

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

Saturday, December 31, 2022

Pasadena, California, USA

Utah Utes

Coach Kyle Whittingham

Press Conference



Q. Can you reflect on what the season has been just in terms of unique challenges?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it's been an interesting ride to say the least. We've suffered some setbacks right at the onset of the season. Not playing very well down in Florida. Then we had the UCLA game here, and then of course the Oregon game. So those are the negatives of the season.

The positives were our team responded virtually every single time our back was to the wall. Our guys responded, and we were able to get things done.

Proud of the way they handled the adversity. Showed a great deal of resiliency, and just kept fighting. Just kept playing, and when all and said and done and the smoke had cleared, here we were in the Rose Bowl.

Q. When it's a veteran group you expect guys to pick themselves back up?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, exactly. We have a lot of great leadership on this team and guys who have been through a lot, so didn't surprise us at all, but still, good to see it happen.

Q. How many times have you had a quarterback start the season at backup quarterback and by the end be a big time running back?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's a first, yes, sir. I guess there's a first for everything, but thank goodness for that because we were in dire straits at that position. When J.J. made that move, it solidified that spot almost immediately.

Q. It hasn't been talked about much, but your defensive line was relatively inexperienced coming into this year. How have you seen them develop, and where are they right now?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: They've done a great job this year.

We didn't start off very well. We had our issues in Game 1 for certain. But they continued to work. Coaches did a great job developing those guys, and now we've got really four guys that we feel really good about inside at the tackle position and four guys right now with the options of a couple of our guys at end, we've got four guys right now that we feel are playing good football for us.

Q. Did you expect this this fast from Simote Pepa?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, did not. Simote has been one of the most pleasant surprises on the team this fall and has really come into his own, especially the last half of the season.

Q. (Inaudible.)

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, they're steeped in tradition, that program. Of course Joe Pa, what a great job he did with the team, and they've got a lot of history. It's really an honor to play them in this game.

Q. We normally don't see a quarterback with this much experience (inaudible) winning coach and quarterback in school history.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he's seen it all, been there, done that, so I'm not sure we could throw anything at him that he hasn't seen at some point during his career. But Coach Scalley is an outstanding schematic coach, and he does a great job of -- what was shown prior in the season and building on that each week, tweaking things, so we try to give a little bit of a pre-snap as well as post-snap indecisiveness on the quarterback, and that's going to be key if we're going to have a chance to slow him down. That's got to happen this week, as well.

Q. You talked about after the SC game that Williams would make adjustments and (inaudible).

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it's a chess match, there's no doubt about it. That's exactly what happens. You don't wait until halftime to make adjustments. If you're waiting until halftime to make adjustments it's typically too late, and I think our coaching staff and players do a great job of



making adjustments right from the onset of what needs to happen, and certainly, like you said, Scalley is a master at that.

Q. What impresses you when you put the tape on about Penn State?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, the whole defense impresses me first of all. I'm going to say right now, I don't think there's any question that this is the best linebacking crew that we've seen all season long. He's a tremendous player. He's active. He's tough. He's just a guy that is obviously off to a great start in his college career.

Q. When you look at Penn State, they get a lot of pressure on the quarterback. Do you see that as sort of a key to the game?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. Our offensive line has done an outstanding job protecting Cam all season. Cam is a big part of that with his mobility and his pocket presence. There's probably several sacks that just an ordinary quarterback would have taken where Cam's escapability allows him to get away from the rush. But that would be a big deal, to be able to protect Cam, and we're in the top 10 I believe in the country as far as fewest sacks allowed.

Q. (Indiscernible) in terms of Penn State's ability to run the ball versus your ability to stop the run.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Right, Penn State reminds me or reminds us a lot of -- bears a lot of similarities to us as far as commitment to the run game. They've got two outstanding freshman running backs, both of them approaching 1,000 yards, and they're very committed to running the football.

Q. Manny Diaz, their defensive coordinator, said that (indiscernible)?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we hang our hat on that. Physicality is something that we feel is a strength of ours, and it's good to know that he recognizes that.

Q. Both coordinators actually said that you guys remind them of more of a Big Ten team than a West Coast team in terms of physicality. Would you agree with that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think there's some truth in that. We're not completely old school because we do have a good passing attack, but we're committed to the run, the play-action game off the run, and that's something that is not real prevalent, particularly in the Pac-12.

