

Rose Bowl Game presented by Capital One Venture X: Ohio State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Utah Utes

Andy Ludwig

Press Conference

Q. What kind of difficulty is there in preparing for a defense that's undergone a midseason change and also has hired a defensive coordinator? How much of all of this are you watching, and are you looking at any Oklahoma State stuff?

ANDY LUDWIG: We are not looking at any Oklahoma State film right now. We're focused on what the Buckeyes have done this past season. I know they've had a couple of changes in staff assignments and things like that, but you see the personality of the defensive shine through every week. We're just preparing very hard for a high quality opponent.

Q. What jumps out about Ohio State when you put the tape on?

ANDY LUDWIG: Athleticism and size, great length on the edges, physicality. And the one thing that really sticks out to me in terms of coaching the quarterbacks, what a great jog they do disguising coverage. The quarterback is really going to have to be on top of some presnap indicators, but they do an excellent job. Very well coached football team.

Q. Is there a strength up front, linebacker, secondary? Something that really stands out?

ANDY LUDWIG: The defensive ends have great length, great range, and a great ability to redirect. They definitely have our attention. Again, quality players all the way across the board.

Q. Does it change your game plan if any of their defensive players opt out? They've already had one on the defensive side opt out.

ANDY LUDWIG: No. We're too far in to adjust and adapt. I know if one guy leaves, they've got another really good player to step in and take his spot. We're working very



hard on our preparation.

Q. What do you think have been the keys for you guys' running game to be able to really hit the stride down the stretch of the season?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think my biggest takeaway from this season is our players' work ethic and improving every day, and then in practice and that improvement showing up in week 4, improving every day, and that improvement showing up in week 5, et cetera, et cetera.

So this group is a hard working, focused group that has shown improvement each day in practice, and it shows up on game day. Obviously, we're anxious to put that on display here in a very large stage.

Q. Tavion Thomas, what makes him such an effective guy for your offense?

ANDY LUDWIG: His physicality. He's an excellent downhill runner. He's got good vision and deceptively fast for a big guy, but he is a load to tackle. It's going to take a couple guys to get him down on the ground.

But his physicality, his presence in the offense was a big catalyst of this offense taking a jump about halfway through the season.

Q. How much have you seen him grow just personally?

ANDY LUDWIG: Tremendously. Because he joined us in the summer, a transfer, a four by four to a junior college then to Utah. So he's learning a different culture and things like that through summer conditioning, fall camp, and learning the offense can be like drinking water through a fire hose at times.

So he's had great growth as a football player, as a person, as he learns and adapts the Utah football culture.

Q. Did you think he'd make this much of an impact

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right away?

ANDY LUDWIG: No, because there was some times earlier in the season where it's like this young man is not going to be ready this year, but he was committed to it. His running back coach Keil McDonald was committed to him, stuck with him. We had some trouble holding onto the ball earlier in the season. He got those addressed, got those fixed. I am pleasantly, pleasantly surprised with his growth and development as a football player and as a person at the University of Utah.

Q. How pivotal was that stretch of the season for him where he had the fumble issues?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think a big red light went on, and Tavion said, I'm going to get this fixed or else I'm not going to play. That ball came out a couple times the first couple games of the year, and he came off the field. He wants to play. He wants to be an impact player in this program. He identified the issue, and he got the issue corrected.

It's a daily process in terms of focusing on ball security, and I'm very pleased with his development and where he is right now.

Q. What's it like to be able to have three different tight ends that you can kind of depend on? How does that change your offense with all three of them?

ANDY LUDWIG: The way that we put the system together for a long time, it's all based and designed -- what we do offensively is based on the players and the program and their strengths. We are very fortunate to have three very talented tight ends. People say we've got to throw the ball to wide receivers more. We're just trying to utilize our best players. That's what gets us into a three tight end look very frequently.

