

# Pac-12 Football Championship

## Game: USC v Utah

Friday, December 2, 2022

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Allegiant Stadium

## Utah Utes

## Coach Kyle Whittingham

### Postgame Press Conference



Utah - 47, USC - 24

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: So proud of our guys. Our coaching staff, our players, outstanding effort. Players never stopped believing. I mean, they had a great attitude going into this game. They were not going to be denied.

Didn't look good early. We didn't play very well in the first quarter at all. In fact, if they would have kept that pace, it would have been 100 points and a thousand yards I think I calculated.

Good job by our defense stemming the tide, pulling another 180 just like they did in the last game, although this came in the second quarter rather than the second half.

We owned third down. I believe they were one of 12 on third down. We were much better in that. I think we were five or six of 12. That was a big key to the game.

Our rushing attack was big, being able to pile up the yards, get those physical rushes when we needed them. Cam Rising was outstanding, obviously, Player of the Game, MVP. Well deserved. He's our leader. As Cam goes, so goes the offense. He was on the target tonight.

Very proud of the guys that stepped up for guys that weren't able to play. It was great to see those guys pick up the slack and perform very well.

Great job by our players repeating as Pac-12 champs. What more can you say? It's been a good last 12 months. Excited to go to the Rose Bowl again. Got to keep the good luck hair for another month now, so you have to deal with that (smiling). Can't cut it now.

But we're excited. We're excited. I'm proud. Like I said, so much hard work by our assistant coaches. Those guys just work tirelessly around the clock. Our players have a great work ethic and attitude. It's just a pleasure to be

around this team and these coaches. Love the culture that we have in our program.

Questions.

**Q. You talk about college football coaches. We hear the same old names. I asked them if it's time we started hearing Kyle Whittingham among the greats. They said absolutely. Can you talk about the legacy you laid here. With two traditional standbys bolting this conference soon, is Utah now the face of the Pac-12?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There's a few questions there.

First of all, it's an anomaly to be at a school as long as I have. That just doesn't happen this day and age. I'm very grateful and blessed to have been at the University of Utah for as long as I have. It's close to 30 years as an assistant coach and head coach. Most coaches in that time frame would have been at 10 or 12 different places. Feel very fortunate.

Love the university. Love the community, love the state of Utah. It's a good fit for me and my family.

What was the question again? Oh, me?

As far as the success we've been able to have, I don't really care one bit about what conversation I'm in, I'm not in. That's not what's important. This job, you got to win to keep your job. But it's all about relationships, building those relationships with your players and coaching staff, even coaches from other teams. That's what it really is all about.

Again, if you don't win enough, you won't be around long enough to build relationships. I've been fortunate in that regard. I have no opinion on should I be in whatever conversation. That's where I'm at with that.

**Q. Every season is unique, highs and lows, injuries. How gratifying is this one having been to this point already?**



KYLE WHITTINGHAM: As gratifying as any season I can remember. We had our backs against the wall when we got beat by Oregon a couple weeks back. These kids never blinked, never flinched. We kept believing. Once we got the news after the Oregon game that there was a pathway that we could get to this game, our guys just were ecstatic. We knew some things had to line up, one of which we had control of.

It's been a magical season in a lot of ways. Things just fell into place. To have this team, this is the goal way back in January, a bunch of our guys came back instead of opting to the NFL, is to run it back, as they called it. Wanted to do it again. Here they sit with a championship in their Hall of Fame out in front. It will be there tomorrow.

**Q. At what point in the game did you sense Caleb Williams was hurt and how did that change how you defended?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we sensed -- I can't remember the exact point, but it was sometime early in the third quarter I believe. When you see a quarterback become not as mobile as he could be or should be, you smell blood in the water and you start bringing the heat. I mean, that's the strategy you want to use.

Caleb is a tremendous player. Maybe the most difficult quarterback to sack that we ever played against. We banged him up, slowed him down. I don't know how many sacks we ended up with, did we have half a dozen? Somewhere in that neighborhood?

He definitely took some punishment from our guys. We turned up the pressure.

**Q. You've won this twice in a row. Can you go back to 2019, what you think USC might be feeling right now. To come this close and then lose, not play well.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it's disheartening. We've been there twice, '18 and '19. In '18, we were elated to be there because we had never been to the championship game. '19 we had that great team; had we won, we would have been in the CFP almost for certain.

We can understand what they're going through. This is a competitive profession. You can just worry about yourself; you can't feel sorry for anybody else. You just keep going about your business.

**Q. Pac-12 Media Day you talked about last year feeling like you got over the hump, achieving something that hadn't been done. What does it say about this program to follow up a year like last year?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, I think it speaks to just that: our program. I think we've got a very good football program. That's what you want. You don't want to have a good team every now and then. You want to have a good program. I think that's the point we're at right now.

