil scored 11 points but picked up just two rebounds.

“It definitely hurts,” said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey. “As Coach Drew said, it comes down to execution in late-game situations. They did a better job of that. Kansas is a traditionally good defensive team, but I think we got some looks we wanted.”

The Bears built a 35-23 lead late in the first half before Mason and Jackson nailed 3-pointers to make the halftime score 35-29.

Kansas hit four of its first five shots in the second half to cut Baylor’s lead to 41-38 and pulled into a 47-47 tie when Lagerald Vick scored on a putback with 11:23 remaining. The Jayhawks completed an 11-0 run when Svi Mykhailiuk nailed a 3-pointer with 10:15 to play.

But the Bears regained their edge with a 9-0 run that was highlighted by Ish Wainright’s 3-pointer and Lecomte’s drive for a basket. Lual-Acuil gave the Bears a 56-52 lead with a pair of free throws with 6:59 remaining.

The Bears continued to look like they would break their losing streak against the Jayhawks but couldn’t close it out.

“I thought our guys really competed, put ourselves in position to win, and we fully expected to win,” Drew said. “They made one more play than us, that’s Big 12 basketball. I think right now, we’re pretty upset, as you would imagine. The good thing is tomorrow is a new day, a new opportunity.”
No. 9 Baylor men's basketball plays sloppy, holds on against lowly Oklahoma, 60-54

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
February 21, 2017

If Baylor is going to make a deep March Madness run, it can’t afford to hit a dead zone like it did against last-place Oklahoma.

The No. 9 Bears blew out to a 15-point lead early in the second half and then slipped into a major lull as they watched their lead shrink to two with nine minutes remaining.

With Manu Lecomte burying a pair of key 3-pointers, the Bears survived a 60-54 win before 6,135 fans Tuesday night at the Ferrell Center.

But the Bears aren’t going to scare anybody in the NCAA tournament with another 24-point second half. Coming off Saturday’s 67-65 loss to No. 3 Kansas, Baylor didn’t play with the same intensity against the Sooners (9-18, 3-12).

“We played pretty well the last game,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “This game, I thought we were really good defensively and weren’t very good offensively. Normally, if you look at most Big 12 games, on the short turnaround game, people don’t shoot it as well. I know I’m pleased to hold them to 32 percent. You don’t hold many Big 12 teams to 32 percent and 54 points.”

The win allowed the Bears (23-5, 10-5) to break a two-game losing streak and move into a second-place tie with West Virginia and Iowa State behind Kansas in the Big 12 standings. The Bears face Iowa State on Saturday in Ames before hosting West Virginia on Monday.

Baylor’s Johnathan Motley enjoyed a big night with 21 points, 16 rebounds, five assists and two blocks. Jo Lual-Acuil also dominated in the paint with 11 points, nine rebounds and a career-high tying seven blocked shots. With Ish Wainright pulling down nine rebounds, the Bears controlled the boards, 43-34.

But the Bears shot just 38.2 percent overall while hitting six of 23 3-pointers. Drew didn’t want to see his team settle for so many 3-pointers but the Sooners were packing defenders inside to guard Motley and Lual-Acuil.

“They’re taking away the inside, so they’re giving you the 3’s,” Drew said. “So it’s kind of like if you’re putting eight people in the box, at some point you’ve got to throw it. You don’t have to tell guys to throw it, because they kind of like taking 3’s anyway. We tried to make sure that we don’t just fall in love with it. It’s hard to tell someone not to shoot when they’re wide open.”

The Bears were banged up coming into the game as Wainright and Lecomte missed practices with ankle injuries and Lual-Acuil with a calf injury.

“Jo was the one that (Baylor trainer David Chandler) was most concerned with that wouldn’t be able to play tonight,” Drew said. “Shoot, he almost had a triple-double. So I told him re-injure it.”

Baylor opened the Big 12 with a 76-50 blowout of the Sooners on Dec. 30 in Norman, and it looked like the rematch was headed the same way as the Bears opened up a 41-26 lead early in the second half.

But Baylor’s offense stagnated and Oklahoma kept slicing into the lead. With Dante Buford’s hook shot, the Sooners cut Baylor’s lead to 49-47 with 9:21 remaining.

Oklahoma had a chance to tie the game but Lual Acuil blocked Jamuni McNeace’s shot. Then Lecomte drained a pair of 3-pointers to stretch Baylor’s lead to 55-47 with six minutes remaining.

“That was huge,” Motley said. “We know Manu is a big shot maker. When we need a big shot out of him, we know Manu is going to take it and make it. We have full confidence in him that he’s going to come through.”

The Sooners cut Baylor’s lead to 55-50 when Christian James drove inside for a basket. But Lual-Acuil stopped another Oklahoms scoring opportunity when he blocked Darrion Strong-Moore’s shot.

“In the scouting report coaches do a good job of showing us what kind of tendencies the players have,” Lual-Acuil said. “We just dial in on film and know before we go out there what they’re going to do. It’s just about reading and cutting it off as quick as possible and reacting to it.”

Lecomte, who finished with 11 points and six assists, hit a pair of free throws to push Baylor’s lead to 57-50 with 59 seconds remaining. Al Freeman followed with a free throw to give the Bears a 58-52 lead with 30 seconds to play.

Freeman scored six points in 21 minutes in his first action since Feb. 4. He was suspended for three games for violation of team policy and Drew chose not to play him against Kansas after he returned to the team.

“I thought Al was really good defensively, really good,” Drew said. “He played within himself, was a good teammate, and he’s done a great job since he’s been back, so he deserved the opportunity.”
Iowa State upends No. 9 Baylor 72-69

Associated Press
February 25, 2017

AMES, Iowa (AP) — Iowa State star Deonte Burton often takes shots that his coaches wish he wouldn’t.

