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An Interview With:

KYLE WHITTINGHAM

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We're excited about the upcoming season. Been in the league five years now. We feel we're starting to get some traction, ended up 10-3 last year, thought we took another step forward. As a football team we think we're in a lot better place right now. We know we're in a lot better place right now than we were when we entered the league as far as playing field and being able to compete and have some success in the Pac-12 Conference.

Biggest thing we've got going on heading into this season, we've got to get our quarterback situation solved. We had obviously Travis Wilson departing as a senior, been our starter for nearly the last four years, three and a half years, so we've got three candidates that are all vying for that job, Troy Williams, Brandon Cox and Tyler Huntley. They'll have an open competition, starts as soon as the first day of fall camp begins. It was that same way through spring ball. We did not really see much separation, and so that competition will continue this fall.

But it's going to be key, obviously, to our season is how that position battle turns out. I feel very strong about our play at the line of scrimmage, both sides, offensive and defensive line. We expect to be among the best in the Pac-12. It's a good starting point. If you want to have a good football team, it's obviously important to be good up front.

A couple other positions of note that need to respond, wide receivers. We didn't throw the ball nearly as well as we needed to last year. We need to have a big step forward in production at that position.

And then on defense, our linebacker crew. It's a rebuild at that position group, so we've got to have guys step up and produce for us in that capacity.

Other than that, we feel strongly about the tight ends, defensive line, like I said, secondary, kicking game should be solid again. We replaced our Ray Guy Award winner Tom Hackett with another Australian, Mitch Wishnowsky. That's a name you'll want to remember. He has a big leg. He's an Aussie kicker just like Tom was, able to do the rugby-style kick. So obviously we have no drop-off in the punt game.

Brought two players with us, J.J. Dielman, offensive tackle, fifth-year senior. He will have his degree in December. He just lacks one class. He'll be graduating in mid-year.

Justin Thomas, our nickelback, same thing. He's a guy that's played a lot of good football for us and is also one class away. He'll be finished this December, as well. Very proud of what those guys have brought to the program. Hard-working guys, do everything right, and represent us the right way. So it's great to have them with us here.

Anyway, questions.

Q. Coach Rodriguez said the Pac-12, top to bottom, is the most talented he's seen since he's joined the conference. Where do you think the Pac-12 ranks among the Power Five conferences?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Oh, boy. Tough question. I'm not familiar enough with some of the Power Five conferences to make a completely accurate comparison. Having been in the league five years by now, I think it may be accurate that this is the best quality. We'll find out. But there seems to be a lot of balance in the league, a lot of outstanding players individually, and it's competitive. With the nine-game conference

schedule, we'll be beating each other up every week for the entire season, but we'll see what happens. But it very well could be. We'll see how it plays out.

Q. Kylie Fitts is about to start his senior season. What kind of expectations do you have for him?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Kylie is a tremendous football player. He's got all the measurables you want for a defensive end. He's 6'4", he's 270 pounds, he's strong, he's quick, he's athletic. And right now we're expecting he's going to be an important part of our defense, and he's a guy that -- another one of those guys that does everything right. You don't have to follow him to class or worry about what he's doing because he's always doing the right thing.

Q. Looking at the conference this year, does it look to you as wide open as it's been in a long time?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Could be. Every year we've been in, it seems wide open. There's going to be a few teams that emerge as surprise teams that overachieve, and then a few that probably underachieve, and that's how it is every year. Right now, going into the season, there's a lot of different teams that could end up winning this thing. We'll see how things going.

Q. Going into the season, what positions do you feel most comfortable with and which ones are you just really kind of nervous about?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, on our football team, the line of scrimmage. Offensive and defensive line, we're as good as there is in the Pac-12 on both sides of the ball. Special teams, as well. We're very solid with our place kicking and our punter. The question marks for us, quarterback, just because it's unsolved. Not that we're worried about that position, it's just there's no pecking order established yet. Wide receivers have to improve, and the linebackers have to step up and play.

Q. What are you looking for in this quarterback position, and what's it going to take for someone to separate themselves?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we've got to go with a guy -- there's two things: Who's going to give us the best chance to win immediately, and who's going to give us the best chance to win

ultimately. That's something as coaches that we've got to have a way out of the equation and then do the evaluation. Because who gives you the best chance to win game 1 may not be the same guy that gives you the best chance to have the best season you can possibly have.

