

Art of Sport LA Bowl Hosted By Gronk: California vs UNLV

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Los Angeles, California, USA

SoFi Stadium

Rob Gronkowski

Del Alexander

Justin Wilcox

Press Conference

ROB GRONKOWSKI: Welcome guys. Thank you everyone for coming out. First off we've got Coach Alexander and Coach Wilcox -- Oregon, USC, Arizona -- us three are representing, rest in peace, the Pac-10 from back in the day. That doesn't exist anymore but you reminisce about those good times that we had and all the good players that came out of that conference. That's really cool that us three resemble being from the Pac-10.

It's a pleasure to have everyone here, the Art of the Sport LA Bowl is fantastic. It's the only football game that's going to be on tomorrow night in the whole entire world. I played in this bowl game, and that's why this is such an honor to host this game. I played in it when it was in Las Vegas. It was the first bowl game that the University of Arizona went to in ten years. It was my sophomore year in college. My brother scored a touchdown up the middle. We beat Brigham Young. They were ranked No. 22 in the country at the time as well.

It was just cool to bring home a championship to Tucson at the University of Arizona.

Coaches, the motivation for this game is this belt right here. If you win, you get this belt for your players. You guys might not think it's cool, but let me tell you, these young bucks think it's cool. Appreciate you both being out here. Congratulations to the UNLV Rebels for a fantastic season. Congratulations to the California Golden Bears as well. I used to beat up on you guys. Sorry, Coach. You probably beat up on them too.

JUSTIN WILCOX: I don't know about that.



ROB GRONKOWSKI: That's all I've got. It's going to be a lot of energy tomorrow night here at the best stadium in the whole entire world. Thank you guys. It's a pleasure.

Q. How excited are you to have these two teams representing something that you are also attached to for this exciting game? (No microphone)?

ROB GRONKOWSKI: I mean that's what it's all about. It's the exposure. Last year we had it on Saturday night. We were going up against three NFL games, four other bowl games as well. We did pretty well and I'm just excited that it kind of got pushed to Wednesday because of the college playoff format. It kind of worked out on our side to be the only football game going on in the entire world. It's Wednesday night as well. All the avid football fans love football, they breathe football. If you're just chilling at home they're going to turn the game on. It's great for the sport. It's great for college. It's great for the UNLV Rebels. It's great for the California Golden Bears as well.

I'm glad we got a California team as well to come represent here in LA. Overall the exposure is great just for these two teams and also for the LA Bowl.

Q. You think you and your brothers would have stayed in Arizona throughout the duration of your great careers there with the modern day NIL and portal?

ROB GRONKOWSKI: I would say most likely. We went to the University of Arizona because we love the campus. Also what's cool is they gave us an opportunity to play together as well. My brother was at the University of Maryland, and he transferred the old school style way. He had to sit out a year at the University of Arizona, and we got to play two years together, which was really cool.

I'm kind of more of a guy that is more about loyalty. I understand the portal. I understand what these players are going through and the opportunity to be able to capture possibly once in a lifetime that paycheck, you don't know if you're going to make it to the NFL or not. So the NIL is good in that way.

Just overall, I think it just needs to be contained a little bit, have these players transferring right now, the portal open



five days before a bowl game heading into the playoffs or heading into any type of bowl game that you're in, I think it's a little chaos. I think it needs to be controlled. The substance of what's going on just needs to be controlled.

I think it's great for the players, but just overall I feel like just a little bit more loyalty needs to happen eventually with the rules that are placed with what happens with NIL and all that.

Q. What excites you to have your name associated with the bowl game?

ROB GRONKOWSKI: I'm a big football fan. I still watch college football. I follow University of Arizona, where I went to school. I'm an avid NFL fan as well. I do the analyst pregame on the NFL Kickoff Show for Fox.

So just expanding the brand, getting the exposure out, getting the name out. I had a decent college football career but definitely a better NFL career. What I really loved about this is, like I said, it's a full circle moment. When you can attach your name to something that meant something to you that means something to you, that's what it's all about. It makes it that much more special and important.