With a potential win over a top 10 opponent slipping away, Burton banked in the biggest basket of his career.

Burton scored 22 points, including a crucial 3 off the glass with just over a minute left, and Iowa State beat No. 9 Baylor 72-69 on Saturday for its fifth straight win.

"I don't know if he called glass on that one. But it was definitely the biggest play of the game," Baylor coach Scott Drew said.

Monte Morris had 17 points with seven assists for the Cyclones (19-9, 11-5 Big 12), who have their longest winning streak in league play since a seven-game stretch in 2005.

It was a back-and-forth matchup for over 30 minutes, with nine lead changes and 13 ties. But consecutive 3s from Donovan Jackson and Morris gave Iowa State a 56-51 lead with 6:50 left.

Johnathan Motley made it 62-61 on a dunk with 1:48 to go. But with the shot clock about to expire, Burton knocked down that 3 from the top of the key to help end Baylor’s five-game winning streak against Iowa State.

"The bank was open," Burton said. "It was just the heat of the moment. I got blessed."

Baylor, which followed with a turnover forced by Iowa State pressure, eventually pulled within three with 4.3 seconds left before King McLure's contested 3 at the buzzer failed to find the rim.

Motley had 27 points and 11 rebounds for Baylor (23-6, 10-6), which dominated the Cyclones in second-chance points 26-2 and on the boards 37-17. But Iowa State shot 58 percent from the field, was 8 of 15 on 3s and 12 of 15 from the line.

"This team is peaking," Morris said. "We trust in each other ... (and) winning five games in a row in this league isn't easy if you don't trust each other."

BIG PICTURE

Baylor: The Bears missed a big chance to bolster their NCAA Tournament resume with a win in Ames. But a home win over West Virginia on Monday night would help Baylor redeem itself.

Iowa State: The Cyclones are getting hot at the right time. Given that Iowa State is also a guard-oriented team, it's also fair to think that the Cyclones might be able to do some damage in March. The win also put Iowa State into a tie for second with the Mountaineers in the Big 12.

POLL IMPLICATIONS

Losing in Ames is nothing to be ashamed of, considering that the Cyclones have beaten four of their last six top-10 opponents at home. But Iowa State might find itself in next week's Top 25 after an extended absence.

NOT SO YOUNG ANYMORE

When Iowa State first played Baylor, freshman center Solomon Young played just 12 minutes in a 73-71 loss against the then top-ranked Bears. But Young's emergence has been crucial for the undersized Cyclones. Young had 11 points on 4-of-4 shooting with two blocks. But Young's biggest contribution was in giving Iowa State a presence in the post defensively.

"He stepped up," Motley said of Young.

THE NUMBERS

Baylor's Al Freeman had 17 points — and was 5 of 5 from 3-point range. But the Bears were just 3 of 5 from the line and they committed 11 turnovers while forcing just five from Iowa State. "For some reason, we're able to keep people off the line," Iowa State coach Steve Prohm said. ... Manu Lecomte was 0 for 3 and was held scoreless for Baylor. ... Iowa State has beaten 24 ranked teams in the past four seasons, second nationally to Oklahoma.

HE SAID IT

"I couldn't believe it," Motley said of Burton's last 3.

UP NEXT

Baylor hosts No. 12 West Virginia on Monday.

Iowa State hosts Oklahoma State on Tuesday, the final game for Burton, Morris, Naz Mitrou-Long and Matt Thomas at Hilton Coliseum. "I'm glad they're seniors," Drew joked.
Ish Wainright is the most respected player on the Baylor squad, an unselfish senior who cares a lot more about winning than his own stats.

The No. 11 Bears wanted more than anything to send him out with a win in his last game at the Ferrell Center. Thanks to an inspired closing stretch, they gave Wainright a great going-away present.

Overcoming an eight-point second-half deficit, the Bears repeatedly broke No. 10 West Virginia’s vaunted press in the final eight minutes to finish off a 71-62 win before 8,203 fans Monday night.

Wainright got emotional when he watched a video tribute for him following the game.

“Told my parents I wouldn’t cry out there, but I cried when I watched the video,” Wainright said. “This was extremely special. My last one, a great ride four years in the making. It’s always fun to win. This win gave us confidence and motivation.”

It was a much needed win for the Bears (24-6, 11-6) after losing three of their last four games. Heading into the final regular season game Saturday at Texas, the Bears are tied for third in the Big 12 with West Virginia (23-7, 11-6), a half-game behind Iowa State. The Cyclones face Oklahoma State on Tuesday night.

“It’s been a tough February, and that’s the Big 12,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “The big thing is we’ve got to get healthy. They beat us to death on the glass,” said West Virginia coach Bob Huggins. “We’ve had a lot of days where we didn’t shoot it very well, but we found ways to win because we rebounded the ball. We just didn’t rebound the ball and they did a great job.”

Trailing 49-41 midway through the second half, the Bears had looked one dimensional with Motley scoring most of the points. But that changed the rest of the way as everybody got involved as Baylor outscored the Mountaineers, 30-13.

Motley started the comeback by slicing inside for a slam, drawing a foul and hitting the free throw. Lual-Acuil scored on a putback before Motley drove inside for a basket and then hit two free throws to give the Bears a 50-49 edge with 6:28 remaining.

After scoring just four first-half points, Motley exploded for 19 points in the second half.

“I was just being aggressive,” Motley said. “I was attacking more and making quicker moves. The coaches told me I had to make those quicker moves and once I got to the free throw line it all started coming together.”

