



UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
DEPARTMENT OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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STEPHEN F. AUSTIN LUMBERJACKS (0-1 • 0-0 Southland)
at HOUSTON COUGARS (1-0 • 0-0 Big 12)
Thursday, Aug. 28, 2025 • TDECU Stadium • Houston

HEAD COACH WILLIE FRITZ

Opening Statement

"Outstanding job obviously by the defense. It is difficult to shut a team out nowadays. I don't care what level you're talking about middle school, high school, NFL or college. We did an excellent job not allowing them to get behind us.

Gave up a few first downs, not very many, but we really tackled well. Played with great leverage and really, just a fine job by Coach [Austin] Armstrong, the defensive staff, but most importantly the players. We got the chance to play a lot of guys. On the front, we got the chance to play a lot of guys. Second-level linebackers, safeties as well so fantastic job by those guys.

We showed some bright spots on offense throwing the ball. There were a couple tough throws in there to Amare Thomas, in particular, that were big time. At times, we ran the ball very well; we just got to get more consistent. When we were consistent throughout the game, we stubbed our toes, some self-inflicted wounds offensively. That happens sometimes in your first game. We had a bunch of guys who hadn't played in a while, so that's to be expected to a certain extent.

The kicking game had a big punt return I was disappointed in. Lost some leverage, didn't do a good job there, but, besides that, Ethan Sanchez was on the money with all his field goal attempts. We recovered most of the time well with our punt team and then our PBR. We had a big return with Mekhi Mews to give us a good starting field position, which I believe led to a score. A lot of good things but also a lot of things to work on."

On improvement on offense in offseason and the defense having a lot of newcomers

"One of the things we try to do is recruit and try to find guys with the type of character that you want to have in your program, and you want to be around you day after day. These guys are hardworking people and very coachable which is so important.

Some of the guys we added on the defensive line – Eddie Walls III, Khalil Laufau – those are great additions. Obviously, Sione Fotu, Carmycha Glass played well. I thought Jalen Garner, I'm going to have to watch the tape, but I thought he had an outstanding ball game. He didn't play that much for us last year. He was the third linebacker behind Jamal Morris and Micheal Batton. They didn't really hurt much, so he didn't get many reps, but he showed some good things.

On the third level we got our hands on a lot of balls. We could've had maybe six or seven, but a bunch in and out of our hands. They did a nice job and our corners did a nice job staying over the top."

On Conner Weigman's poise in pocket

"He runs a lot better than people give him credit for. He tucked it and ran it a couple of times. He had a nice move over on their sideline that resulted in a first down. We just need to do a good job. We want to be a 50/50 team. We have to be firm in our protection. There were a couple times where we got beat on the outside, and all we got to do is get a hand to the guy to pass the quarterback. He does a good job at stepping up in the pocket, so we got to do a great job at giving him a clean pocket.

If we give him a clean pocket, I think with our receivers and his ability to throw in tight windows. He threw a nice ball to Amare Thomas down at the goal line that we scored a touchdown on. That's the hardest I've ever seen him throw a football; he really threw a fast ball in there. It had to be a fast ball, or it would've been picked. Having not played for a while, I thought Conner did a really nice job and I think this is going to be a great learning experience for him."

On rotating cornerbacks

"We're really blessed with some great corners. Latrell McCutchin [Sr.], outstanding corner. You talked about Zelmar Vedder and Will James; they are outstanding. Keany Parks got in there a little bit, so we've got four guys who we feel like can play Big 12 winning football.

We're going to play those guys. I was hoping we could get ahead a bit more, and we could've got in a few more dudes, but it didn't quite work out that way."

On Tanner Koziol's performance and health update

"I think he's fine. Nothing serious. He'll be fine; he should be back at practice on Monday. That would've been an overthrow on most people. He got up there and grabbed it. They always talk about catch radius, and he's got an impressive catch radius.

On the addition of Tanner Koziol changes the passing game compared to last year

"He has great length. The thing he does differently than other people is that he extends his arms towards the ball instead of waiting to receive the ball. He plays that to his advantage. A lot of guys don't do that. They wait for the ball to come to them. He goes out there and gets it. He's got long arms and he's not just tall; he's got great length with his wingspan. He needs to be part of what we're doing."