But you've got three distinct, different characteristics with those tight ends. With Cole Fotheringham, the line of scrimmage tight end, kind of prototype tight end. Brant Kuithe, much more of an detached move tight end. And Dalton Kincaid, kind of a nice blend of the two. But they're very talented football players that all three of them high degree of football intellect, do a great job preparing. That's what allows us to utilize their skills and abilities.

Q. You've had Cam in the program for a few years now. Since he took over as the starter, where have you seen his growth the most? He's grown obviously in a lot of areas, but where have you really seen him maybe explode or grow the most?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think the biggest thing is the way he

prepares, the way he works day in and day out in terms of film study. There's no question that his system knowledge of what we're doing is beyond reproach, more than any coach, myself included, in the program.

He has great ownership, but the way that he is learning to dissect defenses, dissect opponents, and then translate it on game day, I saw this exact look on film, and there's no hesitation and no doubt in his mind.

That to me has been one of the most pleasant, enjoyable things to watch with his development as a preparer for the football game.

Q. Going back to tight ends, how happy did it make you that Brant and Dalton are coming back next year?

ANDY LUDWIG: Tremendously happy. Obviously, we're going to miss Cole, but those are two difference makers for us in the program and fired up to work with them for another year. There is no doubt.

Q. When it comes to tight ends, when you're in the recruiting process for those guys, are you looking for a specific athlete for what a Utah tight end is, or do you like the variety of a mix of different things?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah. I think that position in particular, great tight ends come in all shapes and sizes, and it's my job, once you identify an athlete's skill set, is to design and implement schemes to put him in a position to be successful. These guys are very talented in what they do. They're all a little bit different, but that's the coaching staff's responsibility to design plays for them.

Q. Is it fun as the coordinator? You have to know the matchup problems that this creates, the leverage you can kind of put on defenses, is that just sort of one of the fun aspects of the job when you can take athletes like that?

Because a lot of teams aren't used to matching up with that?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think it's a point of difference for the Utes using three tight ends. Especially three at a time, can be a big advantage for us. I think the biggest difference maker for us is those three young men, their football intellect, their ability to prepare, their ability to master what we're asking them to do, and then to go out and execute it on game day. It's a special group.

Q. Andy, Britain said yesterday that when Cam took over as quarterback, that it maybe allowed you guys to get back your identity, that it put in some context to



maybe to try and help Charlie mesh with what he was familiar with. How did that process work itself out?

ANDY LUDWIG: As I mentioned earlier, what we try to do offensively is put our players in position to do what they do really well. We had a graduate transfer quarterback that spent his entire life in the spread offense. So we tried to implement more of that early in the season with mixed results, as we're all aware of.

Then when the change was made at the quarterback spot, we reeled it back in, kind of went back to what we've been doing here at the University of Utah for the couple years that I've been here, and the results speak for themselves.

Q. Did you notice any major changes between the Ohio State defense once they made their changes? How has that come across to you on film?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think there's some subtleties -- again, I don't know all the exact timetables, things like that. I know they've got a veteran coaching staff. They've been around a lot of football, and they're working very hard together. Maybe a little bit more middle open safety, as opposed to middle closed safety looks on early downs.

But I haven't really dissected to see what has changed. I'm just kind of focused on you take kind of the last half of their season. This is who they are. This is what they're doing. What do we got to do to attack that?

Q. You have a veteran defensive line coach like Larry, does that mean that you sort of have an idea what type things they're going to play and how you can attack them, or do you just going to have to do what you do?

ANDY LUDWIG: It's predominantly we're going to do what we do and do what got us here, but you have great appreciation for his expertise he brings to the defensive front. Those techniques show up, and our guys are going to have to be very technically sound and fundamentally sound in order to have success in this football game.

Q. Does Tavion really have a knack for the zone plays for you guys?

ANDY LUDWIG: We are predominantly an inside and outside zone football team. We do run some counter, but I believe he is best running the ball downhill out -- with his toes at 7 1/2. I don't think he really has a preference whether we're running zone or counter gap schemes, what have you. He just wants the rock.

