University of Texas Football Media Conference

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(transcripts courtesy of ASAP Sports)

Charlie Strong

CHARLIE STRONG (opening statement): Tomorrow will be like a Thursday and then Wednesday will be like a Friday and go play that game on Saturday. We play an unbelievable Texas Tech team. You look at what they're doing offensively, very explosive. We know our hands are going to be (full) -- defensively they're going to give us a lot of issues, and one of the stats that is really alarming is on 3rd down they're No. 1 in the country. We have not been able to get off the field on 3rd down. So it's been a problem and an issue for us.

But our players are ready to go play, and we know how important this game is. We've got to get this one, know how important it is that we need to play well, need to play well at home, Thanksgiving Day, and I think that we will come out and play and be excited and be a fun game for us.

Q. Offensively what has D'Onta Foreman meant to this team and how does his injury impact the offense?
CHARLIE STRONG: D'Onta[Foreman] is really explosive for us, had some big runs, and the thing he does, he's run behind his pads, a very powerful runner. He's the guy to get the ball in the open field, (he) can go score. The injury is going to hurt us. If I would say right now, he would not play on Thursday. We've got other guys who have got to step in and go play.

Q. I know as a defensive-minded guy you don't want to think about getting into a track meet, but when you see Texas Tech is putting up about 46, I believe, a game, do you have to go with the mindset that we may have to keep up offensively?
CHARLIE STRONG: What's going to be key for us on defense is not give up the home runs and not give up the big plays, and they're a big-play team. What they can do is they can throw the ball out in the flat, and you look at with [Jakeem] Grant and [Devin] Lauderdale, they can make people miss and they can take the ball the distance. We've got to corral the ball, and when we go hit it, we've got to get it on the ground, and there's got to be enough people running to the football. We have to do a great job of pursuing to the ball and not giving up the big play.
Q. For a while your guys have known what they needed get to a bowl. They've talked about doing that all season. Do you think they really understand what a sense of urgency means?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, they understand that. I mean, there's two games left, and they know how important these two games are, and there's no reason for them not to

understand that. But they do understand how important these next two games are. But we've got to take this one first, and then we'll worry about the next one.

Q. With all the clutter, with all the Miami stuff going on out there, did you have to address the team at all just to kind of mute that?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, I told our players that I'm not going anywhere. I've made a commitment here, and we are going to see this program through and we're going to get it back on track. The players, they hear all the clutter and they laugh about it, and I told them, 'Listen, guys, it's nothing to worry about. I'm here, and I'm here for the duration.'

Q. What is going to be the flow of the depth chart if you say D'Onta Foreman would be out if you played right now? What's going to be the flow of the carries after him with Johnathan Gray banged up a little bit, too?
CHARLIE STRONG: J-Gray[Johnathan Gray] is banged up a little, so we're going to go with 25, Chris Warren, and then Kirk Johnson, and then we have Bernard. We have some ways that we can get the ball around and just get the guys in place, but right now we're going to go with 25 will be our key guy.

Q. Just to clarify, so with Gray, do you see him as possibly not being able to go on Thanksgiving, too, and also just while we're talking about injuries, are there any other -- Patrick Vahe, Roberson, are they back practicing?
CHARLIE STRONG: No, J-Gray[Johnathan Gray] and [Patrick] Vahe are the two, and everyone else is practicing. Vahe probably won't be able to go, but we're going to look at him coming back the following week, and J-Gray is going to be what happens from here up until Thursday with him.

Q. When you look at Texas Tech's offense, who do they remind you of, and is this going to be the most prolific wide-open offense you'll face all year long?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, it will be, because you have a 3,000-yard passer, you have a 1,000-yard receiver, you have a 1,000-yard rusher, so it is. The thing they can do is it's just so explosive because Mahomes does a great job of just managing it, and he buys time for his receivers to get open. He'll move around and he'll get outside the pocket and he'll scramble, scramble, then all of a sudden he'll just throw one about five yards and the coverage is so deep that their guy catches it and makes a guy miss. Now all of a sudden they're down the sideline. But it will be one of our biggest challenges all season long.