We've got to get that sorted out as quickly as we can. We're not putting a timeline on it other than certainly the drop dead week would be the week leading into the season opener. But we're hoping we can get that thing sorted out before that time, and it's just going to play itself out.

We can't manufacture it. It's got to happen. They've got to separate themselves on the field. But it's going to be of huge importance to us, making sure we get the right guy, and that's our job as coaches, to make sure that happens.

Q. Since coming into the Pac-12 do you feel like it's gotten tougher every year, the level of play top to bottom?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think so, but I think we've gotten better every year. I think we are certainly much more equipped right now than we were when we came in the league to compete in this conference. We took another step forward, like I said, last year. We have three teams in the conference that we have not beaten since we joined the league and were able to get wins against those teams last year. So somewhat of a psychological hump we got over last year, and we've now beaten everybody in the league at least once since we joined, and we were tied for the Pac-12 south championship. In the end we lost to SC in the head-to-head battle, obviously, but we think we've made a lot of headway. We've progressed as a program.

Our program right now is light years ahead of where it was five years ago.

Q. Do you talk about that then, about reaching the title game as a goal?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely, yeah. I think every team in the league talks about that. I think that's what you're in for. You're in to win, win a championship, and that's -- if you're in the Pac-12, you want to win the Pac-12 championship, and that's our goal going in, one of our goals going in.

Q. For people who haven't experienced a home game at Utah, what are they missing?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's a hostile environment. I think it takes everybody by surprise that comes in there that has not been there before. We have a sold-out stadium. I think seven years in a row that we've sold out that stadium. It's not the biggest stadium. We're just shy of 46,000. But it is one of the loudest in the conference, and we have a student section called The Muss. It may not be the biggest student section in the country, but they bring energy and passion to that stadium every single week.

Q. Is there an easy out in the Pac-12?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No easy outs in the Pac-12. Zero easy outs in the Pac-12. Every week if you're not ready to play, you're going to get beat.

Q. Do you care at all about the preseason poll?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Don't care, don't put a lot of stock into it. It's obviously entertaining for the fans and it adds to the intrigue of the upcoming season. But I guess you could say that we were picked higher than we ever have been, so that's somewhat of a sign of respect, but we don't really harp on that with our players. It's not something we focus on. It's tough following Mike Leach, isn't it?

Q. Initial impressions of Troy Williams?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Troy Williams was beginning to separate himself from the other two quarterbacks right when he hurt his shoulder. It was almost the exact midpoint of spring ball. I think it was practice 7 of 15 practices, so he was trending upward and starting to play some really good football, went down with the injury, which obviously put him out of the mix for the last two weeks of spring, gave the other two guys a chance to get more reps, which they made the most of. But we're going to pick back up with the competition in the fall right where we left off at the end of spring, which is all three guys getting an equal amount of reps with the ones and the twos, see how things sort out.

Q. Does it give him an edge that he at least has a little bit of Pac-12 experience?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Sure, that works in his favor, having the experience he had at Washington and being in actual Pac-12 games, live competition. Obviously, also the success he

had last year in junior college helps -- he tore it up in college last year, put up tremendous numbers.

Q. Like you said, you've had a Pac-12 level lineman for five years. Do you think you're catching up on the perimeter?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We think we absolutely believe that. I think that was manifested last year particularly in the secondary. We were second or third in the nation in interceptions, and I think we either tied or broke a school record for pass deflections in the back end, and so when we went into the league, there was some mismatches most weeks in the secondary. We don't feel that's the case anymore. We feel we're equipped back there to compete. We've caught up there.

Q. Is that just because you're able to get into more doors?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. The vast majority of our football team would not be on our football team had we not had the Pac-12 affiliation. There's no doubt. That's just a fact. I can say that with absolute certainty.

Q. What's the status of Nick Nowakowski?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: How do you even know him? Are you from his hometown?

Q. Yeah, about 45 minutes away.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, great guy. He's just about 100 percent now. He had a pretty significant leg injury that he had to get fixed, but he was projected at our starting center, being DQ medical, he won't be with us, that's going to open up an opportunity for Nick to try to grab that starting spot at center. Great kid, came into the program as an walk-on, earned his way into a scholarship, worked his way into a scholarship, and can't say enough about him.

Q. How have you seen him develop over these years?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, he's been -- he came to us as a big strong kid. He's just a big strong kid naturally. But he's a guy that has really improved his fundamentals, his techniques, and he's a guy -- he got a lot of playing time last year, so he's a guy that we have confidence in, and like you said, he'll be right in the thick of the race for that starting center spot.