Q. There's been such turnover around the Pac-12. We've seen that again this off-season. What does the

stability of Kyle having been in Salt Lake for so long done to allow the program to kind of take advantage of the turnover elsewhere in the conference?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think it's such a credit to

Coach Whittingham, his vision for this program and what he's been able to accomplish. I've been with him two different times. I was with him when we were in the Mountain West, and he took the transition into the Pac-12. You know there's always some growth and challenges with that.

But just his clear-cut vision, his ability to communicate and motivate coaches and players, I think the results speak for themselves. I think he's an elite college football coach.

Q. You mentioned the length and size of Ohio State's defensive ends. What kind of problems does that pose for your offense?

ANDY LUDWIG: There's some leverage problems on the edges. Our tackles and tight ends, especially the matchups with the tight ends is going to be a real challenge. I know we're talking a lot about our tight ends. Well, they have their work cut out for them this weekend.

With that, there's some things in the play action game and really the drop-back game that the quarterback has to be aware of. What you may have been able to sink a ball over, defensive end set, that's going to be very difficult this week. Those are, I think, elite edge rushers, edge players that we're facing.

Q. Do you set out to get the ball out quicker?

ANDY LUDWIG: We're going to -- we have a big part of that. That's always our play. We want to get the ball out of our hand and try to get the ball into space as quick as possible. I wouldn't say that we're making a drastic adjustment in what we're doing in the pass game.

We have great awareness and great respect for everybody on their defensive front, but just awareness of the length of the edge players.

Q. Athletically, how different is this team from the Mountain West team? Just body type, access to kinds of players, how does that manifest?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, I think we're longer. We're stronger. We're faster -- you're talking about the team I coached 15 years ago. Yeah, you're recruiting a different kind of player, the facilities, the administration, everybody that supports the move to the Pac-12 very well.



I think we had great players back in the day, but I just think the level of athleticism has enhanced itself here in the past eight or so years.

Q. Do more doors open when that happens, when you move up a level?

ANDY LUDWIG: Oh, yeah. Again, the support of the administration, the facilities, everything that went along with moving from the Mountain West to the Pac-12 opens more doors for you.

Q. Are there any concerns that the game will not be played due to COVID-19?

ANDY LUDWIG: I have no -- that's not my concern right now. I'm concerned on having a good practice here this morning here in about an hour and a half.

But absolutely, in this day and age and what's going on in the world, that is, but I cannot let that be my focus.

Q. What precautions has the team taken to prevent any outbreaks?

ANDY LUDWIG: We are following very closely with our trainer, the CDC guidelines, the city, local community guidelines, and we're all on top of it. Just we're trying to do things right. That's about the best I can explain it to you.

Q. In hindsight three years ago, how beneficial was it for you to have Cam up in the box with you?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think that's probably a better question to ask Cam, but I know one thing, that we have a good relationship. We communicate very freely, very openly. I think he may have developed an appreciation for the view from the box and the approach from the box where it's very removed and very quiet, very detached from the emotion of the game.

I know it has not hurt him, that much I'm confident of.

Q. You say it hasn't hurt him. As a couple of years have gone by, how much have you seen him grow, not just as a quarterback, but as a leader, somebody in the huddle that the guys can trust?

ANDY LUDWIG: His leadership and his interaction with his teammates is beyond reproach. You know him. His personality jives with every player, with every position group. No one is an outcast with Cam Rising. He's everyone's confidante. He's everyone's friend. They listen to him.

He's not a rah-rah guy, but he's a great communicator, and being a great teammate is very important to him.

Q. I'm wondering what you think of, what you have seen from freshman corner Denzel Burke at Ohio State? It's rare to be starting at that young age.

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, gifted player, great awareness to that young man. He's got great change of direction and closing speed. We're very aware of his presence.

Q. Because he was an Arizona kid. Did you ever -- was he on your radar, Utah's radar at all?

ANDY LUDWIG: I couldn't speak to that. I'm sorry.

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