Q. Going back to the tight ends especially this year with all the injuries and issues, does this exemplify the next man up philosophy maybe more so than in recent years?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Without a doubt. I can't remember in recent years where we've had to have the next man up mentality come up as often as it has this year.

Fortunately, the next men that have come up have done a great job and filled the shoes of the guys that are no longer available.

Q. With players deciding about going to the NFL, how much do you as a head coach get involved in that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's something that we have conversations about. We're always there as far as a coaching staff to offer advice to our guys. You've got to be careful; you don't want to be too adamant either way because ultimately it's got to be their decision and they're the ones that got to live with it.

But we certainly give them our take on it. We're also able to gather information for them from scouts, general managers and so forth to help them make that decision.

Q. Is that information ongoing or --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Ongoing, yeah. It starts towards the end of the regular season.

Q. Penn State has three tight ends that they rotate through. How difficult is it to stop their defense?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it's very similar to our offense where we utilize the tight end a great deal, so one of the positives to that is our defense is used to seeing that pretty much every day in practice, so it's nothing new to us, but there were very few teams in the country that utilize the tight ends as much as us and Penn State.

Q. (Indiscernible) running back for Penn State. What have you seen from them on tape that made them so special?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: They've got great instincts, vision. They've both got good size. Of course the one is about 220, the other one is about 205, 210, but they're both very instinctual, like I said, tough, can run between the tackles, can get outside, and they're very impressive.

Q. Ja'Quinden Jackson, how have you seen the transition there?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he's made a great transition to running back. It's not completely new to him. He was a running back throughout his junior high days, and so it's not something that he was starting from scratch. But when you haven't played the position for, what, four or five years, there is a little bit of a learning curve. But it was really short for Ja'Quinden, and he picked things up very quickly, and being a quarterback, you expect that as far as pass protection and responsibilities and that type of thing because you've got to learn all that as a QB.

Now, learning it and actually physically putting it into play is two different things, and he's done a great job of that.

Q. The 2022 season and you guys have made it back to your second Rose Bowl, and Ty and Aaron have gone all the way with you guys. How much has that really made you guys who you are in terms of getting this far in the season?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, Ty and Aaron are still in the forefront of our minds. We remember them every single day. We've got things in our building, memorabilia and things dedicated to those two young men, and they certainly in our minds have played a big part in both last season and this season.

Q. I think you were asked before, but (indiscernible) program for several years. The evolution of this program, you built this program. Do you ever take a second to pinch yourself and realize where you've made it to?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, it's been a heck of a ride, and when you look back and think of all the things we've been through and all the positive things that we've been able to experience, BCS games, New Year's Six games, which I guess are one and the same, transitioning into the Pac-12, there's been a lot of things that have transpired during my time here at Utah, and it really boils down to us having great players that have come through this program as well as great assistant coaches that have made it what it is today.

Q. There are bricks outside of the stadium in honor of Ty and Aaron.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I didn't know that. That's awesome. You'll have to show me where those are. That is really cool, and first I've heard of that. That means a great deal, and it's very -- our football team is so proud of those young men, and we miss those young men dearly. To know that there's a little tribute to them here in the Rose Bowl, that's going to be great. I would guess that nobody

knows that, so excited to tell these guys.

Q. What?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, nobody has told me.

Q. That's amazing. Going into Penn State, obviously you've been getting questions all week long. What do you make of Penn State? How are you guys feeling? How has practice been?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Okay, first of all, Penn State is a complete football team, really no weakness, terrific players, virtually every position group, tremendous season. The only two losses were to Michigan and Ohio State, two playoff teams. They're outstanding. They've got all our attention, all our respect, and our preparation has been very good so far.

We had about 10 or 11 practices in Salt Lake City before we got here. We'll have another four or five here when all is said and done and our guys we believe have handled it very well so far.

Q. Pasadena is a lot of red right now. What does that mean to you?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, our fans are awesome, support us. Last 10 years plus, Rice-Eccles has been sold out every single week. Championship game, they travel to that, bowl games, they travel to those. We can't say enough positive things about our fans and how grateful we are that they give us the support that they do.

Q. Can I ask you about Britain Covey, how he's having success at the next level.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Britain Covey is doing exactly what I thought he would do, and that is be a guy that coaches fall in love with, his teammates fall in love with him. Tremendous kick returner, punt returner, and he's a really good slot receiver, and as soon as I believe he gets his opportunity to show what he can do on game day in the slot, he's going to really open some eyes, as well, and work himself into a guy that becomes a contributor not only on special teams but offensively, as well.

