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Cougars never find offensive form against Air Force

By Brian Hilderbrand, www.armedforcesbowl.com

Fort Worth, Texas, December 31, 2009 - There was no mistaking the look in the eyes of the Houston Cougars following their 47-20 loss to Air Force on Thursday in the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl.

It was a look of shock. Or, considering the theme of the bowl, perhaps shell-shocked is a better term.

Houston, which led the nation in total offense with a high-octane passing attack, never got on track against the Falcons. The Cougars' offense appeared flat from the outset as Houston fell behind early in the second quarter as Air Force intercepted quarterback Case Keenum twice on passes that were tipped.

By halftime, Houston had failed to post a touchdown and trailed 24-6. It proved to be a hole out of which the Cougars never would climb.

Keenum finished with a career-high six interceptions and shouldered the blame for the loss in his brief post-game remarks.

"We've got to give Air Force all the credit," Keenum said. "I'll take all the blame. It's not the way I want to send the seniors out and I apologize to all of those guys. They played their hearts out and they deserved better than that.

"I apologize that it wasn't ended the right way. Things didn't roll our way today. We made a few mistakes and they capitalized. But it's over and that's the best part of that game."

Houston head coach Kevin Sumlin refused to place the blame on his quarterback, who completed 24 of 41 passes for 222 yards and one touchdown.

"Obviously we were a little off," Sumlin said. "But (Air Force) had a lot to do with that, too. 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.

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“No, (Keenum) wasn't sharp today. We weren't sharp today at all; I think that's pretty obvious. It takes more than one or two guys. To win games like this, to win all games, it takes a team effort. Don't get me wrong – we were outplayed today, I don't think there's any doubt about that.”

Linebacker Marcus McGraw, who led Houston with 10 solo tackles, was at a loss to explain why the Cougars came out so flat in the game and could never fight their way back.

“We weren't ready to play,” McGraw said flatly. “They came out ready to win and we didn't bring our A game and they did. They did everything to the 'T,' from their defense to their offense. They did everything we expected, we just didn't do our job. They ran the ball like we (knew they would) on offense and we just had to stop them and we didn't do that.”

Houston cornerback Brandon Brinkley, who set a team record by playing in his 53rd consecutive game, also said the Cougars weren't focused from the time they took the field.

“Air Force was making the plays and we weren't and they were capitalizing off of them,” he said. “(That was a result of us) not being focused, not going into the game ready to play, I guess. We just let them do whatever they wanted to. They run the ball, that's the whole key to their game: run, run, run and then go deep. It was real hard to try and stop all of it.”

The Falcons' top-rated pass defense held Houston to 22 yards passing and 331 total yards while their offense, led by quarterback Tim Jefferson and running backs Jared Tew and Asher Clark, racked up 563 yards.

In the end, it was Houston's six turnovers that cost the Cougars a shot at an 11-win season.

“The tempo in their favor came from the turnovers,” Sumlin said. “If you look back at all of our losses this year, it's been directly turnover-related, (and our) 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.”



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.