

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Utah Utes

Coach Andy Ludwig

Press Conference



Q. When you have games like this, is it hard to be able to keep players engaged knowing that it's not just your typical game week?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, we've talked about it quite a bit as an offensive unit. Again, we're practicing the same plays this week that we did a week ago and not allowing the routine to become mundane and continuing to work to identify things to improve on, perfect your alignment, your assignment and your techniques, and the guys have responded well. It's a veteran crew, and I look forward to seeing their best effort here coming up on the 2nd.

Q. You've coached in the Big Ten --

ANDY LUDWIG: I did, yeah.

Q. So you've got experience in this conference. How does Penn State relate to a typical defense in this conference?

ANDY LUDWIG: In the Pac-12, comparing to a Pac-12 defense?

Q. Or just -- both, Big Ten and Pac-12.

ANDY LUDWIG: I think the defense we're facing in Penn State is elite, their national rankings are off the chart in every statistical category. That one that jumps out at me is they are the No. 1 defense in the country in creating havoc, which is turnovers, sacks, PBUs, hits on the quarterback. They have very good players, very sophisticated scheme. I know Coach Diaz in his first year has done a phenomenal job with that group. It's the best defense we've seen this year without a doubt.

Q. You don't have Dalton Kincaid. You keep losing these tight ends. Do you feel confident in your ability to keep doing what you're used to doing?

ANDY LUDWIG: You've seen through the course of the

year, it's been a different menu. We've drawn from a different menu each week. For whatever reasons, players going down, players not able to participate this week, new players stepping up, a little shift in the emphasis of what we're trying to do offensively, so this is just another challenge with that.

But this particular season has been as challenging as any other in terms of having to adjust week in and week out based on the personnel available.

Q. How much has Ja'Quinden Jackson grown into his role? Obviously he was playing quarterback --

ANDY LUDWIG: Lights out. Couldn't be more happy for him, happy for us. He took to that. It was a conversation. We were having some tailback depth issues. I said, hey, when we're working on the hand-offs with the running backs would you please just take a couple as a running back. It looked so natural, and he's gotten better each week, and I think he's on the path to being a big-time running back.

Q. Do any players on the Penn State defense stick out to you?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, they all stick out to you. It's a very well-coached football team. They're very disruptive as a unit. That definitely has our attention. I know No. 11, the linebacker, is a premier player in the country, and he wreaks havoc in everything he does. That would be the one player that I would single out that jumps off the screen at me.

Q. What can you guys do to deal with all of the pressure up front that they bring?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, we have to do a great job not thinking about blocking the movement but creating movement because that front is moving around dang near every snap. They're not a really big defensive front but they're very athletic, they move very well. That's going to be the match-up of the day is moving those guys up front. But we feel real good about our scheme that we've got going in the plan, but again, not waiting for movement but



creating movement on offense will be the key for us.

Q. Having said that, what do you do with their secondary? Obviously they force a lot of turnovers. Like you said, you want to have movement but also you don't want to make mistakes.

ANDY LUDWIG: We do what Utah offense does. We're going to run the ball, we're going to play action pass protect the football and protect the quarterback. We're not going into this game with a new recipe because Penn State does this or that. Again, I've got great respect for their players and their scheme, but we have to do what got us to the Rose Bowl, and we've got to attack. We've got to attack this opponent.

Q. How exciting is it for you to be able to go against Manny Diaz given his reputation nationally?

ANDY LUDWIG: I'm excited to go against the Penn State football program in the Rose Bowl and extremely excited to represent the University of Utah.

Q. You talk about doing what Utah does and we've seen it for years, obviously. We saw a lot with two-tight end sets. Now both of those guys are gone, so now you're down to your third and fourth guys. Will you still do the same thing that you did with 3 and 4 that you've been doing with 1 and 2?

ANDY LUDWIG: Not to the same extent and a different selection of -- with Brant and Dalton, you're drawing from this section of the playbook. Please do not forget Logan, Logan Kendall has come in as a grad transfer and done a phenomenal job for us, often unsung, much like a sixth O-lineman for us but does do a nice job catching passes down the field. But with Brant and Dalton as tight ends, maybe you draw from this selection of the playbook, with Yassmin and Logan, that selection just has to move a little bit, because they are different players. They have different skills and abilities. My job is to highlight those skills and abilities.

Q. What gives you guys the ability as an offense to bounce back from adversity?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think a lot of that is attributed to the personality and the culture of the Utah football program which all starts with the head football coach, and our guys are very resilient. We have a veteran crew. We've got a leader in our quarterback, No. 7, Cam Rising does a great job, is very resilient, has been through so much in his career, and that guy finds a way to scratch and claw his way back every day, every week, every game. Look forward to watching him play on the 2nd.

