

# Famous Idaho Potato Bowl: Utah State vs Washington State

Sunday, December 21, 2025

Boise, Idaho, USA

Albertsons Stadium

## Utah State Aggies

## Coach Bronco Mendenhall

## Bryson Barnes

## Noah Avinger

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for the pregame press conference with Utah State. Joining me today, head coach Bronco Mendenhall, graduate quarterback Bryson Barnes, and senior cornerback Noah Avinger.

We'll begin with an opening statement from coach.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, just really grateful to be here. I love my football team. The young men that I get to work with every day, they're exceptional young people in really every regard. Our culture just permeates through them and off of them in a way that's really exemplary. I'm not sure I've ever enjoyed coaching a team as much as this one. The unity, alignment, effort. Just the fun it's been to be with these guys has been an amazing experience for both my wife and I.

Our week or the number of days we've had up here, the bowl has been just really fun from the packing the meals, who would have thought there would be singing, hakas, chants while you're packing meals, but that's what our team does. Then next thing I know shirts are off and there's sleds bombs down the mountain at the same time.

Yeah, today, like everything these guys do together, it becomes an event and really fun to be part of. I would love to see our team play well tomorrow, play to our potential, have an exceptional game.

It always is magical for me when our upperclassmen, our seniors, can go out with a win. There's a finality and a statement to that which I'm really hopeful for this team that they can experience that experience in the locker room one more time, for me to be able to express my gratitude to them for all they've done all year.



I expect a tough, physical game, very evenly matched teams. Really looking forward to being with my team tomorrow.

I'll take questions.

**Q. How much convincing did it take to get your shirt off for the sledding?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It was none (smiling). I already knew the outcome. Once there was a hint of the head coach's name being called, you have to get ahead of that as fast as possible. That decision was easy (smiling).

**Q. What has it been like balancing the experience of the bowl game, being with this team, versus the fact you are preparing for a football game?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: We came to prepare first and foremost. We came to play the game and to win. That's why we're here.

But every second that I can be with our team and to show my appreciation, just be with them, we're going to do that. The best teams I've coached through bowl games, they can toggle back and forth. Here's the preparation, here is the unity and fun. This team has done a nice job this week of managing both. So I'm just proud of 'em.

**Q. Coach, you've coached in quite a bit of bowl games throughout your career. How do you know when a team is truly locked in versus being happy to be here?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It's not hard to tell. So there's all kinds of cues along the way, demeanor, body language, actual language, then just watching practice.

What I've noticed from practice is our intent and our desire to play and our enthusiasm and energy is at a really high level. Then the focus has been on the mastery part and the precision, getting the plans dialed in as tightly as possible.

Yeah, I'm expecting our team to play and play well and



hard and unified. But they also really like each other, which makes the other events so much fun. I don't know, you could have pretty much any event and I think our team would have a blast doing it just because that's who they are. They love being together.

Again, the events here has been great. The hospitality has been awesome. The whole experience we've enjoyed. So much of that is not only the structure, which has been excellent, but who's on our team.

**Q. I talked to a couple players. They said it's not the X's and O's that has affected them, but what you talked to them about life off the field before and after football. How do you go about that? For the players, what has that been like for you, how that's affected you guys?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: From an organizational design standpoint, I think in today's landscape maybe more than ever, if the leader is not intentional about building in life skills and life lessons, things that will be really helpful to young people outside of sport, it just defaults to the finance and the outcome and the entertainment. That's where the draw is and that's where the interest is. Yet that's not what I'm captivated by.

Football is an amazing platform to teach from, to develop young people I really care about. There's a daily team meeting. Rarely is it about football. Sometimes there's some football blended in. But just as I watch our team, I see different challenges come up, I get a sense of what things in context are coming up, I do my best to research them, try to pass on messages that might add value to them, not only now, but in the future.

After that segment, which is usually the team meeting segment, then it goes on to the football segment. They get a balance of that every day.

To me, each head coach, if they choose not to do that, they're really defaulting to the superficial and the business part of it. While that's necessary and essential, it's not enough for me and the way I like to lead. That's why we've chosen to do it that way.

NOAH AVINGER: I feel like it's very important to have because at the end of the day we love this game of football, but it doesn't last forever. You can't play it forever. I feel like those tools that Coach Mendenhall gives us on a daily basis is what kind of stimulates the growth for you as a young man, preparing for life after football. I feel like those are valuable because you need them. That's the only way you're going to achieve the goals that you might have after football.

I feel like that's where true growth comes from. Like he said, the platform is football, but having those tools that we learn from football that leads into life, that's how you can be successful outside of the game.

BRYSON BARNES: Yeah, kind of going back to the team meetings, it's never been about football. I don't think it's ever going to be. The lessons that you learn, the principles we build our program on, to me they've changed every facet of my life. My mental, my physical, the way I interact with my family, the way I want to raise my family. Everything that I've learned from that program and those principles that we build this program on is something I'm going to take throughout the rest of my life.

**Q. Coach, how have you felt now with a year under your belt building relationships, recruiting, where this Utah State program is now versus a year ago?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Man, I was visiting with my wife Holly today as we're on the Ferris wheel at Scheels. First time, by the way, on the Ferris wheel. I was just sharing with her one of the police officers who has been around the program for the past 10 years -- it was early this morning, and I was just out there sitting and contemplating in the hotel. And he just says, I've never seen a team like this, meaning behavior, conduct, character, substance, meaning alignment with the institution, the way they interact with the community.

So I listen not for the sake of self-gratification, just I listen for benchmarks. I listen for 'em anywhere they come from. Those things happen and are happening really throughout my wife and I's week, from all these different sources.

