University of Texas Football Media Conference

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Charlie Strong

CHARLIE STRONG (opening statement): Coming off a tough loss over Thanksgiving. Met with the players for the first time yesterday, and you could still see the pain and the disappointment in their eyes, and I told them we've got a tough test this week.

We go to Baylor, and you look at what they're doing, the No. 1 offense in the country in total offense and scoring offense. You look at some of the players, when you think about [Corey] Coleman, you think about [KD] Cannon, guys that can stretch the field and get down the field, and they make the throws to them. They run underneath the balls and they can track it down.

And then on defense with [Andrew] Billings, it's going to be a hard match-up for us in the middle, and look at [Shawn] Oakman, what he does. But it's our final game, and we need to go out and go play well.

You look at our injury situation right now, just to get that out of the way, Pete Jinkens will be out of this game, D'Onta Foreman will be out, [Kirk] Johnson will be out of this game, and [Patrick] Vahe (will be out). [Hassan] Ridgeway and Malik [Jefferson] will be questionable, and [Jerrod] Heard has been cleared to practice, so he's going to be day-to-day, also.

Q. What about [Johnathan] Gray?
CHARLIE STRONG: J-Gray is day-to-day, probably will be back. Good chance he will be back.

Q. Have you given any thought to last game of the year, Jerrod Heard concussion, just letting him sit this one out and letting [Tyrone] Swoopes play quarterback?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, not much, because the thing about Jerrod, he's such a competitor, and I know he's got a concussion there, and I don't know how severe it is, but it was a concussion, and that's why we're going to make sure that the doctors make the right decision in how we go about it. May not need him if Swoopes plays well; who knows if we're going to need him or not. But it would be one of those where we really have to see how the whole situation goes and make sure that he's on point.

Q. So are you looking at [Tyrone] Swoopes to start the game on Saturday?
CHARLIE STRONG: Swoopes will start the game on Saturday.

Q. You have the contracts of some of your original assistant coaches that are expiring, of course, after the season. Where are you as far as the evaluation of those guys goes?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, what I do at the end of every year, which I've always done, is sit down with each coach and talk to them, and that's what I'm going to do, wait until the end of the season and we sit down and talk.

Q. You've had pretty tangible goals all season you could point to, whether it's Big 12 Championship or a bowl game. More than likely, with that all out of the way, do you worry about how the guys will approach this game and if they'll still be mentally committed to it?
CHARLIE STRONG: No, I haven't, and I think they will, because if you think about it, it's not like you sit here with -- a lot of times you have that problem where you have an older team because it allows them, once they see how the season has been going, they just want to get the season over with. But when you have a young group like we have, they'll go out and they'll compete, and that's what I told our coaching staff. We have to make sure that we don't go out there and just roll the ball out on the field and go through the motions. We need to go play or we'll get embarrassed.

Q. There's some talk of some 5-7 teams getting in a bowl. Would you consider getting a bowl if you did beat Baylor and they came a-calling?
CHARLIE STRONG: We've got to make sure we can go beat Baylor and just get this one out of the way.

Q. Can you give an update on Dylan Haines?
CHARLIE STRONG: Haines is day-to-day.

Q. Talking about the safeties, can you talk a little bit about Duke [Thomas] kind of moving back there to safety, what you saw there, what the personnel was that made you want to do that?
CHARLIE STRONG: What we did, the reason why Duke played some at safety, it was all about just personnel-driven because Tech played four wide receivers, and there was always a match-up problem because we played -- what we want to do is bring pressure, so we knew that Duke could go cover their inside slot guys, and that's the reason why we put him there. That was just a one-game thing.

Q. How do you keep this team motivated with the number of injuries that you're facing in this last game and with so many of those objectives that you started the season with now off the table?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, it's still all about guys being competitive and guys going out and competing, and we know we had the injuries. Even during the game, I don't think it's -- so much of a big deal was made about it because our guys kept playing. One would go down and then somebody else would go in. Really I didn't know how many guys were out until at the end, that we lost that many players.

But I think our guys will still go out and compete, because they don't want to get embarrassed, and they know this, that it's their last game, and for the seniors it is their last game. For some of them they may not ever put on another uniform at all, so you'd like to see them go out where we go out and represent them the right way.

Q. Even though you're assured of a losing record, would a bowl game be important for this team, and if so, why?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you always look at it where when you talk about a bowl game, there's extra practices, and that's what you're going to get out of the extra practices. And for the

kids, if they go out and play well and they go do what they're supposed to go do, then that opportunity will be there for them.

Q. Is it good to show progress?
CHARLIE STRONG: Always good to show progress because if you win this next game, it's really good progress for you.

Q. Tyrone [Swoopes] mentioned the other night, he said he had a tough time getting into rhythm, and you mentioned last week that he seems to have more confidence in the role he's been in. What do you have to do to get him on a good start to avoid kind of the slow starts that this team has had on the road this year?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, the key thing for us is we need to start off fast and make sure that with our play calling that we put him in position where there's positive plays and there's good things happening for him.