On J'Marion Burnette and his first-half performance

"There were some excellent things he did. I was disappointed we had third and one and fourth and one, and we didn't convert there at the end of the first half. Some of that we just didn't block when we were supposed to block. Linebacker shot the gap, and we saw a ghost with a slant.

Stacy [Sneed] had a nice run; Dean [Connors] had some nice runs. DJ Butler came in there at the end and had some nice runs. We just need to do it consistently. We need to get bodies on bodies up front and give those guys some creases, not a lot of penetration, which we did and resulted in a bunch of negative plays."

On the offensive line's game evaluation

"At times they played well. Early in the game, we had great pass protection. As the game progressed, we had a little bit of trouble with our defensive end from the outside. I'd probably grade them a C. There were times they were playing at an A level and sometimes, not quite the level we need them to play at. We'll get better up there.

Today was Jason Brooks' [Jr.] first game in two years. [Dalton] Merryman hadn't played for a while. It's going to be a good learning experience for all of them."

On taking advantage of talent at the center position

"We've got seven guys for sure who could be starters. We need to give them opportunities to see who the best is at that position. Then from there we'll figure out who our best five are when it's crunch time. They're all developing stamina right now.

Playing a game is different from practice. We never have a three-hour practice, plus the warmups before the game. You have to be ready to go for a long period of time. Some of them did great at it, and some of them got a bit fatigued."

On success in the red zone

"We work on that all the time. We talk about four-point plays. We want to get touchdowns instead of field goals. We do a lot of competition against each other and really dive into what the team does in the redzone. We try different tactics like making them play left handed."

On setting the tone for the season

"It's big. It's better than last year's first game... I know that. Some of the guys were disappointed, but I told them that it's hard to win games. SFA is a very good football program and matter of fact Coach [Colby] Carthel told me after the game that this is the first time he's ever been shut out."

On Re'Shaun Sanford II health update

"Re'Shaun had surgery yesterday and unfortunately, will be out for the season. He injured his knee during practice."

HOUSTON SENIOR DEFENSIVE BACK MARC STAMPLEY II

On what worked defensively

"I just felt that defensively we prepared well, going to camp the few weeks we had. I felt like today we were just locked into our keys and our assignment, just doing our job, where we were just able to fly around, play fast and the game almost felt like practice."

On if the high standard was to win the game

"Around here, we have the high standard of wanting to win by 50 every time if we can. Any win is a good win, especially at this level in the game. [Coach Fritz] was just reminding us to keep a positive note; that a win is a win, and we just have to keep moving forward."

On extra motivation during a game that is close to a shut out

"The same motivation that we came in with. We wanted to treat it like it was 0-0 the whole time, especially on defense. That's just our mindset. We just wanted to keep our foot down and hold them to zero."

HOUSTON SENIOR LINEBACKER JALEN GARNER

On being a full-time starter

"Honestly, it's been like this for a little while. I've been sitting back a little bit, but at the same time I feel like I've learned a lot from a lot of people who've been in front of me. I feel like honestly, even though I've wanted to play for a lot, I've learned a lot now so I can show this. I'm kind of a little bit of a crash-out, if I'm being honest. I'm calm now. I'm going to get sorted. I'm excited."

On SFA's offense getting frustrated

"SFA's getting a little chippy, if I'm being honest. Honestly, I respect them. I met this one player, I don't know who it was, but he was like, "I got heart!" I felt it, but we're coming here to stop anybody coming; I promise you."

HOUSTON SENIOR QUARTERBACK CONNER WEIGMAN

On looking forward to more opportunities on offense

"We're going to run whatever the coaches call, and I trust the coaches explicitly. He's a smart guy. At the end of the day, we won the game, but we shot ourselves in the foot a few times, and that starts with us as a group. We're going to come back in here and get it corrected tomorrow and get better this week."

On defense's performance during tonight's game

"They're amazing and we see them every day during practice. The guys up front, the backers, the secondaries and Coach [Austin] Armstrong do a great job. We're here every day, and we see it, and that's what we expected of them all tonight."

