

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 27 2017

Kyle Whittingham Utah Utes

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Great to be back. Media Day is always kind of the signifier of the starting of the season, that football is upon us. That's exciting. I brought two players with me today. Two of the big guys up front, both fifth-year seniors, Filipo Mokofisi, a defensive tackle, and Salesi Uhatafe, our offensive linemen. Both those guys have been in the program a long time, done everything right. Leka is in a Graduate program, already earned his bachelor's degree, and Filipo will earn his bachelor's degree in December. So couple guys that have been instrumental to our success at Utah.

Excited about this season. Had three pretty good seasons the last three years, but fallen just short in each of those years. Got to find a way to get over the hump and try to win a Pac-12 South Championship. We'll see what happens this year.

Took a big hit with our senior class talent-wise, and a couple underclassmen that declared. We had eight drafted players and eight signed free agent contract players, so 16 of our roughly 20 scholarship players that graduated are in NFL camps right now. So lot of work to do replacing those guys.

But we feel we've recruited the right way the last several years, lot of young players coming up through the ranks, ready for their opportunity to show what they can do, so we'll see what happens.

So, questions?

Q. Coach, you're the longest tenure in the Pac-12 as a head coach?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, can you believe that?

Q. I can't believe it honestly because you look like you're five years old. But that being said, what has been the key to your success at Utah?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Good players. Recruiting the right way is what it's all about at this level. We've had a group of assistant coaches that have done a great job targeting the right guys, bringing the right guys into the program. I think that's been manifested the last few years, and how you're doing recruiting-wise shows how you're moving on to the next level. And that's been the real key. That is the key to longevity and success in



college football. 80 percent is tied to recruiting.

Q. Having Darren Carrington in as a transfer, what went into that decision, and what do you think he might be able to offer you?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's always a tough decision when you're talking about a player that you're going to add to your program that potentially has a checkered past. You have to make a decision based on all the information you can gather. Based on the athlete's attitude. You know, is he remorseful? Does he understand that he's done some stupid things and ready to put it behind him and move on? There is so much that goes into it. It's a judgment call. You're not always right. But I feel in this case it was the right thing to do to give Darren another opportunity.

Now, he is not cleared to practice or even compete. There are still hurdles to go through. He's on campus right now, and we're hoping that things get worked out. But there are some hurdles he has to get over before everything is a done deal.

Q. You've played against him?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we played against him. Caught the winning touchdown against us.

Q. Yeah, what can you do?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: He's a terrific talent on the field. One of the common denominators that came back from all the people I talked to about Darren was his fierce, competitive drive on the field, on the practice field. He's just a guy that is the ultimate competitor. Brings a toughness to that receiver position that will help us out.

Q. What did he do or say that made you that made you make the decision and decide it wasn't going to be a risk for you guys?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, I think I spent a lot of time talking to him, his parents, coaches that I know that have had direct contact with him, guys that I really trust. You know, it was very apparent that he'll be the first to admit that he's done some dumb things, made some bad decisions. But he's got the right attitude right now. He's bound and determined to put this behind him, move forward. Try to have a successful senior year, and then hopefully have a chance to move on to the next level.

Q. What are the hurdles you are facing with him?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, it's more conference hurdles, NCAA guidelines and things that have to happen, waivers and just paperwork things that have to all be in order before he's good to go.

Q. So you feel confident?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We hope it will happen, yeah. We're confident that it will happen. But it's never a done deal until it's a done deal.

Q. Has he been on a tight leash at all?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Sure, you treat players how they deserve to be treated, so with his missteps in the past, that's definitely puts him on a shorter leash. No doubt about it.

Q. What do you think about the change in two-a-day practice?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I don't like it. I think it was fine the way it was. What you've got to do now to make up for those two-a-day practices that you don't get anymore is come in a week earlier, which makes it five full weeks before you play a game. Five full weeks of fall camp which is too long in my opinion. Four weeks was too long, but five weeks is bordering on ridiculous.

But to get those 29 practices in, you have to move it up a week in order to have the time to do that.

Q. What do you think about early signing day?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think it's a positive for us. I know a lot of coaches are not high on it. But for our situation at Utah, I think it gives us more clarity earlier in the process, and I view it as a positive for us individually.

Q. You talked about some of the guys you've lost. Where do you think you are in terms of rebuilding the offensive line and back field?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we got a good start on it in spring ball. We came away with a good idea who those five offensive linemen will be. Secondary-wise, we got a good start there as well. Although we had two or three guys coming in right now that weren't there in spring that could factor in. But the bottom line at those two positions, very short on experience, but the talent level is there. So it's up to us as coaches to get the right guys out there and get them up to speed.

Q. Can you tell us a little bit about Troy Taylor? It seems a couple years ago he was coaching Jake Browning?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: He was a couple years ago coaching Jake Browning.

