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Big 12 spring football in review

BY BLAIR KERKHOFF | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Along with spring colors comes ... college football.

Off-season workouts concluded for seven more Big 12 programs with Saturday's spring games, bringing the number of teams that have stored pads to 10. Only Kansas and Kansas State remain with games next weekend.

The league breaks in new coaches at Texas Tech and Kansas, replaces record-setting quarterbacks across the board, and if there's been a theme to spring ball in the Big 12, it's a return to offensive balance. Some of the league's top flinging teams are talking more about ground games.

The hybrid outside linebacker/defensive end — the player who can steam into the backfield or drop into coverage — continues to grow as a defensive weapon.

With the redbuds blooming in the background, here's the Big 12 spring snapshot.

BAYLOR

•**Coach:** Art Briles, 3rd season in Waco

•**2009:** 4-8 overall, 1-7 Big 12 (6th South)

•**Quarterback:** Nobody in the Big 12 is more important to his team than **Robert Griffin (below)**. With him, the Bears had visions of their first bowl appearance as a conference member. After his season-ending knee injury in the third game, hopes evaporated into another losing season. The wonderfully athletic Griffin, who has been compared to Vince Young, went through live drills but didn't scrimmage in the spring. He's expected to be 100 percent for fall camp.

•**Outlook:** The Bears replace defensive stalwarts Joe Pawelek and Jordan Lake, and it's time for Phil Taylor, the Penn State transfer, to step up on the defensive line. Briles says this is his most athletic team in three years.

•**Stock:** rising

COLORADO

•**Coach:** Dan Hawkins, 5th season in Boulder

•**2009:** 3-9 overall, 2-6 Big 12 (5th North)

•**Quarterback:** It's the never-ending story. Tyler Hansen or Cody Hawkins? Hawkins, the coach's son, has started each of the last two years, with Hansen eventually replacing him. Hansen was listed first on the depth chart after the spring game, but Dan Hawkins said no final decision has been made.

•**Outlook:** Hawkins will be coaching for his survival, and there are pieces here to expect improvement. The Buffs should have one of the league's better offensive lines, a play-making receiver in Scotty McKnight and seven returning defensive starters. But they have to become less of a self-inflicted wounds team (penalties and turnovers).

•**Stock:** rising

IOWA STATE

•**Coach:** Paul Rhoads, 2nd season in Ames

•**2009:** 7-6 overall, 3-5 Big 12 (4th North)

•**Quarterback:** The Cyclones return one of the league's most experienced players here in Austen Arnaud, who will become a third-year starter this fall. But it's only his second year in the no-huddle set, and Rhoads said he expects Arnaud to take a big step this season as the Cyclones look to improve on an offense that averaged 20.5 points last season.

•**Outlook:** A better-than-expected season included a remarkable victory over Nebraska and ended with a bowl triumph. But the schedule turns nasty and some top-line defensive talent has moved on.

•**Stock:** falling

KANSAS

•**Coach:** Turner Gill, 1st season in Lawrence

•**2009:** 5-7 overall, 1-7 Big 12 (6th North)

•**Quarterback:** Kale Pick or Jordan Webb or Quinn Mecham or Christian Matthews or Jacob Morse or Conner Teahan. Quite a depth chart. Pick is the only candidate who has taken a snap in a Division I game, getting mostly mop-up duty for Todd Reesing last year (there was that late Texas Tech appearance). Webb, a freshman, has looked good in the spring and Mecham compiled big numbers in junior college last season. And Teahan has rings. Not for college football but championship jewelry nevertheless.

•**Outlook:** Whoever gets the QB call, he'll run a multiple offense, sometimes with two backs. And he'll be well-schooled by coaches. Turner Gill ran one of the game's most dynamic offenses at Nebraska in the early 1980s, and offensive coordinator Chuck Long was the Heisman runner-up in 1985 at Iowa.

•**Stock:** rising

KANSAS STATE

•**Coach:** Bill Snyder, 2nd season of second term, 19th overall, in Manhattan

•**2009:** 6-6 overall, 4-4 Big 12 (tied 2nd North)

•**Quarterback:** The battle to replace Grant Gregory will continue into the fall with Carson Coffman, who was last year's opening-game starter, and Collin Klein. Samuel Lamur's inexperience has put him behind, but he's an exceptional athlete who could fight his way into playing time.

•**Outlook:** In his first year back, Snyder reshaped K-State into a division contender, and the Wildcats entered the final game with a chance to play for the Big 12 championship. This year, K-State builds around Daniel Thomas, the conference's rushing leader and major threat with a direct snap.

•**Stock:** steady

MISSOURI

•**Coach:** Gary Pinkel, 10th season in Columbia

•**2009:** 8-5 overall, 4-4 Big 12 (tied 2nd North)

•**Quarterback:** It's less about the quarterback and more about the targets. **Blaine Gabbert (left)** is one of the league's best and won eight games as a first-year starter. He's the league's top returning quarterback by total yards thrown and passer rating. But a large chunk of those yards went to a pair of wide receivers no longer in the fold: Danario Alexander and Jared Perry, who combined for 159 receptions and 20 touchdowns. Tight end Michael Egnew had an excellent spring and could be the Tigers' leading receiver.

