

Aflac Kickoff Game: Baylor vs. Auburn

Saturday, September 5, 2026

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Auburn Tigers

Coach Alex Golesh

Postgame Press Conference



Auburn - 17, Baylor - 16

ALEX GOLESH: Appreciate everybody being here. I just told these guys it certainly wasn't pretty in a lot of ways, but finding a way to win is the first step, and they found a way to win.

A lot of credit to this Baylor team. Man, I thought really good plan defensively. They weren't going to let us get behind them, a really good plan. Changing it up. I thought they did a good job stopping the run. I thought they played really hard.

For us to be able to churn out yards, we didn't create enough explosives offensively to generate enough. And you saw we pressed a little bit to try to create some, and for the most part, it wasn't great.

I thought defensively once we settled in, what we were able to do on third down in the second, third, fourth quarter, I thought we did a really solid job. The fourth downs are what you want back. Certainly the big fourth down at the end. That game should be over, and we obviously gave one up.

Creating the turnovers defensively was huge. Eric Winters absolutely huge there at the end. You can use whatever cliché you want, game of inches. It most certainly is in every way.

I thought the two fourth-down stops defensively to be able to go with the turnovers was the difference in the game. The ability for us offensively to be able to go and drive one down was big off of a fourth down.

I thought special teams, for the most part, was relatively clean, was a nonfactor. We went after a couple punts, didn't get home. I thought we made a really terrible decision there catching the ball inside the 6.

I think overall you certainly are glad that you can coach off of a win. I do think that there's a lot to be said about going and playing a good football team week one. I think that's a really good football team in the sense that they will go and have a lot of success in that league. They play really hard.

The quarterback is a tough, tough -- if you've got any question on how tough that kid is, like I said earlier in the week, I don't know him, but he got banged up early, and that is a tough, tough football player. I've got to find a way to tell him that I truly feel that way.

Outside of that, I just told our guys humble yourself enough to allow yourself to get coached. We'll take in a win, but we've got to get a whole lot better offensively, protecting the quarterback. We've got to get a whole lot better being able to run the football the way we want to run the football. We've got to get a whole lot better with a couple of decisions.

I thought Byrum played really well. There's three plays he would tell you he wants back. We'll take it in week one. We've obviously got to clean that up.

I thought defensively all we've talked about is something good happens, good; play the next play, something bad happens, good, play the next play. Found a way to keep playing the next play.

Proud of the kids and the win, but we've got to get a whole lot better. I'll open it up to questions.

Q. To have your defense play essentially 100 plays but then to make a play like that on the goal line, what does that mean to see them continuing to have to answer the bell time and time and time again?

ALEX GOLESH: It's who we have to be on defense for us to have success. You saw two offenses that were going to go fast. I thought they did a great job of playing it as fast as imaginably possible. They did a great job of snapping it.

I would tell you the fact that that's what they've had to go through during camp and prepare for that gave us the opportunity to go play like that. I think mentality-wise what



Durk has brought to that defense where you just play the next play and play the next play.

You saw from a body-language standpoint there's a lot to clean up. But, like, man, I'm excited to watch the film and see our guys just kept resetting and playing, kept resetting and playing. And that's what it takes to win.

Then on the flip of it, I saw every time they came off the field or went on the field, it was like, man, we've got to get the ball back for our offense. We've got to get the ball back for our offense. Man, as the head coach in week one, if that's the mentality, we'll take it. But the culture that we've built defensively and the ability to just go keep playing the next play, a lot of credit to -- and not just Coach Durk, and certainly coach, but that defensive staff and honestly even more to the defensive players for buying into it.

Q. Speaking of the next play, on the touchdown Eric Winters was there. I don't know if it's a possibility or not, but for him to bounce back in the next play and make the play he did, what does it say about his mentality? Then I think he finished with 11 or so tackles in the game. Just his overall play tonight?

ALEX GOLESH: Yeah, it's -- for a young cat, he's special. He really is. But he works like that. That's how he practices. That's how he comes in the building every day. It's the same person every day. For a guy in his second year, he's special.

Like, what his mental is to just come in and go to work and try to lead. He's not very outspoken yet. I'm going to keep pressing him to be outspoken because the guys around him respect him.

I told him last night in our team meeting, man, you're one of a couple guys that I cannot wait because of the off-season you had, because of the camp you had, I cannot wait to go see you play. I just told him.

We gave him the game ball, career high in tackles and finishing the way he finished, a little bit -- inside that locker room a little bit ironic because we literally just talked about it last night. I said you're going to make a play that makes a difference in this game. I just sense it. He certainly did. Pretty special for a young cat.

Q. First three-pick game for Byrum in his career, but after that third one, he goes on the next drive and leads them to a touchdown. What does that say about him and just kind of that short memory that you really want out of your quarterback in that situation?

ALEX GOLESH: Yeah, kept going over on the bench, are

you good? Coach, I'm good, man, with a smile. It's part of being a veteran, part of being ready for the moment. He's a special football player, special human.

