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Cougars have a great amount of respect for Air Force

By Brian Hilderbrand, www.armedforcesbowl.com

Fort Worth, Texas, December 30, 2009 – To listen to University of Houston head coach Kevin Sumlin and his players talk, you can throw out the adage “familiarity breeds contempt” when it comes to the Air Force Academy.

For the Cougars, who will meet Air Force for the third time in the past 16 months in Thursday’s Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl, familiarity breeds respect.

“I’ve said many times that Troy (Calhoun) does a fantastic job, he and his staff,” Sumlin said of the Falcons head coach. “They’re an extremely disciplined football team. You look at statistics (and) this is a team that has only turned the ball over 11 times. They’re number one in the country in pass defense and top 10 in the country in total defense.

“They’re just a tremendously disciplined, physical football team. It will be a great challenge for us. Basically, we’re trying to do what we want to do and they’re really good at not letting people do what they want to do. It’s going to be a great challenge.”

Cougars quarterback Case Keenum, who will be facing the top-ranked pass defense in the nation in the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl, agreed.

“Obviously, they’re the number-one pass defense in the nation so they’ve done a really good of that,” Keenum said. “They’re going to play extremely hard the entire game, they’re going to be in the right spots at the right time and they’re not going to have very many busted assignments.”

Air Force (7-5) beat Houston, 31-28, on Sept. 13, 2008 but the Cougars (10-3) exacted a measure of revenge by beating the Falcons, 34-28, in last year’s Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl. Neither Sumlin nor his players view this game as a rematch or a grudge match.

“Everybody makes a big deal out of us playing Air Force again, but we also have six or seven games on our schedule where we play the same team again every year,” Sumlin said. “That’s not that big a deal.”

Cougars linebacker Marcus McGraw said his teammates are approaching Thursday’s game at Amon G. Carter Stadium in Fort Worth as they would any other game.

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“Some people that really haven’t played in the game look at it as a new game against a lot of new faces,” McGraw said. “It’s like a new team. For us, it’s like another bowl game, another opportunity to show how good we are. I’m sure they’ve got something to prove but we’re just going to go out and try to do what we’re able to do and get a win.”

In order to do that, McGraw said, each Cougars player would have to do his job and eliminate as many mistakes as possible because the Air Force players are so disciplined.

“We’ve just got to be on our A game,” he said. “We’ve got to be able to trust each other and do our assignments because everybody has got a specific job to do on each play and if we forget something, it could result in a touchdown for Air Force.”

And if backing up last year’s victory over the Falcons isn’t enough incentive, McGraw said the Cougars have a little incentive in closing the season with a victory.

“We didn’t like our last performance out on the field so we’re going to try to change everybody’s opinion of us,” McGraw said of Houston’s 38-32 loss to East Carolina in the Conference USA championship game. “Going out with a win will be able to give us some confidence going into the off-season and make us feel good.

“We’re (also) trying to get to an 11-win season and I think it’s only been done twice in a couple of decades at the University of Houston. I think it’ll be great for our seniors to leave a legacy out there with an 11-win season and for the young guys, it’ll just make us want to do better as the years go on.”



Brian Hilderbrand (bgh5959@aol.com) - Brian Hilderbrand, who will be covering the **Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl** for www.armedforcesbowl.com) currently is a media consultant and freelance writer in Las Vegas after spending more than 30 years as a sports writer covering high school, collegiate and professional sports in Southern California and Nevada. He began his journalism career in 1974 -- while still in high school -- covering local sports for his hometown Placentia (Calif.) Courier. A Cal State Fullerton alumnus, in 1979 he joined the sports staff of the Anaheim Bulletin, where his beats included the California Angels and Los Angeles Rams. After a brief stint at the Orange County edition of the Los Angeles Times, he moved to Las Vegas in 1986. He covered minor-league baseball, golf, motorsports and UNLV football during a 22-year career with the Las Vegas Sun.