University of Texas Football Media Conference

Monday, November 9, 2015

(transcript courtesy of ASAP Sports)

Charlie Strong

CHARLIE STRONG (opening statement): We were just happy to see our guys bounce back the other night. Offensively we were balanced with the run and pass, 299 (yards) and 299, and defensively had some key turnovers there and had a 4th down stop on the goal line. Had a good goal line stand, and the turnovers and sacks were really big because when you get the ball back for our offense, the way we were playing in the second half, we were able to generate points.

We know this: It's going to be a tough road test for us this week, having to go up to West Virginia, and any time you're on the road you've got to have your focus. We can't have any distractions. We have not played well on the road. I expect our team to go out, and it starts this week in practice because if we make it tough on them in practice then you expect it to carry over to the game, and it's got to be a buildup with the preparation and the execution, each and every day, from Tuesday to Wednesday to Thursday, even to Friday, and then to get there on Saturday and go play the game.

Knowing this, you've got to play with energy, got to play with passion, got to have some emotion. Got to go out and compete and play with a lot of confidence. Our players understand how important this game is, just knowing how pivotal it is right now at this point in the season.

Q. I know you're a one game at a time type of person, but when you've only got a couple games left, do you have to turn up the intensity level and start talking about the bowl and the importance and really start hammering it in with these guys?
CHARLIE STRONG: As I've said to our coaches, even to our players, we have to get our seniors to a bowl game, and it's a critical now. We're sitting there with three left, and we've got to go win two of the next three, and it is, it's a one game season. They understand they have to go get two of the next three.

Q. I'm not sure how much you can change about road trips, but considering how badly they've gone so far, is there anything you can alter in terms of how you travel, how you prepare, or do you kind of stick with what you're doing?
CHARLIE STRONG: No, our guys have to understand how important it is, but I don't know if you need to change up anything. It's all about the buildup, and the buildup has got to start at practice and has got to carry on. You look at us, and we go beat Kansas State, and then for some reason you're going into Iowa State, you expect to go play well and we don't go play well there.

But I think they know this, how important this game is. Even last night when we went to work, I didn't have to say much because they went out and they were locked in and focused, and they understood just how big this game is.

Q. You mentioned balance; do you feel like you threw it effectively enough against Kansas to at least keep West Virginia honest?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, the thing we want to do, and we know this: We can run the football in the first half. I think we had 37 yards rushing, and in the second half we were able to bounce back and get over 200 yards. So we need to establish the run, and we didn't do that. We opened up with a big throw to Burt and then he was able to head five down the middle. But we've still got to make the throws, and we know this: We've got to be more effective in the passing game and continue to build on it.

Q. You kind of joked after the game, keep treating us like we're coming off a loss, not a win. Is that your approach to the team a little bit yesterday?
CHARLIE STRONG: It has to be because you know what it is. When you're dealing with a young team, you can't build them up because I think a lot of times they start believing it and they listen to it. I think the more that we stay on them and keep driving them and don't even look at this game, say, hey, listen, guys, just go get the next one, don't even worry about what we just did. I didn't even show them any highlights. Usually on Sundays I show them highlights. I didn't even show it to them. I just said, hey, our focus is on West Virginia; don't worry about the last one, let's go get the next one.

Q. Jay [Norvell] told us after the game that this has been a real frustrating group because they're not playing up to the level you think they can, and he said you kind of have to keep the thumb on them because their attention drifts at times. How big a challenge has it been with this group to get them to focus consistently?
CHARLIE STRONG: You know, it is. When you don't have a good mixture of older guys and guys that can really look at it and say, listen, folks, we've got to get locked in, this is what we have to do. Even when we went to Iowa State, [Johnathan] Gray stood up in front of the team and told them about the environment, how tough it is the last time we went up there, how tight the game was, and so with young guys, they kind of sit there, and they go, you know, well, we'll see, and they don't really get it until they get there.

And even with the preparation, it's almost where you've got to stay on them, and that's what I tell our coaches all the time; don't ever think they know anything. Just treat them like they don't and go over it each and every day. They may say, well, I got it. Well, we'll see if they have it or not.

