

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

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Pasadena, California, USA

Ohio State Buckeyes

Kevin Wilson

Press Conference



Q. Kevin, how has this month of prep been for the offense?

KEVIN WILSON: I think really good. Coach Day did a really nice job coming off the last game with school wrapping up and having some practices that kind of kept us going without overdoing it. Coach Mick did a couple of lifts during the week while we were recruiting for those couple of weeks.

Got a little bit of young guy work, enough to keep the old guys engaged without overdoing it, burning them out, keeping them sharp. Really kind of had a game week preparation prior to being here, and we showed up on a Monday of really a Saturday game week.

So we are kind of in the normal flow, which you try to be, although it gets awkward when the game is on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Today we're on Wednesday. We've already kind of done Tuesday, Wednesday. We've been pretty healthy as far as guys being there every day. And I think the format of what Coach Day and Coach Mick want to do have kept our guys engaged.

Typically, we have a chance to play well when we practice well, and we've practiced very, very well. We'll see if we finish the week up and finish strongly here today and tomorrow as we wrap up the prep.

Q. In terms of personnel, you take Nick out of the mix there at left tackle. I assume Thayer will kick out. Is that a surprise for you guys, or are you planning to make a move?

KEVIN WILSON: We had always, in the world of transfer portal and all that, everybody's made a big deal about the tackles playing. First of all, you're trying to keep the guys engaged and make sure they're playing and happy, and it's also really good players.

So the thought all along was with Nick, when Thayer made the move to go to guard, he would still be the guy on the left side and Paris would be the guy on the right side. Your right-handed stance, your communication is the same. The guys you're working with are the same.

So the thought process was that was the guards that were the backup tackles. Then we really like what Donovan Jackson and what Matt Jones can do for us in guard, and they're equally just as good and in some ways maybe better body types at guard.

Those with Josh Fryar and with Luke have been our best seven, best eight guys combo. So the deal would be naturally Thayer would be the first crack out there if we had to do it, then Paris would be the next one that would go to the left side.

Q. Was there any thought at all for this game about letting Paris get a start in in the next year out there?

KEVIN WILSON: I brought that up, but at the same time, the stress of the game and going from right-handed stance to left-hand stance. He played very, very well recently. He's been practicing great. I think in the off-season, I guess you kind of look between he and Dawand to figure out who needs to be at left, who needs to be at right. There will be some conversations that can happen as you get into February and spring ball and moving forward and have some continuity.

I think those other guys are ready to step up. It's the time of year, though, now a little bit more with some of the early out deals, but we've recruited very well throughout the years. Sometimes it takes a year or two to get your niche. A couple of years ago, we were out here, and there was an injury and all of a sudden, Wyatt Davis had to start.

That was a kickoff to him having a great season, two great years and early out pro. And that's the opportunities that these guys have. It gives an opportunity now to get Matt on the field a lot more and hopefully get Donovan out there



as well.

Q. Coach, Cade Stover moving to defense again, can you talk about what went into that decision?

KEVIN WILSON: I asked the defensive guy. I think we thought they were a little bit shy of some body types with the couple of injuries. We thought with Jeremy and Mitch, Joe Royer has really come on very, very well. He'll be the third. As a matter of fact, he's technically the second tight end in this game with Mitch being the fullback kind of tight end, and we've got Gee Scott. We thought we had enough guys to manage a one-week deal, and we'll see how this goes.

With recruiting, we can decide then what moves -- from my opinion, first of all, I've had a lot of fun with it because I love him. So I do everything I can to give him as much grief as I can because, when I love you, I like to grief you a little bit. I've got a lot of respect for him.

He's brought a lot of energy. When you say how's practice been? He's brought a lot of energy to the defense. I think playing offense helped him understand maybe some offensive looks of what's going on, so his anticipation looks better. He's practiced well. Defensive guys want to use him. It's been fun going against him. We personally look each other up and have a little fun with each other during practice. It has been really good.

