

Battle of the Piney Woods 2022

Saturday, October 1, 2022

Houston, Texas, USA

NRG Stadium

Sam Houston Bearkats

Coach K.C. Keeler

Keegan Shoemaker

Toby Ndukwe

Postgame Press Conference



seconds or so, and I was pretty committed that when we had a yard and a half, we were going to run the ball. I was not going to -- I was like, okay, we talk about how good our offensive line has gotten in terms of -- we lost almost our entire offensive line, and we think we have pieced together a pretty good O-line. Okay, let's find out.

That score was huge, and just to win this thing for the very last time will go down forever.

A lot of our guys came back for this reason. We have a bunch of guys who are redshirting and they've asked to make sure they played in this game because I said, I'm going to control what games you play in, and this is one of the games they all wanted to play in. We have some guys who are here for one year and are playing a nine-game schedule, which is unfortunate, but all that aside, this is the game they wanted to play in. You can see why.

The atmosphere was great. Appreciate the Texans and everything they do in our partnership. Again, it was an amazing, amazing victory.

Questions?

Q. Coach, the second half it was a one-score game. Which was the reasoning to ditch the run game for a little bit there?

K.C. KEELER: I think we were a little hot and cold with the run game. They were doing a really good job of bringing the safety down in the box. They were kind of getting extra free hitter in there. I think we just -- we love Ife and Noah and Cody, we love our match-ups out there. We may have abandoned it a little bit early, but at the same time they were definitely getting an extra free hitter in the box to bring that safety down.

When they load the box like that, sometimes you have to try making them pay with the pass game. I thought there was times where we were right there to click, and we just didn't click at times.

Q. Do you want to explain getting down to the last 2nd down, 3rd down, you got the ball down there running

Sam Houston State 17, Stephen F. Austin 16

K.C. KEELER: You know, there's an old expression: You are what your record says you are. There's a point in that game, I'm saying to myself, this is not a 1-3 football team I have. We are not going to go 1-3. That's not going to happen. This is too good a football team.

We weren't playing our best, and a lot of times it's because of the opponent you're playing. They're doing some really good things. We talked about this all week because it was a lot of emotion in a game like this.

The emotion is even tripled when you consider, like, whoever takes this trophy home is probably taking it home for the last time. Its permanent resting place is going to be in Huntsville, Texas, now, and that's kind of how we thought.

Every play you don't make or every play they do make, the pressure can double and triple. We just kept on talking, just play the next play. Don't worry about the play behind you or two plays behind you or five plays behind you. Just worry about playing that next play.

That's what we did, and we kept them within a score. I thought the turnover down there in the fourth quarter was huge because we couldn't let them get two scores out. We just were not putting up enough points for us to put ourselves in a situation to be down two scores.

We willed ourselves to get that done.

Keegan is just so cool under pressure. We subbed late, which was a mistake on our part, and we were lucky to get that ball off. I think a lot of quarterbacks would have just choked there, and he was like, kind of like gently moving the officials along, and we probably snapped it with two



and all of a sudden you get inside the strike zone and you decide to go pass --

K.C. KEELER: Yeah, it was a combination of how much time was on the clock and time-outs and all those kind of things, and I did think that maybe we should have ran it one more time in there. Then obviously I jumped in on that 4th down play and I said we're going to run this ball in to win this game.

Yeah, I think you'll go back and look at that, and I agree. I thought also it was -- John did a good job of mixing the run, and even though the time was against us a little bit, he warned me, he said, listen, might need to use a time-out here if we don't get the 1st down. So I was kind of working with him with that.

But yeah, I think we got in there, and I think we felt that we could plug a couple in there, and we did.

They made a nice play on the edge, and we had a back open in the flat and they did a nice job getting that hand up and knocking that ball down. The other run we had KeSean Raven open, and he just didn't connect on it or just missed it. He was wide open. It was a play action pass, everyone sucked up, we had him back there. He doesn't normally run that route. That's a Noah Smith route that we had, but Noah went down with cramps, so it was kind of plugging KeSean in there and not quite the body style you would want in there for a play like that.

