

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

Friday, July 21, 2023  
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

## Utah Utes Coach Kyle Whittingham Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Kyle Whittingham, reigning two-time defending champs from Utah. Great to see you.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Great to see you.

THE MODERATOR: Season 19.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I can hardly believe it. Number 30 at the university. It's an anomaly.

THE MODERATOR: You started coaching when you were seven.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Exactly (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Every year is different, every team is different. Can you start with, broadly, state of the program right now, what's unique about this 2023 squad?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we're in a good place. Of course, we have our quarterback coming back, Cam Rising, tremendous player. Absolute leader of our football team. He's the alpha dog of our team.

We're strong up front. Line of scrimmage should be very good for us. We've had some good recruiting classes that we've stacked up last few years. Cautiously optimistic going into this season.

THE MODERATOR: No worries about being picked third.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Could care less.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Resiliency is going to be a big key for you guys this year as you're going for a three-peat within the Pac-12. Cam Rising coming off a big injury. Brant Kuithe coming off an injury. How are those guys progressing? Dote on your guy Ja'Quinden Jackson a little bit. Switched from quarterback to running back.**

### What is he looking like out of camp?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, you're right, we had some very serious injuries last season. Cam and Brant are right on track with their rehab. Brant is obviously a couple months ahead. He had the surgery a few months prior to Cam.

We fully expect Brant to be ready for the season. Cam is going to come right down to the wire. Will he be ready for the opener? We'll have to find out.

We still got, what, a month and a half before that happens, I guess less than that, a month and a week.

Ja'Quinden was a great asset to us as a running back. We made that move last year, that really seemed to give us a little bit of an infusion of energy. He really did a great job of taking to that position. He embraced it.

It's one thing to change positions, but if you embrace it, don't do it reluctantly, your odds of success are much better. That's exactly how he handled it. It was a huge part of our success the second half of the season.

**Q. Last year you talked about winning big games out of conference. Fell short against Florida. In terms of you feel like Utah really winning a big game on a national stage out of conference, do you still feel that needs to be done or it's pretty solidified?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's obviously good for the conference any time one of our members can win those marquee matchups, the ones that have national implications.

Overall I think you judge the season as a whole. That's what we've always done. No one game is really any more important than the other in that regard, especially in conference. They're all important.

I think this conference overall is in a great spot. We ended with six ranked teams last year. I think we're going to open up with probably those same six teams ranked in the top 25 in the pre-season.



We have quarterbacks all over the place in this league. I think the Pac-12 is in a very good place right now. The conference is really strong. We're poised hopefully for a run at the CFP with one of the teams in the league.

**Q. Can you talk about the quality of quarterbacks in this conference. It seems like it's the best since maybe you've been there. How exciting is it to have this group of quarterbacks?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it is the conference of quarterbacks without a doubt. Just for an example, our guy, Cam Rising, who led us to the last two Pac-12 championships, is not even honorable mention, which is crazy to me. That speaks to the level of quarterbacks we have in the league. No disrespect to the guys that are the pre-season guys because they're very deserving, have played exceptional football.

I think the only time that really compares to where the league is right now is when we first got in the league, it was Marcus Mariota, USC was Barkley. There were some really good quarterbacks when we first entered.

I think you're right, this is probably the strongest group that we've ever had as a whole.

**Q. You referenced the state of your program. 19 years as head coach in this program. How do you look at the state of this league?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we're in a great spot, like I said. Any time you can have half the league ranked in the top 25, at the end of the season going into the next year, I think that's strong. I don't know if there's a league in the country, maybe the SEC, that has that representation and that strength where you got half your league ranked in the top 25.

**Q. In the past year or so two of your biggest non-conference rivals, Colorado and BYU, have had big changes in their situation. How do you see the change in that rivalry?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Obviously Colorado, it's an interesting thing that's taken place there. The whole roster has been flipped over. With the new rules, the way things are structured, that's just how it is. Coach Sanders is really shaking the tree there, I guess you could say, brought in a bunch of new faces, new players. He's a sharp guy, doing things the way that he sees them needing to be done.

So it's a work in progress. We'll see what happens, how it shakes out. But he's done a great job.

Of course, BYU going into the Big 12 is a big move for them. We went through the same thing, what, 12 years ago now. We don't play them this year. This will be the second year in a row we don't play that game. It's a rivalry, but not quite the same feel that it had maybe 10 years ago, 15 years ago, when we were in the same league, and it had conference implications, all that.

Certainly still one of the better rivalries in the country.

**Q. You're a great defensive mind. Our friends east of the big money sometimes are negative about the Pac-12, the perception of its defenses. There's a saying, a casual saying, that a good offenses win games, but great defenses win championships. Do you agree with that statement? If you had your choice between a great offense or great defense, which one would you choose?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's an excellent question.

We still feel like we play some good defense at Utah. I believe you got to have a quality defense to compete for a championship. If you look at the analytics, the pure analytics, offense has really taken the forefront as far as what is more conducive to winning football games.

I think it was 50% offense is responsible for your outcome, defense 35%, special teams 15%. Again, these are just numbers that I've read.

In that regard, in order to win a championship, you better be pretty good on offense. Obviously being a defensive-minded guy, having a defensive background, that's always going to be important to me personally.