Q. So for this week, he's just playing linebacker?

KEVIN WILSON: Yes. We can use him in goal line, short yardage situations. I think again with Joe, Gee, and the other guys we have, typically we only went -- when we get two big goal line sets, sometimes we're putting two, three, four guys out there. For what we're doing, we've got it ready where he can be out there for goal line, but we also could use the other guys.

The bulk of normal football, he's played defense the whole time, and we've played offense with Jeremy, with Joe, with Gee, and with Mitch Rossi.

Q. What are your impressions of what you've seen from the Utah defense?

KEVIN WILSON: They're always good. It's Kyle. It's what he did when he was a coordinator. I had the opportunity to play with him and a guy in Arizona years ago at one of the coaches' meetings that we had years and years ago. So I've got a lot of respect for him. The team plays with his personality and toughness. They've recruited well, kids that fit their culture. They've been there so long.

He and Coach Ferentz are the two elder statesmen of college football now. It says a lot in this day and age to be a guy that can withstand and maintain the culture of the team, and the vibe of the team, and the kids keep embracing him, buying into him, the community and fan base buying him.

They're aggressive with what they do. They tackle well. Don't miss a lot of tackles. Defensively, they're one of the best in the nation. I think someone said they don't have a lot of interceptions, but they're one of the tops in the nation in pass breakups. That means you're still playing good pace.

You look at some things. Two inside linebackers, zero one flat run. Two guys off the edge, create a little havoc. Always got those stout, strong leverage players inside. They're outstanding, and they're going to be a challenge, a huge challenge.

Q. Kevin, I assume you prefer to have Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave playing, but where's the excitement level of seeing the younger receivers in?

KEVIN WILSON: When you say excitement, I'm sure they're excited. That will be one of the things for us to keep them calmed down. They have played. The aura of the game, the first time, you have the opportunity.

Sometimes when you play the skill positions, when you squeeze too tight and try too hard, it doesn't go your way. Let the game come to you, play as hard as you can, play well without the ball, and all of a sudden the ball will find you, and you make the cosmic plays that look like you had a great game because you have one, two, or three catches.

The real deal is to settle them down even though you are playing the hype of the Rose Bowl, the opponent you are playing, the exposure of TV and everything in a big game.

As coaches, I think they all shared the stories of you came here to play in these games. Now it is your time. It's a great opportunity to springboard and jump start your next season as you see Emeka and Julian and Marv and those guys will do.

Q. Do you have to build in -- say the first quarter, they're not going to be as precise as maybe they should be just because of the excitement. Do you have to build that into the game plan?

KEVIN WILSON: You don't want to build it into the game, but you've got to be ready to adapt to that. We even made the comment, Game 1 against Minnesota, I think we had

the 11 starters on offense, eight guys, it was their first time starting in the position they played. Garrett was going from slot back downside. That's kind of a new position. I think it was Chris, and it was Jeremy Ruckert. I can't remember who the third guy was that was playing in the spot he had played in. I think it was Jackson because he played H last year. He's just playing in a new spot.

They're going to guard, Nick going to tackle, Dawand in the deal, Paris in the deal, Luke in the deal, C.J.'s first start.

Minnesota did a great job of ball control. We didn't have a lot of opportunity. Early in the game, we were a little bit off. We finally settled down and made plays in the second half and had a good second half of the game. So we were a little bit off.

You'd like to think, or you would think there's a chance early in this game, how do you play if you're a little bit off? At the same time, because Utah is a great offensive team that runs the ball well, can play ball control, they play outstanding defense. If we don't execute and we have limited plays, you're going to get into an ugly game. We want to minimize what we -- we anticipate it could happen. We have to find a way to minimize that, play through the ugliness, and have a great game.

Q. Do you think Jackson stays in the slot next year?

KEVIN WILSON: Haven't even thought about it.

Q. What are some of the areas that you've seen C.J. grow into this season? What are some of the areas of his game that you've seen grow throughout the season?

KEVIN WILSON: I think everyone can see the plays he makes as far as the ability, decision-making and throws. But I think the two things to me where he's grown a lot, just being a young player, is the way he has prepared in practice, which you guys don't see, the time he puts in for a young player studying the game, watching tape, and grasping that information and then taking the information that he has to the field has been outstanding.