West Virginia took its last lead when Jevon Carter hit a short jumper, but Lual-Acuil answered with a hook shot to give the Bears the lead. Motley stole the ball and passed to Wainright. With Freeman’s 3-pointer, Baylor stretched its lead to 57-51 with 4:09 remaining.

Baylor continued its impressive play as Motley hit a pair of free throws, Freeman drilled a trey and Lindsey nailed a pair of free throws to stretch the lead to 64-53. Carter, who scored 18 points, drained a 3-pointer for the Mountaineers.

Lindsey continued to be a force as he hit a drive as he was falling down followed by a free throw. Baylor finished off the win with free throws by Freeman and Motley.
Wainright uses memory of grandfather as he leads No. 9 Bears

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
March 8, 2017

The new jersey meant everything to Ish Wainright.

Wearing the King-Wainright jersey for the first time when Baylor played Kansas at Allen Fieldhouse on Feb. 1, Wainright felt like he was carrying a little piece of history with him on to the court.

Wainright’s grandfather, Maurice King, was the first black starter for the Jayhawks basketball team in the 1954 season.

“Wanted to wear the King-Wainright jersey to show respect to my grandfather and the King family,” Wainright said. “Since I wasn’t actually able to visit with him, I feel like he’s out there with me.”

Wainright never met his grandfather before he died in 2007. But he always wondered if Maurice King was his grandfather, and he underwent DNA testing with his biological father Maurice King III to prove it.

“W was going through my dad’s house just being nosy looking at stuff when I saw an obituary on Maurice King,” Wainright said. “He looked just like me. It freaked me out a little bit. So I wasn’t going to leave this world until I found out.”

He was excited when he learned that King was a groundbreaking African American basketball player in the 1950s who helped pave the way for all-time great Wilt Chamberlain to play for the Jayhawks during the same era. King was a sixth-round pick by the Boston Celtics in 1957 but only played briefly in the NBA after returning from a stint in the Army in 1959.

“Being part of history is amazing, and you can’t go wrong with making history,” Wainright said.

Since that game against Kansas in February, Wainright has continued to wear his new jersey bearing his grandfather’s name. Wainright feels like he’s carrying on his grandfather’s legacy and wants to do his best to uphold it.

On a Baylor squad with All-American forward Johnathan Motley, one of the nation’s best shot blockers in Jo Lual-Acuil and an outstanding point guard in Manu Lecomte, there isn’t a more respected player than Wainright.

Wainright is the Bears’ only senior and rarely leads them in scoring. But he provides exactly what the Bears need night after night whether it’s the crucial pass, a big basket, a rebound in traffic or a game-clinching defensive stop. He’s the kind of player that coaches often refer to as a “glue guy.”

“Without glue everything falls apart,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “Ish is extremely important whether he’s on the bench or on the court. He’s always been a great teammate, a great leader and is playing his best basketball. He does whatever it takes for the team to win.”

Wainright is a big reason the Bears are No. 9 in the country with a 25-6 record heading into Thursday’s Big 12 tournament opener against Kansas State at the Sprint Center in Kansas City.

The Big 12 tournament means a lot to Wainright, not only because it will be his last but because he’s from Kansas City. He was a Kansas Jayhawks fan growing up and attended the tournament or games in Lawrence whenever he could.

“I’m going to try not to look at it as being my last time there because I might get a little bit emotional,” Wainright said. “But I promise to God that I’m going to give it my all every single minute I’m out there on the court. We have one goal and that’s to win the tournament championship.”

Wainright played his sophomore year at Raytown South High School in the Kansas City area before playing his final two years at Montrose Christian School in Rockville, Md. He was a top 100 national recruit who originally committed to Missouri before choosing Baylor over such schools as Ohio State and Texas.

While Wainright is a key part of Baylor’s success now, it certainly didn’t start out that way after he arrived on campus in 2013.

Wainright immediately cracked Baylor’s starting lineup as a freshman but was replaced by Royce O’Neale after seven games. He finished the season averaging just 1.9 points and 1.5 rebounds in nine minutes per game for Baylor’s Sweet 16 team.

His production didn’t get much better as a sophomore when he averaged 1.4 points and 1.7 rebounds in 9.6 minutes per game. Those weren’t the type of numbers people expected from a top 100 national recruit but Wainright didn’t sink into deep depression or consider transferring.

Wainright chalked up his first two years as a learning experience and was willing to do whatever it took to play a bigger role as a junior and senior.

“Life is about challenges and my dad said don’t run from them because God put you here for a reason,” Wainright
Wainright uses memory of grandfather as he leads No. 9 Bears

said. “That’s how I was raised, so I don’t run from difficult times. I learned from Royce O’Neale, I learned from Taurean Prince and even learned from Ekpe Udoh when he comes down. My body was ready but my mind wasn’t for college. I feel comfortable saying that.”

Coming back as a junior at a leaner 235 pounds on his 6-5 frame, Wainright moved into the starting lineup for Baylor. He showed the characteristics that have made him a vital part of the program as he averaged 5.9 points, 4.3 rebounds, 2.6 assists and shot 40.6 percent from 3-point range for a Baylor squad that reached the NCAA tournament for the third straight year.

“Ish is a stat sheet stuffer,” Drew said. “He does whatever it takes for the team to win. He’s somebody physically who gives you some size and strength to rebound in traffic and he has great passing ability that allows you to spread out the defense. Last year his improvement in his shot was important in spacing the floor and allowing him to drive.”

Wainright has put up similar numbers as a senior by averaging 5.5 points, 5.1 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game. But he leads the team with 56 steals and was excited when he learned he was named to the Big 12’s all-defensive team.

Baylor has been one of the nation’s best defensive teams all season, and Wainright’s intensity and savvy are big reasons why.