It's so funny because with Vance [Bedford], we can go out there and we can go through routes, and you get into a game and you see the same route, and you just look at them and say, okay, you saw the formation and you know what they do out of that formation. Well, Coach, I was no, no, no, this is what you're going to get. They'll give you, well, I thought no, you don't have to think. This is what they're going to do. But it's almost where it's you have to constantly stay on them, especially in the secondary when you're playing with so many young guys.

Q. Charlie, as far as road places to go, how would you evaluate Morgantown as far as how tough it is?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, it's a tough place. I know that when we were at Louisville we went up there to play them. It doesn't matter what time the game is. It didn't matter. They're going to be

there. Their crowd is going to be there, and they're going to come out and support their team, and even I told our players, I said, it's tough, it's tough to get in there, but when we get there it's all about us just locking in and getting focused. It's a really tough environment; you've you guys expect it, and we're going to have to go out and play well.

Q. Why do you think Texas has struggled on the road?
CHARLIE STRONG: When you're dealing with the group that we have, it's that we can play better and we just haven't played better.

Q. West Virginia has been involved in a lot of shootouts over the last couple of years. Do you think your team is equipped to go in and play in one of those 45-44 type games?
CHARLIE STRONG: If we can score the points we scored the other night, I think we can go in and play that shootout, but we're going to have to be productive on offense. But defensively we're going to have to play well, too. A lot of times you get in those shootout games, you give up big plays, and we're going to have to eliminate the big plays on defense and make them earn everything they get make them drive the football.

They're a team that loves to run the ball. You look at the game last against Texas Tech, I think they rushed it over 50 times they rushed the football. They want to establish the run, so we just can't let them play-action pass and throw the ball deep down the field.

Q. D'Onta Foreman has been so good. Is there a reason why Johnathan Gray keeps getting the majority of the touches? I know that D'Onta has been a little bit hurt, but is that because he's a senior or because you guys see more out of him, and then also, if you have any updates about any injuries from the game, I saw that Chris Warren wasn't dressed out, like him and Edwin Freeman or anybody else who could be out that you could be expecting back?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, the second part of the question, Warren had an ankle injury. He'll be back. Most of our guys, we're a healthy team with the exception of [Alex] De La Torre, and he's going to practice later on this weekend, so we should get DeLa back by game time.

But when you talk about with [Johnathan] Gray, the thing is we don't count the number of touches. I think the other night he ran seven and the big man ran it 12 maybe, D'Onta. Both of those guys are excellent backs. The thing about J Gray, it's the leadership he provides. He's a senior. So it's not you look at the separation, one is better than the other one. They're both going to play.

Q. You keep telling us about young players, young players, but here we are, and we're nine games through the season, three fourths of the way through. These guys have got to be growing up by now, don't they?
CHARLIE STRONG: Even though you're nine into it and you can think they're growing up, but do they really grow up? Some of the guys are still seniors that act like freshmen.

But no, you know, I do say young players, but it's still about them staying focused and staying locked in. You're right, I tell a guy after he plays one or two games you're no longer a freshman, it's time for you to grow up, and a lot of them have grown up, but you're still dealing with a lot of

them who are not starters that you're counting on, and they're the ones that you just need to continue to stay on top of.

Q. After what happened at Iowa State and just on the road in general, what makes you think they understand how critical this week is on the road?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, they've been beat up so much about it and they've heard about it so much, so they understand how critical it is. With each game, you know, we haven't played well on the road, but even we're coming home, we dropped two at home, so it's more of us just putting it all together and playing good in all three phases, which we haven't done, and we need to get off to a good start. If we get off to a good start and the quarterback plays well, then that's what's going to…it relies on the quarterback. If he plays well, then we're going to get off to a good start.

Q. I know you talked about the importance of these two games and the stretch run, but it's also getting to be an important time in recruiting with kids wanting to make official visits and things like that. How much of a balancing act is it, and how much multitasking do you have to do now that recruiting is starting to pick up?
CHARLIE STRONG: There's still a ton of recruits out there. We had a lot of them here the other night. The recruiting process, it's going to take care of itself. We're going to get who we're going to get, and we're going to get some really good players. It is a balancing act, and some of the guys who are the mid-semester guys, you've got to get them in here in December so they can get a look before they make their decision. But I feel really good about recruiting right now.