Man, I didn't realize that's the first one. I guess it is. These guys made it really hard. Again, I blame us more than Byrum. We tried to force some things to try to push it down the field where -- man, I just felt like we kept driving and stalling right in that middle of the field, that 50 to 40, and I felt like we just had to go end it.

Man, I take more blame for the picks than, to be honest with you, Byrum. That's on us as much as anybody, really on me trying to force it a little bit. So I've got to be better. I will be.

Q. What do you make of the offensive line's performance today and particularly what you guys were able to get in the running game?

ALEX GOLESH: I want to see the film. I thought they made it really hard. I thought they had a really good plan. I'm not deflecting the question. I thought they had a really good plan to load the box when they felt like we were running it.

I thought when we got going and got some momentum in terms of our tempo, I thought we ran it decent.

You could tell we tried to get the run game going a million different ways. We tried it in how -- Byrum, we rotated backs. It felt like the whole first quarter and a half, maybe even the whole first half, we were a little bit off. Whether it was in the box, whether it was on the perimeter, it's hard. Obviously I see it on the iPad. It's hard to tell. It felt like we were just a little bit off everywhere, and it was like different people taking different turns being a little bit off.

I'm excited to see the film and see where that really was, but again, not deflecting it, I'm sure we've got to get a whole lot better, and we will. But what I was proud of was that last touchdown just where we were. We were, I think, on the 17- or 18-yard-line, and it was like, we're going to get into 12 personnel, and we're going to run the football, and we're going to run it with Byrum, and we're going to punch this thing in, mind you, with two sub offensive linemen in there and find a way.

You saw Byrum's toughness there. You saw the O-line grit it out, the tight ends grit it out, the wideouts grit it out. So that part was positive, but I would tell you we didn't run it as well as we needed to.

Q. You mentioned the defensive game plan for Baylor last year. Aranda stayed in to two high and Jackson

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Arnold absolutely shredded him. Do you think the influence of the new defensive coordinator from Kansas State coming over changed that scheme defensively, or do you think maybe Dave Aranda switched after what happened last year?

ALEX GOLESH: I've got no idea. Maybe ask Dave. But it certainly looked different. I thought there were some elements of it. When they guessed shot, they guessed that we were going to push the ball down the field. You saw some two high. I thought they did a good job of feeling like they could load the box and allowing some underneath stuff.

You saw, as we were trying to get Byrum settled, we were good at dinking and dunking underneath. They weren't going to let you get behind him. Whether that was single high, or two high, they weren't going to let us get behind him. They were going to let us keep taking the underneath stuff. And they did a good job of mixing up the single high and two high to where we couldn't quite get a feel for it.

I think the two-minute drive is maybe what I was as irate as anything about because I felt we had a good beat, and we shot ourselves in the foot, I thought. Again, I'll take all the blame there when we got inside the 25. I felt like we got ourselves out of rhythm. We had a good feel for what was going on, and we jacked it up.

Like I said at the beginning, I thought they had a really, really good plan to keep it all in front of them, load the box when they had to. They weren't going to let Byrum run around, and beat him at least early with his feet. Did a good job muddying up the box, twist game. It was hairier than you wanted it to be. It did look drastically different than a year ago, yes, sir.

That was a long-winded answer to your question. Yes, they did a really good job, and it looked way different.

Q. You went to a lot of developing depth and you really needed it. You mentioned you get the game-winning drive with a couple of backup guards, you lose two edges in the game too. Just your thoughts on that. I know it's probably too early, but any early thoughts on the guys that were banged up?

ALEX GOLESH: Yeah, it sounded like Womack and C.K. Murray are going to be just fine. Cole Skinner was backup there if we needed to go back out. We were prepared for a two-minute drive, four-minute drive. We were preparing for both as we were going. It sounded like Strand was good to go as well for the end there.

My hope is everything -- we're going to be maybe just a

little bit banged up, but I think we'll be in a good spot. It was a physical game. It was a physical game.

Q. You kind of answered a few questions ago, but how do you assess your run game today? Byrum ran the ball almost twice as much as Jeremiah did, but maybe not the totals you were looking for on the ground. What changes would you make? What did you see out there about how they were able to kind of slow you guys down on the ground? And how do you get right Byrum running the ball?

ALEX GOLESH: The intent going in was certainly not to run Byrum a ton. We had enough run game in with him that, as we needed to move the chains, we were going to. There was a handful of designed runs. Some of that was obviously scrambles, a couple of short yardages, which is pretty normal.

Like I said, I thought they did a good job of muddying the box up. I thought they did -- I think that front's really good. That front that these guys got is really good. They did a good job of plugging backers, some inside cross-dog stuff that would take away the run. I thought they did a good job high-gearing these ends to not allow you to really get outside of it.

Then it felt like, in run situations, they did a good job of having an extra safety in the box, and like even when they were playing quarters, that guy was adding in there about as fast as you could imaginably go.