Q. Another year has gone by and it seems like the ice has thinned on A&M with the chancellor here, and I think (interim UT men's athletics director) Mike Perrin is open to it. A year later, where do you stand? Do you want to play A&M again, and would you want to see that game return back to Thanksgiving?
CHARLIE STRONG: I would love to play Texas A&M. I just think that you look at it, and you look at two in-state rivals, it's a big-time game for us, and I would love for it to happen. But a lot of things have to be worked out for it to be that, but you look at a Thanksgiving Day game, and you would love to see that happen.

Q. You've got a smaller senior group. What do you feel like you've gotten out of this senior class?
CHARLIE STRONG: It is. I was just looking at that list, I think we have 22 seniors, and of the 22, I think 14 are (on) scholarship. You know what, you always -- when a young man gets to his senior year, you just want to make sure that they go out the right way, and you would like to have a winning season for them, and that's still in place for us if we go out and get these next two. But you look at Duke[Thomas], you look at J-Gray[Johnathan], you look at Sed Flowers, you look at Shiro [Davis], you look at Tank[Jackson], Daje[Johnson], Marcus Johnson, there's some guys in there, and some maybe I've forgotten about, but there's some guys in there that have meant a lot to this University and done a lot of good things. You know, [Alex] De La Torre, he comes up to me, and he wasn't able to play, I think, two weeks ago, and he says, Coach, when I get back are you going to put me back on special teams, and I'm going to get my position back. And I said, 'Yes, if you're healthy you will. He wants to be out there so bad. Nick Rose (too).

But those guys have done so much and meant so much, and you just want it to end the right way for them. You look at Taylor Doyle and what he's done for that offense and the reason why our offensive line is playing so well, because of some of the things that he's doing.

Q. Can you just kind of assess the linebacker passion with Malik kind of battling a cold and you've got Ed Freeman back, where you feel like you're at with that position right now?
CHARLIE STRONG: The guy that's playing really outstanding for us at backer right now is Pete Jinkens. He's another one of those seniors, and Pete has had an unbelievable year. But the thing about Malik is he plays -- so it's not so much he's battling a cold, but he goes out there and competes. That position is not an issue for us.

Now you get Freeman back, but you're still going to have those guys out there, [Anthony] Wheeler, but you just still have enough there in place with Tim Cole, guys can go out and go compete.

Q. Jerrod Heard, what have the conversations been like for him with you guys being banged up at running back? This game kind of screams for him to get loose in the run game.
CHARLIE STRONG: You look at the numbers that their defense put up, and what people have been successful at is running the football. But we have to protect our quarterback, too, and the good thing about it, we have two. So with Jerrod Heard, he's still got to command the offense and he's got to do the things we ask him to do on offense, but when there's a time for him to take off with it, he probably will. But we're just not going to throw him out there and just let him go up and down the field, because I think if we block right, and we should, 25[Chris Warren], you can turn him loose, and [Chris]Warren, he's big and strong and physical enough where he'll get his yards.

Q. When you've called on a lot of your freshmen to step up, they've taken advantage of some of those opportunities. What are you hoping to see from Chris Warren, and what will this game do for him as you start preparing for next year?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, if you think about it, the whole season we've went into the game, it's been three -- it's been D'Onta[Foreman], it's been J-Gray[Johnathan Gray] and Chris Warren, those three guys. Warren hasn't had the carries that the other two has had, so this will be a game for him where he'll be able to step out and get those carries.
I feel really comfortable with Chris Warren because he's big, physical, strong, very mature for his age, but I don't see where he's going to back down at all, and he'll take advantage of this opportunity.

Q. With D'Onta's situation, with J-Gray's situation, is this a deal where you might look at maybe getting Daje a little more involved, maybe expanding what he can do, and maybe getting a look at a guy like Ryan Newsome who could maybe give you some pop?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you still have Kirk Johnson sitting there, and Kirk has done a great job. He's done good for us on special teams.

