

PAC-12 Conference Championship Game: Stanford vs USC

Friday, December 1, 2017

Larry Scott

LARRY SCOTT: Good afternoon, everyone. Delighted to be here and celebrate our fourth Pac-12 Football Championship game here at Levi's Stadium, and our seventh since the inception of the game. We're delighted that we've got two very, very strong teams that are going to be competing in tonight's game between USC and Stanford. I think two of the best teams in the country that are hot teams and doing well. These teams will also, as the 10th and 12th ranked teams in the country, feature some of the most exciting players in the country this year. All eyes have been on Bryce Love as a Heisman candidate most of the season, and Sam Darnold and some of the other talented players on USC's team are also going to be a big attraction tonight. Not just for fans here, but fans that are watching across the country.

This has been a strong year for the Pac-12, with nine teams making bowl games, four teams ranked in the top 25 now. It's certainly been a year where the depth and parity in the league have been showcased, and we get to finish our season in a fabulous way on one of the best stages and platforms for college football and football more generally here in partnership with the 49ers and Levi's Stadium.

It is great to have this platform. I know the players are excited to be here, to have a chance to be in the locker rooms, on the field, in this environment. It's really terrific. I want to thank our partners at the 49ers, city of Santa Clara, Levi's Stadium for being great hosts.

Earlier this year we had a chance to announce that we're going to be partners here in playing the game here at least through 2019. We've got options beyond that, so we're delighted that we've got the continuity of the event here for a while to keep building on the event.

Also want to thank some of the other partners that go into making this not only a great event, but an event that is picking up momentum and steam. Certainly it is from the sponsor-partner community. I think just earlier today we announced, in addition to the 76 who has been the presenting sponsor the second year, Maui Jim has just signed on as a new sponsor, Geico has renewed their sponsorship. I think we've got more sponsors this year than we've had any other year, so



the event continues to grow in stature, which I'm delighted about and very optimistic about the future of Pac-12 football.

We continue to be a destination that attracts some of the best coaches, some of the best players. There's a lot of excitement that our schools continue to make investments. News this week about Chip Kelly coming back to the league after a lot of speculation around a lot of other schools, I think, is another reinforcing confirmation of that. So a lot to look forward to as we go to the future.

The only other thing I'd like to touch upon today before I take your questions is some of the things we've been doing around innovation, something the conference prides itself on, given our geographic location and our relationships we have. Not only are a lot of pregame events, a lot of postgame events being streamed live on Facebook Live, like this press conference, but we're going to be experimenting one of the first sporting events to experiment with Google's new 180-degree virtual reality product. So events around the game and the game are actually going to be shot using this technology, and soon after the game the fans are going to be able to experience this game via virtual reality, 180-degree camera on the Pac-12's YouTube channel. So that's something to look out for.

We've also piloted this season with shortened game lengths. Our average game last season was 3 hours and 26 minutes. I've set out an objective over time I'd like to get our games to about three hours. We've made some steps this year to experiment with shortened halftimes at some games that were on the Pac-12 Networks, we went with reduced commercial formats and traded some on-screen branding during the competition for 30-second TV timeouts. We also pushed the envelope to get kickoff times closer to the top of the hour. All designed to not only shorten the game length, but shorten the telecast windows.

I think you'll see from our press release we sent out, we had some positive results from that in terms of shortening the game length and the telecast windows down to, on average, where we did these experiments, under 3:15. So we made some progress in that regard. We're going to continue to experiment at more Pac-12 games going forward. I've been able to share results

with colleagues from other conferences. So hopefully they try some of these elements as well, and we're going to work closely with the football rules committee to see what can be done next in terms of the rules of the game, which is really what you need to look at next, beyond game management to try to make any significant reductions in the game length.

So a lot going on. Coming off a great year and looking forward to the future. Appreciate you all that are here, supporting this event, and happy to take any questions that you have.

Q. If you have to prioritize between a playoff game and parity, how would you do that?

LARRY SCOTT: I can't want both? From a commissioner's perspective, I'd say long-term you want depth and competitive teams. I like having a lot of markets and a lot of universities that are awarded for the investments they've made. If you've followed our conference for a while, every single one of our schools has made investments in facilities, coaches, coaching staffs. And I think it's a very healthy sign for any league to have depth and parity.

So I would say that's the ultimate measure of health from my perspective. Given that we've got a playoff system of only four teams but there are five major conferences and independents, I don't think that would be the ultimate measure that we should look for. But certainly it's important. Would like to see teams in the playoffs. We have teams that have a shot and deserving of consideration this year as well. But whether they make it or not, I think we're in a good place. We will have our fair share of teams over time that are in the playoffs and certainly want to win National Championships as well.