“I pride myself on defense, I love defense,” Wainright said. “That’s what drives me if I can come down and lock up the best player on the opposing team. I like challenges. In practice, I’ll ask the coaches if I can guard Motley for a few plays to get in his head a little bit.”

Scoring has never been a priority for Wainright, and it’s been that way since he was a kid.

“When I was 8 or 9 years old, I was playing with my older brother and there were about five seconds left in the game,” Wainright said. “The play was drawn up for my older brother to shoot the ball in the corner. But the play broke down and I took the shot and airballed it. The other guys on the team chased me around the gym and beat me up. It was a traumatic experience. Ever since then I’ve been a pass-first person.”

Wainright has such a presence on the Baylor squad that his teammates will stop and listen any time he has something to say whether it’s words of encouragement or a scolding.

“He’s not afraid to confront people, and as a leader that’s something you have to be willing to do,” said Baylor sophomore guard Jake Lindsey. “He even wasn’t afraid to confront Rico (Gathers). I know a lot of people wouldn’t be willing to do that. But if he sees someone who needs a positive word or a pick me up he’s right there. He does a great job balancing that.”

But Wainright isn’t just a vocal leader, he sets an example that the other Baylor players follow whether it’s practice or a game.

“There have been a lot of great words spoken about Ish,” Lindsey said. “But when your leader is one of your hardest workers and he’s a good person, it kind of sets the tone for everything that goes on top to bottom.”

Wainright also has the respect of Big 12 coaches because they see how he’s so unselfish and team driven. They also know how he persevered for two years before stepping into a bigger role, and that’s become rare in an era when college players often seek instant gratification.

“When I arrived we tried to recruit him too late to get involved,” said Kansas State coach Bruce Weber. “He was a highly touted young man, and you’ve got to give him credit for his character and attitude. When players don’t have instant success, they transfer. I admire how he’s stayed the course. Ish Wainright does everything for them. You can tell he’s the leader on the court. When things go bad, he grabs them as a group and helps them do the things they need to be successful.”

Wainright loves playing with this group of players and relishes the bond they’ve created. He hopes he can lead the Bears to the Final Four and carry on the family basketball legacy that began with Maurice King back in the 1950s.

“We have the team, the chemistry, the bond, we’ve got the coaching staff and we’ve got the fans,” Wainright said. “It’s not just about us winning. If we win it, it’s for Baylor Nation and that’s exciting.”
Motley comes up big as Bears stampede Longhorns, 75-64

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
March 4, 2017

AUSTIN — Baylor unveiled a perfect blueprint to make a deep NCAA tournament run in Saturday’s 75-64 win over Texas.

Johnathan Motley came up big inside with 17 points and 17 rebounds, the No. 11 Bears nailed nine of 20 3-pointers, and the defense never allowed the Longhorns to get into a groove in the regular season finale at the Erwin Center.

Of course, every team the Bears (25-6, 12-6) will play in the NCAA tournament will be better than the last-place Longhorns (10-21, 4-14). But Baylor could beat a lot of teams with that kind of versatility.

The Bears built a 17-point second-half lead and cruised to the win as they matched their most Big 12 wins in school history.

“Whenever you play on the road in the Big 12, it’s tough to begin with,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “And then when you add Senior Night, you know that those games are really hard to win. I’m just really proud of the guys’ effort and intensity. That’s the strength of our team is chemistry, leadership and depth.”

Before heading to the NCAA tournament, the Bears will play in the Big 12 tournament as the No. 3 seed beginning Thursday at 8 p.m. against No. 6 Kansas State in Kansas City. No. 10 Texas has a seven-game losing streak going into Wednesday’s game against No. 7 Texas Tech in the opening round.

The Bears finished the regular season in a three-way tie for second place with West Virginia and Iowa State. Now Drew and his players want to become the first team in school history to win the Big 12 tournament.

“We’re all about making history and no other Baylor team has cut down nets there, and that’s our goal,” Motley said. “I think we’re on the right track to do that. We have a lot of confidence going into the Big 12 tournament.”

For the second straight game, Baylor played without point guard Manu Lecomte who has a sprained ankle. Forward Terry Maston also didn’t play due to a one-game suspension for violation of team policy.

Drew hopes Lecomte will be ready for the Big 12 tournament, but he definitely wants to make sure he’s ready for the NCAA tournament.

“He’s close right now, and it was a game-time decision,” Drew said. “The big thing is with the Big 12 tournament coming up, the NCAA tournament coming up, you don’t want a player going in hobbled or limited. We brought him back against Iowa State, and he re-injured it, so we were a little more cautious today.”

While Motley didn’t match the career-high 32 points and 20 rebounds that he had in Baylor’s 74-64 win over Texas on Jan. 17 at the Ferrell Center, he was still highly productive on both ends of the court. He helped the Bears dominate the boards, 44-28.

With Lecomte out, Baylor’s guards contributed in a lot of ways. Jake Lindsey came through with one of his best all-around games by hitting six of seven shots for a career-high 16 points while dishing out four assists with only one turnover.

King McClure scored 12 points while Wendell Mitchell came off the bench to hit three 3-pointers in the first half.

“I’ve been on the Chuck Mitchell bandwagon a long time,” Lindsey said. “I tell a lot of people in the next couple of years he can be our best player, a guy who can play in the NBA. He’s that kind of talented.”

The Bears grabbed a 17-14 lead with Mitchell’s 3-pointer with 11:42 left in the first half and never looked back.

Mitchell came back with his second 3-pointer before Lindsey and Ish Wainright went deep for baskets. McClure scored three times on layups and Nuni Omot and Mitchell drained 3-pointers to stretch Baylor’s lead to 40-29 at halftime.

