MEN’S BASKETBALL

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The Bears would only experience one more loss, which came in the Big 12 Championship against Oklahoma State, where they fell 74-83. That was their last game before entering the NCAA men’s basketball tournament bubble in Indianapolis.

“There’s never a good time to lose, but it’s better to lose now than in the NCAA tournament,” Drew said.

Despite these two losses, the Bears had their best season in program history, with a preseason ranking of No. 2, 28-3 overall record and 13-1 conference record. The Bears held on to their No. 2 rank the whole season except for one week when Michigan replaced them and the Bears fell to No. 3. Additionally, the Bears were Big 12 champions, making it their first conference title in 71 years.

Story by Jillian Veldey
Photos courtesy of Baylor Photography

The Bears won their first National Championship in program history during the 2021 season. They finished their 2019-2020 season with a program-best conference record of 15-3, earning them a No. 1 seed in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament for the first time in program history, only to be stopped mid-stride after arriving for their first game of the Big 12 Championship against Kansas State, where they heard the tournament would be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the offseason, Drew won the lottery when three of his five starting players who declared for the 2020 NBA Draft decided to pull their names out and return for one final season at Baylor. Guards Davion Mitchell, Teague and Jared Butler who had previously put their name in the draft, while maintaining eligibility spoke of unfinished business that they felt they would be leaving in Waco if deciding to stay in the draft.

“In the spring I decided to put my name in the NBA draft to evaluate my professional career,” Butler said. “Through it, all one thing remained on my mind: unfinished business. Baylor, I’m coming back. Let’s win a national championship.”

The Bears’ 2020 season began at the Jimmy V Classic without their head coach Scott Drew, suddenly who was out after testing positive for COVID-19 after leaving the Las Vegas bubble where the Bears dominated Louisiana Lafayette and Washington 112-82 and 86-52 respectively. The Bears pushed on without their leader, defeating No. 5 ranked Illinois 82-69.

“It started off with the defensive end, getting stops and getting in transition and then sharing the ball,” junior guard Davion Mitchell said. “It really hurt them when we started getting dunks and sharing the ball, getting open 3’s and just getting steals. We knew they would tap out eventually.”

During the Jimmy V Classic, the Bears were set to play No. 1-ranked Gonzaga in a heavily awaited No. 1 vs. No. 2 match-up; however, Gonzaga had to pull out last minute due to positive COVID-19 tests within their program.

“We knew it was going to be one of only three meetings with two No. 1’s,” Drew said, referring to a split decision between The Associated Press poll and coaches’ polls. “We were hoping the coaches knew more than the media. If both of us are still ranked there when we do play, it will only mean we’ve both had good years and it will be even bigger.”

The majority of the rest of their season followed in a similar fashion, dominating their opponents. Their season was paused to several positive COVID-19 tests amongst players, coaches and various staff personnel in the program. The Bears were unable to practice or play for 21 days, which was evident in the following weeks after resuming, when the Bears were handed their only two losses of the season.

“I think it really showed a lot of heart from our guys,” Drew said. “I’ve talked to a lot of coaches who’ve had long pauses. Normally, they say three games until you’re normal. Minimum.”

In the following two weeks, the Bears were handed their only two losses of the season, one being a conference where the Bears traveled to the infamous Allen Fieldhouse falling 71-58 to the Jayhawks.

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