

December 31, 2009



Air Force - 47
Houston - 20

An Interview With:



THE MODERATOR: Troy, make an opening statement about the game, and then we'll open it up for comments.

COACH CALHOUN: Yes, sir. Just overall we played terrific football today. If you want to break it down into the three phases, you know, defense, offense, the kicking game, one by one, we really were outstanding.

Yet even above that, just the unity, the kind of team chemistry, the esprit that's part of these guys.

Special, special group. Be hard ever to not coach again and not have these guys that are seniors with us again. As much as they've given to our football program, and more importantly what these guys are going to do well down the road just through and through, these guys got the kind of heart and the kind of soul, they're going to do special stuff after they graduate from the Air Force Academy.

Q. Can you tell us what you did right before halftime with 17 seconds?

COACH CALHOUN: We tried to call a bootleg. What we wanted to do was either not get caught in the field of play, but the guys on the sideline, get out of their way, they're all prepped for that. We do that every week during the season. So it's something you put 'em through.

Probably realistically that's something that arises maybe once every two years, and yet to be able to have that occur, it just tells you our guys were sharp and really into it, hustled to get the ball snap.

I think it was snapped with about 3 seconds, so there was still a little bit of time there.

Q. Talk about your game plan offensively.

COACH CALHOUN: Just team-wise, I think it's easy to kind of get enamored with only a sector of the way you play. But we're one of those groups where you got to have contributions across the board.

I think anytime you're able to complement when you run the ball well with hitting some throws, that really opens up some big plays.

I think also some of those plays, two- or three-yard gains are now four- or five-yard gains after you complete a few balls.

Q. What made you so effective?

COACH CALHOUN: I tell you what, phenomenal preparation is where it starts. When we got here on Saturday, you could just sense something about our guys. I thought two years ago we were extraordinarily giddy to be here. Played with a lot of spark.

Last year, we were a little bit wide-eyed at some spots last year. Just being able to mix up some looks. We didn't bring as many five-man pressures today. We played a lot more where we rushed three. Anytime you rush three, you still have to find a way where you have to make the quarterback maneuver. We did that with our front three guys.

And then being able to mix our back looks. There were times we were playing five-under, three deep. There were times we were rushing three, playing a form of four-cross, with having a guy that was a choker or a low player, a spy guy that could look for cross guys, be able to hug to a

screen, also be able to contain the quarterback.

We mixed it up. Ultimately it comes down to the execution. Our players were fantastic.

Q. There was a key player in the second quarter. I think it was fourth down and three, and I kind of want to hear from Asher on that play that y'all scored a touchdown on.

ASHER CLARK: It was an option to the right. T.J. saw the corner come down. He just had to pull it and pitch it to me. I was able to get around the corner with some good blocks and score.

Q. Troy, big picture-wise, what does this do for your program, just the exposure, winning a game like this on national TV?

COACH CALHOUN: It helps significantly. I think just to be able to be in a Bowl is a major accomplishment for our guys. Especially to have to work, to navigate through the Mountain West Conference. You have a winning season and you're able to win a Bowl berth. That's pretty darn good milestone.

Yet I think when you win a game like this, we beat a ranked opponent, somebody who is ranked 25th in the country, and I don't think we've done that in a while at the academy.

Yet it's awesome for the younger guys to realize what can be achieved when you look at only the football part of it, the program. There's just no better way for this guy and those 14 others to conclude the least the playing part of what they're going to do at the academy.

Q. You were more prepared for this game than the previous two years.

COACH CALHOUN: We were ready. You know, you never know exactly how that's going to completely translate and carry forth. I tell you what, these guys, practice this week, we were good at practice. That takes maturity. You know, there's just so many things that happen. Can you bounce, the fun part of it. You just sense it. These guys, there's nothing they wanted to do more than win.

He's not going to say more than two words unless you ask him. He's a model, somebody as a leader by example. Both these guys. I mean, they're workers.

Q. Does the victory today say a lot about the strength of the Mountain West Conference?

COACH CALHOUN: It's another feather; a good one in the cap. We know where we got to begin. We're a service academy. That's our focus. That's the mission. That's the purpose of the academy.

But certainly it speaks well of the Mountain West Conference. You look over all four. You're 4-0 right now, got a chance to win a fifth one. Three of the four have been very convincing wins, and the other one was a team that wasn't favored going in, but played really, really well in the first one in New Mexico.

Q. (Indiscernible.)

CHRIS THOMAS: It all goes into the preparation. Coach did a great job of putting us in the right spots to make plays. Up front, the front three, like coach was saying, kind of got in his head, kind of got into him. When he was on the run like that, feel like we had the advantage.

Q. Did it get easier as the game wore on?

CHRIS THOMAS: Definitely not. Their offense is great. Second best skill we played all year behind TCU. Speed. They run the up-tempo offense. Definitely I wouldn't say it got easier as the game went on.