“When you take good looks it’s about making open shots,” Lindsey said. “Nine for 20 (3-pointers), you’d obviously take that most days. We focus on the type of attempts we’re taking. You have to take good shots. If someone leaves you open, you shoot. You have to play confidently out there. That’s our motto.”

Jarrett Allen, who led the Longhorns with 20 points and nine rebounds, scored a pair of baskets early in the second half to cut Baylor’s lead to 40-35.

But then Motley began to establish his dominance again by scoring twice in the paint and hitting a free throw. Two more Motley baskets pushed Baylor’s lead to 52-41 with 12:37 remaining.

The Bears never let up as Lindsey nailed his second 3-pointer and scored on a layup to extend the lead to 67-50 with 4:50 remaining.

Drew was proud of how his team performed with a short-handed roster.

“We were concerned,” Drew said. “But it was a great opportunity for guys to step up. And that’s what we did. Earlier in the year, when we were able to play guys like (Mitchell) minutes, I think that’s benefited us now, because the last two games we wouldn’t have won without him. He’s showing more confidence and more stability out there.”
KANSAS CITY – Kansas State is a desperate team playing for an NCAA tournament berth that could save coach Bruce Weber's job.

That's precisely the kind of team No. 9 Baylor didn't want to see in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 tournament.

With Barry Brown scoring 21 points and D.J. Johnson hitting 13, sixth-seeded Kansas State pulled off the 70-64 upset over the third-seeded Bears on Thursday night at the Sprint Center.

"I knew they were going to come out with a lot of intensity because this was a big game for them as far as the NCAA tournament," said Baylor coach Scott Drew. "I thought they answered the bell and they won this game. It didn't matter what anyone was seeded. They made the plays. They earned it."

The Wildcats (20-12) advanced to the semifinals against No. 2 West Virginia, a 63-53 winner over Texas in the quarterfinals Thursday night. Meanwhile, the Bears (25-7) will find out Sunday if a one-and-done performance in the Big 12 tournament will hurt their seeding when the NCAA tournament bids are handed out.

Baylor got some inspiration from point guard Manu Lecomte who didn't start but hit five of seven shots and scored 13 points in his first appearance since Feb. 25 against Iowa State after missing the last two games with a sprained ankle.

But he believes the Bears will have to play much better in the NCAA tournament to have a shot at advancing.

"We just need to learn from this game," Lecomte said. "We've just got to go home and watch film and get better as a team. We honestly don't care about what seed we're going to get. If you play like that, it won't matter. We've just got to get better. And whoever we play, we've got to bring our 'A' game."

After going into halftime tied 25-25, the Wildcats shot 65 percent in the second half and got big performances from Brown and Johnson.

The Wildcats took command of the game with a 12-4 run to open up a 45-37 lead with 8:57 remaining.

With the game tied 33-33, Johnathan Motley's basket was nullified when the replays showed he shot the ball after the 30-second shot clock expired.

Kamau Stokes then found Isaiah Maurice for a dunk and Stokes followed by scoring on a drive. With Brown's 3-pointer, the Wildcats grabbed a 40-33 lead with 11:55 remaining.

Al Freeman scored on a layup and Nuni Omot hit a pair of free throws for the Bears. But Brown struck again for the Wildcats as he nailed a 3-pointer from the left corner, drew a foul from Omot and hit the free throw for a four-point play to give Kansas State a 44-37 lead with 9:34 remaining.

"Our offense wasn't the problem in the second half," said Baylor guard Jake Lindsey, who dished out 11 assists. "They blasted us on defense. I was not good enough. We fell for pump fakes on guys who were drivers. We didn't guard the ball. We didn't fight for post position."

Lecomte who hit a pair of 3-pointers and scored another basket to cut Kansas State's lead to 51-46. Drew said Lecomte tweaked his ankle and didn't want to risk playing him in the final few minutes.

"He was playing well and stepped on someone's foot or stubbed it a little bit," Drew said. "We saw him start to limp and I know he wanted to stay in, but we obviously need him healthy for next week."

The Wildcats scored six straight points as Brown hit a pair of free throws, Wesley Iwundu scored on a layup and Johnson got inside for a basket to push Kansas State's lead to 57-46 with 4:09 remaining.

Pressing and trapping, the Bears made a late push as Motley scored inside twice and Freeman got loose for a layup to cut Kansas State's lead to 62-57 with a minute remaining.

But Johnson nailed a pair of free throws with 59 seconds remaining. Freeman hit a 3-pointer to cut the lead to 64-60 before the Wildcats closed out the game with free throws.

Freeman led the Bears with 16 points while Motley matched Lecomte with 13 points. But the Bears had trouble scoring after grabbing offensive rebounds.

"It was very frustrating because we usually do a good job of capitalizing on offensive rebounds," Motley said. "But credit to Kansas State because they did an awesome job in the paint."

Baylor's defense allowed the Wildcats to hit a 52.3 overall field goal percentage while nailing six of 14 3-pointers and 18 of 27 free throws.

Baylor's offense couldn't get into a solid groove as it made nine turnovers in the first half and went into halftime with a 25-25 tie.

Motley got inside twice for early baskets and Lindsey found a clear lane to the basket for a layup.

After missing the last two games with a sprained ankle, Lecomte came into the game with 15:53 left in the first half and quickly drained a 3-pointer to give the Bears a 13-8 lead.

But Isaiah Maurice got inside three straight times for baskets as the Wildcats took as 14-13 lead.

Baylor's Jo Lual-Acuil was then called for a technical after blocking Maurice's shot and Stokes hit both free throws.