We tried to take some advantages. You saw some RPO game clear that out. I'm giving you a long-winded answer to your question because I want to see the film. Like I thought early we were just a little bit off. We can't be. You play in this league, you're going to get your brain beat in if you're a little bit off. So we've got to obviously get a whole lot better.

Q. There was only just one drop in the passing game today. What does that kind of say about the ceiling of the offense this year?

ALEX GOLESH: Yeah, the expectation is we catch the ball. I guess that's -- I don't remember the one drop, but I felt like those guys did a solid job. Got to keep not dropping the ball.

Q. In fall camp you talked about establishing the identity of this team. Would you say that today represented the identity that you all established throughout fall camp?

ALEX GOLESH: That's a great question. Today what I



... when all is said, we're done.®

saw was a team that played together. I mentioned it earlier. Defense would get a stop, come over to the offense, man, we got you. Offense would have to punt, hey, we've got to get the ball back for the offense, from the defense.

When I tell you that that has been as big of a focus to bring these guys together, it's probably the hardest thing to do in college football right now. I'm not saying we are perfect, but I saw a bunch of dudes that played for each other. I saw a bunch of dudes that genuinely love each other. They picked each other up.

When I tell you that I had six people on the sideline looking for you, tell me if somebody's complaining, somebody's looking the other way, somebody's not locked in. And I kept asking, are we good? We're good. We're good. We're good. We're good.

They are intentional about playing together. They are intentional about being connected.

Were we the most violent team on the field today? I don't know, I want to see the film. It was a physical game. I thought there were times we were, and I thought there were times we weren't.

Are we a mentally tough football team? I would tell you we are today. I thought they showed a lot of grit. I thought they never, never put their head down.

I talked about this next-play mentality on both sides of the ball. I thought they did that. I never saw like, oh, man -- and there was plenty of opportunity offensively for sure to be like, come on, or defensively if like, man, we keep fourth down stop, fourth down, stop, turnover, like where are the points? Never saw it. Didn't see it in the locker room.

So I would tell you we took a giant step in terms of our identity. If we are going to stay connected and we're going to go finish football games in the fourth quarter and that's our identity, I'll take it, but I thought it was a step.

That's why I was really excited to play a good football team, and you guys will write whatever you want in terms of how good Baylor is. That's a tough, gritty football team. That quarterback is tough and gritty. That O-line was tough and gritty. That running back ran his ever -- I don't know -- 91 yards on 25 -- that is -- Dawson Pendergrass is a tough football player.

I thought they tackled well. I thought they kept it -- like I think that's a good football team.

What they turn out to be, I don't know. But I'm so happy

that we got to play a good football team to where we can coach off of it, and I'm glad we won too, but that we could coach off of it and say, man, like, it's only going to be better. So humble yourself enough to get your butt coached, and I do believe that we will.

I know that's long-winded, but I was wondering that walking off the field too. Is that who we are? If it's the fact that Eric Winters is going to go strain at the very end and our defensive front, as frustrated as they were about not getting as much rush as they wanted to, is going to go rush him as fast as they can.

I saw guys like Xavier and Elijah just continue to lift everybody up. Like if that's our identity, then we took a step. It's week one. It's a long season, but it was a step.

Q. It felt like whenever the defense needed a play tonight, it was either Eric Winters or Elijah Melendez. Talk about the impact that both of those guys had and how they helped the defense pull through when things got tough.

ALEX GOLESH: Yeah, two young guys, second-year guys that both -- I know I talked about Eric earlier, but Elijah, man, you saw was a captain today, selected by the staff, and when we announced him, the entire defense was cheering. They respect him.

He works -- just like Eric, man, Elijah's a worker. Physically, obviously, he's a complete freak show, but he's a worker. He does it the right way. I'm going to continue to challenge him to be more vocal, because he's not. He's a lead-by-example guy, which I explained in here, is not actually leading.

We're going to continue to challenge him, but he does lead with the way he plays and his energy, and he has got a really, really bright future ahead of him. He's special. So's Eric. There's a bunch of those guys, but those two are really, really special.

Q. You only get the first win feeling once. I'm just curious what your emotions were up on that podium with the leather helmet on.

ALEX GOLESH: I only put the leather helmet on for a second because the guys made me. That's already going to become a meme, I know it. My daughter, I'm sure, is all over it already.

I don't know, my wife told me to let it sink in for just a second. Credit to these kids, man. These kids, this staff, we've got a really cool staff. We've got a bunch of kids that have bought in. Don't know what that results in, but I'm



certainly grateful to them. I told them that in the locker room. Grateful to them.

I know I get to sit up here and talk about it. It's never going to be about me. It never has been. Humbled and just continually humbled to be the head football coach here. I'm going to work as hard as anybody to continue to turn out wins. That's the only thing that matters. That's what I was hired to do while continuing to mentor a bunch of kids that need it.

I don't know. We'll enjoy it. Get to watch the film on the way home. Enjoy it with my crew tonight, come in tomorrow and get ready for Southern Miss. We've got to go be better next week.

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