So in answer to your question, I love Logan. It's the perfect fit for my wife and I and my family. This stage of my career, this time at Utah State, in terms of moving to the Pac-12, the commitment to football, the nature of the valley and the team that are there, the heritage. There's all these things coming together that seem to be aligned really well. You add our new athletic director and president, I'm just really grateful.

I think my wife and I are a great fit in Logan. I think Utah State has a super bright future with the trajectory of our team with guys like this, which is who we're going to build it on, and in a next-tier league in terms of competitiveness with the opportunities that will come with that.

It just seems like it's all aligning really well. So the past year, I don't know, when I was hired, I was told some pretty harsh things about the state of the program and the state of the institution, et cetera, et cetera, including there's no chance that we'd be able to make a bowl. There would be

a bowl ban because the academics weren't strong enough. That was stated multiple times. There won't be a chance to play post-season. Yet here we are, and with the highest GPA in school history academically.

I like being told what we won't be able to do. Those things have just been ticked off and checked off along the way. That doesn't mean we're satisfied, doesn't mean we've reached our full potential. I think there's been significant progress in every part of the program with just more to come.

**Q. Bryson, the offense has been explosive all season. You're playing a Washington State team that limits scoring. What is your approach knowing that you're facing such a good situational defense? Knowing that, they'll also try to control possession with their run game on the other end, as well.**

BRYSON BARNES: Yeah, I think going up against a good defense is always kind of a treat for a quarterback. We've definitely played against some really good defenses. We played Texas A&M earlier in the year, one of the best defenses in the country. We managed to be able to explosive plays against them. I think it just really kind of comes down to what we're doing offensively, dialing in what we need to do.

Washington State, they've got good players, they've got dudes that make plays, great scheme. It's all going to come down to the way we execute on offense.

**Q. Bryson, with Washington State having a lot of players transferring and opting out, how much does that change the scheme, but it's the same defense?**

BRYSON BARNES: Yeah, I feel like with the transfer portal right now, the window is not technically open, so to me you anticipate those 11 guys that have been playing all year playing tomorrow. That's kind of the approach. It doesn't really change my mindset. I don't think it's changed our coaches' mindsets as far as putting the schematics in place either.

**Q. You played this team last year. Is there anything you can take from that, or is it a whole new team, scheme?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It's more so the second, whole new team, whole new scheme. There are some players that are held over. That team was a top 20 or top 25 team a year ago. So as a coaching staff, as a program, we see their talent. We respect the talent. We know they're capable of winning. The style of play is different than a year ago. It's a more complete style with offense and

defense kind of matching.

But we know the personnel, we know the talent, we certainly can see the schematics. More so it's a different team. The commonality would be some of the players are the same.

**Q. Noah, Washington State's offense, probably unsung, because there's focus on the defense. What do you see from Washington State's defense that you have to be ready for?**

NOAH AVINGER: Absolutely, they have a very good offensive scheme, very situational aware. Good third down conversions, red zone conversions. That's the biggest thing we've been focused on as a defense.

Just dialing those details in at practice all week, just understanding the situations that we need to come up and make big stops to give the offense back the ball. Those are the biggest things that I feel like we've been focused on.

**Q. Bryson, the quarterback, there's a lot that goes on you. You've been throwing a lot more passes, running the ball. What has it been like taking an increased load of the offense in the last three games?**

BRYSON BARNES: Yeah, I mean, regardless of how many carries, regardless of how many times I throw the football, whatever we got to do to win, I'm going to go out there and do it. That's kind of why I play the game. If that means I have to carry it 25 times up the middle to win the football game, that's what I'm going to have to do. If it means throwing it for 50, that's what I'll do.

The increased load, I'm excited for it. I'm ready for more. Yeah, just got to do whatever you got to do to win.

**Q. Bryson, you've had a very storied career so far. How do you feel going into your last game?**

BRYSON BARNES: Yeah, I mean, it's kind of cool to look back on, definitely all the things that have taken place throughout my career, a lot of highs, a lot of lows, a lot of times where I wasn't sure about my position about where I was standing as a football player. There was a lot of doubt in that, as well.

To me I feel like everything has kind of come to a tipping point. Everything has kind of happened for a reason for sure. I couldn't be more blessed to be in the situation that I am, with Coach Bronco being my head coach, Coach McGiven being my OC. I couldn't have written it better myself.

**Q. Improvements in the second half of the season, how prepared do you feel the unit feels playing in a big game like this compared to five or six weeks ago?**

NOAH AVINGER: Absolutely, I feel like the confidence of our defense is what took the biggest step. Just being put under those situations in practice, maybe like five weeks ago where we talked earlier in the week where the turning point was really after the New Mexico loss.

Just the details of practice, it's not the how we do it -- I mean, it's not the why we're doing it, it's how we do it. I feel like that's been the biggest shift of our defense. I feel like each week we've made those steppingstones.

I feel like the confidence of our defense is just on an uphill battle right now. It's trending in the right direction.

**Q. Bryson, yesterday WSU's coach said you play reckless in a good way. Would you agree with that? How would you describe the way you play offensively?**

BRYSON BARNES: I'd say reckless from a quarterback position. Yeah, there are a lot of hits that maybe I probably don't need to be taking, (smiling). Yeah, reckless, I mean, you could call it that. I just want to win. That's all.

**Q. Bronco, bowl season in general. Some people thinking about moving the bowl season to the beginning of the year. Do you have any thoughts about that since there's such a conflict with transfer portal and recruiting?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I think the idea is nonsense. You qualify for a game based on how you play. All we have to do is move the season forward, then the bowl games will be earlier. Yeah, I'm not for it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all for attending. Gentlemen, best of luck tomorrow.

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