At that position we have enough options where if something was to happen where we can plug another guy in and just continue the flow of it. But you can't look at it where you can go down with another injury because you just don't have -- you need a big ol' back, and that's what you've got right now with Chris Warren, a big ol' physical back.

Q. Coach, senior day, a lot of emotion in this game. What can you say about this senior class, what they've been through, and I know a lot of them love you, and you want them to go out on top to win this game.
CHARLIE STRONG: It's been a tough road for our senior class, and you think about it, when they signed on here, I don't know what they were ranked in the recruiting class, but they had a vision, they had a lot of high goals. It hasn't happened for them, but you just want them to go out the right way on Thursday night. It's Thanksgiving Day, and I know it's going to be a lot of emotion for them. But I told them, 'Hey, at the beginning it'll be very emotional, but once that game starts we've got to just tone it down and let's just go play.' But you want it to end the right way for them.

Q. It's been kind of a shotgun wedding for you and Mike Perrin here, but can you talk about that relationship and how open it is, how much y'all are talking about how things need to be? I know the first 20 months were a little rough.
CHARLIE STRONG: Mike [Perrin] is an unbelievable person, and he's going to do a great job, and just he has that leadership ability about him where he can get things done. We have a relationship, and he understands the football side of it, and not only football side, but with every program within the athletic department because that's what he's going to have to do.

It's not one of those where he walks into it and then he understands and he knows. It's all about people and it's all about relationships, and he's a people person, so he's going to be great at it.

Q. Part of Tech's real attack is they like to throw the ball to the backs coming out of the backfield. You guys don't do a lot of that; y'all have done some but not a whole lot. Does that hamper you guys in practice because you haven't seen it a lot since y'all aren't doing it a lot?
CHARLIE STRONG: No, see, what we do when we practice, because they move their receivers around, so No. 11, [Jakeem] Grant, he's going to play wide receiver, he's going to play running back, they're going to put him in the -- you have to know where he is all the time, and he has to be accounted for. So as long as you can find him, you have a chance because they're going to throw the ball out there, and they're to run a screen with him. They're going to flare the ball out in the backfield, throw it to him. They're always trying to get him one-on-one and just get him in the open field because he's very dangerous.

You look at him back there on the kickoff, he returns their kickoffs, their return guy on their kickoff return, and I told our kickoff team that it's not one of those where you run down there relaxed, because it doesn't matter how deep the ball is kicked, he's going to bring it out and he's going to make something happen with it.

Q. How impressed have you been with Tank (Desmond Jackson) and the job he's done coming back from everything that he went through? He shows up here in coat and tie on Monday and wants to be a part of this. And then second, with Daje (Johnson), just his road here, as well, and how many times you thought he wouldn't be here anymore and all that kind of stuff?
CHARLIE STRONG: I'll tell you what; Tank[Jackson], I call him Young Corporate America because he walks in here with his shirt and tie on, and he has that business look to him. But once he got healthy, he really came on and started playing very well for us, and he just does a great job of just commanding the middle and just chases the ball. Just plays so hard. You know when he's in the game because from start to finish, I mean, he's just going, going, going.

And Daje [Johnson], you know, I was just telling him the other day, I said, 'You know what, I'm so proud of you and so happy because you have come a million miles.' I can remember the first day I took this job, I was downstairs and he came walking in, he had some of his friends with him. He came up to me, and I said, 'What's your name, and he said, Daje. I said, 'Oh, you're the guy I've been wanting to meet; I've heard a lot about you.'

So he didn't like what I had to say to him, but just to see just how far he's come, and some of the guys that got dismissed, he was in the worst position of all of them. And look at him, he survived it. And he told me, he said, 'Coach, I guarantee you, you will not dismiss me from this program because I have nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. I will make it.' And I said, 'Well, it's going to be up to you to make it. I'm not trying to dismiss you and I'm going to give you every opportunity to get it right.'

