

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

Wednesday, December 29, 2021

Pasadena, California, USA

Utah Utes

Junior Tafuna

Press Conference



Q. My first question for you, if you had any actor to play yourself in a movie, who would it be and why?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Zach Galifianakis. Shoot, he's from -- what's it called? I watched that movie the other week. He's rowdy. I feel like I'm kind of rowdy too. He's funny too. That's one of the reasons I would play him. I love his attitude. I love his juice.

Q. And if you had -- who controls the aux in the locker room? Is there any person who controls the aux in the locker room?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Personally, on the defensive side, we have a lot of leadership. I feel like Devin Lloyd, Mika Tafua, Hauati Pututau, they're all leaders. I feel like we all kind of rally around each other. We don't have persons really. We all just know what's up and where to go. I feel like that's just how we follow, just lead and do what we do.

Q. Last question for you. What advice would you have for any young players, maybe defensive linemen?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: All I've got to say is believe in yourself and keep working. There's only so much you can do and so much you can grow to be. You've just got to keep continuing through the hard stuff. Just keep grinding, even when you're getting pushed around, falling down, and pancaked, it don't matter. Just keeping through, and you'll get through it.

All the work you do, you'll reap the rewards.

Q. What are kind of your first impressions of Ohio State's offense from watching the film?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: From watching the film, they're a really great offense. Probably the best plays all season, but obviously the first game with them. I think they're really

good. Really just they're the show.

Q. Is there any one player or position group that sort of stands out on their offense?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Obviously, I would say like there's a lot of them on that offense. Shoot, their quarterback, their running back obviously. Even their O-line, their O-line's really good as well. If I had to choose, probably C.J. Stroud. Shoot, he's been good for Ohio State.

Q. Is that a Rose Bowl mask?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, it's Utah. That's just our logo with the rose.

Q. Is there a reason you guys switched venues for the practice today?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Just when it rained the last two days, the grass was kind of swampy. We were kind of sinking in the grass. I think we just tried --

Q. It wasn't a very good place to practice?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, we were slipping all over the place. We were just trying to get on a field where we could run around and kind of get to feel good. Hopefully today I think we'll be back on grass.

Q. Harbor College, is that what it is?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I think so.

Q. Are you looking forward to that Beef Bowl tonight?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, shoot. I've never -- is that like a food competition or something like that?

Q. I don't know.

JUNIOR TAFUNA: That's what we were hoping. We have some big boys we want to challenge to eat that Beef Bowl.



Q. Did you go on any rides at Disneyland?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, I went on a lot. Kind of milked it in. My favorite was probably like Space Mountain, Splash Mountain.

Q. Have you talked with your team about COVID? Anyone that you know of that's diagnosed with COVID?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: We've been doing pretty good. I feel like we've been doing good all season. So far, probably none. I think we took care of it right beforehand. I think that's why there's no talk about it, which I'm grateful for.

Q. Talk about your freshman season, kind of getting in here. I hear you were talking to the media on media day. You have had quite a freshman year?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, it's been a great ride.

Q. I know it's fun to get to the Rose Bowl. What's it like being here doing the activities and practicing knowing it's just around the corner this Saturday?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Knowing it's around the corner and activities, it's overwhelming, but it's definitely rewarding. You get to enjoy the experience. Just have a good time. At the end of the week, end of the day, we have a game to play. That's our main goal, and that's our only goal. We're grateful for it.

Q. What's it like being a defensive lineman at Utah with such prestige and so much expected of you guys?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: It's an honor. I don't know how to explain it. I guess it's just so much people looking up to you. We have a lot to hold for because there's a bunch of D tackles coming through Utah that look up to us, look down to us, and expect us to do what we do.

At the end of the day, I feel like it's all love. They believe in us, and we believe in ourselves. I'm just grateful for it.

Q. What was it like a couple days ago when you had your picture with the patch on the jersey and all of that, did it really sink in that you guys are here?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I guess even coming to Disneyland, everything is like we're finally here. It's crazy. Being the first ones in Utah history to come here, this experience, it's once in a lifetime. My wife is like you never know when you're going to come here.

Q. With that said, we're in Hollywood. They're doing stories, they write screen plays. If you could write your own screen play, how would your Hollywood ending be on Saturday at the Rose Bowl? Recovering a fumble for a touchdown? How would you write it up?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Hollywood ending, I'd probably say coming off of a fan block, jumping up, getting an interception, and taking it to the house. You ten yards maybe to the red zone, end zone, something like that. That would be my Hollywood ending.