The Bears regained the lead when Freeman buried a trey with 6:10 left in the first half, but the Wildcats took it back when Brown hit a 3-pointer for a 21-20 edge.

Lindsey once again gave Baylor a lift with a 3-pointer with a minute remaining before Iwundu scored on a drive to the baskets to make it 25-25 at halftime.
Double-shocked Baylor not looking past No. 14 seed in NCAA

Associated Press
March 14, 2017

WACO, Texas (AP) — As Baylor players flipped tires during a workout on the day the Bears got a No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament, their strength and conditioning coach delivered a message.

"All Coach Charlie (Melton) was yelling at us was, "We're not going to get bounced in the first round!"" said Ishmail Wainright, Baylor's lone senior. "I'm pretty sure we're motivated."

While the Bears have made the Elite Eight twice under coach Scott Drew, their most recent March memories are true madness — getting upset by double-digits seeds each of the last two years.

First came R.J. Hunter's 3-pointer for 14th-seeded Georgia State that knocked his coaching father out of his seat and Baylor out of the 2015 tournament. Last year, Yale was a No. 12 seed and making its first NCAA Tournament appearance in more than a half-century and held on for a 79-75 win over the Bears .

Baylor (25-7), making its fourth consecutive tournament appearance and seventh in 10 years, plays Friday against 14th-seeded WAC Tournament champion New Mexico State (28-5) in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

There is not much Drew has to say to remind his players, including six who played against Yale a year ago, about the perils of overlooking a double-digit seed.

"The best teacher is the personal experience," Drew said. "The personal experience of going home after one game, not having a chance to advance, I know that hurt them like it hurt all of us coaches. So hopefully that's motivation. ... It doesn't matter what the seed number is."

Baylor has certainly found that out the hard way with early exits and quick trips back to Waco.

After starting this season 15-0, the Bears reached No. 1 in the AP poll for the first time ever in early January. They have lost six of their last 11 games, all against Big 12 teams and while point guard Manu Lecomte has dealt with a sprained right ankle.

Drew said Lecomte has improved since the Bears lost to Kansas State in the Big 12 Tournament last Thursday, and that the extra time before the NCAA Tournament was beneficial for the guard to "get back in the flow of things" with teammates in practice. Drew also said All-Big 12 forward Johnathan Motley isn't having any real issues with the dislocated finger on his left hand sustained against K-State.

The Bears didn't play New Mexico State this season, but beat them in each of the previous two seasons in their only meetings since 1980. All 10 games so far in the deadlocked series have been played in December.

A win over the Aggies would send Baylor to a potential second-round matchup against SMU. The former Southwest Conference rivals haven't played since 2004, and have met only four times since the SWC broke up more than two decades ago.

But the Bears, ranked 12th and a spot below SMU in the final AP Top 25 poll, say they aren't thinking about who might be next.

"We have to play like our backs are against the wall and we have nothing to lose," said Wainright, who will be the first Baylor men's player to participate in four NCAA Tournaments.

Before the upsets, Wainright was part of a Sweet 16 team as a freshman in 2014, when Motley and junior guard Al Freeman were both redshirting.

"I was in the locker room after we beat Creighton and beat Nebraska and then went to the Sweet 16. I know the feeling of that. I also know the feeling of being in the tournament and then losing in the first round," Wainright said. "We don't want our last game of the season to be an 'L', especially in the first round."
Bears have plenty motivation after early exit last season

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
March 16, 2017

TULSA, Okla. – Reeling off one impressive nonconference win after another, Baylor felt like it was in the middle of an extended party that stretched from the Ferrell Center to the Bahamas to a night playing before the soldiers at Fort Hood.

Then came the grind of the Big 12, a two-month stretch that took a physical and mental toll on the Bears.

As the NCAA tournament begins, the Bears want to get back to that freewheeling team that put together a season-opening 12-0 nonconference run that led to the first No. 1 ranking in school history in early January.

No. 3-seeded Baylor faces No. 14 New Mexico State in the East regional at 11:40 a.m. Friday at the BOK Center in Tulsa.

"There was a time when we looked at it a little like a job and we weren't having fun," said Baylor senior guard Ish Wainright. "Now we're back to having fun. We're back to being our goofy selves, joking around a lot and that's a good thing. So you'll see a lot of smiles and a lot of laughs on the court."

The Bears should also have plenty of motivation after losing in the first round of the NCAA tournament the last two seasons to lower seeded teams. In 2015, No. 14 Georgia State went on a late run to pull off a 57-56 win over Baylor in Jacksonville, Fla. Last year, No. 12 Yale stunned the No. 5 Bears, 79-75, in Providence, R.I.

Wainright said the Bears haven't focused on those two losses as they've prepared for New Mexico State.

"What happened the last two years?" Wainright said. "We haven't really talked about it. We know what we need to do. This is a new season and New Mexico State is a great team."

Unranked in the preseason polls, the Bears caught the attention of the college basketball world by beating four Top 25 teams, including No. 4 Oregon, No. 24 Michigan State, No. 10 Louisville and No. 7 Xavier.

But since improving to 15-0 after winning the first three Big 12 games, the Bears have gone 10-7 including a 70-64 loss to Kansas State in the Big 12 tournament.

Stepping outside of conference play again, the Bears hope to go on another big run. If Baylor beats New Mexico State (28-5), it will play again Sunday against the winner of Friday's first-round game between sixth-seeded SMU and No. 11 seed USC.

The Bears face a considerable challenge against a New Mexico State team that qualified for the NCAA tournament by beating Cal State-Bakersfield, 80-70, in the WAC championship game.

Baylor has some history against New Mexico State since the two teams played the last two seasons with the Bears taking a 66-55 win in 2014 and an 85-70 win in 2015. Paul Weir was an assistant coach on both of those New Mexico State teams before taking over the head coaching position this season.

