

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

Friday, July 29, 2022
Hollywood, California, USA

Utah Utes Coach Kyle Whittingham Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with Utah here. We're joined by Coach Whittingham. Coach will give an opening statement, then we'll open it up to questions.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: With all the stuff I guess you could say that's going on in college football, it's good to be finally getting back to getting on the field and actually practicing and being with your guys, getting the season going.

Excited about that. We've got some stuff going for us this year, a lot of good players back off of last year's team. Looking forward to getting into fall camp, like I said. We got a tough opener down in SEC country in the Swamp September 3rd. That's got our guys' full attention. Working hard to get ready for that football game.

Great to be here. Media Day always signifies the start of the season, right around the corner. Excited, like I said, to get back on the field and do our things.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You just mentioned all the stuff that's going on in the world of college athletics. How do you feel about the direction and future of college football?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, well, the future is really anybody's best guess. I think from my own perspective, super conferences are on their way, already starting to form. A full-blown Playoff, 12, 16-team Playoff, that's around the corner as well. The landscape is changing rapidly.

I don't think we're ever going to see anything close to what we've been used to the last 50 years in college football. It's all changing. You add NIL on top of that, it's a completely different world.

But it is the world we're in right now so you got to adapt. It's just something that as a football coach, no control over those type of things that are going on. It's really

administration and the commissioners that are handling that obviously.

From my perspective, it's all about our team, this season, recruiting. That's where I keep my focus, don't really spend any time thinking about much else.

Q. Last year you were a completely different team when Cam Rising stepped into the lineup. What are the things we don't see as the media which makes him a leader on that team?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Cam is a terrific player. He's First Team All-Pac-12. Also, he provided an instant spark, immediate spark, when we inserted him into the game, the San Diego State game, he got his first opportunity. He never looked back.

Cam means so much to our football team. Off the field he's the leader of the leaders, the alpha dog of our team, really sets the standard. You couldn't ask for a better leader. He's one of the best leaders I've ever been around.

Q. Could you talk about the significance, even though it was a loss, of the Rose Bowl on the program, where it's gotten to this point, playing Ohio State like you did, maybe lasting effects going forward.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, it was a great national stage for our team obviously to be able to be in that game and have that exposure.

The game itself was terrific. Didn't come out on the right end of it, but something I'm positive all the fans enjoyed, the ratings were really good, all that stuff.

For our program, it signified the next step in the evolution of our program, winning the Pac-12. We'd been to the championship game, that was the third time last year. We had been denied the first two times, so it was good to get over that hump. We certainly felt the effects of that game in recruiting, still feeling the effects of that. Off to a good start with our '23 class.

All good except for the outcome of the game, but a lot of



positives.

Q. With the importance of the Rose Bowl game, the importance of the 2009 Sugar Bowl, you mentioned the possibility of a 12- or 16-team Playoff, how does it make you feel as a football fan if that diminishes the importance of games like the Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You have to speak up a little bit.

Q. With the importance of the 2009 Sugar Bowl and then the Rose Bowl game, how does it make you feel as somebody who has been invested in football, the prospect of an expanded Playoff diminishes the importance of those games?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There's so much revenue being left on the table, not having a full-blown Playoff. That's what drives everything these days, always has, actually.

I'm sure there's got to be a way to incorporate a full field of 12 or 16 teams and still incorporate some of the bowl sites. They all can't survive obviously. But it's going to change. Hopefully they'll figure out a way to maintain and continue to include somewhat of a bowl feel.

Again, it's like March Madness, March Madness is a great event, generates millions of dollars. I think that we're heading towards with the Football Playoffs.

Q. Having played for LaVell Edwards, getting started in coaching under him, how did he influence you? Do you still feel the effects of being around him today?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: LaVell, I had the opportunity to play for him, as you mentioned. I was able to be a graduate assistant for him a few years later. Great person, great coach. It was a great opportunity to learn from him.