So his ability to become a great preparation player as a young player is off the chart. And the second thing is he's played, he's become in his own right, in his own way, a pretty good vocal leader for our team. Early in the year, you're a quarterback, you're supposed to lead, but you're kind of quiet.

As the year went on, not that there's a lot of team meetings or not that he is grabbing the bull by the horn and doing everything, but you see him more comfortable speaking up,

talking to players, telling them what he sees.

There was a play the other day, he said, Coach, if so and so does this, that safety is going to concern me a little bit. I said, hey, he actually ran a little bit wrong, but I agree with your point.

I shared that with my player. C.J. just come to me, Coach, now it's a play we call. Now if he gets a little bit in, I'm worried about the safety right there. So his ability to get more and more comfortable communicating, talking and his ability to prepare has been awesome. As a young player, that's why he's had such a great year and he sets up to have a great career for us.

Q. What are you seeing from him off the field as far as his characteristics?

KEVIN WILSON: I think he's very calm, very level headed. When he's off the field, with all the hype and notoriety, you still see him coming in and spending as much time preparing and studying.

In this day and age, when you can get pulled, a lot of people getting in your ear, you need to do this and that. I think he understands to play well, he needs to prepare well. And I've seen him stay very, very grounded with all the notoriety. You don't see a guy that's very boastful. You don't see the guy patting himself on the back. Very complimentary of his teammates. Doing a great job of preparing and working.

Q. Do you watch that closely to see if there's an affect of the limelight? He's gone from the spotlight to the limelight. You're always in the spotlight when you're an Ohio State quarterback, but Heisman finalist is a different step all together. Have you kind of watched him to see if there's been a change?

KEVIN WILSON: Personally. No. I am sure Ryan is with that. He has a lot of good sense of a lot more things going on behind the scenes and the distractions. We do talk a lot more with our players for the distractions our players have, with the things you're holding in your hand and all the information they're reading.

I was talking to a player who plays on the defensive side today about my opinion I think it would be good for him to do in the off-season. He said every time I read Twitter, I start grrr. I said it's just a negative thought. You're getting challenged, why don't you do this? Why did you do that? You've got parents in their ears, the agents, the branding, the NIL, all kinds of things pulling guys.

The great players are still the talented, most humble, hard

working, best practiced players. C.J.'s had a great year because he's talented, but the way he's prepared and as humble as he is has made him a special player.

He actually did something the other day and actually challenged my son, and my son said something about it, and I said that's the Heisman guy saying something to you. When I was a freshman, Lawrence Taylor didn't know who I was. It just shows what kind of teammate -- you have an upper level teammate saying, hey, man, I need to see you do this. I would use that as a positive challenge because one of the premier players in the country is asking you to pick your game up. I think that's a heck of a compliment, and I think it shows what kind of leader C.J. is.

Q. Real quick, has Jackson, have you noticed him step up, not necessarily in the wide receiver room, that's not where you are, but on the field, et cetera, suddenly now he's the leader of that young group coming back and stuff?

Obviously, Chris Olave is here, but he's not playing. What have you noticed, I guess, rise in Jackson as more of a leader coming out?

KEVIN WILSON: Well, to say he's been different in what we've had in practice -- I think we've had 10 or 11 practices. To say he's been significantly different, he like C.J. has had a great year. He's a great practice player. He practices every day. He shows up every day. He competes in one-on-ones.

So just the way he continues to just practice, leadership is best coupled with performance, and he performs very, very well. He practices very, very well. He commands the ball because he gets open. To me, he just keeps practicing. So that would be a question for Coach Hartline and how is he maybe one-on-one with some guys.

I see in my world over there Jeremy Ruckert, and I see Jeremy grabbing Joe after a play and saying, hey, man, the next time that linebacker does that, lean into him a little bit more, snap out a little bit more. Those are things I see because I'm working with Jeremy. I'm sure Jackson's doing that, but right now, I just see a guy who's had one of the best years in college football continue to practice as good as anyone on our team. That's a great quality.