Q. He's playing such a big part of the special teams. What's it like to see him maybe in February?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's awesome. I'm sure they're obviously going to the playoffs. I believe they're the No. 1 seed right now in the NFC, and Brit is a special young man, special individual, and we loved having him in our program. He was instrumental to our success. Great team

leader, and my guess is he's going to be doing the same thing in the NFL for quite a few years.

Q. When you say he's an inspiration to your guys having success at the next level and being able to make that contribution in the NFL?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Without a doubt. Brit does not fit the typical mold of what they're looking for in the NFL as far as size and that type of thing, but he's just too much of a competitor, too talented, and just too much of a team guy to not have on your football team. I can't imagine anyone in the country not wanting that guy on their team.

Q. Returning your kicks and punts do you think (indiscernible) Rose Bowl.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I hope so. That was great last year, he took one to the house in the Rose Bowl, took a punt to the house in the championship game -- excuse me, it was the first Oregon game. But if we get that kind of production this year, Devaughn Vele will be handling our punt returns, and Money Parks will be handling the kickoff returns, and so those are two very gifted guys that we hope can break loose.

Q. Can you talk about your run to get to this second round of Rose Bowl?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it was a difficult road. We had some setbacks during the course of the season, starting with the opener against Florida, didn't play well down there, got beat in The Swamp. Started playing some good football, then got beat by UCLA here in this stadium, recovered from that, ripped off several more wins, ended up losing to Oregon at Oregon in a closely contested game, but then when we had to get it done towards the end of the year, we were able to do that. Everything fell into place that last weekend for us, and here we are at the Rose Bowl.

Q. I know you have a big game in front of you, but how much do you have left in the tank?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Me personally? I get asked that quite a bit. I'm not that old; I'm 63. But I'm just taking it day by day and season by season. As long as I have the passion, the energy, the drive that I have now, I'm good to go.

This job is too consuming and there's just too much to it to be able to do it unless you're all in. You've got to be all in.

Q. Your family, your father and all he accomplished and really your family that supported you, do you think

about that when you're on the verge of another great contest?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely, and family is everything in this program. It's our culture. We are a family, this football team. I lean on my family a great deal. They've given me great support through the years.

Q. Obviously from California, so you're familiar with the area. For this team, you guys were in the Rose Bowl last year, you played UCLA this year. Is it a different mindset this time? Is this a business trip?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, no, it's far from a business trip. Our guys have earned the opportunity to come to the game back-to-back now. We encourage them to enjoy the bowl experience. Don't get me wrong, the number one objective is to win the game, and the real key to success in a bowl game is being able to separate the time to work and focus and the time to enjoy yourself. I think our guys have done a really nice job being able to negotiate between the two and handle their business.

Q. I've been asking a lot of guys who they think is the funniest guy on the roster. Do you have any funny player interactions?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Funniest guy on the roster.

Q. I'll give you some names, but I want to know who you think first.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Junior Tafuna is really funny. Dalton Kincaid has got a great sense of humor.

Q. Some say Cam, once you're in and you've got to gain his trust.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You've got to get in his circle, then the real Cam starts to show up. He's very witty and very intelligent.

Q. The name everyone has thrown out, just about everybody, is Stone.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Stone Azarcon. I've never seen that side of Stone.

Q. They say it's more of a locker room type of thing. You might have to follow up with him.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That surprises me.

Q. That's everyone's go to choice. I was like, who's Stone? I didn't know who he was. Everyone was

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

telling me about him. Just going back to the game and you guys, the offensive line, I'm not familiar with the name of No. 78, California kid. Tell me a little bit about him.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, a very talented young men, very versatile. He actually plays center, as well. He's a guy that is one of the linchpins of the offensive line, very unselfish, does whatever we ask of him, hard worker, extremely high football IQ, and just a great guy to have on the football team, and he's going to play this game for a lot of years.

Q. Talking to your offensive coordinator the other day, he mentioned something along the lines of hey, we just want to put our five best guys out there, and he was among those guys that was willing to move around, kind of make that fit. How do you feel that's kind of worked out now that you guys have film and some games under your belt to evaluate that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, very well, and we're looking for our five best linemen and we continue it from there, based on their strengths. But we've got the five best out there, and that necessitated moving Sataoa to the outside, which he did, and that will help him as well at the next level when the NFL scouts know that he can play both positions.