Q. Can you give us any insights?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There is no inefficiency with Jake. He's the complete package. But I've been watching Troy a lot of years. My nephew played for him at Folsom High School. My brother who is on our staff now, when his nephew got there, he said, you've got to look at this guy. This guy is phenomenal as a coach. The schemes, the way he handles the players, his approach to the game is unbelievable. So I started watching him, was very impressed. Still it was high school, so I was a little bit skeptical there.

When Troy went on to Eastern Washington and had the same success there that he had in high school, I was sold at that point, and that's when we pulled the trigger and brought him on board.

Q. How is it different with the offense he's bringing?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Heavier throw element to what we are doing. Little different route structures, little different read progression for the quarterbacks, very simplistic in how he coaches quarterbacks. He's got a great track record. Not only is he a good offensive schemer at putting things together there, but just tutoring and mentoring and developing at the quarterback position has been a strong suit for him.

Q. Talk a little bit about Troy. I imagine his reaction

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KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Troy Williams?

Q. Troy Williams. With a guy who wants to throw the ball, I'm guessing he's excited?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Very excited as were the receivers, as was really the whole offense. He was very well received. Spring ball was very positive, very productive, and the players are excited about the direction we're going with the offense and the attitude.

Q. How is Troy Williams, the quarterback, progressing?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Progressing well. He had an outstanding spring, as did the other two behind him, Tyler Huntley and Cooper Bateman, came out of spring one, two, three, in that order. Tight enough race that those three guys will continue to get reps at least for the first week or two in fall camp, and then we have to make a decision to get things pared down to the two guys who are going to be getting all the reps and the one guy who is going to be the guy.

Q. Can you expand on why the early signing day may be beneficial?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, you've got a guy that maybe has a Utah offer or a Alabama interest, and December, or whatever, 20th comes along and we say,

hey, we've got a scholarship for you now or we're going to move on, you can wait and roll the dice and see if something else materializes, a lot of guys are going to take the bird in the hand concept.

So I think it's an earlier indicator for us where we stand with a kid, how strongly he feels about us. I think it's going to make things a lot clearer. Because the commitments, they change. They commit, decommit, recommit. It's such a -- there are so many unknowns and so much uncertainty in that, this will provide a much clearer picture where you stand. At least on December 20th, it's almost like you have two milestones now, December 20th, who can you get in the boat and get signed up, then you know what you have to do December 20 to February 1.

Q. Is Kyle Fulks going to be a full participant when you start up tomorrow?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Like health-wise? He was completely cleared about a month and a half ago, so he's good to go.

Q. What went into the decision for the timeframe?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: He played tackle in high school, and we lost both our tackles last year with Garrett Bolles moving on and Sam Tevi. You look at getting your best five guys out there. And we think the best five guys are the guys we have labeled as the starters, obviously. And he is the best fit at the tackle position. He's a guy that's taken reps at tackle periodically throughout his career at Utah, so it's not foreign to him.

Like I said, he played there in high school. He's got the most length, other than Jackson Barton, of any of the candidates, and that's a big thing at tackle. Your wing span, and how you can -- you know, your length to ride guys around the edge of the defense. And with Jordan Agasiva, a highly touted JC recruit that we got, more suited to play guard, it seemed like a natural to make that switch.

Q. How much is tempo part of Taylor's offense?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's a part, but it's not the end-all, be-all. And what you're going to see a lot of is not fast tempo until we've made the initial first down or two in a drive and then pick up steam as the drive lengthens. One of the worst things you can do is have a 25-second three-and-out, and your defense is right back on the field.

That's Troy's philosophy. That's not something I'm trying to convince him of. He's fully in tune with that. And as a head coach in high school, he's aware of not stressing the defense any more you have to. So there will be times we're going as fast as anybody in the country, but typically and most predominantly early in

drives, a little more methodical.

Q. Do you have to adjust defensively to those change in styles?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, and that's more difficult as a defense to adjust to teams that go at all speeds than a team that's going at one speed all the time. So I think that works to our advantage.

Q. When Colorado came into the league, they designated you as rivals. I think the last four or five games have been down to one score.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Been very competitive.

Q. Is there something organic that's growing into that game and becoming a little more --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I don't want to say it's a rivalry yet because it doesn't have that feel. We have all the respect in the world for those guys. They do a great job. Hopefully the feeling is mutual. To me, the term "rivalry" is some sort of bad blood. Some sort of rift, I guess you could say. I don't feel that with those guys. We respect them, like I said, and they're a great program.

But as far as any bitterness or, you know, something that transpired in the game that really upset you and you want to get back, that type of deal, I don't think you can manufacture a rivalry. I think it's got to happen naturally, and hasn't happened yet in my estimation.