We were mixing and matching a little bit because we did have some guys go down.

Q. Can you talk about the blocked punt? Before that it didn't look like you guys had much life?

K.C. KEELER: Yeah, Donovan Adkins -- first of all, Zach Milliet and Thomas Rocco run our special teams, and Zach is in the box, and Zach has been with me probably six or seven years now. I think I've fired him probably 10 times. But boy, he's gotten good, and he's really been a nice complement to Thomas Rocco, our special teams coordinator. They were telling me all week, like, I think we can get one.

Donovan Adkins is a young man that last year half of his hair was blond, half of his hair was black, and I don't know if we would have trusted him a year ago in this situation, not because of his hairstyle, but just he wasn't there yet. But boy, he has just matured and he's going to be a great football player.

We had such confidence that we could get that loose, and we actually spent some more time this week on that block

because we thought we could get that block because their man protection.

You have to give a lot of credit to our special teams coordinators and also Donovan, just getting that hand out and -- we had to make a play especially going into half, and that was the talk in the locker room at halftime. We grabbed the momentum, let's keep the momentum.

You don't make that play, boy, there's not a lot to talk about. But it's like, hey, let's come back. That game was a little bit of juice and a little bit of momentum. Yeah, it was the key play of the game in my opinion. That's why I had him up doing the fight song, because I wanted to just reward him for doing that.

Q. Last year was Ife who was the hero, now it's Jackson the hero this time around. Where does this game rank personally for you?

K.C. KEELER: Yeah, I mean, first of all, a rivalry game is just so cool. The way our fans showed up and their fans showed up, just all the pomp and circumstances, the spirit walk, and again, when we recruit, this is one of the big things we talk about, playing in NRG Stadium in a rivalry game, and the intensity and the passion.

You've got to remember, like Keegan has friends on that team from guys either on his team or played against or was in All-Star games with or went to camps with or whatever, and probably same with Toby. So there's so much commonality amongst the programs, and I think we both have great cultures, that when you play in a ballgame like this, it's a game you always remember forever. Yeah, it was pretty cool.

Q. How was your blood pressure as it came down to that final minute?

K.C. KEELER: Yeah, I'm good. It's how I coached, though. I lean on my assistants a lot, and I just sort of kind of think the game through. We need to run the ball here, we need to use a time-out there. I try to put myself as a kind of managing everything, managing players, managing coaches, managing the clock, managing situations.

Usually I don't get myself caught up with anything beyond other than -- it was kind of unusual for me to even going there with being 1-3, but I did because I think it was like, this team is too good. We're not going to go 1-3. We have to get better, there's no question we have to get better, but I've got to get that crap out of my head because that's not who we are.

But yeah, I mean, how we feed the family, and we say. I

enjoy every moment out there, even in those situations when it's getting hard, because I just love problem solving with my team to try to figure out how we can get a win.

Yeah, these things don't usually give me heart attacks. We'll see.

Q. Keegan, you've made back-to-back starts the last two Piney Woods. What's your thoughts and how were you so calm with that?

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: I really think it's like a team thing, like the defense did a great job today. Like they held in, they gave us so many opportunities to go down and score until like that final drive. I really think it's been team and preparation and the guys accepting me as their leader, and they did a great job.

Q. When Desmond runs it in, what was going through your head?

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: Excitement. Excitement that we got the last one.

Q. Keegan, you guys were able to get it done last year and it was your first start. In this game you threw a couple interceptions, a lot of punts from the offense. How were you able to keep the group focused and pull this one out?

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: It talks about us as a team being really resilient. I think that trickles down from the coaches, from the leaders on our team, and then everyone is just able to play a part, play their role.

Q. Keegan, how was your blood pressure those last few --

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: High, very high.

