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texas tech

Texas Tech must shore up shaky defense

By John Henderson
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First-year Texas Tech coach Tommy Tuberville and his defensive coordinator, James Willis, came from the Southeastern Conference, where defenses eat raw meat and tailbacks with equal ferocity.

So imagine the culture shock they're experiencing getting used to coaching a bunch of toothless Red Raiders.

Texas Tech (3-3, 1-3 Big 12) comes to Folsom Field to play Colorado (3-3, 0-2) on Saturday with about as sorry a defensive skid of any school with no hyphen in its name.

The Red Raiders rank 102nd nationally in defense, allowing 434.8 yards per game, and have given up season highs in yards the last three weeks. It started with Iowa State gaining 441 yards. Iowa State's 52 points were its most against a major-college team in 15 years. Then came the 507 yards allowed in a 45-38 victory

over Baylor. Then came Saturday's 34-17 loss to Oklahoma State, when Texas Tech surrendered 581 yards.

In the SEC, where Tuberville coached Auburn for nine years and Willis was the associate head coach on Alabama's national title team last season, that isn't defense. It's indefensible.

"It's just basic," Willis told the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal over the weekend. "It's a guy's eyes in the wrong place. It's a guy missing a tackle. These are things we have to address and be honest with ourselves as far as, do we have the right people doing the right things? Are we doing the right things as a staff?"

To be fair, Tuberville inherited a defensive line with only one returning starter in senior Colby Whitlock.

The end result is games like Saturday's, when Oklahoma State's Justin Blackmon caught 10 passes for 207 yards and Kendall Hunter rushed for 130 yards. Now that's balance.

"We haven't been very good," Tuberville said Monday on the Big 12's media conference call. "We haven't tackled very well. We've made a lot of mental mistakes. The great thing is they're playing hard, they're practicing hard, they're trying to get better. It's new to them."

The good news for Tuberville? He inherited a typical Texas Tech quarterback producing calculator-popping numbers. Senior Taylor Potts has been even more productive than he was a



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year ago, when he was third nationally at 312.7 passing yards per game under former coach Mike Leach. Potts is averaging 312.5 yards per game, but he's much more efficient, having thrown 18 touchdown passes and only four interceptions. He had 22 TDs and 13 interceptions a year ago. He has recovered from getting his jaw banged up Saturday.

Tuberville's mission, however, is making Texas Tech less of a pass-happy novelty act and more of the conventional attack found in the SEC.

Despite ranking last in the Big 12 in rushing, the Red Raiders are showing improvement. Sophomore Eric Stephens had 99 yards rushing and senior Baron Batch had 83 against Oklahoma State, but the Cowboys dropped their entire student body into the secondary and dared Tuberville to call a running play.

Then again, how can Texas Tech run when it starts slower than a West Texas stagecoach with a busted wheel? The Red Raiders fell behind Texas 14-0, Iowa State 24-0 and Oklahoma State 21-0.

Texas Tech had three-and-out series on four of its first five possessions Saturday against Oklahoma State.

"There's no excuse for it," Red Raiders offensive coordinator Neal Brown told the Avalanche-Journal. "You play 12 games a year and if you're not ready to go, I don't understand it. I tell them all the time, 'It's 12 months for 12 games.'"

"So there's no excuse for not being ready to play in any game, especially on a home game when we had a sellout crowd."

Footnote.

Colorado's Oct. 30 game at Oklahoma will be televised by ESPN and will kick off at 7:15 p.m. Mountain time.

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