Q. Being that last game of the season, though, it comes down to somebody winning the Pac-12 South. Do you like having that kind of game at the end of the season like that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, sure. Geographically you think you could have the makings for a rivalry, the closest to each other as far as the rest of the conference, the timing of the game being the last game of the year. Everything's in place for it to become a rivalry, but I just don't feel it should be termed a rivalry at this point in time.

Q. Given all the competition you have at several different positions, especially running back, do you think TJ Green could come in and make an impact out of high school?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, he was certainly a dynamic player in high school and did a lot of good things. How those players, especially a high school player, adjusts to the speed of the game and complexity of the game at the next level, not everybody adjusts the same and in the same timeframe.

So I'll give you a lot better answer in about four days of what we think of TJ as far as his readiness to contribute. But he certainly is a talent. We wouldn't

recruit him if we didn't think he was a big-time talent.

Q. You're the last team that beat USC. What challenges does Sam present to you this year?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, tons of challenges. The guy is incredible as far as his skill set to play the position. He's got everything. The size, the arm strength, the mobility, the pocket presence. He seems to be a great decision-maker.

So, yeah, we caught him on his first start. We were able to get the win. But he is one of the best, if not the best, quarterbacks in the country, in my opinion. And we've got several of the best quarterbacks in the country in our conference here that we've got to face.

And he's got a great supporting cast. Don't forget about that. They're loaded. They've got players at every position. So that will be a big challenge for us.

Q. Flip that, what kind of challenge does your quarterback present?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, last year we were pretty pedestrian on offense. Is that the right way to use "pedestrian"? So we weren't scary or potent as far as capability. Now, we'll hammer you and we could hammer the ball down just about everybody's throat, but it's proven not to be enough. You've got to be more prolific in the throw game. We've got to be more efficient and productive than we were last year. That's why we brought Taylor back in, is to give that a shot in the arm.

Q. Now that Utah has been in the league going on seven years, as you look back on that time, what was the biggest challenge of building a program in this conference?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Recruiting, getting the team up to speed, I guess you could say. When we first joined the league, we felt really good in the line of scrimmage and we were matched up well at the line of scrimmage from day one. At the perimeter we were way behind, and I think we've closed that gap. And we're not a done -- we're not a finished product. We're still a work in progress. But we have come miles in that regard as far as team speed, team athleticism overall.

Q. When did that shift?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: When we got in the Pac-12, I'm going to tell you right now, I say it every year, percentage-wise, probably 80 percent of our team, we don't get -- if we're not in the Pac-12, if we're a Mountain West, a non-P5 team, and so every year that's just built on. I think you've seen that in the NFL production too. The guys we've had drafted, it just increases each year. This year is a high water mark. That's going to be difficult to duplicate every year. But

you've seen a trend of more talent come to the program. And the best barometer that I know to determine how well you're recruiting is how many guys you're sending on to the next level. That's probably the best indicator as far as just a raw data that you can look at.

Q. Various teams have won the South and haven't been able to maintain that. Is that a commentary on the competition?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, very balanced. Everyone's won it but us. That's very well known. Since we've joined the league, with Colorado winning it last year, we're the last two teams that haven't won the South. I think that speaks to the level -- I hate the word "parity," but balance in the South. People take turns beating each other up in the South.

I think that's taken a toll. Does anybody know, has the South won the championship game? Yeah, I think we've had so much competition amongst ourselves that we've been pretty beaten up throughout the year.

Q. You've arguably been the most consistent throughout the time, too.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I guess you could say that. The last three years, for sure, we've been able to maintain a pretty competitive balance -- not balance, but competitive situation in that conference -- division. I guess it's division, South Division.

Q. Kind of off topic here, but hot topic nationally, the coaching staff sizes, that something you'd like to see more regulation on?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You're talking about non-coaching personnel? That would be great to see regulation on that. There are some schools where they have a recruiting department where they have 20 guys and they're all making \$100 grand a year or more. And that's not fair. What is fair? People have bigger stadiums, bigger buildings, bigger budgets. So there's nothing really fair in the truest sense, but I think it would help if there was some regulating of non-football personnel, what you could have. Because right now it's way out of whack. You have some teams that have it all and some teams that have nothing in that regard.

Q. Have you heard discussions?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, that seems to be a topic, we're going to limit it to six non-coaching personnel or eight or whatever the number is. But any way you slice it, it's not going to be equal. Because if you get eight, we're going to pay our eight \$300 grand a year, you're going to barely struggle to give them a couple thousand a month. So it will never be a completely level playing field. But I think it makes sense to try to level it at least a little bit.

Q. Have you tried to get creative in that regard?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Very creative in that regard. Very creative. We're doing our best to try to keep up. We've made a lot of progress in that area. I guess the benchmark school is Alabama. You look at what they have, supposedly -- haven't been there firsthand -- but in their recruiting department, it's a full-blown -- it's almost like its own entity. It's a corporation of its own. But I'm all for the tenth coach, I can tell you that. Adding that tenth coach this January, I think that's a positive thing.