Q. Wanted to ask a basketball question, if I could, involving the UCLA shoplifting incident in China. Since that happened prior to the Pac-12 China game and became such an international kind of ordeal, I was wondering, did the Pac-12 have any discussions with UCLA as far as having input in the length of the suspension? Have you talked to Dan Guerrero about that and have you been involved with that in any way?

LARRY SCOTT: Informally. I speak to the chancellor, and I speak to the athletic's director, but we don't have any formal role in their discipline process, because the incident is something that took place away from the competition. So once they got back to campus and the school's trying to decide what the ultimate discipline should be, it's not something that the Pac-12 would officially be involved in.

Q. Do you have any thoughts on what would be an

appropriate suspension for those players?

LARRY SCOTT: Not something I'd speculate on.

Q. If there was an eight-team playoff, tonight's game would feel a little more important, you'd be playing for a shot to go. As things sit, neither team is probably going to get in. Would you be in favor of the college football system moving to an eight-team field?

LARRY SCOTT: I have not been in favor of that. I think as we balance the importance of the bowls, the traditions that the Pac-12 has with the Rose Bowl and others, I think it's been great for college football that we've moved to a playoff. But I think four is the right number.

Yeah, it was designed so we have fewer spots than we have conferences. So we always know it there will be years where certain conferences don't have a team in.

Q. 2020 is when this game may open up and move to a different location. Have you started discussing that with places like Las Vegas or Los Angeles that are both building new stadiums?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, we're certainly aware that there are some exciting developments happening on the West Coast when it comes to football and new facilities, and I think that's great news for football generally. But we are delighted with our partnership here. It's just in the last year that we extended it through 2019, and we have an option for 2020. I think as we get closer to that we'll talk to the 49ers and Levi's and consider all the options. But we couldn't be happier here.

Q. The optics on this game nationally have never been very good. They're tarping seats tonight. You made the basketball work in Vegas. How can you make the football work like you've made the basketball work?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, well, we're happy with this event. I think it looks good on TV. Of course we'd love it to be full, but I think it's a strong attendance for our game. I think there are always going to be challenges with neutral-site games, and especially Friday night games. I think we understand that.

We've been happy. Our teams have been very happy with it here. We look at the overall experience. We'll sit down, if we have other options to considerate the appropriate time, we'll sit down and look at them.

Q. How about changing the day of the week? If Friday night's an issue, how about changing the day of the week?

LARRY SCOTT: What we've found in our new TV contracts, FOX wanted to broadcast it Friday night given other commitments they had Saturday. ESPN

had the option, Friday night or Saturday. And what we found in the first few years of doing the event is that the ratings are significantly higher on Friday night than they are on Saturday. I think in order of magnitude of certain years, two and a half times, sometimes a little less, sometimes a little more, up to three times the audience. That's got to do with a bunch of variables. The significance of the game nationally, but importantly, the competition you're up against. There are several other championship games on Saturday.

So what we've found, and importantly what our broadcast partners have found, because it's at their option when the game is played, is that the audience is much bigger. So in that regard, we've got multiple objectives we're trying to balance in terms of the student-athlete experience, fan experience, and audience. But the audience you get for this game is as significant as any criteria. We want national relevance. We want as wide an audience focused on our two best teams as possible. So the fact that you get such stronger ratings being the main game in town on a Friday night on a major broadcaster like ESPN tonight has been the determining factor for ESPN and FOX.

Q. Is there anything that the Pac-12 and the Big Ten can do to put pressure on the ACC, SEC to play a nine-game conference schedule to make the playing field a little more fair when it comes to the College Football Playoff?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, there is nothing about our system that gives us any leverage or pressure points the way the system was designed. You only have 12 regular season games as it is. Every league is different in terms of their strength in any given year, the quality of the non-conference opponents, when those games take place, and how many conference games there are, as you point out, compared to non-conference. There are a lot of variables involved, and you identify one of them. Whether it's nine conference games or ten. But there are other things that are as important. It's the reason we have a committee that's looking at these things, because it's not that easy to compare teams, because not a lot of data points.

But to come back to your question, there is nothing about the way the College Football Playoff was designed that mandated similar scheduling. So it's just been the nature of the system. Having said that, I think leagues -- there has been a trend toward nine games. We were the first, and now you see the Big 12 doing it, and the Big Ten doing it. And I think the committee has done a very good job of signaling that strength of schedule matters, all things being their equal.