Q. Is there potential for shuffling those five?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely potential for that. We're going to come away with the best five guys, and if that necessitates making some moves, we'll do that. We're not going to play with an inferior player at one spot when we have a superior player backing up another spot. It doesn't make sense.

Q. The narrative coming out of all these media events with the Pac-12 this year is the Pac-12 is very deep, doesn't seem like there's an obvious elite team, and there might be a lot of cannibalism this year. If the conference got left out of the playoff a second consecutive year, how do you think we should respond?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, that's a good question, and with a nine-game schedule -- I've been a proponent of the Power Five schools all playing a similar schedule, whether it's eight or nine doesn't matter, as long as it's uniform throughout the country, as well as the championship game. I think with as much at stake as there is, I think there needs to be a little more uniformity in the regular season, and I don't know who takes control of that, so is that the NCAA, is that the Power Five presidents? I don't know how it goes down. But there is -- with the nine conference games there's a chance to put another blemish on your record which could keep you out of the playoffs. And with as much at stake, like you said, I think it needs to be looked at hard and see if we're doing it the right way as a Power Five group. I'm not talking about just the Pac-12.

Q. In your mind what would constitute offensive progress for you guys?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Being able to throw the ball with the efficiency that we need to. That was the thing that kept us from winning a championship last year was not being able to throw the football nearly effectively enough. That's got to change.

Q. What is the efficiency that you're looking for?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We've got to be at least midway through the Pac-12. We've got to be at least midpoint throwing the football as far as production. Last year I think we were second to last.

Q. Do you feel like you guys have an identity on offense, or is that still something you're searching for?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We did with Booker. He's gone. He was our identity. He was the guy that we threw the ball to 30 times a game. We've got Joe Williams at running back, who we really like, but he's not a 30-carry-a-game back, so we've got to be more balanced, and we've got to be able to throw the football and throw it down the field. Missing Patrick last year was big for us because he was our go-to guy. The upside to that is he got a sixth year that's been approved by the NCAA, so he's eligible for this year and he's 100 percent healthy. So we need Tim to have a big year for us. We need to have the four or five freshmen/redshirt freshmen that played for us last year elevate their game, and the quarterback obviously has to get it done from his end.

Q. Most coaches say it's really hard to play defense in the Pac-12 given the diversity of the offenses. You guys have figured it out for the most part. What have you guys done well defensively since you joined the league?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we've played the run tough every year. That's where it starts. If you can't defend the run, you can't play defense. We've been able to defend the run. I think we ended up in the top 10, fifth or sixth in the nation last year against the run. That's always the starting point.

But with the diversity of offenses that we mentioned, we have changed from a 4-3 scheme to a 4-2-5 nickel scheme as our base, which is more user friendly, I guess you could say, to try to defend all the varying types of schemes that we see. And last year -- two years ago I guess was the first year that the 4-3 became the minority and the 4-2 became the majority of the snaps. So we're gravitating more in that direction this year. So that's been -- I think, a big key is change of scheme or at least personnel. There's not a whole lot of difference in the coverage aspects and what we do with the match-ups.

Q. Is that tough to do? I remember you mentioning, I think you called your old 4-3 ancient. Is that tough as someone who has done something one way for so long and grew up believing a scheme to kind of turn it up on its head and say, no, only two linebackers, not

three?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, yes and no. It's not as much deviation as you think because it's really the substitution of an outside backer for another DB. The other 10 guys are essentially doing the same stuff, and so it's not that big a departure. But it gives us that one guy that's a better match-up because with all the three and four wide receiver sets, to just have another linebacker makes no sense at all, so it was just necessity.

Q. Who would you say is the grumpiest coach in the Pac-12?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Besides -- the head coach? I'm going to tell you -- grumpy? Grumpy? That's a tough one. I can't really --

Q. Because I was going to say that I think most of the media here would say it's probably Jim Mora. Is Jim grumpy with the media or is he always grumpy?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I've never seen -- I've not been in situations with him and the media, so I couldn't answer that, but I'm going to say Mike Leach probably is maybe the best at everything as far as all this extracurricular stuff.

Q. You got to follow him every year.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Every year. Every year, yeah. The guy keeps me in stitches, though. He's hands down the funniest. Hands down.

Q. What's the funniest thing he's ever said?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Every day. Every day it's something else. There's too many to single one out. He can tell stories, though. I'll tell you that. Rich Rod is pretty good, too. Rich Rod is a close second.