You have to change with the times. I think we've done that at Utah. Andy Ludwig, our offensive coordinator, does an exceptional job. We have a great quarterback. I think maybe the old adage is not quite as true as it used to be. In fact, offense is probably statistically more important to winning games than defense, at least on paper.

**Q. Everybody is talking about the six teams that are ranked, deservedly so. Of the other six teams, which one of those six do you think has a chance to get up into that top?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's a great question.

I think all are capable. Both Arizona schools, transition at Arizona State with the coaching staff. They're just getting things going there. I think Coach Fisch has done a great job at Arizona gaining some momentum. Got a lot of

respect for Coach Wilcox at Cal. Excellent defensive mind. Stanford, Coach Taylor, brand-new coaching situation there.

Washington State, I think they're on the right track as well. We already talked about Colorado and the big transformation that's happened there. I think the whole nation is sitting back and anxious to see how that turns out.

**Q. This is probably going to be the last time you get to play USC and UCLA in Los Angeles. How is that going to affect recruiting for you, knowing those families won't be able to watch their kids play in L.A.?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I would say to be determined. I think it certainly will have an impact on recruiting. Without a presence in Southern California, that's been a real focal point of our recruiting for years and years. I can't give you a great answer other than we'll have to see how that shakes out.

We're still going to recruit that area. We're not going to stop just because of what's happened. We're going to continue to rely on that area.

But report back to me in a year or two, I'll have a lot better answer for you on how that's going (smiling).

**Q. Back to your defense from last year, you struggled early with the L.A. schools, the Florida school with the rushing defense. The second time you played SC, you shut them down. Was that level of competition or stuff you guys did?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we had a lot of guys that started to really come of age during the season. We had some young guys in the lineup, particularly in the secondary. I think as the season went on, those guys got better and better, more acclimated and settled in.

I just think we gained momentum, as you said, defensively throughout the course of the season. I think it's primarily for that reason, guys getting experienced and getting comfortable with what we're doing.

**Q. You mentioned Coach Taylor at Stanford. When he was with your program, how much did you see that capacity for him to be a program builder?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I didn't hear the first half of the question. Acoustics are terrible. Is this a nightclub (laughter)?

**Q. How much did you see Coach Taylor to be a program builder?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Coach Taylor is an outstanding football coach. Exceptional offensive mind. That's his forté. He was wildly successful for a lot of years at the high school level. Did a great job at Eastern Washington before coming to us. Subsequent to us he went over to Sac State and tore it up there.

I think they've definitely got a guy in place there that is going to make that program better. No disparity against Coach Shaw, I think he did a tremendous job as well. Troy Taylor is a very bright mind in the game. If you just parallel that or look at what he did at Sac State, if he can do that same project at Stanford, they're going to be very good.

**Q. Coming off consecutive Pac-12 championships, it would be completely easy to get complacent. How do you go about setting expectations for your team, keeping them energetic?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think it's very easy. Nobody has ever three-peated in the Pac-12. That's one thing right there that we can accomplish that has not been done. Still not made it to the College Football Playoff. That's something else we're looking at. There's a lot of things that we have yet to accomplish at Utah and are excited about getting another opportunity this year to try to raise the bar even higher.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned about Cam, but can I ask you about Cole. Led the team in tackles, leader on defense. What do you admire about the way he plays the game?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Cole Bishop is a tremendous football player. Very physical style of play. Could be a linebacker. If we put five or 10 pounds on him, he could be a tremendous linebacker as well.

From the minute he set foot on campus, it was apparent the guy was a pure football player. Loves the game. Trains like a madman. There's nobody that out-works him in the weight room. Studies film constantly.

To do what he's done in the two years that he's been there is pretty remarkable.

THE MODERATOR: When you look at your team trying to go three in a row, when you talk to them, seems like some of these guys came back for a purpose, last dance, what have you noticed about what they've done to the younger players?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: They're great leaders for us. They are extremely focused, this team. It starts with the

upperclassmen. We have a saying in our program that when the recruits come in, you will become us, we won't become you, you will become us. The young recruits get sucked up into that philosophy, that mindset.

Our older guys do a great job of setting the example, setting the expectations, then demanding those younger guys measure up to that.

THE MODERATOR: Time for one more question for Coach.

**Q. In regards to NIL, do you see that has a negative or positive in regards to college athletics?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think the concept of NIL overall is a big positive. I like seeing the players getting some monetary reward for their abilities and what they're doing, things like that.

It's a little bit out of control right now. There's no guardrails, there's no parameters. I don't see that changing unless Congress steps in. That's my own opinion. I don't know how you get this thing in a situation where it's regulated unless Congress does it. From my viewpoint.

Happy to see the players getting more benefits. Somehow it's got to be reined in, put some regulations and parameters on it. Right now I don't think it's sustainable. The way it's going right now, I don't think it's sustainable more than the next few years.

In order for it to be something that's going to be plausible, I think Congress will step in. I don't know if they will. I don't know if they're interested in doing that. You tell me how else it's going to happen. It's not going to happen at the NCAA level. They can't do it. Right now it's just state to state. So much inconsistency in it right now. We got to get some consistency and guardrails in place so it can be a better situation.

The concept is great. How about that?

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. It's been great to spend some time with you.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Thank you. Appreciate it.

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