Q. Talk about the emotions from the kickoff returns for touchdowns?

COACH CALHOUN: Two gigantic plays. 24-6 at half. You're thinking when you go in at halftime that we're going to kick it, come up with a stop, we're going to respond with a score, and now you got a chance really to take a pretty sizable lead.

All of a sudden they return, it's 24-13, and you realize you're right in the middle of a doozy.

It may be the first kickoff return we've had I think since 1985. Spike Thomas is here today. I remember in 1985 being a freshman at the academy and standing on the field when that happened. Tell you how good my math is. He returned a touchdown. It was against Rice in September of '85.

All of a sudden looked up at the clock, and there was 14:53. It was 101, or 102 yard kickoff. He ran pretty fast. As a freshman, you fall for it at the academy.

Q. Scored two touchdowns on fourth

down, but a fake punt that kept the drive going, kind of a jambo today.

COACH CALHOUN: I think hands down out of the 120 schools that play Division I football, we lead the most going forth on fourth down. I think you play to win. There's going to be some flack if it doesn't work, and there is.

On a fake punt on your side of the field, yet the kid made a heck of a play. We had three really good blocks on the perimeter. All three guys engaged in their blocks. Jonathan found were the sticks were and found a way to convert it. You just better be able to live with it one way or another.

Q. How important ways it to rebuilding the momentum right away after their kickoff return?

COACH CALHOUN: It was very much so. And yet that's part of playing in Bowl games. We talked last night as a team. Anytime you're playing a ranked team, they're good. They're going to make plays. They're going to land some punches.

Yet what you have to do is be able to counterpunch. And when you do connect on a punch, you've got to be able to come forth with some flurries, not just one jab.

Q. Can you talk about the difference between Jefferson, not completely healthy, but close.

COACH CALHOUN: He played well today. You see a bunch of our guys, and I -- just see the games that they make maturity-wise. These guys can share with you how much you change while you're at the academy.

I tell you what's huge, is for our guys getting a chance to go home. Our last two practices right after they finished finals. Their eyes are all dark and wrinkled. It was good for them to get home. Just across the board, all these guys, just in terms of energy and focus, and it certainly was the case with him, too.

Q. Once you continued to score, you were determined not to give them the run backs on the kickoff, rather give them better field.

COACH CALHOUN: Absolutely. Even on the kickoff return, we wanted to execute. There was a sky kick. That was a pretty well-hit ball. It was into the wind. Caught it two yards from the sideline. We're gonna make some plays. We had a chance where we had some angles, a couple guys had angles.

We have a puncture of the blocks that occurred. We got to be able to make a play, we should have been able to. Yet those are talented guys. They had four kickoff returns during the season. All of a sudden they're in the fifth right there.

Q. Asher, was there more getting to the outside, you were able to get to the edges pretty well?

ASHER CLARK: We were able to get to the edge because the line guys, they rarely get pushed off the ball. We got good blocks on the perimeter. The cornerbacks generally want to get cut, so we were able to push them out. We were able to get underneath most of the blocks.

Q. You talked about turning your two or three yard gains into six or seven or eight yard gains. When those pile up, does it make a difference?

ASHER CLARK: It does. It wears on the defense. They're a great defense. We had to turn those two and three yard gains into six and seven yard gains. We were able to do that with the push we had from the line.

Q. (Indiscernible.)

COACH CALHOUN: He was not. Our first day here on Saturday we practiced, he hurt his groin. The other guy in there a little bit, Cody Getz, who is going to be a good player, too.

Q. Any other injuries after the game today?

COACH CALHOUN: No, sir, no.

Q. Speak about how important it was to get out early with some points?

COACH CALHOUN: I think the hardest thing to resemble in practice is being able to simulate the speed of the receivers, the execution of the quarterback, how instantly and cleanly that ball comes off his fingers when he throws it. It just helps the adjustment.

Tell you what we did a good job of. Whenever the ball came out quick, even when we were in a three-man rush, there were times I've seen it, your three pass-rushers say, I'm a non-factor, and they go limp.

I thought today they realized, Hey, it's a quick ball, they got a pod. Probably happened

about four times where that's the case. I think that's indicative of their effort, you know, just the relentless approach by those guys up front, our defensive ends, Benny Garland, Rick Ricketts, Ryan Gardner, Myles Morales, those guys that play on the defensive line for us.

Q. You came in wanting to throw the ball. You held the ball roughly two-thirds of the game. Were you expecting it to be that lopsided?

COACH CALHOUN: I think if you lay out a plan, you'd like for it to be that way. Yet getting to the point of that occurring, there's a lot of work that was done, and it was done by our team.

You know, I think sometimes whenever you run the ball well or you have the ball for a prolonged period of time throughout the course of a game, once it all adds up, you think it's only because of the offensive line, what it is.

There weren't very many prolonged drives that Houston had today. You know, there were a lot of times this year where they're up-tempo, but they have 10, 12, 14-play drives. Tells you our defense got off the field. I don't have it in front of me. On third down and fourth down today, we were good on defense.