"I think Paul is playing a smaller lineup, doing a great job especially in transition," said Baylor coach Scott Drew. "They really push the ball. But I see more similarities than differences, and that's a positive because it's an outstanding program."

Led by three players averaging double figure scoring, the Aggies are ringing off 78.9 points per game and shooting 46.8 percent from the field. Guard Ian Baker is averaging a team-high 16.6 points and 4.1 assists while guard Braxton Huggins is averaging 13.6 points while nailing a team-high 84 3-pointers.

Forward Eli Chuha is a big threat inside with 12.4 points and nine rebounds per game and forward Jemerrio Jones also gives the Aggies production in the paint with 9.9 points and 8.5 rebounds per game.

"They're very similar to a lot of teams we play from the standpoint of a lot of athleticism," Drew said. "They've got great length, they play up and down and are very good on ball screens."

Weir knows combating Baylor's size and zone defense will be difficult. The 6-10 Johnathan Motley is one of the best players in the country as he averages 17.3 points and 9.9 rebounds and 7-0 Jo Lual-Acuil has amassed 9.2 points, seven rebounds and a team-high 2.6 blocks per game.

"Obviously, Baylor is a terrific basketball team," Weir said. "They've got as much size as we've probably seen this year and are a very good offensive rebounding team. So we have our work cut out for us as far as mitigating that size the best we can."

Baylor guard Manu Lecomte is healthy and ready to play after playing 24 minutes against Kansas State in the Big 12 tournament. After missing the final two regular season games against West Virginia and Texas with a sprained ankle, Lecomte hit five of seven shots and scored 13 points in 24 minutes against the Wildcats.

Drew is looking forward to seeing the return of the Baylor team that played with such a sense of joy at the start of the season.

"I think some of the grind of the season wears you out," Drew said. "But that's the beauty of the NCAA tournament. Everybody gets a breath of fresh air. Different venue, different excitement, and playing different teams."
Unsung heroes Maston, Freeman shine for Bears in NCAA tourney win, 91-73

By: John Werner
March 17, 2017

TULSA, Okla. – The NCAA tournament is made for unheralded players like Terry Maston and Al Freeman to come out of nowhere to star for a day.

With huge games off the bench from Maston and Freeman, Baylor no longer has to answer questions about first-round upsets.

Maston amassed 19 points and nine rebounds while Freeman hit 21 points to lead third-seeded Baylor to a 91-73 win over No. 14 New Mexico State in the opening game of the East region Friday afternoon at the BOK Center.

For the first time in three years, the Bears (26-7) avoided a first-round upset after losing to 14th-seeded Georgia State in 2015 and 12th-seeded Yale last season. The Bears will advance to the round of 32 Sunday against USC, a 66-65 first-round winner over SMU on Friday.

"No one wants to leave the tournament early," said Baylor forward Johnathan Motley, who finished with 15 points and 10 rebounds. "Our ultimate goal was to come in here and just win it. We want to play every game our hardest, just desperate because you lose, you go home. We knew one team was going home today, and we made sure it wasn’t us."

A key reserve most of the season, Maston had almost disappeared by scoring just two points in Baylor’s previous six games. But he hit nine of 12 shots against the Aggies (28-6) and kept the Bears in the game in the first half with 12 points as Motley played just nine minutes due to foul trouble.

"I knew in the tournament anything could happen, so I was just waiting on my opportunity when my team needed me, and I’m glad I could step up today," Maston said. ‘They gave me the mid-range jumper and I made a couple and they kept falling for me."

Freeman started 22 of Baylor’s first 23 games before he was suspended for three games due to violation of team policy. But the junior guard has been a major factor in the last six games with 77 points.

Against the Aggies, he hit six of 10 field goals and all three 3-point shots to come within one point of matching his career high of 22 points against Oregon last season.

“When you see the ball go in a few times you loosen up and you become more free,” Freeman said. “I think early in the season, I was really pressing and wasn’t letting it come to me. The last few weeks I’ve just kept it simple.”

Going into halftime with a 40-38 deficit, it appeared the Bears could be headed for a third straight first-round exit in the NCAA tournament. Motley didn’t play the final nine minutes of the first half after getting his second offensive foul.

The Bears would have fallen into a much deeper hole if not for Freeman and Maston coming up big off the bench.

Freeman nailed all three of his treys in the first half while Maston drilled six of nine shots. During one stretch, the duo scored 20 straight points for the Bears.

“Al and Terry had monster games and that’s the beauty of having depth,” said Baylor coach Scott Drew. “They’re experienced players. They didn’t want to stop playing and they did a great job of stepping it up, especially when Mot was in foul trouble.”

New Mexico State took the halftime lead after burying six of 14 3-pointers, including several beyond NBA range. But the Bears were confident they could take command in the second half by ratcheting up the defensive intensity that would lead to more transition baskets.

The Bears began the second half with a 13-4 run to open up a 51-44 lead, and New Mexico State never threatened again.

Motley got things rolling by passing the ball to Lual-Acuil for a slam before Ish Wainright flew inside for a followup dunk. After Manu Lecomte drove inside for a basket, Motley stepped outside and drained a 3-pointer.

Freeman followed with four straight free throws to give the Bears a seven-point lead.

Maston continued to be a presence in the paint as he scored on a pass from Motley, drew a foul and hit the free throw for a three-point play. After Maston nailed two more shots and Motley sliced inside for a basket, the Bears stretched their lead to 60-47 with 12 minutes remaining.