Q. It seems like every time you guys throw the ball to John Burt, something good happens. Is that something you've got to look at and say somehow we've got to get this kid a little more involved?
CHARLIE STRONG: Yeah, the thing about Burt, he's a threat and he can make things happen when the ball is in the air. He can go up and get it and he can make the catches. Anytime you're throwing the ball and it's in his vicinity, he's going to come down with it. You know, look at the first play the other night and been able to throw him some bubble (screens), but the ball, we're going to get the ball in his hands, and it's just a matter of us making that throw and getting it to him.

Q. Another recruiting question if you will. What is your message to offensive players who might not might be concerned about who's going to be the play caller, what the system is going to look like, who the coaches are going to be?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you know what happens, too, the University sells itself a lot, so a lot of times when we talk to recruits, their concern is, hey, Coach, not so much who the play caller is but how do I fit in, what position I'm going to play. Really what number do I want. That's the key there, what number can I get. That's the first thing I ask them because that's what a lot of them want to know.

When you look at the recruiting process, we'll be fine because those guys, they understand it, and they see it, and they understand what's going on.

Q. You bring up fast start, and what can you do to raise the probability that you might have one? Do you script plays on offense? What do you do to make sure that you don't get

that slow start, especially on the road?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, you'd like to start off like we did the other night, throw the ball down the field and let Burt go get it and run it down. But what you like to do any time you're on the road is that you need to establish and get first downs and move the ball, then when the opportunity presents itself where you can go over the top of it, go take a throw down the field.

But you have to move the ball and our offense needs to stay on the field. It can't be one of those three and outs and turn the ball over, then all of a sudden here they come with some momentum. You can go out there on defense and stop them, make them punt the ball back away, but offensively we've got to establish, and once you create first downs then it's going to lead to touchdowns.

Q. Ahead of the game, Vance Bedford and Jay Norvell both told me that a lot of guys were going to get more opportunities against Kansas, and we saw that. One of those guys that stood out was DeShon Elliott. Why did it take so long to get him more involved in the game plan?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, he was hurt the first part of the season, so he missed the first six weeks of the season, so that was tough, so he had to get back and get to learning.

Q. Did he do enough in that game to earn some more playing time?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, it depends on how the game is going to go. You're looking at two vets with Dylan Haines and Jason Hall. We're going to play the young guys; it just depends on the flow of the game.

Q. On your protocol for the road you're not changing anything like an intense movie or bringing Navy Seals or anything?
CHARLIE STRONG: (Laughing) No, you know what we need to do is it isn't so much what we do, it's just how our guys handle it. I'd say this, not to make an excuse, we didn't get into when we went out to play Iowa State, we didn't get into Ames until like 9:30 or 10:00 at night because of the weather that was here that day, but that's no excuse why we lost the game because we had all day on Saturday to get prepared for it. Usually with an early start, the guys don't have much, you get them in and the time when they get up it's time to go play so they don't have to sit around all day.

Q. You've got Skyler Howard who can run the ball, Wendell Smallwood, Rushel Shell. Can you speak to their (West Virginia's) run game and how effective they are?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, when you think about Howard, the thing he does, he's sitting there and he can make the throws, but also he can pull it down and run with it, a very good dual quarterback. And then when you look at Smallwood, he's a back with a lot of speed, has made some big long runs. I think he broke a couple against some of the opponents. And then you look at Shell, he's just a power back. I remember facing him when we were at Louisville. He was at Pittsburgh before he transferred over to West Virginia, but you're looking at three guys in there, I think they're going to run the football, and Smallwood is averaging over 100 yards rushing, so we're going to have to stop the run. In order for us to win this game, we've got to go stop the run.

Q. About Malik [Jefferson], what was going on with him, and is everything okay moving

forward? Do you expect him to miss any practice this week? Was it a stomach issue or something?
CHARLIE STRONG: Malik is fine. He'll be okay.

Q. I'm just curious if you talked to Shaka [Smart] before they went to China and kind of what your thoughts would be on opening the season overseas.
CHARLIE STRONG: Actually I spoke to Shaka before he left, and he was just calling to wish us luck on the game. But I don't know about opening games overseas. I love playing right here.