Just keep the memories going of when we won at the Las Vegas bowl. We beat BYU, like I said. I'll remember those days for the rest of my life. Just everyone rushing the field, all the fans rushing the field. I didn't even have a good game, but that doesn't really matter. That's not what it's about. I had a good time with the teammates out in Vegas. I had a good time in the game as well.

My brother scored a touchdown up the middle on a play action pass that I'll remember for the rest of my life. Just to see him as a fullback score a touchdown, that was really special, not just for him, but also for me. Our quarterback, it was one of his last games of his career, Willie Tuitama. He threw for over 300 yards. That's just a memory that I'm going to hold on for life, that my teammates are going to hold on for life when we won that game.

That's what makes it really cool about hosting this bowl game as well because I'm attached to it, I'm a part of it. Just to bring that spirit and energy to the game as well so these kids can understand what it's all about and they can enjoy the moment as well.

Q. Last year Ashton Jeanty played in this game. How much did you enjoy watching him? Is there any other players you're looking forward to watching tomorrow night as well?

ROB GRONKOWSKI: We're expecting a Heisman hopeful coming out of UNLV next year at the running back position after last year's game. That was really cool. Ashton Jeanty played in this game last year. It shows that, you know, it's not the highest bowl game, it's not the playoffs, but this is a pro typical bowl game where it's a lot of exposure. A lot of good players will be playing in this game at California and UNLV.

I'm just looking forward -- what I'm really looking forward to, it's not just individual of the players, I'm just looking forward to a good football game. These two teams are going to clash together very well tomorrow, one from the Mountain West. I don't even know what conference California is in anymore. I want to say Pac-10 still because I'm a Pac-10 guy.

JUSTIN WILCOX: ACC.

ROB GRONKOWSKI: Oh, you're ACC now. I was thinking Big Ten possibly, but ACC. We're hoping for a good game, a lot of energy, and big hits as well. I'm a big hit guy. Thank you guys. We'll see you out there tomorrow.

Q. Coach Wilcox, if you just want to kind of say a few words, and then we'll open it up for questions after both coaches kind of say a few words to the media here.

JUSTIN WILCOX: It's an honor to be here. Any time you make a bowl game, it's great for your team. It's great for the players who are playing their last game in a Cal uniform. It's great for the young players who might get their first opportunity to play.

You have these extra 10 to 12 practices, which create development for your team. It's always a goal of ours to win a bowl game at the beginning of the year, and we know we have a tough task. UNLV is an excellent football team. Credit to Coach and his staff for what they've done.

Gronk hit on it, this -- and Coach knows -- this time right now, there's a lot going on. I mean, there's a lot going on with players, individual players, teams, coaching staffs, and people forget these guys have -- they go to school. We've had in the last -- combining Monday, Tuesday, and tomorrow, game day, we'll have about 170 finals being taken. We have guys taking finals tomorrow before the game. So these guys have a lot going on.

The environment is a new and different for everybody. I think the more -- the further we get into it, there's going to be some more controls, but right now these guys are balancing a lot. I have empathy for the players because this is brand new for them, and it is -- for the fans and the



coaching staffs and everybody involved, there's a lot going on. It can be a little bit chaotic at times, but we're certainly excited to be here. Our team's fired up. We've had three really good days of practice.

Looking forward to a great opponent. I know it's going to be a tough football game, and it's one more round for our team for this year.

Q. Coach Alexander?

DEL ALEXANDER: First, I want to say thank you on behalf of UNLV, our athletic department, President Whitfield, our players, and our coaching staff. It's not often that UNLV is in a bowl game, but over the last two years, we've established a standard that we hope to keep as a tradition.

It's a difficult time on our side of the ball, but our guys have done a great job. They're full of energy. They're focused. They're giving the coaches every bit of their attention, and they want this reward. They want this reward and the opportunity to play in a bowl game that they've earned through their hard work, but at the same time, every day is a new day.

These guys, they come to work. There's outside influences. But they're locked in to playing in this bowl game, having success, and going out for their seniors, as Justin said, and making sure that we enjoy the process.

