

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

Friday, December 31, 2021
Pasadena, California, USA

Ryan Day

Ohio State Buckeyes

Kyle Whittingham

Utah Utes

Coaches Press Conference



team, great program, steeped in tradition, just one of the top programs in the country year after year.

Our guys are excited, and hopefully we get a great game on Saturday.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to the Head Coaches Press Conference for the 108th Rose Bowl game presented by Capital One.

We'll start with Coach Day to give an opening statement.

RYAN DAY: Thank you. Had a wonderful week so far here in Los Angeles. The Tournament of Roses has been excellent hosts. We've been really -- appreciate them bringing the Ohio weather here to Southern California here too. So we felt right at home with some of the weather the last couple of days.

We saw the sun out today, so we're excited to get back out in the field and have a great day of preparation.

It's been a great opportunity for our guys over the last month to really practice, for the young guys to build some momentum as we head into this game, and then obviously into the off-season next year. For the older guys, we really want to finish the season the right way.

So far, it's been an excellent week of preparation. Our guys have been practicing hard and looking forward to the game.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I echo what Coach Day said, we're elated to be here. The Rose Bowl committee has done a terrific job. They have been doing this a long time. It's been a great week. Our kids really enjoyed it. We've been working a long time to get here.

We got in the league 11 years ago in the Pac-12 into Power 5 football. It's been an incredible journey, but our guys got it done this year. This is what we've been shooting for, like I said, for a lot of years. So we're excited about the opportunity to play Ohio State, great football

Q. Ryan, when you look at the injuries and opt-outs and everything else with your roster right now, is the size -- are you comfortable with that going into a game tomorrow?

RYAN DAY: Yeah. I think certainly we've had our adversity over the last month, but what a great opportunity for some of our younger guys to come in and start this thing off the right way.

Certainly at receiver, that's going to be a great opportunity for them. We've talked about it before. There was a good portion of this team that will be coming back next year. So what a great opportunity for them to play in this game and against certainly a very, very good team in Utah.

The way they played down the stretch and how they played together and playing complementary football, certainly a tremendous amount of respect for Coach Whittingham and what he's done not only in his career, but this year and this team and all the things they've been through.

It's a big challenge for our guys. What a great opportunity for them at the year, really two things, for the younger guys to build the momentum, and for the older guys, to end this the right way. But to answer your question, yeah, we feel like we've got plenty.

Q. After five weeks of listening to what happened at Michigan and the finesse versus force, that whole idea, do you sense there's a chip on the shoulder of your team? And five weeks, is that enough time to improve on the things that maybe happened in that game?

RYAN DAY: We'll find out. That's obviously -- it doesn't take an expert to figure out what we need to really focus on here over the last month. I think the practices have been

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

really good. They've been spirited. They've been physical. There's been a lot of progress made, but the ultimate test will be on Saturday.

Q. Kyle, if you would talk a little bit about Ohio State's team and what they do that concerns you the most.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Everything. I mean, their offense is terrific. Outstanding players across the board. One of the most explosive offenses in the country. Quarterback is tremendous, leading the nation in QB rating, which is the statistical analytic by ESPN, which in my opinion is the most accurate barometer of how your guy is playing.

Solid on defense. Just like I said, no weakness. They've got players at every level. They play hard, and they're well coached.

Q. Chris, you said on Monday, had opted out of the game but has continued to practice this week. Is there any chance at the last minute he would have a change of heart about this game?

RYAN DAY: I don't think so, but certainly we would be excited if he did. I just have so much respect for what Chris did coming back this year. He certainly had an opportunity to be possibly end of the first day, early second day pick coming out of last year. He decided to come back and really did a great job in leading and didn't want to leave the team. Wanted to stick with it through the bowl and practice and be around our players and our guys. That meant a lot to him, certainly being from Southern California. So I don't expect that to happen, but you never know.

Q. Kyle, when you consider Covey and what he's done during his career, is there a moment or a game, anything that stands out to you more than anything else?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Not really. Just his consistent leadership that he's brought to the football team, his attitude, his personality is just infectious amongst his teammates. One of the best leaders that's ever come through the University of Utah.