Q. What is the development and the growth been like for him? I believe he's in his third year, an All-Pac-12 guy.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he's got the whole package, the size, the ability, the strength, the intelligence that I mentioned, and he's going to make an outstanding pro football player.

Q. What's it like for you to be back in the Rose Bowl? I know it's never a smooth ride, some bumps in the road. What do you think about the journey this year and being back in Pasadena?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, certainly wasn't easy. We had our fair share of setbacks, but our guys hung in there, handled adversity, never flinched, never backed down, just kept swinging until the bitter end and now the dust has settled and here we are in the Rose Bowl.

Q. Going back to that UCLA game, what did you take away from that? What did you learn about the team? Was there anything about that game that maybe kind of helped you guys along the way?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we didn't play well as a defense that game. That was almost a watershed moment

for our defense because we really started to gain momentum after that game.

Q. (Indiscernible).

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think it's a great honor for us to be able to be in this game just in general back-to-back years is a tremendous accomplishment by our players, and if indeed this does become the last traditional slotted Rose Bowl in its traditional setup, it's a great honor to be a part of that.

Q. It's certainly a combination of a lot of things, bringing the pack into the Pac-12, establishing yourself as a champion. It's not the end of anything, but it's a nice puncture Asian.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It is, absolutely, and our players, it's been a long, hard road since we joined the conference 11, 12 years ago. Took a little bit of time to get some traction, but we feel right now that our program is on the right trajectory, and got a lot of really good players in this program, a lot of really good players we're recruiting for next year, and we think the future is bright.

Q. When you get to play a blue blood program like a Penn State or Ohio State, do you emphasize that to your kids, or do they even care?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, they're aware and they understand that there's a hierarchy in college football, and we are now starting to become in the conversation of those programs, which is a great tribute to our guys.

Q. You guys have been a power as long as they've been aware of football.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Exactly, exactly.

Q. Do you prepare for weather, rain, stuff like that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we have what we call wet ball mechanics, the specialists, the quarterback, the receivers, anybody that handles the ball, we had periods in practice where we dash the ball with water and soak it up and get them used to it. You don't want to do too much, but you've got to be prepared for some rain, some wetness on the ball. That's standard procedure for us all year long. We check the weather reports. Anytime there's a chance for weather we'll incorporate that into each practice.

Q. I know you're focused on this game, can you have you brought about the future, maybe your future? How excited are you about recruiting, what you've done --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Very excited. I think we're on the right trajectory. We're building each year taking a step forward. Certainly this year being able to go back to back, Pac-12 champions and making it to the Rose Bowl was a huge step in that direction.

Q. With the workmanlike approach (indiscernible)?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. That's a big key to having success in the season is being able to separate work time from time to have fun, and our guys have done a great job with that.

Q. You're back here for the second year in a row. Last year you talked about how special the team was. This year you've talked about how special this team is. Had a has your last 12 months been like with both of these teams ending in this location?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: What a ride. It's been incredible. Being able to be a part of these guys' success and what they've accomplished, when you look back and understand that they've been to four Pac-12 Championship games in the last five years, back-to-back Pac-12 champs, back-to-back Rose Bowls, what these guys have accomplished is amazing, and I'm just grateful to be a part of it.

Q. Talking to a lot of the players, they seem so grateful to be a part of your program and how you mentor, taught, recruited, developed them. How has your relationship grown with these guys in a really unique time in our sport where maybe the relationships aren't as fruitful and rich as they once were?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, early on in my career if I could go back and do something over, it would be to be more mindful and aware and appreciative of relationships. I did not do a great job early in my head coaching career of building the relationships like I should. I think I've learned along the way, at least I hope I have, and the relationship I have with this football team from my perspective is outstanding. I love these guys, love being around them, and being able to come to work every day is an absolute joy for me.

Q. Second time here; what have you noticed about some of your key players having gone through all of the elements you're going through?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, not quite as wide-eyed and just looking around and in awe of the experience. It's more, okay, been here, done that, and that's not to say we're not enjoying the bowl experience, because we are,

but they've done a great job of managing work time with the time to sit down and have some fun. That's really key to winning both games is being able to separate that, get the work done when it needs to be done, have a good time when it's time for that.

Q. You've talked about pregame or during the game, look up, wow, the San Gabriels, the Utah fans.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I absolutely do. Any championship game, any bowl game we go to, our people are there in full force, and we're very grateful for that. Our fan base is outstanding, and want to throw them a big shout out and tell them how thankful we are for them and what a support they've been to us.

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