“The main thing is we had a lot more energy defensively and we tried to get as many deflections as we can,” Lual-Acuil said. “We got in the passing lanes and built a wall at the rim and made their guards shoot tough shots. When we made stops and got out and ran it and we had Terry playing great and Motley at the rim, we were kind of able to open the game up and make a big run.”

The Bears dominated the boards, 39-27, and collected seven blocked shots. Guards Braxton Huggins and Ian Baker scored 19 points apiece for New Mexico State, but it wasn’t nearly enough once Baylor starters found their groove in the second half after Freeman and Maston set the stage.

“Like Coach Drew says, it’s our depth that makes us so good,” Motley said. “Anyone can step up any night. We know what kind of players Al and Terry are, and they’re both great offensive players.”
Baylor men beat USC, 82-78, advance to Sweet 16

Waco Tribune-Herald
By: John Werner
March 19, 2017

TULSA, Okla. – Baylor is headed to Madison Square Garden and this time it’s not for the NIT.

With point guard Manu Lecomte taking over in the closing minutes, the third-seeded Bears overcame 11th-seeded USC, 82-78, on Sunday night at the BOK Center to earn a spot in the Sweet 16.

The Bears played for two NIT championships at New York’s Madison Square Garden, finishing as the runner-up in 2009 and winning the championship in 2013. But this time Baylor (27-7) will play at the famous arena in the NCAA tournament East semifinals against seventh-seeded South Carolina on Friday.

With two more wins, the Bears will reach the Final Four.

“It means a lot to play there, just for the history of that place,” said Baylor forward Johnathan Motley who finished with 19 points and 10 rebounds. “To win there would mean the world to me. I’m thankful for the opportunity and I want to take advantage of it.”

After losing in the first round of the NCAA tournament in 2015 and 2016, the Bears will make their first Sweet 16 appearance since 2014. It will mark the fourth Sweet 16 appearance for coach Scott Drew who led the Bears to Elite Eight appearances in 2010 and 2012.

“I used to watch the NCAA tournament on TV and had never played a game there before this year, so it’s a blessing,” said Lecomte, who played two seasons at Miami before redshirting at Baylor last year. “You dream about that.”

The Trojans (26-10) have been comeback kings all season as they’ve rallied from double-digit deficits to win 13 times. They rallied from 17 points down in the second half to beat Providence in the NCAA tournament play-in game before rallying from 12 down against SMU to pull off a 66-65 win on Friday.

Trailing Baylor 36-26 late in the first half, the Trojans rallied to take a 67-65 lead with a pair of free throws by De’Anthony Melton with 4:57 remaining.

Scoreless after missing his first six field goal attempts, Lecomte took over the game for the Bears by scoring all 12 of his points the rest of the way.

Lecomte drained a 3-pointer at the top of the arc and drew a foul by Elijah Stewart. He nailed the free throw to complete a four-point play to give the Bears a 69-67 lead with 4:39 remaining.

Lecomte then stole the ball from Jordan McLaughlin who fouled Lecomte. He nailed both free throws.

With 3:54 remaining, Lecomte drove to the basket to push Baylor’s lead to 73-67. Lecomte has started Baylor’s two NCAA tournament games after missing the last two regular season games with a sprained ankle.

“I just had to pick it up because I had been struggling,” Lecomte said. “But my coaches and teammates kept believing in me and they trusted me with the ball in my hands, so I just had to go out there and play. I know I’m a great shooter.”

USC’s Chimezie Metu drove for a basket, drew a foul and hit the free throw to cut Baylor’s lead to 73-70 with 3:36 remaining.

Terry Maston then nailed a free throw and blocked Jordan McLaughlin’s shot. For the second straight NCAA tournament game, Maston amassed 19 points and nine rebounds after he put up those numbers in Friday’s 91-73 win over New Mexico State.

Lecomte then drove inside for another basket to push Baylor’s lead to 76-70 with 2:24 remaining. After Metu scored four points for USC, Lecomte came through with another drive for a basket to push the lead to 78-74.

“We see Manu practice every day,” Drew said. “We feel great because we know more are going to go in than not. You can affect the game even if you’re not making shots, and Manu does a great job feeding the post. What I’ve really been impressed with is his humility. He cares about his teammates.”

The Bears shot 50.8 percent overall and got a big game from King McClure who nailed five of eight 3-pointers and scored 17 points. Baylor also dominated the boards, 34-23, and overcame a 28-point performance by Metu.

With McClure nailing four 3-pointers and scoring 14 points, the Bears led by as much as 10 points and took a 36-31 halftime lead.

While Bennie Boatright nailed a pair of early 3-pointers and scored USC’s first eight points, McClure hit two early treys to pull Baylor into an 8-8 tie.

The Bears took command in the first half with a 10-0 run to grab an 18-10 lead.

Maston started Baylor’s 10-0 run with a pair of free throws before McClure stole the ball and passed to Ish Wainright for a slam. Motley scored a pair of baskets in the paint and Maston completed the run with a short jumper.

Maston remained hot by hitting two more baskets and Jake Lindsey got loose for a layup. McClure took over the scoring again with a layup and 3-pointer.

Motley delivered one of his most impressive slams of the season over Metu before McClure drained his fourth 3-pointer and Jo Lual-Acuil got inside for a dunk to stretch Baylor’s lead to 36-26.

Metu scored USC’s final five points of the first half with a drive and free throw followed by a turnaround jumper.

The Trojans made it a 10-0 run by scoring the first five points of the second half as Boatright drained a 3-pointer and Metu drilled an outside shot to pull into a 36-26 tie.

From that point, the game went back and forth. The Bears grabbed a 48-44 lead when Motley drove to the basket, drew a foul and hit a free throw. But USC tied it with Boatright’s outside shot and McLaughlin’s drive for a basket.