There's really three head coaches that I've gathered knowledge and information from that really have molded me. That's LaVell, Ron McBride, and Urban Meyer. I had a chance to work for all three of those guys. Terrific coaches. Each had their sets of strengths.

As far as me as an X's and O's guy, a football coach in general, my father was the biggest influence on me. Had the opportunity to play for him in college. Best defensive football coach I've ever been around.

Between him, those three head coaches, that kind of molded me into what I am today.

Q. In regards to the Rose Bowl game, the offense put

up a lot of points, but the defense... What was their approach in the off-season? How have they responded and coalesced after the Rose Bowl?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we didn't play real good defense in the bowl game. Attribute that and credit Ohio State for a lot of that obviously. Their quarterback was outstanding.

Wasn't our typical Utah defense. Not to make excuses, but we had to convert a running back to corner because we were out of corners by the end of the season. Decimated by injury at that position.

It was tough to go into a game where they throw the ball as well as they do, but you got to put your guys out there. Like I said, there's no excuse. No one feels sorry for you. But that was not our best outing on defense.

Overall, when you look at the numbers from last year, I think we had a solid season defensively. Not quite what we're used to, but hopefully we get back on track this year.

Q. When you look at how far you have come as a program, everywhere you've been you found a way to enhance Utah, do you feel like they get the respect nationally? They're still fighting for that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think we're still fighting for that in a way. We're a program that is still working on our brand and trying to become more of a national presence. But you got to earn that. No one's going to give that to you.

The way you do that, every time you have a chance to prove that, national television, bowl games, that type of situation, then you have to play your way into that respect and that level. So I think we've made inroads. Are we where we want to be? Not yet. But we think we're heading in the right direction.

Q. What was your reaction when you found out that the two L.A. schools were leaving the Pac-12?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, surprised but not surprised. I mean, nothing can really surprise you I don't believe in college football right now. There's so much movement and things that have happened through the years.

There's going to be a great deal more change, in my opinion. I think, as I mentioned earlier, the concept of super conferences is starting to materialize, become a reality. Wasn't completely taken back by the move. The timing, I don't know if there was ever a good time, but the timing was a little bit of a surprise.



Anyway, like I said, that's where things are moving. We'll just have to wait and see when all the dust settles where we're at. It's not settled yet. There's a lot of dust to come.

Q. Do you agree with the commissioner that the Pac-12 is still a viable product moving forward?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Sure. I think the real proof of the pudding of that is going to be in the media rights deal, see how that comes out. If those numbers are right, absolutely. If those numbers are not where we need them to be, then look at other options.

Right now it appears to be very unified, the Pac-10, the 10 that are staying, and we'll see how it goes going forward.

Q. You have experience moving conferences, having gone from the Mountain West. What are some of the difficulties maybe that USC and UCLA face as they change conferences?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, they're going Power Five to Power Five. I don't see that as the same situation that we were in.

But certainly going to be getting a read on the different opponent, a bunch of new teams that they've never faced or faced very rarely. Travel is going to be a consideration. You're going to go two time zones quite often. That's something that's going to be how to handle that. You go a day early for all those games, leave Thursday instead of Friday. A lot of things to iron out in that regard.

As far as going from Power Five to Power Five, I don't see that as the same as going from the WAC to the Pac-12.

Q. As a member of the conference in a bigger picture way, in a couple of years when the L.A. schools leave, what is the importance of maintaining a connection to Southern California?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, it's certainly in our recruiting footprint. We'll always have a connection to Southern California, the proximity to Utah. It's just an hour-and-twenty-minute plane flight. I think we're always going to have a presence down here.

Is there going to be maybe some Pac-10 games that are neutral site games that take place in southern Cal? I think we'll figure out some ways to always have a presence. We'll continue to recruit Southern California, obviously. If you look at all the areas that we do recruit, the majority of players on our roster are from the Southern California area.