Tremendous player obviously on the field as well. He's done so much for us as a slot receiver, punt returner, kickoff returner. So he's just meant so much to our program for the last 12 years or however long he's been here (laughter), and we're excited that he's got one more chance to play with him again this weekend.

Q. There were several guys who didn't practice. I know the availability report is coming out, but can you

give an update on Sevyn Banks, Antwan Jackson, Marcus Williamson, Cody Simon and anyone else that might be missing?

RYAN DAY: Yeah. There are a few guys in there that are game-time decisions. Instead of going through all those guys, we'll handle with the availability report. Some of those guys will be game-time decisions as it comes through the end of the week and closer to the game.

Q. Ryan, just the receivers, the young receivers in particular, who's kind of jumped out at you this month, the fact that they know they're going to play and play a big role, how has that changed maybe even their practice habits, et cetera?

RYAN DAY: I think they've all been practising well and hard all year, when you look at Julian and Marvin, Emeka, certainly Jaxon has had a tremendous year.

But those guys in particular, I think -- I talked to Marvin about it the other day. When you think about Chris's freshman year, nothing really happened until that last game against the team up north, and he had two touchdowns and a blocked punt. All of a sudden, his career took off. So I mentioned to both of those guys that that kind of happened that way in the receiver position.

If you think about Garrett Wilson, same thing. His freshman year, he kind of popped it in that last game and went on and played pretty well in the Clemson game.

They've really worked hard this year. I think they're both very mature. Julian Fleming also now has an opportunity -- he's played some before. They practiced well. What we see in practice is not what everybody else sees. So they were behind two very, very good receivers. So now it's time for them to step up and play.

They came here for a reason. What a great opportunity and a great opponent to do it against.

Q. Coach Whittingham, I talked to a number of players on both teams this week who made comments that maybe they didn't watch the Rose Bowl growing up and it wasn't part of their New Year's Day repertoire. I'm curious how you guys have gone about teaching the history of this game to your team and getting them to understand just how important and historic an opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl is.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think from our perspective, I think our guys, most of them get it and understanding the history of this game and being the granddaddy of them all and all that goes with it. I grew up here the first 14 years of my



life, so I've certainly been aware of the Rose Bowl and its importance since day one.

We've had conversations about the tradition and what it means to be in this game and how long this game's been around and the whole nine yards. I feel like our guys are pretty well versed and up to speed on the magnitude of the football game.

RYAN DAY: We have a certain percentage of our team that played in this game three years ago. So they know, and they talked to their teammates and they understand it.

I think the thing that's more significant is there's two years of guys who haven't really been through a bowl experience before on our team just because of last year and the way things played out. Going through this process has been great for them, and they really enjoyed their time here. And they understand how big of a game this is.

Q. Kyle, you talked about this has been a long road for you to be able to get here. Was there a turning point maybe this year or any other years that you can say that kind of allowed you to feel like this was actually a possibility?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, I don't think there's any one particular turning point. It's just been a steady improvement in recruiting, and that's what college football is all about. It's all about recruiting and personnel.

When we got in the league, we had some deficiencies, particularly on the perimeter in the skill positions. We weren't quite as athletic and fast as the other teams. We felt like we matched up at the line of scrimmage. That's been since day one, but it's taken us some time to steadily improve that roster year after year.

We got to the Pac-12 Championship Game three of the last four years, finally got over that hump this year and was able to break into the Rose Bowl. It's just been a process. It's been a steady process. There was no one moment in time that made the tables turn. We just kept at it, a great tribute and credit to our assistant coaches who are on the front lines of recruiting, identifying the talent and bringing the right guys to the table.

I just give them all the credit. They've done a great job of assembling this roster, and we finally made it. So that's where we're at.

Q. After a 1-2 start and a couple of back-to-back losses, what were some of the key turning points for your team this year?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, the change in quarterback. It was Game 3. A little past midway point in the fourth quarter, we were down big against San Diego State. Thought we needed a spark, made the change, put Cam Rising in the game, provided the spark immediately, brought us all the way back to triple overtime.