Q. Is it a bonus for you maybe that you didn't think going into this a couple weeks back that you'd have Nate Johnson but they changed the rule and now you have him? I imagine you've got a package for him.

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, that's a big plus, and I think that it kind of speaks to where we are in college football where with the players have the ability to opt out of bowl games and the injuries, gaining that one extra player is a big difference for us. Nate is an exciting, dynamic player. We just want to make sure that Cam Rising is getting his due in the football game, and not featuring Nate too much.

Q. Cam hasn't made a decision at least publicly, but if he were to go to the NFL, do you see Nate Johnson as a potential starter in Game 1 this season?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, it would be right now a three-quarterback race between Nate Johnson, Bryson Barnes and Brandon Rose. It would be a wide-open competition. Those reps that you saw with Nate in the middle of the season or late in the season played to his strength, but they were just kind of novelty. They weren't really quarterback reps, but he's a tremendous athlete. He's a football fanatic. It'll be a great competition in the spring should that situation come up.

Q. With the one-time rule that will allow Nate to play, would you like to see that become a permanent thing where the bowl game does not count toward the four?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think yes, that's a huge positive for the young men, for the program, and I think, again, some of these bowl games, now it's a battle of attrition. It's like who's going to be left to play in the game, and I think that rule will allow some flexibility and give you a better product on game day year in and year out.

Q. As you announced that potential race in the spring, you didn't mention Jackson so he's exclusively a running back going forward?

ANDY LUDWIG: He will be a running back. He will be a big-time running back.

Q. You talked about what he was able to do. Were you surprised he was able to pick it up so fast knowing it's a different look, a quarterback versus a running back?

ANDY LUDWIG: You know, he played some high school running back, and I think it's his natural position. He's got great vision. But I was so excited the first time I watched him run the ball, I was like, this guy has got a shot, and then made that move full time, and is continuing to get

better.

I think playing with his quarterback background, that helped him with the bigger picture understanding the position. If you're moving a defensive back to running back, it would be a whole different world, all the terminology, so at least there was some quick transition there that helped him make that move.

Q. When you talk about the three quarterbacks, how or when you guys decide that maybe we need to look at the portal for another veteran option at that position?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, that will come up. We'll see what Cam decides he wants to do and then kind of reassess from there. But that's always an option. That is always an option.

Q. After watching Penn State on film, what's something that sticks out to you?

ANDY LUDWIG: They're aggressiveness. They do a great job rerouting physicality with the wide receivers. We have to do a great job of releasing. They have excellent ball skills, and when they are playing off coverage, they do a great job of getting their foot in the ground and breaking and driving on the receiver and the ball, but I've got great respect for the way they play and how they're coached.

Q. Is there any Pac-12 defense that you've faced that remind you of them?

ANDY LUDWIG: No, as I stated earlier, this without a doubt is the best defensive unit that we've faced this year.

Q. Cam spoke super highly of Abdul Carter, No. 11 on Penn State's defense. I was wondering what you have seen from his film and how you work around him.

ANDY LUDWIG: Well, it's hard to work around anybody. There's some plays we're going to try to work away from him and some plays we want to go right at him, but I've got great respect for the way he plays. That guy creates havoc snap in and snap out so we've got great awareness of 11, great respect for what he does.

But we're not game planning around him by any means because they move him around so much, so we've just got to make it go.

Q. Regarding Mike Leach, when is the first time you heard about -- when is the first time Mike's name popped up in your recollection and maybe when is the first time you crossed paths with him?

ANDY LUDWIG: Shoot, back -- I'm not an air-raid person, but I know -- I guess it was probably my first awareness when he was the offensive coordinator at Oklahoma before he became the head coach at Texas Tech when I first kind of got that, said what is this air-raid stuff and kind of looked at it and very intrigued with it. I never actually met Coach Leach. I think my favorite story -- the only story I really have of him is we played against Washington State in 2019, my first year back with Utah, and I come out, we're playing Washington State, and there's Coach Leach at midfield talking to Coach Whittingham eating a banana. I have never seen a head coach eating a banana at midfield pregame.

Q. It was regarded as a gimmick offense, but now you look, it's everywhere in every level of football you see traits of that air-raid. Is there a moment where it kind of crossed from gimmick to accepted?

ANDY LUDWIG: I just think the success and the caliber of quarterbacks that have been through that system validated everything, and there's been some great air-raid coaches that are now rising in the ranks or have risen to the highest ranks, made head coaches in the NFL, et cetera, et cetera, but I couldn't pinpoint when it transcended. But yeah, it's a good system, and I think it was Coach Leach that -- any system is a good system if you believe in what you're doing and you don't try to be masters of everything, just focus on what your core beliefs and values are in terms of Xs and Os and put all your investment in that.