Q. Has Cade Stover the last month or so proven his worth to this football team from the standpoint of playing defense against Michigan? He's practicing with the defense now and stuff. What would you say -- how would you explain Cade Stover to someone?

KEVIN WILSON: Well, we'll go through after this game

and decide long term, and I said this to him when we talked to him, I said, I don't want to hear what's best for the team because what's best for the team sometimes is a bunch of crap when you're a player. I said what's best for you? If you don't want to go over to the defense, we'll stay here, you'll keep playing. You'll have a good opportunity. You'll play in this game and play special teams. He's been a great special teams player for us, and that's fine, if you think that's something you want to do.

And now as we finish this game up, after a quick break, we'll get into January and start getting a plan for spring. I do think we're getting to a point where we need to get direction for him so he can have high success. Whether that be he's coming back and going to be a tight end, with Jeremy and Mitch being seniors, there's going to be a great opportunity at tight end.

Right now, there's a little bit of void at linebacker, and there's an opportunity there. I will say this, I think he loves playing over there and brings a lot of energy and a lot of fun. I think he's been good for the defense in this short period of time.

Coach will talk about what's best for the team. Personally, I want what's best for Cade. He's one of my favorite guys on the whole team. He's been a pleasure to coach. Selfishly, I'd like to do it, I am going to do what is best for the team. I want to do what's best for Cade Stover.

Q. If Kevin moves to linebacker, is the tight end room where you have a need? Will you look to the portal?

KEVIN WILSON: The issue we have we won't make any hard decisions for Cade until after the spring semester starts. If there's anything on that realm, it will be later. I don't know if that's good with the transition to summertime and get a guy up to speed.

We think and look at that a little bit. We've got Bennett Christian coming in. Our mathematical numbers are to have five. Right now, we would have Joe, Gee, Sam Hart and Bennett coming in. Then we'll see.

We're still going back and forth with Mitch. If he wanted to play another year, he could. I think he's trying to figure that out. What's the grad school opportunities? Is he ready to go on? Potentially, I guess, there's a chance that Mitch could be with us. We're not forcing that. We're just seeing if that is something he wants to do.

Cade would be the fifth one, or we'll have to look and see if there's a good portal opportunity.

Q. How do you feel about Gee?

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KEVIN WILSON: First of all, he's a different -- he's not a true tight end just size-wise yet. He's gotten his weight into the mid-220s. He doesn't lack courage or the ability to want to block or the toughness. He's actually very, very strong. If you go to the weight room, he's strong. He does need the old quote, unquote, little more lead in the pencil, just when I'm blocking guys, have the mass, anchor down and firm up some things.

That being said too, he's a guy that flexes out as a receiving tight end better than those guys. Sometimes a tight end has his hand down. Sometimes he's playing in the backfield. That backfield guy is really good for Mitch Rossi, where Mitch flexes out, and he does that a lot in practice, and he's good at that, but he's more comfortable as a backfield type player.

Gee is going to be a little more comfortable as a tight end and does a lot of complementary tight end things on the fringe and a little bit more as a big receiver. And then graduating a couple of wide receivers or those guys going out early, there's an opportunity and niche there. His role would be a little bit more of a tight end/H-receiver versus Mitch Rossi is a tight end/H-fullback. And you still ask them to do some things but you play to their strengths. Right now that's where he is.

To be a complete tight end, we've got to continue to get a little bit more weight and continue to enhance that. He's had a good first year. I think he's had a frustrating first year because he wants to play a lot more than where he is, and he's played in a position where a lot of times, like O-line, it takes about a good two years to get up to speed with all the skills you have to do.

He's basically playing -- I was talking to George Kittle, had him with our group a year ago. When you're a tight end, you play left tackle half the time, you play wide receiver half the time. If you go to the NFL, you make half the money they make too, but you're doing both jobs.

So for Gee to get those jobs, it just takes time because there's not enough time to practice it. You're kind of practicing as you play. That's why the ability to stay healthy. Like Jeremy, he's been out there every day. Mitch Rossi has been out there every day. The ability of those guys like Joe Royer and Gee to be out there every day, they'll develop and we'll do well.