Q. With so many young players in the secondary, how much of a role model and leader have you seen or has Duke Thomas been to the younger players?
CHARLIE STRONG: Duke has been great for the young players, and they all gravitate to him. He's done a really good job, and the thing you like about Duke, there's no ego, and we've moved him around so much. He's played corner, and when we go to our speed package, he's one of our linebackers, a guy who's in drop, a guy who blitzes. But he does a great job coaching. If you ever come out to practice, he's always coaching them, whether it be Holton Hill or whether it be [Kris] Boyd or [Davante] Davis. All three of those guys, he's coaching them up.

The other day we're standing out there during a walk through, and I saw he had [DeShon] Elliott back there and P.J. [Locke] where he was telling them, hey, when we call this coverage, this is what you've got to look for. If you're watching the game, anytime there's a short split, he's yelling it to let them know, hey, short split here, letting them know what route is coming so they'll get locked in, because a lot of times those guys just line up. They don't see the split or the receiver, they're just knowing, hey, I've got to go cover that guy. But a lot splits will tell you what the route is coming.

Q. I know you follow boxing. Why has it been so hard for your team to bounce back after they take that first shot in the mouth, and how much have you impressed upon them that that could happen this week and they're going to have to be ready for that?
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, and that's the thing, we've got to keep preaching to them. We play well, we can't let one fall. You've got to continue to play and continue to get better, and the only way that happens is you've got to be prepared for it and you don't listen to what everyone says and you don't need to have a pat on the back. It's all about just continuing to go get the next one and work hard to go get the next one and stay focused and stay locked in.

Q. You mentioned going to the bowl game for the seniors, but that's a pretty big deal for the program as a whole and for the younger guys, too, right, in terms of the practices that you get and building for next year?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, it is, and it's good because you really know now that you play so many young guys, the bowl games, when you talk about practices, you know who the players are now. It used to be a time when those guys were all redshirted, which we don't have many. We done played most of them. So now those guys have played and they're really locked into it, so you don't have to worry so much when you get to a bowl game that this guy can play. We know who the players are now. But you want to extend your season and you want the practices.

Q. You guys get out to the good start that you say you wanted, get a nice lead, then Kansas

kind of gets back into it. How do you teach a team to keep mashing the gas when you've got them down?
CHARLIE STRONG: Yeah, we got up in that game and then we let them into it with some throws, then we turned the ball over down there. And the thing is you've just got to keep playing. Our guys, you can't ever relax. You try to tell them, don't ever look at the scoreboard, just play. You have to get better each and every play and don't worry about the opponent. It's all about how you play and how you go about it.

You know, to let them back into it but see us make the goal line stand and then them missing a field goal right there at the end probably gave us momentum to come back out the second half and go play as well as we did.

Q. What do you like most about your offense right now, and what concerns you the most?
CHARLIE STRONG: There's always concerns because knowing this, when you don't move the ball, you don't score points and that's always a concern for you. But as long as our quarterback continues to improve…the other night we threw the ball well, which we didn't do a week ago, and running the football is what you really like because I think that we're a physical team and when we come off the ball you've got two big backs.

[Johnathan] Gray is a small back, but when we get [Chris] Warren back, you have in form two and have two big backs that can pound people, and you can run the football and be physical at the point of attack.

Q. At the start of the season you look at the way the schedule works out and we all kind of thought that this was going to be the week that you guys had had to make or break for y'all, and here you are…
CHARLIE STRONG: I'm glad you told me that. You should have told me that at the beginning.

Q. Do you attack this game with a different mindset because of how important it is?
CHARLIE STRONG: Oh, it's important, and you hate to (attack it differently) there's no denying it. Our players understand that. That's why all of a sudden, like I said, on Sunday what we usually do is we focus on the game before and then you go through it and pick up the big plays and show them offense, defense, special teams. But I didn't do any of that yesterday. What I did is I just got up and talked about the guys who played well on offense, guys who played well on defense, guys who played well on special teams, and I said, we'll bury this game and let's get on to West Virginia right now because we usually don't start the West Virginia prep until Tuesday.