Q. How will that change things?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It won't be a dramatic change. But it gives guys an opportunity to coach at a Division I level and gives the players more. I think our ratio might be as low as any sport as far as coach-to-player ratio, so that will help to balance that out a little bit.

Q. What are you hearing by your stadium expansion?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I'm hearing that things are on track and progressing. Nothing is a done deal still, and, again, until the actual construction takes place, you never know for sure. But I think it's being well received. Eight straight years of sellouts sure doesn't hurt our argument for it. But you want to be careful not to overbuild because you don't want a bunch of empty seats in your stadium. So there is a balance you have to strike there. It seems to be in the low 50s is a good number in the Pac-12. That seems to be a targeted number that makes sense. So we'll see what happens.

Q. Sam Darnold was talking again today about after the first couple of series last year in the Utah game he realized he could play.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I knew he could play before that. I watched him in high school. We were his first offer out of high school. Ask him who offered you first in high school, and he better say us.

Q. I think he may have.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Anyway, what was your question?

Q. Just the idea that you say you knew already?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We knew he was a tremendous athlete. We were very surprised that he hadn't gotten his opportunity prior to our game. I had not been at their practice to see what's going on, and I'm not criticizing anybody, but we knew he was a very talented kid.

Q. Can you talk about the quality of running backs in this conference this year?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Coming up this season?

Q. Yeah.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, there seems to be a bunch of good backs every year. Quarterback seems to be the premier position in this league, if you look at what the Pac-12 is known for. We've had our own run of thousand-yard rushers. We've got Armand Shyne this year who we really like.

But I haven't really, off the top of my head -- who is coming back? USC has a couple of really good ones coming back. So there is definitely talent in that position in this league. But there is talent at every position, in my opinion.

Q. Can you talk about Phillip Lindsay from Colorado?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Tremendous back, great runner, quick, fast, makes you miss, and he was a big part of their success last year. Huge reason, yeah. Is he a senior yet, I hope?

Q. Yes.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Thank goodness. Yeah, we were hoping he was coming out last year.

Q. He's pretty good.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah.

Q. You talk about the quarterback as well. You saw Sefo for the last several years, but Steven Montez --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, huge arm, big arm. Is he 6'5? Big kid. He's got a cannon. He looks like he's got a lot of upside.

Q. That game, it seems we always ask about that rivalry, supposedly rivalry. But it keeps getting better every year. That game is always within a touchdown. It meant a lot last year. Is it exciting to see that sort of rivalry develop and that game mean so much?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think if you're playing for a chance to win it in November, that's great. We've been in that situation for a few years now. We were in that situation in year one. We haven't gotten over that hump. But at the same time, if you're not winning in September and October, November doesn't matter. You've got to win -- in order to make November important, you've got to win in September, October -- you've got to win every month, that's the bottom line.

So right now we've not been able to win every month. We've had a couple good months and not so good Novembers. A lot of that is scheduling. You play the Huskies, and Colorado in the last month, that's, you know -- that is a factor.

Q. I know you've been asked about Darren a little bit, and maybe I'm late to the party, but have you been able to sit down and have some conversations with him?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Oh, yeah, extensive. Him and his parents. We've done our homework on Darren. We've talked to everybody that we think would have valuable input in that situation. Guys that we trust, guys that I trust. You know, made the decision after all was said and done that the kid was worthy of a second chance. Has the right attitude and right mentality for that.

Again, I keep saying, it's not a done deal. He's not been cleared to practice or compete for us. That's still in the works. We're hoping that happens. We expect it to happen, but it hasn't happened yet. So if, in fact, he gets cleared and he's able to be on our team and compete, we think he's going to be an integral part of the offense.

Q. What was his message to you?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That he screwed up. He understands that. He did some dumb things. Put himself in bad situations, very bad situations. I'm very -- I've had strong feelings about some of the things he did. At the same time, you help get a kid get back on track, get his life back in order and open up opportunities for him. I don't think you kick a kid to the curb because he made a mistake or two. Unless he's got no remorse and doesn't care.

There is so much to -- his state of mind and a player's state of mind in that situation to me is one of the real keys. They could probably fool you and tell you what you want to hear. That's what you've got to decipher as a coach, is he being sincere.

Q. Did you talk to Willie?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, I don't have a relationship with Coach Taggart, but I've talked to coaches that were with Darren for four years at Oregon and had some great insight.

Q. So his paperwork, would it involve any graduate transfer?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, pretty much the same process you'd go through with any graduate transfer. Although, being inner-conference puts a different spin on it. Very similar to what we went through -- well, not us, but what USC went through with Stevie Tu'ikolovatu, trying to get him ready. Yep.