Q. How has Pac-12 Networks and shows like The Drive that you were featured in helped in recruiting?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, it got us on a national stage, so to speak, and fortunately we're going to have a good year. You don't want to get on a national stage and not be playing the best football, so that helped us out in that respect. You're in more recruits' homes that way, and it's all about recruiting, so the more homes you can get in and the more exposure the recruits have to your program, positive exposure, the better. So I don't have any data to prove it, but I think we got a little pop out of it and a little bit of a spike in recruiting. I

feel like it was our best recruiting class ever, so how much that had to do with it, I don't know, but it certainly had a little bit to do with it.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Cory Butler-Boyd and what he brings?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, Cory Butler-Boyd is an interesting kid. He's tremendously talented. We had him playing both sides of the ball last year. He's going to major in wide receiver this year. He's going to just play one side of the ball and kick return. He's a tremendous talent. He's a JC transfer. Typically those JC transfers take a year to get settled into your system and then the next year they flourish, and we're hoping that's exactly what happens with Cory. Last year he was able to kind of get his feet way and this year he completely excels.

Q. You used him both ways last year?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, last year he played some corner and some wide receiver.

Q. Is it hard for you to move a DB to offense?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Very hard, defensive guy. He could be a tremendous corner. I'm convinced of that. But I think his heart is set on playing wide receiver, and I think that's maybe where his most upside is.

Q. I know you've got the three quarterback thing and you want to stay that way, but can you talk about Troy Williams and how he's done and where he is now?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he got on campus in January, and it's very obvious that he has the intangibles you look for in a quarterback, the leadership qualities, the personality, just his -- players gravitate towards him. In fact, all three guys have that quarterback personality that you look for. Troy is very mature. He's been there, done that, was at Washington a couple years, has Pac-12 experience, in-game experience, had JC experience last year, was tremendous at his junior college. I think they were 10-1, 11-0, and he's a guy that is right in the thick of the race. As I mentioned earlier, he was starting to pull away before he got hurt in spring ball, but now he's got to come back and reestablish himself.

Q. Does it surprise you everybody he's

played for talks like you do except one school, one coach? They found him wanting as a person, I guess.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I don't know who you're talking about, that one school. But we love him. He's a great kid and a great addition to our program.

Q. Do you still look at USC as setting the standard in this league?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely, yeah. Talent-wise, from a talent standpoint, I still think that is the benchmark. Oregon, Stanford, they have some personnel, as well, but I think if you were to say man for man, it's got to be USC.

Q. And do you expect to play BYU every year for as long as you're a coach or is that fluid?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, I think they're on the schedule -- it's either two or four years out that they're on the schedule. You probably know better than I do. They're on the schedule this year and next year, and at my age, beyond that, it really doesn't matter.

Q. What's your defensive coach's view of Josh Wilson?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: All the respect in the world. He's going to be one of the best quarterbacks in the country this year in my opinion. They feel the same way. He's a tremendous talent, and I think he's going to really come on the scene this year. Last year he was very good, but this year I think you're going to see him take it to another level.

Q. Thomas just said he was surprised to find out -- he said he thought he was a junior.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: He's a freshman. Yeah, he's a tremendous player.

Q. Can you expand on the center situation? Is Lopez out? Is he retiring?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he's disqualified medically. He'll be an assistant coach, student assistant, so he's going to work in the office with Coach Harding, which means Lo Falemaka right now on the depth chart is No. 1, Nick Nowakowski will be No. 2. But like we talked about earlier, if we feel there's a better combination, we're going to put the best five out there. We'll have to see how that shakes out. But

he is officially done, which means even if he gets healthy at the very end, he won't be able to participate.

Q. The story line is that obviously replacing a center is a big deal.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It is a big deal, and I feel so bad because he's a fifth-year senior and he's worked four years for this opportunity, his chance to take that position over, and it just breaks your heart. That's why I think the NCAA -- I think there's a flaw in that system where he should be granted another year. But as the rules are set up now, he doesn't qualify. So it's a shame, but we'll come out all right. We've got a lot of experienced guys up front.

Q. In a year where you're getting a new quarterback, maybe it's not as damaging as it could have been?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, it's damaging. I don't know whether the quarterback situation plays into it at all. It's tough to lose a good player and have a kid's dreams taken away from him, because like I said, he worked for a lot of years for this opportunity.

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