But just to see him do it, he has a chance to graduate in the spring, and I told him, 'You're going to stay here and you're going to get your degree and then you can go train wherever you want to go train, but you're going to stay here and get your degree before you walk out of here. I'm not going to let you go take a semester off.

Q. There was sort of a national implication recently that things were getting too tough for you here and you wanted a way out. Knowing you, how much did that bother you to hear that about yourself, and what are the reasons why you want to kind of stick through just to make it work here?
CHARLIE STRONG: I don't run from anything, and when you work so hard to place yourself in this position and then all of a sudden -- nothing is ever tough. You just grind it out.

We always talk to our players about, hey, you hang in there. It may not be the way you want, but so what. You just grow up and you can't have self-pity. A lot of times guys want self-pity. There's no self-pity. A lot of times when you're in the position you're in, it's because of what you did to yourself. We didn't do a good job of coaching. If we did a better job of coaching, we wouldn't be in this position.

Q. DeAndre McNeal has been pretty vocal on social media, saying how he wants to be more involved, he can score touchdowns, and Coach [Jay] Norvell said there's a couple of little things that go beyond just playing. What does he have to do maybe on and off the field to be able to get the opportunities he says he deserves?
CHARLIE STRONG: Get off social media. (Laughter.) It starts there, then he'll get his first chance. But he gets his chance like everyone else.

Q. You said about Daje, get your degree and then go train. Speaking of that, we're getting to NFL Draft time. Some draft analysts are saying Texas might not have any players drafted again this year. Do you see any of these guys getting drafted? For one, who are some guys you could possibly see; and for two, has Hassan Ridgeway talked to you at all about maybe checking what his status would be with the advisory committee?
CHARLIE STRONG: Ridgeway always asks me -- I'm his advisor. I help him out with that. No, I don't get a chance to talk to those scouts. They talk to the other coaches. But we just wait and see at the end of the season how it goes.

Q. The top academic person here has been out. There's no south end zone expansion plans any time soon. There's an interim AD. Can you stay in there -- are you absolutely certain that Texas has and will do whatever it takes to make you and this program successful?
CHARLIE STRONG: It will. You think about it, and I know so much has been made about what you don't have. I mean, I've come from programs where if you look at our facilities -- you know, sometimes just take some paint and throw it up on the wall. They're going to be fine. It's not like we're walking into a facility and you're saying, hey, we're so far behind. What are we behind on, because we don't have a barber shop in our locker room? I don't know.

And a lot of times, it comes down -- when you recruit, it's all about recruiting character. It's about recruiting young men who want to be here, and you know, you look at just recruiting-wise, a lot of players, they're not into the flash. Some players are. Some players aren't. If they're into the flash, this may not be the place for them.

But I'll tell you this: They're going to have a chance to walk out here into a stadium and play in front of a big-time crowd, and all those things are going to happen for them. But you're at the University of Texas. The commitment is here. Now, it's all about -- like I said, it's all about us getting it right and doing our part, also.

Q. You said you guys wouldn't be in this position if you guys were coaching better. Do you put any accountability on the players?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, it is, but it's also on us. I go back through the season, and you know, I start with that first game at Notre Dame, and I built -- I probably built the game up so much myself because even before we played that game, I think two weeks before we played it, every day I showed them something about South Bend, about Notre Dame, about their tradition, about our tradition, and then we get there and we just don't play well.

Then you get to the California game where you're a point away from (tying the game) -- and then if we just go play better and go stop them one or two times on D. Then you look at the Oklahoma State game.

But there's games -- you know, you look at the TCU game where we just walked out there and didn't do anything, and then the Iowa State game.

We could have done a better job of coaching, a better job of preparing our kids and getting them ready to go play. And it does, and I do, I look at myself, and I say that I could have done a whole lot better job than what we did.