On thoughts on the offensive line

"They played hard. They played with effort. Those are my guys; I love them to death and like I said, we are going to be in here tomorrow for quite a bit. We are going to watch that film and break it down thoroughly, and we're going to get better from it."

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN HEAD COACH COLBY CARTHEL

On tonight's action

"First of all, congratulations to the Cougars of Houston, and Coach Willie Fritz. They came out and played a solid game and played very well defensively and really gave us some problems there and they didn't make mistakes. They deserved the victory and have a good ball club. They'll win a bunch of ball games this year and credit to them. Proud of our guys and how hard they played. I don't think there was any quit in our guys tonight. We just didn't make the plays to give ourselves the chance to be in this one, and it was frustrating. The effort and heart was there; we just didn't make the plays. Couldn't put drives together, couldn't convert third downs, 0-3 on fourth down.

Defensively, they played hard; they had some good stops. Four point wins in the red zone put it on some short fields on fourth downs that we didn't convert, but we didn't create a turnover, and we didn't play as well as we wanted to on fourth down. The highlight of tonight was our special teams. We gave up one, 15-yard punt return.

Other than that, I found our coverage was really good. We did a good job on punting the ball and that was a positive. All in all, there's some things we need to work on. The good thing is everything is fixable. We have the first one behind us, now we turn the page and get ready to head down and have FCS play."

On the defensive performance

"They played their tails off, and they were frustrated because it was the 'Jacks beating the 'Jacks on a few of those. On that first touchdown, we just let the tight end loose and you can't beat yourself, especially in a game like this against a Big 12 opponent. They were frustrated because they knew they were better than that, and every point is going to matter, and every score is going to matter. They still came back and battled and forced a lot of punts, and we were very physical. They were hitting and tackling, and I don't know how many tackles for loss or right at the line of scrimmage we had. They knocked a bunch of them down for very little or no gain. They had the big fourth down stop there. It was in the redzone or close to it, and so that was a big momentum deal.

All in all, the third downs hurt us. When the game got away from us, we pinned them; we punted. We'd pin them on the five; we had them third and long. Then they threw the go ball down the sideline. We will look at it on film. Then that flag came out and gave them a first down. Then another third and long conversion. Then it was third and long again, and they got messed up and snapped it while not ready. We didn't know if we could go and then [Conner] Weigman scrambled for about 25 yards. That drive right there, that 95-yard drive really took the wind out of our sails. We really played a lot better until that drive. Still, you got to credit the other team. It's a Big 12 opponent, and they have some really good players, but I was proud of the effort. We would like to have a few of those plays back."

On offense struggles against Houston's defensive game plan

"Credit those guys. They have good coaches, and they were all new. We talked about it earlier this week. We knew that was going to be a problem for us. We didn't know what film to watch with so many new coaches and so many new players. We didn't know what they were going to be doing schematically and prepared for a lot of different things and tried to get some things going but just didn't convert on some throws and some catches.

We didn't keep the sticks moving. When we did get them going, we tried to stay in the game with some fourth downs, have to roll the dice a little bit in a game like this when you're outmatched and outgunned fighting up two weight classes, so that's where I our defense did a good job keeping us in the game and playing hard and turning some of those short fields into four-point wins for the Lumberjacks.

We just never got on track, and the few times we did, we ended up with turnovers and threw a couple picks there. I'm so disappointed because I know those guys are better than that and they know it too, but you have to give credit to the guys in red because those are really good and talented players, and they did a really nice job on defense."

On the momentum after facing a Big 12 Conference opponent

"You either lose or you learn; we choose to learn. We learned some stuff about us today, and we found some things we need to work on, get fixed and we chose to play this game on Thursday for a reason. We get a couple of extra days of rest, recovery and turn the page to Abilene Christian.

It's not on the stat sheet, but what I'm happiest about is we got out of this one hefty. When you're fighting up two weight classes in a game like this, you have to collect the catches and stay healthy. For the most part, we have a couple of bumps and bruises but nothing major. That's a win for the Lumberjacks there and back to work tomorrow morning. Let's get ready for the Wildcats."

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