Q. How did you stay calm?

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: It's really just like knowing what guys I'm with. If it wasn't these guys, I don't know if I'd be that calm. It's a tribute to them.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the transition that you're all having to go through now? You didn't have anything to play for but the guys on each side of you and you having to sit here and keep motivating? What's your speech each day to these guys?

K.C. KEELER: Well, you know, it was really difficult five or six games into last season when we were going to move to Conference USA to have that discussion with them and

say honestly, I don't think we're going to be able to play for anything next year. We can't worry about that right now. Let's just go try to win another National Championship.

But I had to let them know. In our very first team meeting, I said this is my 29th year as a head football coach, and this is the first time I'm not able to talk about us trying to win a National Championship. I said, it's going to be a little different for me, too, but what we're going to play for is the standard.

We're No. 6 in the country in wins in the last decade, behind North Dakota State, Alabama, Ohio State, Oklahoma and Clemson. That's pretty special company. There's a standard that has been set by the guys behind us, and we're going to play to that standard. It doesn't matter if we can't technically win a championship. We're going to play for the standard.

We've talked about that, and then you have the unique situation that we're also redshirting players, and you're doing that because you're trying to take as many good players into Conference USA as you can. Those are difficult things, too. We had a bunch of guys sit out the last game, and then we have a bye week, so they're sitting out two weeks.

Yeah, there's been some navigating to do, and one of the things I'm going to really push for the NCAA to take a look at is that if we can't play for a bowl next year, which right now that is up in the air, but if you would go by typical standards, it's a two-year transition, we have something called the transfer portal. No one has ever transitioned before from FCS to FBS with the transfer portal. Not only can't I recruit players off the transfer portal to play for nothing, it's tough to keep players that you can't play for anything but the standard.

So we have a lot of moving parts. We really do. I appreciate that question because it's something that I don't think the NCAA has thought through, because again, this portal is brand new, and us transitioning -- when Appalachian State transitioned, those kids couldn't transfer sideways. They couldn't transfer up. They only could transfer down.

We're in a different world right now. I am blessed that I think we have such a great culture here, we lost very few people, but we lost some All-Americans. It was guys who graduated that said, hey, Coach, I graduated, just won 21 straight games, won a National Championship; I'm going to go play at Kentucky. I get it. I'm going to go play at Oklahoma State. I get it.

Yeah, so that's been hard. That's been hard. But we just

were really up front and honest with our guys about what's going on, and I think they just love the camaraderie and the culture and we're going to navigate our way through it, but it has been a challenge.

Q. Toby, give me your thoughts, a breakout game for you. You guys held SFA to three points in the second half. What are your thoughts?

TOBY NDUKWE: Man, it's a credit to our team, just offense not giving up on us and defense, just keep playing defense.

Just holding them to just three points at the end of the game, it just shows how resilient we are. Defense just kept playing defense, and we played all the way to the end of the whistle. Just shout-out to them.

K.C. KEELER: Yeah, we've had to lean on Toby more. Markel Perry, the Player of the Year, Preseason Player of the Year, is out for the season with a shoulder, so we've asked Toby to play both sides, play our jack position, play defensive end. So we've actually had to lean on him a lot.

You could see this game that he showed up and played pretty well.

Q. Toby, 35 seconds left, defense needs one more stop to win the game. What was the mentality with all the guys, all 11 guys going out there knowing, hey, this is for potentially ever?

TOBY NDUKWE: Play the standard, perform and compete. That's what we do on defense. 35 seconds left, we know what's at stake. We were up, and we just -- winning. That's what's on our mind. Find a way to win, and we did.

Q. Keegan, I want to ask you, it's been an exciting season for you personally. You got engaged after the A&M game and picking up a win in the final game possibly against SFA, what is it going to give you guys as a team, the motivation to push through, to finish the season off high?

KEEGAN SHOEMAKER: Like Coach said, playing for the standard, playing for each other. This team is a tight-knit group, so I think we're going to finish strong.

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