Q. What kind of luxury is it to have a guy like Thayer when Nick makes the decision he can go back to left tackle and you don't miss a beat?

KEVIN WILSON: First of all, I would go back. It shows

what kind of young man he is. You come back for your senior year to play tackle, which is where all the notoriety is, and now by the way, hey, we need you to go play guard, would you? So to be the teammate, I think that's why he was recognized as being the guy that wears the Block O, because in this day and age, hey, what about me? I know in my career, a lot of guys think they need to play left tackle. I've had Lane Johnson at right tackle, Trent Williams at right tackle. I had a bunch of right tackles make a lot of money.

You want to be really good. I think it says a lot for Thayer, just the teammate, team leader he is to do that. And now the luxury he has the skill set to come back and play the tackle force in a pinch. That's great. I have a lot of respect for him to be humble enough. At the same time too, I think his future in the NFL maybe is at guard. I don't think he's hurt himself. It says a lot for him as a young man.

When you've got a lot of people in your ear about what you need to do, he made one of the biggest sacrifices for our team this year.

Q. Matt Jones has obviously been in and out, played different roles for you guys. Sounds like he may step in at the guard position. Again, another guy who sounds like he's sacrificed for the team; is that a fair assessment?

KEVIN WILSON: No doubt. Him, to me, he's been a little bit -- maybe as a young guy, sometimes immature with maybe the practice habits or the consistency, but his talent and skill set and ability to play, to be a tremendous player is really, really high. And for him to just battle through and keep showing up when I'm year 2 not playing or year 3 not playing, now he's into year 4.

This will be like last year he started in the Sugar Bowl, I think he started in the Orange Bowl, and he is starting with me. He's had some quality starts for us. He's played a lot. But we've had enough depth, where he has been of the five linemen, he's been number 6 and number 7, where he's had to play left guard, had to play right guard, had to practice center.

I think he made honorable mention in the Big Ten as a sixth lineman. I think it shows what people see in him when they see him play. I think he's a tremendous player. He's played very well in this game against great competition. I think he sets up well to have a great fifth year season and move on to be an NFL player. I think he is outstanding.

Q. How would you describe the intensity of preparation the last three weeks?

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KEVIN WILSON: I think it's been really good. We did not have a lot of meetings, a lot of discussions about our last performance. I think we have a lot of coaches. I think we have a lot of players that have a lot of pride, and it just kind of showed up every day and practiced extremely hard. Been very, very -- we've done a fair amount of ones on ones and ones on twos.

One, because I think we've gotten thin enough that sometimes our scout team or threes were getting very, very thin. I think just to have good work, and quite honestly, some of the things that I think both teams do offensively and defensively, we could get some decent looks, kind of going against each other, that would be wasted practice plays. We're not going against like an odd three-man front team like Tulsa that played a three-three deal.

So we've had a lot of just very competitive practices. I wouldn't say preseason or spring ball-like, but more like that than a game week. It's been fun.

Q. How excited are the guys who will replace Garrett and Chris? They played a little.

KEVIN WILSON: Yeah, they've played and done well. I'm sure they're very excited. Coach Hartline, if he were sitting here, would have told you the last five or six weeks, Marvin Harris has practiced as well as any receiver we've had. It's one thing during practice, now take the driving range to the golf course. Now take it to the Rose Bowl. Take it against a quality defensive football team.

But he has been off the chart in practice in his details. He's very, very mature. With Chris and Garrett, those guys still got the bulk of the plays and they were getting their opportunities. But Emeka has shown flashes of being outstanding. Julian's gotten in there and is healthy and doing well, and Marvin has been a great practice player.

I think those three plus Jackson, you've got Jeremy in the mix with Joe and Mitch, and we've got wings out there. We'll be very aggressive and attack these guys the best we can.

Q. Kevin, is there a benefit for you guys at all of having Chris Olave out at practice?

KEVIN WILSON: That would be for -- he's been there every day getting individual stuff. We did very, very minimal. Again, no one really said until we got here whether he was or wasn't playing.

