

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

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Pasadena, California, USA

Utah Utes

Mika Tafua

Press Conference



Q. What would you tell your teammates about how you got here, and what would you tell your 12-, 13-year-old self what you had to do to get here to this point?

MIKA TAFUA: Just keep working. Sometimes things go your way. Sometimes they don't. But if you put in the work, you'll reap rewards in the end. Like our coaches always say, the cream will always rise to the top. And I believe it will, if you put in enough work.

Obviously sometimes opportunities need to come your way, too. But for the most part if you work hard you'll be blessed.

Q. Describe the challenge of going against Ohio State and what it means to Utah.

MIKA TAFUA: I think it's a good opportunity to show the nation what Utah brand football is. And so it's just a good opportunity for us to show that.

Q. Some things on their offensive line, (inaudible) is not going to play. How does that affect you in terms of preparation and knowing some of these guys you haven't seen in those roles?

MIKA TAFUA: Probably just watch a little more film. We've been watching the guys who have been playing all season. And just the guys who are coming in now, probably watch a little bit more on them.

Q. (Inaudible). You haven't seen him play a lot. What's been the key to that?

MIKA TAFUA: To stopping the run? I think just assignment-style football. We're put in good positions to make plays. We've just got to be there to make them.

Q. How great is it to be here? After the season you've had, now you're at the Rose Bowl, it's a reality, right?

MIKA TAFUA: It's exciting. Just grateful to be here. We had the Disneyland experience. That was pretty fun. And just being around with the boys, going to all these different events has been fun for us.

Q. Seems like you have a good mixture of being loose -- coaches riding bikes to practice -- and also hard work, crossing that red line. Is that the mentality for you guys?

MIKA TAFUA: Usually away games or games we have to travel it's all business, business. But Coach Whit emphasized enjoy the bowl experience. But we're here to play a football game and play the best we can to win this game.

Q. You guys obviously have some great players yourself, Devin, Fotheringham. Defensively what's been the key to you guys this season? You have had plenty of injuries and ups and downs.

MIKA TAFUA: Playing fast, physical, assignment-sound. That's what it comes down to. If everyone's doing their job, then we'll come out with a victory. I feel like that's the case with any team. If everyone is doing their job, everyone's executing, they'll probably end up on top at the end of the game.

Q. Asked a couple of guys like yourself, going out in a Utah uniform in the Rose Bowl, how special is that?

MIKA TAFUA: It's exciting. The other day we did a photo shoot. I'm sure I can say that because we released the uniform reveal already. But just seeing the patch on the uniform, it was a cool thing to see. It all stood out in the all-white uniforms.

Q. We're kind of Hollywood, write stories about great things. How would you script your Hollywood ending at the Rose Bowl and Utah career if you could script it

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out this Saturday?

MIKA TAFUA: You already know the answer to that one. But just coming out with a dub and enjoying the last time where we can dump water or Gatorade on Coach Whit and see the confetti fall.

Q. From watching film, what stands out about the offensive line and the quarterback?

MIKA TAFUA: They're a pretty good offense. He's obviously a Heisman candidate for a reason. I think it will be a good challenge for us. And, so, can't wait for January 1st to see it.

Q. How fun has it been just to be here in California preparing for the game?

MIKA TAFUA: Especially this time of year, it's way better to be here than in Utah. It's kind of snowing over there. Couple of my friends back at Utah said it's a blizzard right now. So glad we have to deal with the rain and not the snow.

Q. They had a couple of opt-outs. Does that change the way you guys prepare or are you trying to prepare for their scheme?

MIKA TAFUA: I think it changes the way they prepare more than the way we prepare. Going into every game we focus on ourselves. And usually when we don't do that things go bad. So we've just been focusing on the things that we can control.

Q. What's the first thing that jumps out about the Ohio State offense when you watch them on film?

MIKA TAFUA: You know they're a good offense. I don't know what other words to describe it. They're a good offense. They execute. And when they do, they're dangerous.

Q. Is there any similarities to the other offenses you have played this season?

MIKA TAFUA: Not that I can think of off the top of my head. But they're a good offense.

Q. What do you have to do to contain them, I guess?

MIKA TAFUA: Assignment-style football, like I've been saying. If you execute, you'll generally come out on top. At the end of the day, the team who executes the best will win the game.

Q. Generally the rule to winning football is stop the run. This is a team that likes to throw the ball. Is it a little different where, is the goal still the same, stop the run, make it one dimensional?

MIKA TAFUA: For sure. For us it's stop the run and have fun on third downs. So once you stop the run, you know, you can get after the quarterback a little bit. He gets the ball out really quick. It should be a good challenge for us.

Q. Any, I don't want to say sigh of relief, but they'll be without their top receivers. Do you guys even think about that or is it just all about you guys?

MIKA TAFUA: Honestly, we just focus on ourselves. That's something that they're going to have to change up to kind of prepare for -- to deal with the other guys that are behind them. But we're just doing the things we can do to prepare to win this game.

Q. This is an Ohio State offensive line that is mixed and matched throughout the year. New guys around. How difficult is it to watch on film to gauge who is going to be playing when and what those guys do?

MIKA TAFUA: I mean, Oregon did that a little bit. They would switch a couple of their tackles here and there. We just watch film on everybody.

Q. I guess you've got a month to do it?

MIKA TAFUA: We had quite a while.

Q. How much more film are you even going to watch? Are you done watching film?

MIKA TAFUA: No, we watch film. We're about to go watch film after this. We do a really good job of watching film the past few weeks where now we can enjoy the bowl experience and then just have a little film sessions here and there. Stay fresh, stay on top of things.

Q. What's it like winning the Pac-12 and going to the Rose Bowl?

MIKA TAFUA: Winning the Pac-12 it was a great experience especially with all the adversity we went through this year, it was a great way to end the regular season. This is just a cherry on the top that we want.

Q. You've obviously had practices back at home, not really having much of a team stuff, but then you guys get here and you've got Disney and also a big part of being a captain, and you have all these other fun things as a team, how hard is it to balance between

having fun and focusing on this game?

MIKA TAFUA: Basically when it's time to work, it's time to work. When it's time to play, it's time to play. So just knowing the difference between the two plays a big part, especially like -- when it comes down to having leaders on the team, I'm not just talking about Devin and myself, but all around on the defense you find leaders, making sure that everyone knows the difference, when we step on the field, it's definitely time to work. And when we're in Disneyland, just relax a little bit. Wax Museum yesterday, relax.

Q. When you guys, talking about the leadership with that, is there much conversation you guys are having with those younger guys, or do they kind of see how you guys handle it as you guys lead by example?

MIKA TAFUA: It's kind of a balance. Definitely need to walk the walk if you talk the talk. So I think as far as talking and telling the younger guys, you've got to show them as well.

Q. As you now have watched film on the Buckeyes for the last, seems like, probably a month, what stands out to them as far as their O line, their offense? Obviously their quarterback is a Heisman finalist. Just seeing what they can do, what do you guys need to do to be able to create havoc for them?

MIKA TAFUA: The O line is pretty big. Their quarterback, he's obviously a good quarterback. As far as us on the defensive side, especially the defensive line, just play with proper fundamental and technique. Be assignment sound and execute. So that's the three things that it will come down to.

Q. You guys played against Oregon State who is widely considered to have the best O line in the entire country, does that help you guys, how you played against them, to go into this game with probably a similar mindset of what you guys had to do against them?

MIKA TAFUA: For sure. Every week is a new week. Every O line is a different O line. You can compare and contrast different O lines, but it's going to be different for sure. They definitely have good people on their O line. But if we are able to be physical and play fundamentally sound, we should be fine.

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