Q. Duke [Thomas] said you went to him before the game about wearing No. 28. What was your thought process on that, and also, the guys seemed to really like the throwback uniforms. Is that a look that you might keep in the rotation and maybe bring it out once a year?
CHARLIE STRONG: They told you that, huh? They told you they want that throwback. Freddie (Steinmark) meant so much to this program, and our players had a chance to see the movie (My All American). We took the upperclassmen first and then we took the freshmen, because usually when we walk out, then we hit his picture (on the scoreboard) down there. Now they know what it really means when you talk about his passion and the way he played the game.

So I told Duke, I said I want you to wear No. 28 because you're a defensive back, and just the way he's played this season and how he's went about it, because a lot of times guys get to their senior year and they don't play hard. Duke has done it and he's been one of our most consistent players. I wanted them to realize what was going on that day. I didn't even say much to them until I said right before we were at the hotel, I was talking about, hey, when we get out on the field, there's going to be a dedication and some of the players are going to be out on the field. I want you guys to walk up and shake their hand.

They didn't even know anything about the jerseys or the pants or anything. I didn't say anything to them. We go out and warm up, then we come back in, and then I say, this is our uniforms and this is the way we're going to go play tonight. If some of you don't feel like you can play like this, then just stay in here; I don't need you out there. I don't want you out there.

But when they saw it they all started jumping and screaming. You know how some guys are, well, my shoes aren't broke in, but hey, let me tell you this, some of you aren't going to play that much anyway, so they won't get broken in. But the guys that do play, then put some water in there. It'll soften up for you.

Q. I don't know how much you follow what's going on at Missouri with some of the players refusing to practice and do any football activities. I'd like to know how you feel about college athletes taking such strong stands on social issues.
CHARLIE STRONG: Well, if you look at it, they have such a strong voice on campus and so many people look to them whenever there is an issue. But, I haven't really followed what has happened at Missouri. But any time an athlete takes a stand on a social issue, then you know that you're going to garner a lot of attention because people do follow athletes, and they want to hear what their message is, and making sure it's the right message and they're doing the right thing.

Q. I know you like to have the upperclassmen do things first and I know it's been a transition year in terms of the leadership and everything, but what how do you balance that, and when you played all the young players Saturday night, was there a message to the older guys before that game that we're going to be playing more young guys?
CHARLIE STRONG: No. You know, the players… the thing you realize, players know players, and they know who the good players are. You don't ever have to…they understand that as a coach that you're not saying, hey, I'm playing this guy because we recruited this guy and he's young. No, they see it at practice. They watch guys work. You look out there with our two corners, with those two, they've played well all season long, actually the three corners we played. Malik has played well. You saw it in the two offensive linemen. But you don't ever want to get into where you're playing one against the other, where you feel like the upperclassman is thinking, hey, he's going to go the route of a young player. But they understand, and they know who the good players are. You don't have to say much because they know it right away.

Q. You said some of the seniors tend to maybe check out a little bit and then you've got a guy like Peter Jinkens, kind of this year's version of John Harris, not only production, but I remember after the Cal game he was very supportive of Nick Rose. What switch has gone off with him this year?

CHARLIE STRONG: You know what happened? And not all seniors, but you get a guy like Pete [Jenkins] who comes into his senior year and has an unbelievable season, and I told him that just the other day. I said, “You know what, Pete, I'm just so happy to see you step up and become that guy finally because it was always there, but the light finally came on your senior year.’

He’s having an unbelievable year. Duke is playing well. Taylor Doyle is having a really good year, Sedrick Flowers. But some of the seniors that are playing, even Daje [Johnson], look at the turn that he's made. But the guys that are playing are having a good year for us, and that's why when Chip asked that question about the young guys, you have such a good collection of seniors that it doesn't bother them when they see young guys out on the field because some of them are helping them, so now with that happening, then they realize that, hey, I need to help develop this young guy because if we get this guy developed the right way then he's going to help us. They're just looking for guys to help them. It's not about what class they are. Hey, if he's a good player, put him out there, Coach. And I tell them all the time, I'm going to play the best player. I'm not one of those guys who's going to walk in there I know of you guys are seniors and you've been here a long time, but everybody wants the best players on the field. Even you as a teammate want that to happen.