

# Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

Thursday, December 29, 2022

Pasadena, California, USA

## Utah Utes

## Junior Tafuna

### Press Conference



#### Q. How's everything been going so far?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: It's been going fine. The activities, practice, it's been good so far. It's been awesome coming around the second time.

#### Q. When you guys had a chance to go to Lawry's last year, do you feel like you got a chance to get it all out of your system? Do you know what you're expecting this year, going for a record or something?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Definitely. Unfortunately last year we weren't able to go, so this year we'll be able to go. I hear it's better over there, so that's cool.

#### Q. Are you doing that tonight or tomorrow?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, we'll be doing that tonight or right after practice.

#### Q. How was Disney?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Disney was awesome. I'm a Disney guy, so even going there for free, that's even better. Going there for free is even better, doing all the classic rides and stuff like that. It's awesome. I love it.

#### Q. How many times have you been there?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Shoot, in the past I'd go with my wife every year. We go to Disney World every May. It's a little tradition we have, a month off of football. Last year we came back right after the Rose Bowl. It's just a good experience, a good way to get away from football, get away from head space and all that. It's good.

#### Q. What's your dad's first name?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: His name is Timothy.

#### Q. Tell me a little bit about -- you guys were here last

year.

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yes, sir.

#### Q. Does that make a difference to you coming back this year? Did you want to be back here? Is it a reward for a season that maybe you didn't expect to have? What was the experience like?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I mean, to be able to come back here and do it again, I think it just has more meaning, just because now we're here again. Now it's time to take advantage of it. Last year was kind of our first time. Especially for me -- I still consider myself a young dog, it's weird, but it just has more meaning because we're here now, so we've got to take advantage of it. We're all grateful to be here and be able to have the opportunity to play Penn State. It's amazing.

#### Q. When you look at this Penn State team, this is a team that has a lot of weapons. Does it remind you of anybody you've played this year?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Man, I would say they remind me -- they run a lot of what our offense does, too. So I always like to say they remind me of our offense. They have a lot of running power, but they can also air the ball out which they do really well, too. So they have a great quarterback, great offensive line and great running backs, too, that can run the ball.

I think it's just going to come down to who can execute the most and do their job the best.

#### Q. I think both teams pride themselves on their toughness on both sides of the line of scrimmage.

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Exactly.

#### Q. Is that a little bit of a challenge for you guys to see how you stack up, mano-a-mano in the toughness category?

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, I would say at the end of the day it's going to be who's going to outwork each other. I guess



I'm just excited and happy to see what's going to happen coming in on Monday.

**Q. You lost your third game, which I think was Oregon; was that your third loss?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yes, sir.

**Q. Can you remember the feelings then? Did you think, all right, the season is over kind of thing, we're not going to go to a great bowl, and then it turns around and you play USC. Can you talk about the difference in emotions?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, it's crazy because this game against Oregon really determined everything. So when we lost I just remember walking off the field and looking at the scoreboard. It was a horrible feeling. Came back that next week and just figured we've got to do our job, just win, beat Colorado and hope everything will play out, and shoot, it did.

It was crazy because never once did we doubt that it wasn't going to work out because there's great teams in the Pac-12 and Oregon State goes on and beats Oregon and we end up here going to the championship. I'd say, man, we're definitely blessed and humbled to be able to be here and do everything that has happened.

**Q. To win a Rose Bowl and to be the first in program history to do it I would think has got to be a pretty good carrot to have out there, right?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: It is, man, especially for our program. I love Utah. It's home. It's where I've always been. It means a lot.

I feel like there's a lot of us that really have bought into trying to go into this game. So we're just, I guess -- we're just humbled and just ready to go.

**Q. After coming so close last year, I would think that kind of motivates you a little bit, too, this year, right?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, it most definitely does motivate us just because there's a lot we could have done defensively. We're just going to learn from that and just go into this one and just see what we can do.

**Q. What challenges do their running backs present?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Oh, man. I mean, shoot, I don't even know the numbers, so No. 10, I know he's a hard runner, so they run the ball really well and he's a great, explosive running back for them. All their running backs do. I think

as long as we're able to hold our blocks up front, keep our back ends free, we'll be able to match that run game and stop it.

**Q. Both teams obviously had long layovers; how important is the start of the game in terms of making sure that you slow down their offense at the beginning of the game?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: No, it's very important. I believe the first drive kind of sets the pace for momentum, even the second and third. But I think as we come out there and do our jobs as we plan to do, it's only going to help us get the ball back to our offense, hopefully we can get momentum going, as well, too. Do our jobs, do assignment sound football, and hopefully everything takes care of the rest.