We ran the ball so well the other night that we didn't -- I think we threw for, what, 64 yards and just didn't make the connection, had some dropped balls. But it's about the rhythm and making sure we have really good rhythm, and in that way that'll keep us on pace.

Q. The way Oklahoma played Saturday and really the back half of the season, with [Samaje] Perine and [Joe] Mixon, next year is that kind of a model that you would like to see, two big running back threats, dynamic quarterback play, but they're not throwing it 100 times, very strong running team? Is that what you ultimately want to get to?
CHARLIE STRONG: I always say this: You win games when you run the football, and if you can get a good rhythm and a good chemistry on offense, and if you look at it, the quarterback is playing well for them and he can make plays. Even when things break down, you can put the ball in his hands and he can create. And then you look at the two big backs they have, similar to what we have right now with our two big backs, but it's all about making sure that -- play calling is rhythm and play calling is making sure you go get first downs and then you have the opportunity to go on top, you go steal one over the top.

Q. Can you update us on Kai [Locksley] and Matthew [Merrick] and their progression through this year and how much you expect them to push Tyrone [Swoopes] and Jerrod [Heard] going into the off-season?
CHARLIE STRONG: You look at Kai and Matthew, and they both -- they've progressed very well. The thing is you have those two with Tyrone and Jerrod, you had those two quarterbacks, so you always prepared one of them to be the third one, so we was always back and forth which one would be the third one.

But you look at the spring, they'll have a chance to go in and compete, and they have the ability. So it'll be interesting this spring where you get a chance to look at all four of them again.

Q. Talking about that running game ahead of it, we really saw Chris Warren locked into Tommie Robinson, taking in a lot of direction, et cetera. What have you noticed about his development from when he first stepped onto the Forty (Acres) to his performance the other night?

CHARLIE STRONG: We always felt like Chris Warren had a lot of ability, and early in the season he was nursing a lot of injury, whether it be a high ankle, then I think he ended up twisting it again midway through the season, but he's one of those players who's always been focused, very mature for his age, and he's one of those guys that you can tell him something and he's going to hold you to it. So when you tell him something, it better be the right thing because he's going to do exactly what you tell him.

But I knew, and that's why I said last week, I felt like he would have a big game because once we give it to him, I just knew that he's one of those guys that the longer the game goes, the stronger he gets, and he got very strong.

Q. So with [Johnathan] Gray possibly playing on Saturday, do you give J-Gray the start or do you use Chris Warren?
CHARLIE STRONG: Yeah, Warren would be the guy. But J-Gray is still day-to-day, so Chris Warren is going to be back there.

Q. Do you feel like Mike Perrin is going to do everything that you need going forward to support you in every way, in any possible changes that you would make, and have you outlined to him what you think needs to happen at the end of the season?
CHARLIE STRONG: Not yet. I haven't sat down with him. But I know this: We have plenty of support in this program, and I'm not concerned about that. We've just got to do our part.

But I know when I sit down with Mike, whatever we need to get done, he's going to do it for us.

Q. You mentioned this morning on the call that you still need a couple pieces, but once you get those pieces you're going to be in the right direction. I wonder if you could expound on which pieces you need, and also, is next year kind of the year that you're building towards? Is that the year when you think everything should fall in place?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you always think about recruiting, and you want to make sure that you get all the pieces in recruiting. And if you look at us, you started two freshmen offensive linemen. We need to get that position -- that's a position where you always recruit the big guys for our offensive and defensive line. We've got to get us more big guys at those two positions.

Skill guys, you'll be able to find them, but we need some more guys there, and I think that once we continue to build those two positions, then we'll be in place and get to where we need to get to.

Q. With Chris Warren kind of performing the way he did, especially after Kirk Johnson got hurt, he knew it was on him, everybody knew he was the guy, has it allowed the staff to go back and maybe be reflective on the amount of rotations they had at running back to maybe give one guy the load and let him see if he can carry it for a while?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you look at it, and what we tried to do in the beginning, and like I said, like Chris was kind of banged up early so it fell on J-Gray and D'Onta, and you wanted to see those two guys. Then you watched D'Onta make some big runs and even J-Gray, but when you're talking about three backs, it's not enough to space it out the way you wanted to because then we weren't really running the ball as well as we're running it right now. So, now we have

had a chance to see him and we know how strong he is and what he can do, and I always felt that way about him. The longer that game goes, the stronger he gets, and he just kept coming on.

We could have just fed him -- I told him before the game, he'll probably have 200 yards rushing, and he ended up, what, 276? Could have got him 350, I wish.