Q. You mentioned before five conferences with four spots is a problem. If you don't make it in this year,

you'll be 2 for 4 in the first four years. Is that a good ratio for you? Over the course of 12 years, is that an acceptable ratio that 50% of the time getting a team to the playoff, or would that bother you?

LARRY SCOTT: I don't think it bothers me at this point in time. I think if we get to year 10 or 12 and that's a trend, I might feel differently about it. But I think our league is very strong. I think it's deep. There are some particular circumstances that went into teams having two loss rather than one loss this year that were tough. But, yeah, it's very elusive and hard challenge to be one of the top four teams making the playoffs.

When I look across at the overall strength of our programs, the coaches that we have, the facilities that we have, the student-athletes that we're recruiting, I've got no reason to believe Pac-12 football isn't in a great place.

Q. As a follow-up, there is potential here for three two-loss conference champions, Ohio State could be a two-loss champion, TCU, and USC. USC is not being discussed -- is not in that discussion right now, at least it's not nationally. Why is that?

LARRY SCOTT: Well, first of all, I think they are in the discussion. They're in the discussion that matters, which is the discussion of the committee. So I know that because we talk to the committee. I think USC depending on how if they are to win the game, win the game in impressive fashion tonight, I think they've got a very, very strong resumé, and they've got a great case for the playoff, depending on what happens elsewhere. But certainly against any other two-loss team. If the committee is looking at two-loss teams, depending on what happens elsewhere, I think they'll have a very strong case.

They played 12 games in a row. Their two losses were away. They were away at Notre Dame, who had had a bye the week before, by design. They were away on a Friday night in Washington State. Against Notre Dame they had seven players that were injured and out against Washington State. They had at least five. Of the seven that were out against Notre Dame, four of them are back tonight playing, including Stephen Carr, I think, who was one of their most prolific offensive players, was out, now is back. These are all things that matter.

The other two spots behind Ohio State, I think, in the current standings. But I think the team that the committee is going to see play tonight is different than the team that suffered their two losses due to injuries. When you look at strength of schedule, I don't think there is any other two-loss team in consideration that's got the strength of schedule numbers that USC has.

Western Michigan, Texas, Notre Dame, some strong, very notable, non-conference games. If you look at any of the numbers, any of the services that mention strength of schedule, you'll see USC right up there.

So I actually think they've got a very, very compelling case. Depending on the outcome tonight and depending on what happens elsewhere.

Q. You mentioned the USC-Washington State loss. This season with three different teams that were sort of in the mix with USC going to Washington State, Washington State going to Cal, and Washington going to Stanford were all Friday nights on short rest. How much is that going to be taken into consideration for scheduling moving forward?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, it's something that got a lot of conversation over the last couple of months, as we went through the process to prepare a 2018 schedule. So like we do every year, we go through a process where we decide are we going to change any of the scheduling parameters that we have before putting together different versions of what a calendar might look like, and getting the input from our TV partners.

We're always going to have Thursday and Friday night games to start with, because those are contractual obligations to our broadcast partners, and we've got about ten different scheduling parameters that get put into a computer with an outside consultant that we work with, that kicks out all those different parameters and different schedule options.

This year, one of the priorities was looking at those scenarios, and we added, for the press, we go through consulting with our athletics directors and ultimately they vote to change the parameters. We added a parameter that says you cannot schedule a team to play a Friday night road game after a Saturday road game. So it is something that got a little consideration. If you look at the losses within our conference and nationally, of the top 20, 25 teams, there's a very high number that happened on the road on short weeks. So I think that weighed heavily on those in the conference office and on our campuses that discussed this and decided to change the parameters.

Q. Following up on that one, USC had they not had the Friday night game, might be 11-1. Where does that put them? Because they had the Friday night road game following the road game the week before last year, also this year. Should the Pac-12 maybe have picked up on that a little sooner? Because you got rid of it for next year, looking back, would you have liked to have gotten rid of it for this year?

LARRY SCOTT: Hindsight's 20/20. If we could reengineer some things, there would probably be a long list of things we'd do differently. But, you know, no one's got the benefit of doing that.

Q. So did people not understand that a Friday game on the road following a road game the week before would be more of a difficulty?

LARRY SCOTT: All I can tell you is it has not been an issue in our conference previously. When we sat down every year, as we do, to review the schedule from the year before, the coming year, are there any changes we want to make, it hasn't up until now. But this year it did. And USC had the double whammy of that scenario plus 12 in a row. That was a very, very tough road, especially for a team with a tough non-conference schedule where they suffered a lot of injuries, especially coming out of the Texas game. So they had a very, very tough road. I'm hoping it's something the committee does take into account. I know we've certainly made the case, and it is something that will get discussed.