Q. Coach, I know this is coming home for you. The team was here able to take some pictures. What does this moment mean to you to be the interim head coach?

DEL ALEXANDER: It means a lot. Out there in the crowd, there's a young man that we went to high school together, and he's here doing his job. There's someone else in the crowd there that we went to the junior college together. There's family five minutes, hours away from here in the Inland Empire, and I just don't have enough tickets for everyone. But it means a lot.

I'll just go back to the beginning, UNLV being my first official job, and before that, I was with John Robinson at USC where I played, and there's a part of me that wants to make sure that that is noted, and there will be a JR sticker on our helmet. The last time UNLV won a bowl game, it was with him, and I was there with him.

Those kinds of moments you cherish when you get back there and sit in this seat.

Q. Del, you kind of mentioned it in your opening statement, but the simple fact of what this means to

your team very few guys have hopped in the portal thus far -- I think only four. That's a very low number. What does that speak to the values of the program and what it means to be here?

DEL ALEXANDER: It speaks to their character and integrity. As you know, you've got guys that have jumped into the portal, and they're going into the playoffs. So it's a difficult time.

I just think that we talk about respecting each other. In the short time I've had, we talk about respecting each other, respecting everyone's option to choose. But I think that word respect in our locker room has to do with let's stick around and let's finish what we started.

Q. Coach Wilcox, I'm sure you've seen UNLV's offense, particularly the Go-Go system. Is this already one of the more unorthodox offenses you'll see all season long, and how explosive do you feel they are?

JUSTIN WILCOX: They've been very explosive. You just look at the scoring, the variety that you see from them, the option game. Then the traditional offense that you see, the spread stuff, the tempo stuff, the QB run, the QB pass, the receiver's a phenomenal player. So they've got a lot of weapons, and what they do, they do well.

They do give you some formations and some conflicts that are a little unique. We spent a fair amount of time obviously preparing for that, but I've got a lot of respect for what they've done offensively this year and the players doing it.

Q. I wanted to ask you just about Fernando Mendoza and what he meant to the program and how did this team and quarterback room react to his transfer?

JUSTIN WILCOX: This is just college football in this era. There's going to be changes. The individual's got to make decisions.

Again, I empathize with the players. I don't feel sorry for them. There's a lot that they're going to be able to take advantage of in their time as college football players that people in the past didn't. I think it's a more complicated environment.

In the old days -- I guess that was 2021 and before -- the temptations weren't there, and the number of people involved with the players were fewer. But now the voices that are talking to them from obviously family members who care about them deeply, but then there's agents and trainers. They're getting pulled a lot of different directions. So I do have empathy for them.



But the individual's got to make decisions based on what's best for them. We have some really good football players on our team. There's going to be guys that have played all year that are going to be playing tomorrow night, and then there's going to be some guys that have opportunities, due to either injuries or departures, so I'm excited for them.

It's just part of college football in 2024, and nothing really surprises me anymore.

Q. Coach Alexander, you have a quarterback who was thrust into a tough position as well early on in the season. Can you talk about how the team has rallied around him and what you've seen from him in his growth and leadership until now?

DEL ALEXANDER: After speaking to his mom last night in an event that we were fortunate to go to at Causal?, he doesn't see it as adversity. We don't see it as being thrust into a difficult situation.

We got to the end of training camp, and we chose a quarterback. Speaking to his mom yesterday, we talked about it's obvious how he was brought up and how he was raised. When we chose the other guy to be the No. 1 quarterback, he didn't waver. He didn't waver. His voice was still present. His ability to come into the building first in the morning didn't change, and when his opportunity showed up, he was right on the spot.

So there wasn't anything he had to do different once it was his opportunity. Again, it just speaks to the locker room, but Hajj is a winner. You see that a little bit in our record of success, but what you don't see is behind the scenes and how our guys support him and how he's a big part of keeping the energy going when we're out on the practice field or in the game.

Q. Has anything changed with coordinators on the sideline? Do you still expect to have Scherer and Brennan Marion out there.