We ended up obviously losing the game, but it was very apparent that he was what we needed. He proceeded to start the rest of the season and just got better and better as the weeks went on.

You combine that with the offensive line struggle earlier in the year offensive line-wise. Once we got that position settled in or that group of five settled in and playing well together, that certainly helped our cause. Then the emergence of Tavion Thomas, our running back, that was huge. He had some fumble issues earlier in the season, but he got the ball security situation fixed. Then once he started getting some momentum, that made us a lot more physical in the run game.

Then defensively overall, we have a lot of freshman that start. I think we have eight or nine on the field at a time during some portions of the game. Just to watch those guys grow up and get better and better week after week, that was probably the other thing that allowed us to finish the way we did.

Q. This is for both coaches. Coach Day, starting with you, how has your conference prepared you for the team that you're going to be facing tomorrow?

RYAN DAY: Well, in the Big Ten, certainly the last six games, that last six games was a strong one. We had to bring it every week. I do think that Utah is similar to some of the teams that do play in the Big Ten. They line up with several tight ends. They have different ways to attack you, but they want to run the ball, control the game, play complementary football, play excellent on defense, don't give up big plays.

So I just think that our conference week in and week out, you have to bring it. So I think that it prepares all the teams in our conference to play well. Just looking at how things have gone the last couple weeks, the Big Ten has played well in conference play, and I think that's just because of the high level of play in our conference.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Same question for me then? Okay. We pride ourselves on being a physical team. That's one of our starting points for our program is just physicality and preaching it and recruiting to it. We feel like the Big Ten obviously is a physical conference. So we feel like whenever we play teams from either the Pac-12 or

other conferences, we do match up well at the line of scrimmage, as I mentioned earlier.

That's where it all starts. If you can match up on both sides of the line of scrimmage, you always have a chance. We feel like that's been a strength of ours for a lot of years.

Q. For Coach Day, obviously you know Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave are obviously going to be absent here. What kind of coaching has been put in for Jaxon Smith-Njigba just to understand that it's not going to be the same as it has been for him and quite possibly could face some double-teams, could get frustrated if he's not getting the football and have to fight through a lot of contact. Just what kind of coaching have you guys put with him to say you're going to have to go extra, work extra hard to get open, et cetera, to make plays in this game?

RYAN DAY: I think we've actually done just the opposite of that. He believes in his teammates, and he relies on his teammates. I think in situations like that, if you try to do too much, you can get yourself out of whack, and you can get yourself frustrated.

He just needs to do what he's done all year, which is play within himself and believe in the guys around him. We have a really good running game in Trey and Miyan and the guys, Master. He's got a really good, talented running back crowd there. And then obviously at receiver, you've got to believe in the guys that are in your room. Certainly Ruckert and Mitch and Cade and those guys at receiver had a really good bowl practice. He's got to believe in the guys around him, and C.J. just has to take what's there.

We've never done that before where you pick one receiver and throw it. You're going to take what the defense gives you. Jaxon has had a very good preparation to this bowl, and I expect him to play well.

Q. For both of you guys, I was wondering you've had a relationship with Urban Meyer in your past in your coaching. What is something that still resonates with you, maybe one thing that you still take from that relationship one way or the other? I've got another question for Ryan Day after that.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, I had an opportunity to work for two years under Coach Meyer as defensive coordinator. It was kind of a weird situation. I had been at the university, what, seven or eight years. Our head coach was let go. I thought I should be the guy. Urban got the job. Turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me as a football coach because, after two years with him, I realized that I wasn't ready two years prior. It was a great

learning experience.

I would say the one thing, if you had to peg it down, or pinpoint one thing, I would say his complete organization of the entire program, just on a day-to-day basis, mapping out the entire year. Nothing was left to chance. Everything was organized meticulously, and that really is the thing that I took away is just how he day to day ran the football program just from an organizational standpoint.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I would echo what Kyle said. I thought very unique that Coach and I both were handed the whistle after the game and took over for Coach. I would agree with him, just the overall organization of the whole program, certainly in recruiting and the way he drives the coaches and drives recruiting on a daily basis and has a great feel for the team and what the team needs at that moment and motivation, I think, were the things I took most from him.