Q. You always had that little note card for play calling. What does that mean that you could have just an index card --

ANDY LUDWIG: I couldn't tell you because mine is larger. I need more. I need more information.

Q. Your offense is very reliant on the tight end; would you agree with that statement?

ANDY LUDWIG: It has been, yes.

Q. You're without two of the ones that you thought you were going to have at the beginning of the year, right?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yes.

Q. Do you change or do you have guys that you can pull in and use --

ANDY LUDWIG: We have good tight ends. We have good depth at that position. We have Logan Kendall, who is a



graduate transfer from the University of Idaho, had been a starter all year, and one of those tight ends -- he's more your traditional blocking tight end, and then Thomas Yassmin who has stepped up since Brant Kuithe went down in game 4, what have you, against Arizona State, has really stepped up and has been very explosive.

But it's not necessarily the same selection of plays -- if you're calling plays for Brant Kuithe and Dalton Kincaid from over here, it might have to shift over here a little bit for Thomas and Logan to execute. It's all player driven. We've got good plays, but it's all about the players and doing what they can do well.

Q. I think by reputation, Utah is more physical than the rest of the Pac-12. I don't know if that's accurate or not, but I think that's the reputation. Do you think that's right? Have you guys recruited that way? Do you X and O that way?

ANDY LUDWIG: That is the foundation of the Utah football culture and has been that way since --

Q. Because of Kyle?

ANDY LUDWIG: Coach Whitt, yeah, sets the tone for that, and the players thrive on that identity.

Q. What's Cam's adjustment like when you bring in these new guys after -- especially at tight end when he's been so locked in with Dalton Kincaid the whole year. How has he adjusted with these new guys stepping up?

ANDY LUDWIG: He's done a very good job. Cam is very good about distributing the football, not locking in on one particular player, but I would point out, Money Parks, Jaylen Dixon, Thomas Yassmin are players that have had to step up with some of the injuries to the tight end position, and Cam hasn't batted an eye. He just rolls through it. He's got his read progressions, he's got things he's got to take care of to get the football distributed, and he's done a nice job with that.

Q. What are the challenges against Manny Diaz' defense?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, they do so many things well, and I stated earlier, they are the a No. 1 havoc defense in the country, so trying to minimize the havoc, trying to minimize the havoc, trying to stay ahead in the sticks. That defensive structure loves to get you in third down, and the longer the situation the better because then they can very exotic with the way they attack the passer, so I think staying on schedule, winning on early downs will be critical

for us, and really establishing a physical presence offensively at the line of scrimmage and trying to stay ahead on the chains will be a big part of the Utes' success.

Q. What are your impressions of Abdul Carter, of No. 11?

ANDY LUDWIG: He's lights out, and we were talking earlier, and they move him around so much, so you have to have awareness of where he is but it's not like the game plan is to run away from this guy or run at this guy because he's so multiple in the way that Coach Diaz utilizes his skill set.

But he's a dynamic playmaker. We've got great respect and appreciation for him, and he's a big part of these match-ups that we're talking about we've got to win, the physicality match-up.

Q. Is there another linebacker that you guys have played against or throughout your career that kind of reminds you of him, kind of a havoc caliber --

ANDY LUDWIG: Not that -- I couldn't draw a comparison, yeah.

Q. When you're looking at the exotic blitzes, I know it can be a challenge trying to figure out where the pressure is coming from. Purdue week 1 what they were doing versus what you saw at the end of the year, how far back are you looking --

ANDY LUDWIG: We looked at everything, but you can't statistically analyze everything. But we've looked at it all.

You can see the growth and development from Purdue to Michigan State. It's not the same defensive -- it's different. Game 1 in this new system is a heck of a lot different than Game 12, and you can see that, and you can see it -- we focused our primary breakdown on the last five or so games and are utilizing that for our statistical analysis. We're looking at all the video. But you can see the growth and development of the unit and then the creativity element as the players gain mastery of the scheme, you can see Coach Diaz doing a little bit more and more each week.

Q. At any points in your career have you guys ever gotten to know each other?

ANDY LUDWIG: No, never met him.

Q. A lot of these guys, you've got two teams that don't have that familiarity, especially geographically. That's been interesting.

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah.

Q. Talk about your relationship with Cam a little bit; how much does he sort of send the message that you need sent, and what's your connection with him like in terms of being able to prepare?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, I've got so much respect for Cam. I'll share this with you. My first day back at the University of Utah was January 10, 2019. Cam was on his official visit that day. He showed up, so I've known Cam as long as I've known any other Ute player. The thing that I respect so much about Cam is his tenacity and his resolve because that 2019 season is one of the very few quarterbacks in the country that did not get granted a waiver to become immediately eligible.