Q. Can you kind of assess where your quarterback depth is, not just obviously now but going into next year, and is bringing in a junior college guy or looking for a graduate transfer to compete and make that room better, is that something that you might look at for next season?
CHARLIE STRONG: The quarterback position, they're going to be a year older next year, so you look at [Tyrone] Swoopes, he plays with a lot of confidence. Probably with the position he's in right now of coming off the bench, probably helps him more than anything. And then you look at [Jerrod] Heard will grow up and he'll probably be a better player this time next year. You still got [Kai] Locksley, you have [Matthew] Merrick, and then we just signed -- got one committed in this class.

So it's all about us taking what we have and taking advantage of what we have and using it the right way.

Q. What do you like about Kirk Johnson, and do you see an opportunity for him if Gray and Foreman are banged up?
CHARLIE STRONG: We've been working Kirk [Johnson] some there to get him ready to go play. I tease him because he runs like Roger Craig; he's one of those guys that picks his legs up. And the thing he does is he gives you everything he's got. If it's on special teams, he's trying to be the first one down the field. He plays and he loves the game. You know, to get him in and give him a few carries, it wouldn't bother me at all because he is deserving. He's worked. So we'll just see how the flow of the game goes and see where we can get him into it.

Q. One of the things that has picked around the edges of the program over the last years has been this lawsuit from Oklahoma State against one of your assistant coaches. You've been deposed. They want more. They want to talk to one of your players. They put you on a list for potential trial testimony. What are your thoughts on just their efforts to really peel back the layers and look deeply inside what you guys do in your strategy rooms?
CHARLIE STRONG: I can't really talk about that now because of what's coming out, like you said, with what they're trying to get done. And really -- just really haven't had a chance to really sit down and work through it and look at it from all parts and all layers.

Q. You were talking about Daje (Johnson) and Tank (Jackson). When you think of J-Gray, Johnathan, he seems like he's played a real pivotal role in helping you transition into this because of his work ethic. What do you think of, and how sad will it be if he doesn't play in this game?
CHARLIE STRONG: It'll be tough if J-Gray[Johnathan Gray] doesn't play, because you look at him, and he's just been a total leader, and everything you ask him to do, he's done. He hasn't had the year that he wanted to have, but still, though, he's one of those guys, he's the first one in. He's always working with the young guys, always talking to them. But he is such a special player, not only -- just a special person, and like you said, he's done a great job just being with the coaches, and he's a guy that's very accountable. He's a guy that's very responsible, and when you talk about just a guy with character, that's what you get with J-Gray. He has all the tools that you look for in a young man.

Q. I know you said you couldn't talk about your testimony in that suit, but how big a distraction has it been for you and the program and particularly Joe (Wickline) and doing his job?
CHARLIE STRONG: For me it hasn't been because I haven't really thought about it. I try to get our team ready, so I really haven't thought about it at all.

Q. What about for Joe ?
CHARLIE STRONG: I don't know. I don't know how much Joe[Wickline] has because every day he comes, he just works and never has brought it up or even talked about it.

Q. Are you guys talking about the tempo because of Tech's ability to score points? Are you looking to take the air out of the ball this weekend?
CHARLIE STRONG: I just hope they don't get out there and just score too quickly on us. You don't ever want to get into it with us, especially trying to match scores, because I don't know -- you've got to have those big plays and they've just got to come, come, come.

If you can run the ball and you can control the clock and keep their offense off the field, then that would be to our advantage because I don't think we want to turn it into a scoring match at all.

Q. It's not the A&M game, but it's still Thanksgiving. Texas is always playing on this weekend, on this day. How special is it just being in the Thanksgiving spotlight?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, it's great, and you know, it's a national audience, and it's Thanksgiving Day, and by the time we go play, everyone is sitting on the couch after they've eaten, so they're rested up watching the game.
I told our players, I said, 'This is a special game.' It's Texas Tech, and it's big for us, and we need to go play well. So it doesn't matter if it was Saturday, we still play the same way, but being on Thanksgiving, it has a little more meaning to it.

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