Q. You're the favorite in the conference in the pre-season poll, defending conference champion. All the talk has been about the new coaches. Do you kind of feel like you're under the radar?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I would say probably not. I think, as you mentioned, there's new coaches in the conference. Everyone is interested in that, finding out more about those guys.

We've always traditionally been a team that likes to fly under the radar a little bit, play with a chip on our shoulder. We don't take offense to any of that.

I think being chosen as the Pac-12 pre -- you know, the early champion, I guess you could say, is a show of respect to our program and where we're at. We've worked hard. It's been 11 years of hard work and recruiting to get to that point.

Q. With you guys and NIL, how has it impacted your program, especially in terms of recruiting and devoting resources?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, NIL has had a big impact. I think we're on the right road towards getting that all solidified, getting our ducks in a row. It definitely is becoming more prevalent in recruiting. This '23 class, new class, that's part of the equation. When you recruit, those are questions you get asked, you've got to have answers for.

It's becoming more and more of a decision-maker for the kids. Where it's going to go, who knows. I don't know what parameters or guardrails we're going to be able to put on it. I don't know if it can happen unless it happens at the government level. Right now there doesn't seem to be a lot of enforcement of the NIL structure that's laid out.

We'll have to see what happens.

Q. In the wake of the UCLA, USC move, how does your message to Southern California recruits change?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we're going to be playing UCLA and USC for the next two years. At least as of this moment in time that's what's going to happen. The message hasn't changed a great deal.

I'm sure with the next recruiting class it's going to become even more prevalent. Pac-10, with the remaining Pac-10, is still a really good group of schools and competitive. We'll just have to continue to formulate our recruiting pitch as we navigate through it.

Right now we've really had very little pushback from Southern California recruits based on what's happened. There really hasn't been much of an effect yet.

Q. How important is the opening matchup that you have there in Gainesville for the Pac-12 to be going against one of the premier schools in the SEC?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's very important. Every game obviously is important. But when you have a chance to go down to SEC country, play a storied program like Florida with their history, a tradition, in a place like the Swamp, that's a challenge for our guys. It's important for the Pac-12 to make noise on the national scene whenever we get opportunities like that. There's several other teams in the league that are going to have similar opportunities. We have to make the most of it.

If you want to gain respect, gain national attention, you got to come out and win some of those games. Hopefully we can go down there and play like we're capable of.

Q. You're going to the Swamp, a night game. If you could whisper into the scheduling gods' ears, would you prefer to lead up with a Group of Five opponent, or is baptism by fire... How do you reconcile that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There's pros and cons. You play a lesser opponent, you have a chance to maybe get some of your younger guys some experience and ease into the season, I guess you could say, even though as a coach you're never easing into anything.

One thing it does is it gets your players' attention as far as their preparation. We've seen it starting in January that these guys have been working their tails off getting ready for this game. Carried into spring ball, summer conditioning. When you have an opener like that, like we said, we have to be able to hit the ground running. Our guys are aware of that.

It certainly makes the focus and the work ethic in the off-season a very easy thing to achieve because of the opening opponent.

Q. The front seven of Utah, I've been impressed by it. What is it about Utah where you're getting these players? You're probably going to say recruiting. It's consistently excellent.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We've had a reputation, backed up by statistics, defensively, to be pretty stubborn, particularly against the run. Philosophically, I'm a defensive coordinator by trade. That was always my philosophy: You play great defense by first stopping the run.

Everything we do in our system is geared towards stopping the run, putting teams in long-yardage situations, getting after the quarterback. That's the short version.

We've been blessed with really good players. Put a bunch of guys in the NFL from our front seven through the years. It all rolls back to recruiting. Recruiting is really the lifeblood of your program. 80% of your success or lack thereof is tied to recruiting. That's something that I've maintained for years and years. That's been really the key, is getting the right kind of guys into our system, then developing those guys.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. Appreciate it.

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