Q. Why?

ANDY LUDWIG: NCAA back -- yeah. So he just redshirted, gave our defense a great look, came back the next year. That would be 2020. Injured after the first 15 plays against USC in the COVID year, got injured, had to rehab a shoulder injury, battled back, keeps battling back. We brought in a transfer quarterback because we weren't sure if Cam's shoulder was going to be healthy enough, did not win that quarterback battle, got voted captain the next day. Takes over against San Diego State in the third game of the year, completely changes the '21 season for us, and the rest is history.

The guy just battles. He just battles.

Q. Is he an elite recruit? He's out of this area, right?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, he's out of Ventura, and he transferred to us from Texas. He was a big national recruit out of high school. He's a great leader, great vocal but very positive voice. There's not a negative tone or anything about that in his approach, but very positive in his approach.

The thing when he talks, because he's been in the same system for four years, he's got great system mastery, he can talk O-lineman language, he can talk wide receiver language. He can get guys lined up and dialed in, and he's got great appreciation of that.

Q. Do the other guys gravitate toward him?

ANDY LUDWIG: They do. I think one of his strongest quarterback traits is his leadership, is his personality. As Cam goes, the Utes go on offense without a doubt.

Q. Can you talk about -- Cam likes to meditate. Is that

mentality spread across your offense? Does he instill that calmness, that stillness?

ANDY LUDWIG: I think he does instill that. He's the only player that I know of on the offense that meditates. I don't know if that's your question or not.

No, he's got great confidence, and the entire unit draws from that confidence. They gain confidence because of his confidence.

Q. What is it like drawing up a game plan with him in mind? What does he do physically that sets him apart from other quarterbacks?

ANDY LUDWIG: Well, he's such an athletic guy that you love to design plays where he can move in the pocket. His ability to make decisions, throw with accuracy down the field, he's a very good runner. We don't run the quarterback a whole lot, but we're not afraid to do it with him because he is athletic and tough.

I've got so much confidence in the way that he carries himself, in my mind there's nothing he can't do. But we can't do it all at the same time, so we just try to draw on all our strengths.

Q. No. 78 is a California guy. Can you tell me a little bit about his performance and what he means to the program for you guys.

ANDY LUDWIG: He's a big-time player now, and we moved him in fall camp from right guard to right tackle, and that really solidified the entire line. He does a great job in pass protection. He is our most athletic offensive lineman. Don't tell Braeden Daniels I said that. But he can really run, and he's got great physicality about him. He's a good dude. That's what I've got on Sataoa.

Q. What went into the thought process? Did you guys lose a guy last year at that position where you had to shift guys around?

ANDY LUDWIG: We're just trying to get our best five on the field, so Michael Mokofisi was really making a move as an interior player, and to make room for Michael and still just getting our best five on the field, it was a natural, and it has worked out great.

Q. What do you think of the quarterback match-up in this game, two experienced guys which is kind of rare to see.

ANDY LUDWIG: It is, to see guys that stick around that long in one program, yeah. I think it encapsulates really

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

the entire match-up. I think there's a lot of similarities in the Utah football program. When I watch Penn State on defense, when I see them on offense, I see a lot of similarities in the approach. I think these are very two like-minded programs that are going to go at it here in the Rose Bowl. Starting with the quarterback position, two veteran guys that have been around.

What I don't know, I know Cam and I have worked together for four years, and I don't know -- has it been three years with Clifford and the OC there?

Q. Yeah.

ANDY LUDWIG: So he's got great system mastery and all that stuff, but I think there's a lot of parallels in that room.

Q. What was it like last year, that Ohio State game being an OC, with the score being what it is, just trying to match them score for score?

ANDY LUDWIG: It was awesome. It was awesome. I'll tell you what, it's like watching a tennis match up there in the press box in that second quarter. Things were moving really fast.

But just to see the players just take the game over, playing above the Xs and Os, it was very rewarding, obviously. Need to find a way to win the game. Didn't score enough points in the second half.

But it was a heck of a game. That was one for the ages.

Q. Now that last year's milestone, being here for the first time and with the fans and (indiscernible) what's it like this trip kind of you're familiar with Rose Bowl and everything, is there a little bit of a chip on your shoulder based on last year?

ANDY LUDWIG: Well, I don't know if -- yeah, it's time to win the Rose Bowl. It's time to win the Rose Bowl. This is the opportunity presented to us. Our guys have had a great couple weeks of preparation. We'll continue that preparation here in an hour or so.

Yep, the novelty, it's still -- what a blessing to be invited to play in -- have the opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl, but now we need to win the Rose Bowl.

Q. A little easier this week, too, knowing that you guys were here last year, knowing kind of how the week goes and everything?

ANDY LUDWIG: Yeah, there's been no surprises. There's been no surprises, which is a good deal. And the weather

is a little better this year than it was last year.

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