DEL ALEXANDER: No, there's still things going on behind the scenes. You guys will find out soon enough, but Brennan has decided to move towards other opportunities. We've collectively put our heads together and decided this is how we're going to do this game.

It's the same offense. After you spend 14 weeks together or two years together, I think that, just like players, no one player is going to dictate how the game's going to be played. That's what's going to happen. We're going to live with it.

The players are in charge of the game. Looking forward to young players playing the game. Looking forward to experienced players to step up and to continue to make plays.

It's the same thing on the staff. Wherever there's adversity, we rally, and that's what's going to happen.

Q. Want to talk about Nohl Williams, former Rebel, one of the best defensive players in the country. What can you say about that young man?

JUSTIN WILCOX: We were fortunate to get him, I'll tell you that. Nohl came into the program, and he was a guy we felt like had a lot of tools athletically. Last year, his junior year, he had some real good moments. He had some not as good moments. He was a bit inconsistent, and we really challenged him to dive into the technique and become an expert at playing the position and trusting the defense, and he did that.

That guy lives football. When he goes home, he still thinks about football. When he wakes up in the morning, he's thinking about what do I need to do for my football career? That's shown. He studies, he's bought into everything we've asked him to do.

He went out, and he's got talent now, and he went out and had a phenomenal year. He's a consensus All-American. A lot of first team All-American lists that he's on.

He doesn't say a whole lot. He goes about his business. He is a total professional. He is going to play pro football. We were just so fortunate to have had him. He sets a really good example on how to become a good player and for other guys in the room.

Q. Coach Wilcox, can you talk a little bit about, I guess, some of the nuances of getting your starting lineup together? I think maybe you were down to your No. 3 quarterback. And what are some of the other changes, and how has that impacted preparation for this game?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Preparation has gone very smooth. Things happen and rosters change for one reason or another.

C.J., who's our third quarterback, C.J.'s a -- C.J.'s played college football. He's played in conference championship games. He's the MVP of a bowl game. He can play.

We're glad he's on the team. He's done a great job this season. Probably didn't get to play as much as he would've wanted. But just like Coach said, took advantage

of the reps he had, the preparation, his behavior in the building, how he acted towards his teammates, you would never know the difference. So I'm really excited for C.J. to get an opportunity.

Heck, we've got another quarterback in there that's a true freshman, E.J. We've got C.J. and E.J. He's a darn good player. Hasn't played, but he came to us out of Seattle and done a really good job. He's made up a lot of ground in the last few weeks just getting more and more opportunities in practice and in our developmental period. So I'm excited for him as well.

Q. What has been both of your experiences so far with team activities leading up to the LA Bowl?

JUSTIN WILCOX: Experience, yes. I've known Coach a long time. He's done -- anyway. It's been really good. We got here on Saturday. They got the Universal Studios. That was on Sunday. We had practice, Universal Studios, then they had the Monday Night Football experience last night.

Again, most of our team could make that. Some of them couldn't. Again, we had some of those conflicts with finals, but they've enjoyed it. We're staying at a great place. The hospitality has been unbelievable. The practice setup has been fantastic. Great job on the weather, whoever was in charge of that out here, really, really solid.

We've got a lot of guys from Southern California, so that's really cool too because their families are out at practice. A lot of ex-players have showed up to practice. It's been fantastic.

Now it's the day before the game, and it's honing in on the game. Our guys have done a great job of balancing football, enjoying themselves, finals, and then getting ready to play tomorrow.

DEL ALEXANDER: Yes, everything he said. To go to a bowl game, you step off the plane. You've got the police escort, and it becomes real.

We get off the plane, we take the ride to Long Beach. Me being a native, I'm like wait a minute, we're playing in SoFi but staying in Long Beach, I'm full of complaints. But you ride over the bridge, and you get over to Harbor College, and the ride is maybe only ten minutes. The facility there is set up, locker room, field. They did a good job making sure the facility we practice in is great for our players.