Q. Maybe he'll do that this week.
CHARLIE STRONG: I'm not going to say this week. Not just yet.

Q. Early on, you had touted the defensive line as a strength of this team. Where have the breakdowns been in rush defense? Why was Texas Tech, why was West Virginia and others able to run the ball against you?
CHARLIE STRONG: When you talk about our defensive front, and I did, I said that would be the strength of our team, but it's about getting off blocks and guys making plays. We went to a stretch through where we were kind of beat up a little, and then you have to look at also when you talk about the front seven, even with the defensive front, the linebackers' play, also, it was a position where you started Malik and you had Pete (Jinkens), both of them played well, but we needed better play from a total front seven. So, not only with the defensive front, because that whole front seven has to stop the run, but you would like to see better play, and we should have been a lot stronger against the run.

Q. When you look at Baylor is it hard to evaluate (Chris) Johnson because of the game in the mud and the muck and the rain and the wind, and kind of your thoughts on their offense with him at quarterback and the fact that they run the ball so well but everybody thinks about the pass game?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, and they do (run the ball well). That's where they are. You look at [Shock] Linwood, they do a great job of running the ball, and with [Chris] Johnson, you look at the second half where he came in and played, he still made the throws because they're still going to stretch you out. They're going to let [KD] Cannon, they're going to let [Corey] Coleman run down the field and throw the ball up and see either you're going to make a play on it or they're going to go up and take it from you. He can lay it out there, and he has a strong enough arm where he can get it down the field. But what they've done a really good job with him, also, is on the quarterback run game, because you watch the quarterback, he runs the ball, and they run the power play with him, they do side play with him, big strong quarterback, but it was hard to evaluate him in the TCU game. But we tried to go back to watch the second half of the last game and look at him and see where he is. We know our hands are going to be full because they've still got everybody else around him, so now it's a matter of him just getting the ball into the right people's hands.

Q. Speaking of recruiting, you mentioned it earlier, you guys closed very strong last year. Can you give me an idea of what you guys like to get accomplished in the month of December that sets up what you'll be able to do in January, what you're trying to get done in this particular month?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, a lot of our guys are out right now recruiting, so this is the first time we can actually have contact. It was critical to get out Sunday and today, and what we do is we go and see every player that's still sitting there that hasn't committed. We're in their homes, so we

had a ton of visits last night, and we're doing the same thing all through the day, and then see some tonight. So we want to make sure that the ones that are still sitting there that we have an opportunity to go get that we're going to go get.

Q. Are you still surprised you beat Oklahoma? And do you think teams like Alabama and Clemson are going to be calling you for advice?
CHARLIE STRONG: I don't know why (laughter), but you look at our team and we played so well against Oklahoma, then you would have figured, okay, after that game you've got six to go play. We're going to hit a stretch here where we're going to play well because you look at -- there's always a game that sets you up where you say, okay, that's the game, now we can really take off, and we never took off.

I told our guys this yesterday, I said, 'I don't know how many of you had a chance to watch some of the games yesterday.' I said, 'I didn't, but I know some of you guys did, but I kind of sat back and said, you know what, just think about why can't we go play like that, what's holding us back, and it comes down to what is holding us back.'

Q. If you had one thing that did hold you back --
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, a lot of times it goes back to team chemistry and guys playing together and playing for what you represent. It's not always the name on your back but what's in front of you, and that's what it's got to come down to. You've got to play for what's across your chest.

Q. On recruiting, are you concerned by the number of guys that are choosing to leave the state, or is this early reservations in your opinion?
CHARLIE STRONG: No, I'll only say this: We have until February to go chase some down, and a lot of times guys are going to leave the state, but still, though, once everything is over with, then you've got a chance to really just go to them and bear down, then you go chase them and go run them down. We're going to get the guys that we need to go get, and some we're going to lose, but still, though, we can't be afraid to go recruit them, and we're not going to be afraid to do that.

Q. As far as the WILL position with [Peter] Jinkens being out, [Anthony] Wheeler filled in mostly in the last game. Is [Edwin] Freeman back 100 percent, and will we see any kind of rotation between 45 (Wheeler) and 35 (Freeman) in the game?
CHARLIE STRONG: Yeah, because what we did with Pete going down, and then once we lost Malik [Jefferson], because usually when you have Malik still there, you can always play Tim Cole at the WILL and make sure that he can back up Wheeler, so now you've got Freeman who's got to come in and help us. If Malik is not able to play then it would be Tim Cole at the MIKE position with [Breckyn] Hager backing him up.

Q. Do you see Breckyn Hager as more of a linebacker, inside linebacker, or as an outside linebacker/defensive end?
CHARLIE STRONG: I think with Hager you can do a lot of things with him. He's one of those guys that can play linebacker for you, and then he's big and strong enough where when you get down to the 3rd down and you get into passing situations, he's a guy that can rush off the edge, a guy that plays so hard, and all the players love him because of how hard he goes. He's exciting to

watch. May not always go in the right direction all the time, but he's going to give you everything he's got.