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Healthy Jefferson Hopes to Help AFA Contain Houston

By Jim Benton, www.armedforcesbowl.com

Fort Worth, Texas, December 29, 2009 - Air Force quarterback Tim Jefferson is feeling good these days, which is a departure from the way he's felt most of the season.

Jefferson, the sophomore who was the Mountain West Conference's freshman of the Year last season, didn't play in three games and missed part of two others because of nagging injuries.

He is rested, healthy and hopes to make an impact when Air Force meets Houston in Thursday's **Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl** at Amon G. Carter Stadium.

"It was an up and down season for me," said Jefferson who averaged 100.4 yards rushing and passing this season. "Getting hurt early in the season set me back for the rest of the year. It kind of lingered and lingered. I couldn't really get over it.

"That was kind of the most difficult part for me to get over it. I would tell myself I really wanted to be out there playing but the coaches wouldn't let me play because they want me to get healthy. When I would hear them tell me, 'hey you are not going to be practicing today' that just hit me hard because I want to go out there and play. It was a tough season but if you can overcome adversity, that's only going to make you stronger. I've had a chance to get rested up and I'm feeling really good now."

Air Force will need a healthy Jefferson and a good offensive performance Thursday to help the Falcons bottle up the explosive, fast-paced Houston offensive attack.

Air Force has the nation's fourth best rushing offense, averaging 273.74 yards per game. The Falcons have controlled the ball for an average of 31:36 per game this season and will likely have to surpass their season averages to stay in the game against the Cougars.

"The main thing for our offense is that we are going to have to control the ball and have a huge advantage with that," Jefferson said. "As long as we keep their offense off the field, they are going to have a real tough time scoring. If we hold onto the ball and keep driving out first downs, we will have a really good chance of winning."

Offensive lineman Nick Charles agrees that the offense will play a big role in containing Houston's offense.

"It's not surprising we run the ball because that's what we do really well," said Charles. "So we're going to have to do what we do best and execute it to perfection to keep that (Houston) offense off the field.

"With the drop of a dime, they can score points. They are top of the line doing that. Our offense is almost an extension of our defense. If we can control the clock and do a good job of running the ball and put some drives together, it will be a lot harder for them to put points on the board."



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Air Force coach Troy Calhoun hopes his offense will be able to contribute.

"It's a team effort," he said. "If we are able to finish the game with more points than they have, it's going to require contributions all the way around. It's a challenge.

"We're going to have to run the ball. That's something we do well and yet on Thursday that's something we're going to have to do great. We're going to have to play our best football game of the year. To knock off a team like this we are going to have to play extraordinarily well and yet at the same time we are ready to win one of these games."

Defensively, the Falcons will be challenged to contain Houston's spread offense that leads the nation in passing and total offense.

Cougars quarterback Case Keenum, the country's passing and total offense leader, has passed for 5,499 yards this season.

"Definitely it's going to be a big challenge," Air Force defensive back Reggie Rembert said. "They are not the No. 1 pass offense in the nation for no reason."

Keenum will be going against an Air Force pass defense that ranks No. 1 in the country with an average of 148.7 yards allowed per game.

However, defensive lineman Ben Garland is quick to acknowledge that the Falcons defense will have to play their best game of the season.

"Keenum is a great quarterback," Garland said. "He can throw the ball fast, get it off fast and the thing we have to do is play our best game, be technically sound and play with a lot of energy because he's going to be fast, get the ball off fast and put it right on the spot. We just have to play faster."

Keenum routinely passes for over 300 yards a game. In two games against Air Force last season he threw for 362 yards and four touchdowns in a 31-28 loss and for 252 yards and one touchdown in a 34-28 victory over the Falcons in the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl last December.

Despite the Falcons gaudy pass defense statistics, Air Force was burned for 377 yards and five touchdowns by BYU quarterback Max Hall in a 38-21 loss in the regular season finale over a month ago.

"I think that experience of playing against a quarterback that gets the ball off fast and throws under pressure is a great experience for us," Garland said. "It gives us the experience of seeing what we will be going against and make the adjustments that we failed at last time."

Rembert, however, says BYU passing attack is different than Houston

"In a sense, yes, it will help because they throw the ball well," he said. "But they are totally two different styles of offense. BYU has a lot of two-back and use their tight ends. Houston spreads it out with a lot of small receivers. In some ways playing BYU in our last game will help but in some ways it will be totally different."

HE SAID IT - "There's a reason why they (Houston) won 10 games and there's a reason why they are ranked in the Top 25. Yet there is also a reason why you come to the Air Force Academy and love playing football at the Air Force Academy and that's to meet challenges like this head on." Calhoun talking about the test of going against Houston Thursday.



Jim Benton - Jim Benton was a sportswriter for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver for 41 years until the paper folded last February. He started as a high school beat writer four decades ago. Since then, he has covered a variety of sports including college football, basketball and hockey, professional hockey, football, baseball and basketball, tennis, golf, bowling, soccer, horse racing and NASCAR. Benton is a Denver native and a graduate of the University of Denver.