To be able to go to Universal Studios. We've got a mix of players. I can't say that a majority are from California and the West Coast, but we've got some guys that were able to

go to Universal Studios, have fun. Some of the younger guys come in on that last bus, and they've got big hats, big stuffed hats. They've got hands and Harry Potter and all kind of stuff going on. So some of those guys really enjoyed that.

Cosm yesterday, to be able to experience the game and the food there was big time, first class. And to walk into the stadium today. We play in Allegiant Stadium. It's one of the best stadiums in the world, as Gronk said, so to follow that up and play here at SoFi, another big venue, it's special.

So I think everything has been first class. I think the people, Adolfo has done a great job. Our primary escort, Juan, has done a great job. Once you get to know people, you talk to them. I talked to Juan, and come to find out that Juan and I grew up in the same neighborhood, which is shocking because not a lot of people grew up in my neighborhood.

It's been first class, and our guys and our players and our staff really appreciate the hospitality. Like Coach said, this is Friday night. So I say all of that, and then I throw it out the window because it's time to get ready to play a game.

Q. Coach Alexander, can you also talk about the versatility Ricky White provides both on offense and as a special teams player?

DEL ALEXANDER: Yes, special and unique when you've got a guy that thrives in special teams. Normally as a receiver, he's a return guy, or he's maybe a left tackle somewhere on kickoff return where it's a little insignificant. But to be a guy that's making plays as a punt blocker --

When you start off at special teams and you bring a group of guys in, the first thing you ask is which one of you guys have ever blocked a punt? Then you put him in a position to try to make a play. Well, a year ago, Ricky didn't block a punt, but the time that he spent being a student of the game and listening to Coach Shibest and find those little details that are going to help him get closer to the punter, I mean, he took it and ran.

What you see, to be an All-Conference Player of the Year on special teams as a wide receiver, non-returner, I hadn't seen it before. So that's tough to do -- you know, non-returner, non-punter, kicker -- I don't know. I've never seen it before. So very special and unique.

Q. All of the changes on coaching coming to your programs, for both of your programs, you have a huge shift in coaching, and everyone talks about the players coming and going. What's going on? Which coaches

are here and coaching, and which ones have moved on to their next stop?

DEL ALEXANDER: I think bigger than the whos, it's really about -- I mean, that's normal. It's December, it's January. Once the season is over and you've done well, someone is going to try to come and get you. If you haven't done well, then we know that result also.

I think the biggest thing now that is bigger than us coaches is the players. The players are forced to make business decisions now, and I don't think that they're old enough and mature enough. Now it's the outside influences that are -- some less experienced than others, influencing decisions, and we know that there's up to 3,000 guys in the portal.

So transition is normal in our business, but at the same time, for me the biggest issue isn't the coaches. It's with the players. We just talked about a guy that was in year 3 and 4 and has only gotten better, and we've got players in year 1 and 2 that don't want to take the time to develop.

JUSTIN WILCOX: As Coach said, this time of year, there's going to be movement. Fortunately for us, we've got stability, and we also have support on each side of the ball. So there's been, on offense for us, we've got some new faces, and they're there to support, encourage. They're helping with recruiting. Then there's staff members who have been with us through multiple years who are coaching the positions and game planning and going to be involved in calling the game.

The practices have gone very, very smoothly. Again, some of the positions have been elevated. So maybe they were working with the receiver group and now they're in charge of the receiver group. So it's been really good for them. Our players have done a great job of staying the course. So really hasn't been very disruptive at all.

The new guys have been around and involved just to encourage and meet the guys and be supportive, but not involved with game planning and things like that.

Q. Del, who is going to call the plays on offense for you guys, and how have you sort of prepared for that?

DEL ALEXANDER: That's top secret -- no. The way I explained it to the guys, and Coach knows this, the game is pretty much scripted, you know what I mean? You have the normal down and distance base calls, you've got the situations calls, and as a staff, what we've done is we've put that together. And one of us, if the camera can find him, will be making those decisions based on the group.

So we're working tirelessly this week. Somewhere

between trying to talk to signees and get instruction from Coach Mullen and make sure the players are having fun. The hours that are left are the hours that the offensive staff is coming together collectively to say what is our plan? The walk-through today, the walk-through in meetings tonight and tomorrow, we'll really define who we are in a given situation.

