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## Houston's Cleveland making the most of second chance

By Brian Hilderbrand, [www.armedforcesbowl.com](http://www.armedforcesbowl.com)

**Fort Worth, Texas, December 29, 2009** - One year after playing his freshman season in the Big Ten for Iowa, James Cleveland found himself at Trinity Valley Community College in Terrell, Texas, with little hope of ever playing in the national spotlight again.

"When I was leaving the University of Iowa, I didn't think anybody would ever pick me up because that's just how the process goes sometimes," Cleveland said. "There were some guys that never played another down of football that were at the University of Iowa with me; the dice can just roll like that sometimes.



"I didn't even have a community college to go to when I initially started the whole process of trying to find a school. Schools were telling me 'no,' and I was just worried that I wouldn't be able to play again."

Trinity Valley gave Cleveland an opportunity to return to his native state and play football. University of Houston head coach Kevin Sumlin, who recruited Cleveland out of high school when Sumlin was an assistant at Oklahoma, liked what he saw and gave Cleveland the second chance he thought would never come.

Cleveland responded this season by not only leading all Cougars receivers in receptions (101), yards (1,182) and touchdowns (14) but he emerged as a vital team leader to a receiving corps dominated by underclassmen. On Thursday, Cleveland will be in the starting lineup for Houston when it meets the Air Force Academy in the **Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl**.

Nobody is more surprised than Cleveland by his success this season - which includes an All-Conference USA first-team selection and the honor of Conference USA Newcomer of the Year.

"Actually, I have surprised myself," Cleveland said Tuesday. "Going all the way back to junior college, I didn't think anybody would give me another shot - especially at the DI level. I was thinking I was going Division IAA or something like that. Just having this opportunity was a blessing - even if I had caught 20 passes or 50 passes this season.

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"Just being able to play back on this national level again is a blessing and a great opportunity for me and I'm not taking it for granted. Looking back on the entire season, it was just mind-blowing for me - I don't know if it was for anyone else. It was like, 'Man, I did this in 11 games?' It's just mind numbing."

Sumlin, however, is not surprised in the least by the accomplishments of the junior receiver. Sumlin offered Cleveland a scholarship because of his maturity and experience and was hoping those traits would rub off on the Cougars' younger receivers.

"He's different than all our other receivers in that we've got a bunch of little fast guys," Sumlin said. "We wanted a guy that was older with an edge and some toughness. He brought some attitude, he brought physical play and he also brought the experience and savvy in a spot that we need it."

Cleveland's "attitude" is not to be mistaken for cockiness, Sumlin added.

"There are some guys who come into a situation and can be too cocky and it's all about them," Sumlin said. "I don't think for one day was it about him; it was about how he could help the team and what he needed to do to get better. I think that's why his relationship with Case (Keenum, Houston's quarterback) and the rest of the team is what it is. Our guys look to him as a leader and I think he became a leader by example.

"He realized that he had made a mistake (at Iowa) and that he couldn't change that (but) he could change his image and given the opportunity to do so, here's a guy who made a mistake and got caught up in some things. We knew a lot more about the situation than probably anybody did because of our relationship with his coach and family. Obviously, we made the right decision and we're thankful that he wanted to come back to the Houston area."

Cleveland is coming off a stellar performance in the Conference USA Championship game in which he caught 19 passes for 241 yards and three touchdowns in a heartbreaking 38-32 loss to East Carolina. He said he is looking forward to again playing on a national stage in Thursday's **Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl**.

"Air Force has got a stingy defense and it's going to provide for some great excitement for the fans," he said. "We're leading a lot of categories in offense and they're leading a lot of categories in defense so something's got to give one way or the other. I expect it to be a great battle and I'm up for the challenge.

"These types of games are what you want to play, when you play a team that's going to bring the best out of your team and you make them excel to the best of their ability. That's what you hope for."



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