If you compare, we're going to be in a scenario -- we may be in a scenario where there are a lot of teams in consideration for the last spots for the playoff that have similar looking records. When that's the case, there are a bunch of factors that are supposed to kick in. Who won a conference championship, you know, number one on that list, head-to-head, strength of schedule. And I think if USC is a two-loss conference champion, given their strength of schedule numbers and given what I believe are mitigating factors around some of the losses and other teams may have mitigating factors too. But if you look at the losses and the injuries that they had and the difficulty of their schedule, I think they've got a very, very compelling case.

Q. There are two schools in the conference who combined to pay \$24 million in buyout money to two coaches. Do you have any considerations with people at the different campuses about that concept of paying that much money for someone to go away?

LARRY SCOTT: I don't. Those aren't conversations that schools have consulted me or the conference on.

Q. I think next year there are six or seven Friday games. Do you have any options with FOX to make sure you avoid a repeat of the games that were bumped due to truck races to FS2 (Inaudible)?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, I didn't want to wait until the end of the season. I was actually in China when it happened this year, and the phone was lighting up about it. I was very, very disappointed in what happened and raised it with the president of FOX. I

don't think a Pac-12 football game should ever be delayed for a truck race, and I think we should have better options. But we also realize put the truck racing from a different part of the country aside, we also know that there are always going to be situations where something runs longer or there is weather, and you might have to join a game in progress. So we get that. But what I want to make sure is that we have strong alternatives and overflow channels where fans can go that have similar distribution to the main channel they'd be watching it on.

FS2, unfortunately at this point, doesn't have near the distribution that FOX or FS1 has. So we've told FOX that's not acceptable from our point of view, and we're going to be talking to them in the off-season about other alternatives for next season.

Q. This is your showcase event. Is it a good idea to have a team on a bye playing a team that's playing its second game in six days?

LARRY SCOTT: This is a year where for USC, on the one hand, they were punished, you could say, by having to play 12 in a row. There is a lot of discussion around have they been treated unfairly during the regular season? Now that they're in the championship game, right, it's switched to are they getting some unfair benefit? So no one knew in the beginning of the season whether they'd make the championship game or not. It's just the way the schedule worked out. No one knows who is going to make the championship game, and the schedule doesn't get designed with that in mind, trying to figure that out.

So we have had a few years where there have been 12 in a row and other teams in a situation. So I think it just goes with the territory, unfortunately.

Q. You discussed this earlier, so you think a two-loss conference champion should get priority over a one-loss team that did not win a conference? Of course I'm speaking about Alabama here, but in general, is that your philosophy?

LARRY SCOTT: I would say this year, yes. But I don't think that's -- that's not a rule, that I would say is necessarily the case every year. The committee made a decision last year, for example, I think that a one-loss non-champion deserved to be in the playoff. So the committee has the ability to make that decision. But I think what you heard Kirby Hocutt, the chair of the committee, last year say, if it's clear, if it's unequivocal that non-champion is really one of the four best teams in the country, that's a situation where the committee would make that choice. In a situation where sometimes they use the word cluster, where it's not unequivocally clear, if there are a bunch of teams that might look similar, that's when the conference

champion issue, amongst others, kicks in as a determinative factor. That's my understanding of the way it's supposed to work.

So say when I look at the landscape this year, I don't think there is a one-loss, non-champion out there that would trump a two-loss champion from the Pac-12, at least.

Q. Kind of following up on that question, as commissioner, do you study the SEC in a way where you say how did they do it? When you look at, there's never, ever a discussion about whether they're going to get one. It's whether they're going to get two. You have three teams playing for one or two spots this year. In a year where the conference below those three teams was down, I would say. I mean, how do you assess that situation, or do you just think that's the system we're in? Or are they doing something infinitely better than everyone else?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, we spend most of our time focused on our own league, but of course look at what others are doing. It raises conversations all the time. Every couple of years we'll discuss should we be playing nine games versus eight games in the conference? Should we put, you know, a non-conference week later in the season where schools, if they wanted to, could schedule, let's call it a weaker opponent, to give them some break. We've decided not to. That for a variety of reasons we prefer playing each other more. We'd prefer having, with the exception of Notre Dame, which is a grandfathered, historical situation where we do have a non-conference Notre Dame game later in the season, we prefer to play non-conference at the beginning of the year and then after conference season. But these things do get revisited regularly. We've got new coaches coming in and out of the league all the time. New athletics directors, and I think we stress test these things every few years.

Q. There is nothing in the contract with ESPN and FOX that would prevent you from scheduling Sacramento State in the middle of November?

LARRY SCOTT: No.