That stuff comes from who we've already been, you know what I mean? We don't want to reinvent anything. We're just going to make sure that collectively between series at halftime that we're doing the right thing by our players.

Q. You mentioned all the stuff that's going on outside the game. How do you keep the players focused on the actual Xs and Os and these are the plays we're going to run, and what have you seen from them leading up to this game in that regard?

DEL ALEXANDER: That's the locker room, you know what I mean? That's the culture, to be able to go out to practice, call the guys up, and look in their eyes, and all they want is information. That's how we're going to have success.

You can't fake that when you stand in front of a group of young men and you know that they're eager to move forward. The energy's been great. The effort's been great. The focus has been great. I just hope it's great on Saturday.

It's been fun. There's been a lot of buy-in, and that doesn't just happen overnight. We wouldn't be where we are right now without those guys, and Coach Odom setting the tone. And now with him moving on, with that same player leadership in the locker room taking care of the small things.

Q. Coach Wilcox, how do you feel like you and your staff and your team navigated its first season in the ACC?

JUSTIN WILCOX: In terms of just the travel and all that -- the rules of the game are the same. Have you ever seen Hoosiers? You might be too young. Has anybody seen Hoosiers? Remember when they measure the basket? Rules of the game are the same.

Some new venues, some new coaching staffs, some players that maybe you're not quite as familiar with as you would have been in the old Pac-12, but football is football. With the travel logistics being different, our university did a great job supporting us, our admin, our operations team. We left a day early. These airplanes are fast and big and comfortable, and they got food and Gatorade. So our guys did a great job.



We made it a positive. We'd leave on Thursdays. We'd spend an extra day together, all day Thursday we're traveling. Friday we're together. Saturday we're together playing the game. We'd fly right home after the game, and our guys loved it. It was awesome.

Especially in this era when you've got new people each and every year, you've got a lot of new faces, it's like those three days are valuable. You're with each other for three straight days. We had academic time on Thursdays and Fridays to make sure they're doing what they need to do in school, but I thought it was awesome. Our guys handled it great. We had great support from the university.

Like I said, new venues, new players you're going against, new coaches, but the rules of the game are the same.

Q. I want to ask you about Dan Mullen, the energy he brings. What are your thoughts on him being named head coach?

DEL ALEXANDER: Well, you look outside at the press conference, and you say wow, you know what I mean? It was packed. They had to bring chairs that were outside of the tent that they set up for him. They got the red carpet there.

From the outside, you listen, and you hear him being an entertainer. Having been a commentator, you listen, and you hear him control the crowd. He gets people excited with his presence.

I know doing my research the success that he's had. You look at his record there at Florida, and it's like in this day and age it's a winning record. Whatever happened to winning records being okay?

But his energy is great. We've had great conversations. He's back on campus. Man, he's working. He is a spark plug, and he is going. It's like, hey, Coach, I'm going to practice. I don't know if I can call this guy right now.

But I'm looking forward to getting with him Thursday when we get back.

Q. What's been your impression so far of SoFi Stadium?

JUSTIN WILCOX: In modern stadiums, I guess you would call them, this is impressive. The feat of putting this all together, but every detail, when we got here the other night, we had a coaches function, and we were in, I guess, one of the suites, one of the entertainment areas. Everything was thought of. There wasn't one little detail

that they didn't think of in building this place.

Then the way it looks, the way it sounds. Everybody has told me when we came down, this is -- for a modern stadium, this is as good as it gets. It's really exciting for us and our players and everybody to get a chance to play in it.

DEL ALEXANDER: Well, I'm a little bit of a jokester, but I think that this is way better than Jerry's World, you know what I mean? This is big time.

I'm an LA guy, and when you walk in and feel the effect, it's kind of like a little bit of a gladiator coliseum where it just goes up and not out. It's right on top of you, and every seat is a great seat.

But it's big time, it's special, and it's just kind of where things are. To be able to have two teams play here, it's got to be special. So I like it.

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