Q. Has it been a challenge trying to balance having fun because coming into the game, you guys were practicing back at home, not really having too much of the attention that you guys get here, Disney, all that other stuff. How hard is it to try to balance that having fun while also staying locked in?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Our coach would say, when it's time to have fun, have fun. When it's time to work, it is time to work. At the end of the day, like we are overwhelmed. For me, it's been pretty 50-50. I just try not to overdo it, just try to keep my leg and my mind fresh. Overall, it's been pretty good experience so far.

Q. You picked up a pretty big honor being the freshman defensive Player of the Year. What kind of honor does that mean for you, especially knowing your story where you had to really work your way up in the system and really take advantage of every opportunity?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Honestly, it means a lot to me, not only me, but to our defensive tackle room. I couldn't do it without my brothers in that room and my coach. So I'd say that award's for all of us.

It's an honor, but at the end of the day, there's always another game, always another day to get better. Just grateful for every opportunity I've had.

Q. What you see from this offense coming in, you guys have faced talented teams, but where do these guys stack up compared to other teams you've played this year when watching film?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: We've played a lot of great teams, Oregon, UCLA. I would say Ohio State, they're probably going to be the best team we've played all year. Shoot, we're blessed to play them. I guess we're just ready for an opportunity just to really go out and just do what we want to do and try to get this win.

Q. Seeing how Oregon State has been widely considered to have the best O-line in the entire country, does that help you guys going into this game having to face them and done fairly well?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Oh, yeah. I mean, every week by week facing different O-lines has helped. And just having -- even Oregon, playing their line, it's a great setup for us because Ohio State, they are a physical O-line. It's a great look for us. We're ready to go out there and compete, and at the end of the day, see what happens.

Q. When you watch film of Ohio State, what's the first thing that jumps out?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Shoot, when I watch film, just seeing the downhill run, the double-teams, they're real now, you know. You see that explosive running back, and just a really, really great offensive scheme. The staple of their offense is that downhill run, and not only having a great quarterback that can throw and make plays.

Q. As a defender, you're getting ready to play the top scoring team in the nation. How much fun is that just to be able to show what you can do against that?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Man, it's amazing. I feel like we all have -- especially on the defense, we have this culture that we really want to show and really just grind and show people what we can do. Going against this offense is going to be a great opportunity for us to showcase not only Devin Lloyd and just everyone who's going to contribute, every single one of us. So it's a great opportunity.

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

JUNIOR TAFUNA: That feeling was amazing. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You never know what you're going to get. I'm grateful for the opportunity. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think, man, we actually did that. I am just grateful for the opportunity that we did it. Coming here for the Rose Bowl, once again, it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'm just thankful to be here and enjoy the experience and just capitalize on everything.

Q. Saw the helmets on social media. What did you think of those?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I didn't see them until today because I'm not really on social media. I seen them today on our little influencer app. I seen them and was like, man, they're beautiful. You can see the rose between the U. I love it too.

Q. You get to keep that?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I hope. If not, I'm going to take the sticker. That's about it.

Q. Can you talk about the team, and it seemed like the Pac-12 championship game was very emotional. Can you talk about the experience and not having your teammates, Aaron and Ty, there?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Shoot, it was an emotional season, losing them (crying). Sorry, man. Even Viane Moala, he's one of our D tackles we lost too. He didn't come out in the season. He got injured. Most of the season, just being able to push through. To do this for others instead of ourselves, it's probably the main theme. There's others we're doing it for, not just us.

To be able to win the Pac-12 and just do it for -- like we didn't just do it just to win. We did it for others that couldn't be there with us. It was one of the best feelings to be able to win it because we know we did it for others. Just to be able to be there in that spotlight and to be able to share it with others who went there years before and lost but were able to embrace that moment again to win. Shoot, I'm grateful for that.

Q. What does it mean for you to play in the Rose Bowl?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: It means everything to me, to be able to play by my brothers. Hauati Pututau, senior, he's my brother to me. He's a mentor football player to me as well. So to be able to play alongside him playing in this game, it's a lot. It's emotional. It's an experience that I'm grateful for.

Q. Do you guys still feel like you have to prove yourself on a national stage? You beat Oregon twice, but do you feel like you have to prove this program on a national stage?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I believe that's how Utah football has always been with that chip on our shoulder. I think we're all grateful for that. If there is something to prove, I think we have a great mindset to be able to go out and prove it. So chip on the shoulder or not, I'm just grateful that we're able to do it.

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