We have a program that's got some momentum now, a great deal of pride, a great deal of talent on the roster, excellent coaches. That's what you strive for, to be an outstanding program.

Thanks to the hard work of our assistant coaches and players, we're closing in on that.

**Q. Can you speak more to the play by the depth guys, Thomas and Ja'Quinden.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It says we have depth in the roster. That's what we've been trying to achieve ever since we got in the conference. When we first got here, our first 22 were good, but a big drop-off after that. We've been working tirelessly to improve the depth of the roster.

I think we're as deep and talented now as we ever have been. I know we are. I think that was manifest a lot of times this season. A lot of times we were without guys. Other years probably could not have overcome it, not continued to play at the high level we were able to this year. That's because of the recruiting efforts of our coaches, their development of those players, the sheer talent of the roster 1 through 85.

**Q. Can you talk about the fans. The Utah fans traveled out in droves. How did that help or impact this game?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's awesome. We love our fans. I don't know, 10 straight years of sellouts in Rice-Eccles back home.

They showed up without a doubt tonight. When we left the field at halftime, that's when it really hit me, how many fans we had there. The roar after we scored on that two-minute drill. We love our fans.

I know they're going to show up again at the Rose Bowl. I promise you that.

**Q. Your players get praised a lot for their physical toughness. What are your thoughts on their mental toughness considering the game and the way they battled back tonight?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, no question there, mentally and physically tough. That's a reputation we had in the



Pac-12. That's the one we had in the Mountain West. That's who we are. A calling card of our program, physicality. We preach it. We practice it that way. We're physical in practice.

I think mental and physical toughness go hand-in-hand oftentimes. We had some guys play this year in some circumstances that they were pretty banged up. They're so tough mentally, it starts with Cam Rising. I'm certain most quarterbacks would have missed a lot more time than he missed when he had that injury.

Proud of our guys. That's something we take a great deal of pride in, is being mentally tough and physical.

**Q. Talking to Morgan afterwards, he was saying there were a couple of miscues, miscommunications early on the defensive side. Felt like if you just cleaned that up, there was no need to panic, you could be fine. Could you address that?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we had a few blown coverages early in the game. Then later in the game we had a defensive back fall down, which created another big play. We never panicked. It was just a situation where I was more disappointed with the missed tackles. The tackling wasn't real sharp at the beginning of the game. We knew those few assignment errors that we made early could be corrected and were corrected.

Felt if we didn't start tackling well, nothing else was going to matter. That was really the biggest turnaround, was the way we tackled, then the way we turned up the heat on the quarterback with the pass-rush.

That really was the difference in the fourth quarter, was our fourth quarter pass-rush. That's how you put a game away, a strong running game and a fourth quarter pass-rush. We had both those tonight.

**Q. There were a couple years you went 5-7 back to back.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Two years. Thanks for reminding me (smiling).

**Q. Since then you've won nine games in seven of eight years. Can you take me back to those early days and what you did fundamentally to set the stage for what you've done since.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, first of all, when we first went into the Pac-12, we knew it was going to be a big challenge. We had things we had to accomplish facility-wise, budget-wise, recruiting-wise. There were a lot

of challenges. That was like spanning the Grand Canyon, going from the Mountain West to the Pac-12. That was not an easy job.

We had, like you said, early on, pretty good front 22. First 22 guys, we were a pretty good at the line of scrimmage. But I think it was the third and fourth year, either the second and third or third and fourth year in the Pac-12, somewhere in that neighborhood, where he with had that dip. We were still in the process of getting everything up to speed. It was a process.

We appreciate the administration of the university being understanding and standing by us, not cleaning house. A lot of schools probably would have cleaned house after a couple of 5-7 years.

Grateful we had the opportunity to continue to build and grow with the help of the administration and facilities, all the things that you need to compete at the Power Five level falling into place. We think we're in a good spot right now.

**Q. Obviously, coming into this game, there was a lot of talk that USC was guaranteed the Playoffs, Caleb Williams the Heisman. Was there a sweeter factor to winning it this year with all that noise out there?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There was a lot of noise. We had a team meeting and had a vote if we should even show up for kickoff because they were already going to the Playoffs and had the Heisman and this and that (smiling).

It's not their fault. It's people that get ahead of themselves in the media. We had a chip on our shoulder. We didn't really take a vote for that.

We definitely got the message loud and clear that a lot of people were underestimating us, not giving us much of a chance in this game. That's the wrong group of players to do that to. We've historically been a chip-on-our-shoulder type of program that's getting harder and harder to do the more success you have.

That was in our DNA from way back when, feeling a little bit disrespected and people weren't giving us our due. You shook up a little bit of a hornets nest when that happened.

Thank you. Appreciate you guys. Don't lose your money in Vegas.

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