**Q. For people that haven't seen you guys play, what would you say is the identity of your defense?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I would say it's the just culture we live along -- RSNB, Relentless, Smart, Nasty, Ball hawks. That's something that Coach Scalley has instilled in our defense and that's what we live by and we try to push ourselves everyday in practice to do, so you just see a lot of people running to the ball, playing smart and just playing as a team on the defense.

**Q. You say relentless --**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Nasty ball hawks.

**Q. What does your defense present as a challenge to Penn State's offense? Where is your strength and their weakness?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I would say our strength is just -- I'd say our front seven. Our whole defense is great, but really, really it just starts with the front seven. If the front seven can lock down up front it's going to make everything easier in the secondary. As long as everyone comes to play on that day, I think it's going to be a great game for us.

That's what we hope to do.

**Q. I've got a couple of fun questions.**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I love those, man. Sweet.

**Q. First one, who in the locker room is not getting the (inaudible)?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I've got to say Dalton Kincaid just because he plays a lot of Taylor Swift, and I can't really do that. But yeah, I'd say Dalton Kincaid most definitely.

**Q. What are you playing?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I'm playing oldies. I'm playing Earth, Wind and Fire. Shoot, you ever heard of George Benson?

**Q. Yeah.**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: He has all those little instrumentals and all that. I love those, too. I listen to a lot of oldies so that's kind of what gets me in my mood.

**Q. Do you ever go jazz?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, I haven't really gone that way, but I would definitely say I would tap into it just because I love any music, just oldies. I don't really like the new music. I kind of like sticking with the old stuff. It's just happy, gives you a good vibe.

**Q. Who's got the weirdest habits on the team, ability to juggle, anything like that? I'm going not the weird stuff --**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I'd probably say Miki, Miki Suguturaga. He's Polynesian kind of like myself, too, but like you said, they got the ability to juggle, he can juggle as well, too. I didn't know he could do that. Seeing him doing that, you wouldn't even think he would be doing that. He's kind of quirky, too, just does a lot of, what do you call, like they move off of no instinct -- I can't remember the word.

**Q. Reactive?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Yeah, just on instinct, so I'd say Miki.

**Q. If you had any super power, what would it be?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: Shoot, if I had any super power I'd probably say -- man, probably say the ability to run fast, speed like Flash, just because I hate walking. I hate walking and going far, so if you're running fast you'd be able to get things done. Speed clean, speed eat, whatever.

**Q. Speed instead of teleport?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: No, I'll take the speed because I would feel pretty bad, you know.

**Q. What have you seen from Penn State on tape so far?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: You know, Penn State, they're an amazing team. Offensive line, since I'm a defensive tackle,

so I'd say the offensive line. I'd say they work great together as a group as well as individually. Really stout, really physical, as well, too.

I think also behind them, Clifford the quarterback and then the running back is very explosive, too, can make explosive things happen.

I just think the backfield, up front, they're great. It's definitely going to be a challenge, the best challenge all year for us, and man, we're humbled to be able to have this opportunity.

**Q. You guys are back for the second year; how much do you got to get this one? Not too many guys have opted out, but how important is it to get this win after last year?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: It's really important just because our first time -- like you said, our first time was last year, and for me it was really new, like man, we're here. To be here the second time, it's like, we've been here and why not come back and take advantage of it. It's given to us a second time, and it means a lot for us to have this opportunity to compete and try to get this game.

**Q. Back for a second year; what is the biggest difference do you think about this run at the Rose Bowl compared to a year ago?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: I think everything is just a lot more smoother just because like you said, we were here last year, and this year it's just nothing new. Kind of like that phrase, been here, done that. So now we're here, we have to take advantage of the situation we're given. So we have this opportunity to play, and so we're humbled to go and compete for this win.

**Q. Does it feel a little more like -- I've heard other guys describe it, a little more of a business trip?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: No, it definitely feels more business trip like. I'm grateful you brought that up, just because I feel like we've all taken that first initiative, just we're here for business. All the festivities were new to us last year. It's definitely a business trip, definitely feels like that more than a trip this year. I'm grateful for that, too. You just kind of separate the two. When it's time to work, work, when it's time to have fun, have fun, but not too much, though.

**Q. How would you describe the growth of this defensive unit from week one when you were down in the swamp so now getting ready for the Rose Bowl?**

JUNIOR TAFUNA: You know, I give props to everyone, all

the players on the defense, just because we went through a lot together as a unit, even as position groups, and a lot was thrown at us. Hey, we're playing for this, playing for that. I'm grateful we were all able to pull through, trust the coaching, even more just believe in ourselves. I think that was the biggest thing, and that started to take over. The weeks we started peaking, playing better defense, playing better ball, you could just see we were having fun out there again, so it was awesome to have that same feeling and I'm still feeling it now, so it's just, yeah, can't wait for this game coming up.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