Q. Quick follow-up for both of you. Are both of you surprised the way things went for him this year? What do you think didn't resonate that resonates with you guys?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, he is one heck of a football coach. I've got all the respect in the world for him, owe him a lot -- any success we've had since he's been gone, a lot of that attributed to him. I can't speak for what went on there. It just seemed to snowball and kind of get away from him.

But he is a terrific football coach, and that's pretty much what I have to say about that.

RYAN DAY: I'll echo again what Kyle said there.

Q. Ryan, obviously the middle of the defensive line, Haskell skipping the game, Antwan Jackson, I don't know if he's going to be available or not, doesn't appear to be. Just how have you challenged those other guys in the middle like Jerron Cage, Tyleik Williams, et cetera, about the challenges coming?

RYAN DAY: Like any game, but very important for a lot of reasons in this game, certainly how physical Utah plays. The challenge has been set forth to win up front and to be physical in this game. That's nothing new. That's not groundbreaking, but it certainly has been an emphasis and always is an emphasis.

Yeah, we are down a couple guys, but we have plenty of guys in there. So for the coaches, the leaders, and the players, the challenge has been set forth, and now it's time to go put it on the field Saturday.

Q. Ryan, obviously in the midst of bowl preparation, you obviously hired another member for your staff. In the process of any of this, did you talk to Jim Knowles about this matchup, have him look at anything, just a phone call, a text, anything like that? Additionally, how did you sort of use this last stretch, I guess, as like a staff evaluation period or staff development period? And what did you want to see maybe from your coaches as far as preparing for this game?

RYAN DAY: Well, I decided that with Jim this is just going to be something we start after the bowl game. Kind of inappropriate, I think, to even have any type of input coming from the outside. Just don't know the situation. You don't know the scheme up to that point. There's just a lot of things when you step into a situation that is very difficult. We just decided we'll start fresh on the 2nd.

Still trying to figure out what that mix of guys is going to be moving forward, and that's going to be important for our team. But our job is to put our guys in an environment to be the most successful, and that's my job is to do that and surround them with that. So that's what we'll do there.

Q. Ryan, we talked with a lot of your players this week, and they mentioned they want to end the season on the right note and want to get that bad taste out of their mouth per se. How important would it be to you and Ohio State to play well in the Rose Bowl and end the season on the right note like they mentioned?

RYAN DAY: Very, very important. We said there's three things we wanted to do when we got here, and one is to win the Rose Bowl. That is the first thing. That was our first goal. The second thing is to represent Ohio State in a first class manner. And the third thing is to enjoy this week. We've done that. I think the guys have enjoyed that. This is the first time in a couple years we've been able to enjoy a bowl week. There is a reward for that. A lot of hard work has been put in.

Winning this game would be important for those two reasons I mentioned before. One for the older guys, send them off the right way like you mentioned. 11-2 with a Rose Bowl win would be a big deal. Secondly, for the young guys, building momentum. Some of the guys have to step up in this game into the off-season next year.

Q. Kyle, they're bringing the Moment of Loudness to the Rose Bowl. What does that moment mean for you and your team every time it comes on?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's been incredible. We've had that at our stadium all season long. We had it in the

championship game. To be able to honor our two players that we lost in that fashion has been terrific. I get choked up every time I go through it and experience it. It's just a great way to keep their memory alive.

Our team is excited about it and really looks forward to it. So I'm glad that we're able to bring that to the Rose Bowl because I guess there was some question whether or not we were going to be able to do that, but thankful we're able to implement that one more time, at least one more time this season.