I think he likes being around his brothers. I think he likes

being around his teammates. I think he likes practicing, and they're making a decision that's best for his future. He's trying to still be a great team leader, great teammate and be here.

Some of Chris's best things in leadership is by example. He's a verbal guy, but he's not overly outgoing on the verbal page deal. I think him being out there and doing light things in practice and making some bullets to receivers is one of his best ways of leading and how he's trying to lead and finish off his role as one of our team leaders.

Q. I'm sure you'd love to have Chris and Garrett out there, but could it be helpful and beneficial for the team and for C.J. to play in this kind of setting, so they can start to develop that chemistry for next year? How helpful could that be?

KEVIN WILSON: To me, in our sport, you pop the pads. You've got to re-establish the chemistry and the timing and all those things. From a confidence standpoint in an arena, it's one thing to do it in practice. Like I said, Marvin has practiced as well as any receiver we've had for about two months now. It's been ridiculous how well he's practiced. Now take that to the game. We have an opportunity in critical moments to take it to the game field, critical third downs. Critical scores on situations. Normal down one-on-one plays.

So to have that opportunity this year as opposed to next year probably gives you a little bit more self-assuredness or maybe also shows you where you're still lacking. Sometimes even in practice, as good as it looks, you can still be a little bit off. So to go through some of those growing pains, even though it's a huge game and a must-win game, it's still going to be a great opportunity for those teams as we springboard into 2022 as well.

Q. In your position, Cade, what are your thoughts on your positioning?

KEVIN WILSON: First of all, one of the reasons is we do like what Joe Royer and what Gee has shown and the potential moving forward. We like the young guys we signed.

I think Joe is setting himself up well to be a quality, quality player. I mean, his skill set. He's getting more mature, more consistent. We'll see where Cade stays. I think we'll have a discussion here. Again, the comments I made earlier, don't want to do what's best for the team, what's best for Cade.

What's his best opportunity? Not help our team, but help

him because I know he wants to be an NFL-type player. Is that coming back to being a tight end? If we have Cade and Joe and Gee, three pretty good ones, and obviously look to consider if Mitch Rossi wants an extra year because he can get it. And you've got Sam Hart and Bennett Christian coming in, that's not too bad. That's a pretty good group.

pretty good. I appreciate it.

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If Cade's out, Mitch don't come back, we're a little thin, then we have to figure things out, but that's college ball. It's a revolving door right now. I've seen a quarterback room look like one thing, and the next semester it was completely different bodies. It was still good bodies.

Q. Is the transfer portal still an option? I assume it is.

KEVIN WILSON: The only issue on spring is you're getting close on time, semester's starting, and it might have to be a late add. That's where Coach Day has always done a great job of not only getting guys just to put on the roster. Is there a niche? Is there a need? Do these guys fit?

If you look at the guys we brought in, whether it be Jonah Jackson or Ruggs this year, the guys we've brought in have hit for the most part really, really high. If we do something, it's because there's a need and we think there is a guy who's going to pop for us.

Q. Kevin, there were a bunch of coaching jobs this off-season. Is that something you pursued as well?

KEVIN WILSON: I appreciate the Akron deal with lifelong teammates and friends. I never had a conversation with any of them. No disrespect to them. I appreciate whoever threw that out there. At least I had a bunch of former players and colleagues hit me up. One of you guys hit me that day about good luck on Akron. 30 minutes later, one of my old coaches hit me up. What's up with Akron?

I'm getting old enough that maybe not. I'd love to have that opportunity, but I do love every day working with Ryan at Ohio State, what we do and the opportunities here. By no means am I at a point where I'm just dying to do something. I think, if it's meant to be, it's meant to be.

I'm at one of the best places, one of the best jobs, having as much fun as I've ever had. I love coaching the kids we work with. My family loves it here. It's kind of neat my son's here. I never thought that when he showed up. It's kind of neat he's here.

By no means am I content because we need to play a hell of a lot better than just we just played. There is a lot of things we need to do. I thoroughly, thoroughly love where we are at and what we do and dealing with you guys is