Offensively, on the flip part of it, to be able to convert on third down, and especially on fourth down, too. I mean, now all of a sudden you're working it away where at the end of the game you got a chance to have that ball for 38, 39 minutes.

Q. The seven-minute possession at the end of the third quarter into the fourth quarter, was that kind of a turning point right there?

COACH CALHOUN: It was a good one. You know, I thought that. Then immediately, the touchdown to score, we go up 41-20, immediately what followed was an interception, too. I thought the interception was a pretty significant Black & Decker nail.

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An Interview With:



THE MODERATOR: Coach, just make an opening comment and we'll open it up for questions.

COACH SUMLIN: That's a really good Air Force team we played. I think it's evident by, you know, the No. 1 pass defense in the country.

Obviously we were a little off. But they had a lot to do with that, too. As I told Troy after the game, you know, a well-coached team, well-prepared. You know, without reviewing it, they played very, very well and took advantage of the opportunities they had and created some opportunities on their own.

You know, we turn the ball over like that, you can't ever expect to win any game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Coach, can you speak to the tempo and turnovers.

COACH SUMLIN: The tempo in their favor came from the turnovers, so... That's what happens. Like I said, you look back at all of our losses this year, it's been directly turnover related, inability to get off the field on third down.

There were some critical third downs defensively that we didn't get any stops, had a chance to get off the field, turned the ball over.

You add those two things up in any college football game right now, any football game, and it's a recipe for non-success, I'll put it that way.

Q. (Question regarding Keenum's performance today.)

COACH SUMLIN: I don't know. Like I said, we had some tip balls early. I mean, they're good. They created the breaks. The tip balls, they're hustling, got to the ball, made plays.

We threw the first ones up, hit our hands first, they got it. The next two were tip balls at or around the line of scrimmage that they got. You get those balls by playing hard.

That's a credit to them. They created their own breaks. You know, the ones later on in the game, he's just running around, trying to do something, get back in the game.

I'm not going to make any kind of generalization based on the overall numbers in the last two games for him. He's a damn good player, has been, and will continue to be for us.

Q. How much did the layoff affect Keenum? Was he sharp today?

COACH SUMLIN: No, he wasn't sharp today. We weren't sharp today at all. I think that's pretty obvious, you know.

The layoff may have hurt him. I don't know. We had a longer layoff last year that didn't hurt him that much, so... You know, every time something like this happens, you're always looking for a reason why.

As a coach, first of all, I've got to do a better job based on the results today. It starts with me. And, number two, you know, you're always as a coach going back and you're going to analyze the positives and negatives of the year and positives and negatives, mostly what went wrong with your losses.

We'll go back and look at that. I don't know that we did a whole lot of things differently than last year, and the results are a whole helluva

lot different this year than they were last year.

Q. You said earlier you were a little bit off today. Do you know why?

COACH SUMLIN: No. I just answered that, okay? Next.

Q. Talk about your MVP, Marcus, his job on the defense. Had to make the drive to make those tackles.

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah, but it takes more than one or two guys. Any time you play a game like this, it's a team effort. Obviously, when you're playing defense against an option type attack, it forces everybody to have responsibilities. One guy has never made a team offensively or defensively.

You know, to win games like this, all games, it's team efforts. But, you know, Tyron has been a really good player for us all year. Continued to play well here today, made some big catches, big return. Obviously Marcus is one of the leading tacklers in the country.

We expected it out of them. We've got to get some help from other people, too. When you play in those type of settings, as I told the team, you know, it takes a lot more than a couple people to win games. We had some guys looked to me like they were waiting around for somebody else to do something instead of doing it themselves.

You know, when that happens, you get the results you got today. And, like I said, don't get me wrong, we were outplayed today by Air Force. I don't think there's any doubt about that.

Q. Were you surprised at how effective Air Force was at the passing game?

COACH SUMLIN: Yeah.

Q. Were you out of position, especially on the long balls?

COACH SUMLIN: I don't know. We had guys there; didn't make plays. Wasn't like they were wide open, right?

Q. Could you speak about the seniors. You've been here two years. This obviously isn't the best way for them to go out.

COACH SUMLIN: You know, I told the seniors, I apologized to them for the way this ended up. They're still a part of a 10-win team. We have 15 of those guys, five of which we put on scholarship since we've been here. They're walk-on guys.

You know, we're still a very, very young team. But obviously to win 10 games, you know, it has a lot to do with your senior leadership and what happened with them. So we're appreciative of what they've done, brought to our team. A lot of those guys are special teams guys, they're not starters.

That's a tough role for those guys to see younger guys play and still be in a leadership role. I appreciate everything they've done, you know. I've visited with those guys this week and told them individually how much we appreciate what they've done, what they've accomplished since they've been at the University of Houston.

You know, I wish things had turned out differently for them today. But, you know, that doesn't take away from everything they accomplished this year.

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