Q. My question, just the raw numbers here, as we understand it, Ohio State sold 13,000 tickets and Utah sold well over 30,000 and whatever the balance is going to be. It seems like you're walking into a little bit of a Hornet's nest here potentially tomorrow. What have you guys talked about dealing with noise? It could be, instead of a typical neutral site where it's 50-50, it may be hard for you guys to get your signals. I don't know. What are you guys thinking about in terms of that?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, we've said that we have to prepare for everything. When you come on a bowl trip like this, you're not sure what that's going to be like. So we said we have to prepare for everything, whether it's 50-50 or in our favor. It's like being on the road. We'll do the best we can, and we've prepared for all of those scenarios.

Q. Ryan, could you address -- and Kyle too, I guess, your COVID situation, have you had any cases? Is that going to affect anything with this game?

RYAN DAY: Very typical to what this season and really probably the last couple months has been. There's been a few isolated incidents here and there, but we feel strong going into the game that we'll have a full roster ready to go.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Did you say Bucknuts, was that the last one? That's awesome.

(Laughter)

RYAN DAY: It's one of about 15, Coach.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Okay, great.

COVID, no issues, knock on wood. We seem to be in really good shape there.

Q. Ryan, C.J. Stroud, before he was a Heisman Trophy finalist and after, have you seen any change in him? What has been the biggest change that you've likened him through the season up to now, basically asserting

himself as a leader, et cetera. But what have you seen sort of change in him as this year's gone along?

RYAN DAY: I could probably talk on that for a while. You're talking about somebody who went into the season without throwing a college football pass, playing in a road game at Minnesota. Everything was a first for him as he went along. He had to deal with his first interception, first loss, first win. Then as the season went on, he built and got stronger and stronger.

Then certainly over the last month, you could see just even more of a maturity and a different look in his eye coming off of the last game. So it's going to be fun to see where it goes from here, but certainly I think he is in a different place than he was certainly a month ago and obviously three to four months ago.

Q. Ryan, it looks like Cody Simon has been out for you guys. Cade Stover has been getting in some work at linebacker. Just where do you feel about the linebacker situation going through this game, and what kind of role could Cade potentially play at that position?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, we've had Cade going on both sides to try to help us out. As you know, Cade came over from linebacker, so we've been a little bit light there going into the bowl practice. We feel a little bit better about the depth now. Yeah, Cade's prepared to play in this game. He's been excited. I think he's done a very, very good job in bowl practice of bringing an edge and bringing a toughness over there.

I know he's excited about it. He's fired up. So we'll kind of see how it goes on Saturday.

Q. Kyle, seeing that some of your guys, Devin Lloyd, Nick Ford, some Southern California guys playing their last game in this Rose Bowl, what does it mean for you to see them go out in this way to play their last game in the Rose Bowl?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, we're elated that they're playing. Devin is a first round pick, maybe a top ten pick, and for him to want to finish with his teammates and see it through and complete the season, I think that's awesome. Nick is also a draft choice potential. So to have them both with us is big positive. It would be great to see them have success here in their last game down here on their home turf.

Just to echo what Coach Day's been saying, we too would like to send the seniors out the right way and the upperclassmen that are going to be leaving. We have

several juniors that are going to be leaving us this year, and that's important. We're doing everything working towards that end to see if we can make that happen.

Q. Coach Day, you mentioned this is a week where you've been able to enjoy the bowl experience because the last couple of years you were more focused on the fact it's been a playoff team. How were you able to manage your time this week balancing the celebration this week is but also recognizing this could be the first step towards what you're hoping to accomplish next year?

RYAN DAY: I think even more importantly, just last year not having the week to be at the site I think is significant. But I think that's why you work so hard back home. You put the game plan in. That's the way we do it. We'll go through the whole game plan back in Columbus so that, when we get here, it's like repainting the bridge so that we can enjoy and smell the roses, for lack of a better term, and enjoy where we're at in the bowl site.

For a lot of our guys, they have not been here to Los Angeles. They haven't been to Southern California. This will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl.

So those are all the things that you don't always get an opportunity to do when you're so stressed out about the game, but I think it's important for our guys to do that because they work so hard and these are the types of things they're getting rewarded with they should be able to enjoy.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®