•**Outlook:** You trust the offense to get it done. It's about the defense. Mizzou ranked in the Big 12's bottom half of most major defensive categories and the Tigers lost linebacker Sean Weatherspoon.

•**Stock:** steady

NEBRASKA

•**Coach:** Bo Pelini, 3rd season in Lincoln

•**2009:** 10-4 overall, 6-2 Big 12 (1st North)

•**Quarterback:** There's intrigue here. Zac Lee started 12 of 14 games last season, yanked for two starts because the offense stalled. But replacement Cody Green didn't fare much better. Lee then had his best game in the Holiday Bowl victory over Arizona. He sat out the spring recovering from hand surgery, and another candidate, speedy freshman Taylor Martinez, made the most of his opportunity.

•**Outlook:** Most starters return from one of the nation's best defensive units, but dominant Ndamukong Suh will be missed. The Huskers will be the division favorites, but clarity is needed at quarterback.

•**Stock:** steady

OKLAHOMA

•**Coach:** Bob Stoops, 12th season in Norman

•**2009:** 8-5 overall, 5-3 Big 12 (tied 3rd South)

•**Quarterback:** An awful year by Oklahoma standards means the Sooners are a year ahead of schedule in the **Landry Jones** era. Jones (above), who got the call when Sam Bradford went down twice, appeared in all 13 games and put up solid numbers. He'll need to reduce the 14 interceptions (league high), but he's coming off the best game of his career, 418 yards and three touchdowns against Stanford in the Sun Bowl.

•**Outlook:** Nobody will lose more talent in the NFL draft — as many as four first-rounders — but that doesn't change expectations. The Sooners will be gunning for the division, conference and national titles. They'll build a defense around studs Travis Lewis at linebacker and Jeremy Beal up front.

•**Stock:** rising

OKLAHOMA STATE

•**Coach:** Mike Gundy, sixth season in Stillwater

•**2009:** 9-4 overall, 6-2 Big 12 (2nd South)

•**Quarterback:** Introducing Brandon Weeden, the 26-year-old former minor-league baseball player who succeeds Zac Robinson. Actually, Weeden got a taste last year when he rallied the Cowboys to a victory over Colorado when Robinson got injured. He'll be running the offense of new coordinator Dana Holgorsen, who oversaw the nation's top passing attack at Houston last season.

•**Outlook:** Holgorsen, who spent eight seasons at Texas Tech, takes over play-calling duties from Gundy, who said he wanted to devote more effort to the entire team. Even Mike Leach stopped by in the spring to share some spread offense wisdom. The defense will need plenty of attention with nine new starters. But a good one returns in 2008 starting linebacker Orie Lemon, who missed last season with an injury.

•**Stock:** falling

TEXAS

•**Coach:** Mack Brown, 13th season in Austin

•**2009:** 13-1 overall, 8-0 Big 12 (1st South, conference champion)

•**Quarterback:** Lousy circumstances surrounded Garrett Gilbert's first big moment, when he took over for Colt McCoy in the first quarter of the BCS title game. Texas will make the transition easier for Gilbert by putting him under center and giving the offense more of a running game. Play-action passes were a big part of his success in the spring game.

•**Outlook:** Despite the first new quarterback since 2006, Texas remains the conference favorite. Probably more questions on the defensive side — at linebacker and the interior — but the secondary should be among the nation's best. Spring ball helped the offensive line adjust to new blocking schemes as Texas seeks a more balanced attack.

•**Stock:** steady

TEXAS A&M

•**Coach:** Mike Sherman, third season in College Station

•**2009:** 6-7 overall, 3-5 Big 12 (5th South)

•**Quarterback:** Jerrod Johnson was used sparingly during spring workouts following arthroscopic shoulder surgery after last season, but he'll be back in the fall at full strength as one of the league's best. He led the conference in total offense and saved his best for the Texas game when he passed for 342 and four scores and rushed for 97 and a touchdown. He's starting to get some Heisman buzz.

•**Outlook:** The defense was the Big 12's worst — and it returns the nation's leader in sacks in Von Miller. Among the program's four new assistant coaches are defensive coordinator Tim DeRuyter, who shaped Air Force's top-notch unit, and former A&M linebacker great Dat Nguyen.

•**Stock:** steady

TEXAS TECH

•**Coach:** Tommy Tuberville, first season in Lubbock

•**2009:** 9-4 overall, 5-3 Big 12 (tied 3rd South)

•**Quarterback:** It used to work like this: identify the starter, pencil in about 4,500 yards and 40 touchdowns and call it good. Let's see what the new decade and new coach brings. The players remain, although Steven Sheffield and Taylor Potts were both injured during spring workouts. Tuberville said Sheffield had a slight edge in the early practice sessions.

•**Outlook:** The Red Raiders may not lead the nation in passing this season, but they rolled up big numbers during scrimmages. Among the new offensive wrinkles: some empty backfield sets and motion. On defense, Tech is switching to a 3-4 and it vows to be better against the run.

•**Stock:** falling