

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 25 2018

Kyle Whittingham Utah Utes



Q. Why do you think this team is ready for the Pac-12 South?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we've a lot going for us coming this fall. We have a good situation at quarterback. A running back, four of our five starting offensive linemen back, talented kids on defense, solid special teams.

We have some positives. We still have some question marks. Inexperienced receiver group that's got to step up. Lost our two top tight ends. So we have new faces there. But we've got a lot of guys that are very focused and really like the attitude and just the demeanor of this football team.

Q. What is the next step for Zack Moss as a running back?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: To pick up where he left off last fall. I thought the light switch went on for him about the USC game. He ran with a great deal of violence and physicality from that point throughout the remainder of the season. Really it was the back that we envisioned him being when we recruited him. He just needs to continue on that trajectory.

Q. Talk about your quarterback situation, how happy or maybe unhappy you may be with their development?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Okay, we think we have a good situation at quarterback. We've got Tyler Huntley coming back as the incumbent. He was the guy that started it all. I think it was four games for us last year. Behind Tyler, we have a red-shirt freshman, Jason Shelley, from Texas who had an outstanding spring. He's a lot like Tyler, a dual-threat quarterback. Then we recruited Jack Tuttle from San Diego area. He's a guy that was with us in spring ball, exceptionally talented young man.

This fall camp is going to be those three guys getting all the reps at the position.

Q. You have a knack for turning out really good offensive and defensive lines, what are the traits you're looking for when you're recruiting those guys?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we've had a good run of

linemen on both sides of the ball. We oftentimes don't get the four- and five-star guys that are ready made and ready to play. We've got to project and evaluate. We look for big frames that can run, they may be underweight in high school, but we know in our strength program that a 240-pound guy is going to be 290 or 300 pounds.

I think it's a great job by our assistant coaches of projecting talent and being great evaluators. That's what recruiting is all about. There is no surefire thing. Even the five- and four-star guys, there are no guarantees there.

Q. You mentioned the highly touted recruits. Even among them, what percentage are ready to play? Is it 10 percent or five percent?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, that's a good question. I know the freshmen are more ready now than maybe ever before. Back when I first got into coaching, 95% of your freshman class would red-shirt. Now it's probably less than 50%. The numbers have been seeming to trend in that direction. Can't give you an exact percentage on it, but I know many more freshmen are playing now than ever before.

Q. How do you think the new rule regarding red-shirts will change your personnel usage?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think the new red-shirt rule is a huge positive for the players. I think it was a great decision by the NCAA. There is a lot of conversation that's taken place and will continue to take place of how to use that red-shirt, the new red-shirt rule, because you can use any four games. It can be up front, at the end, mixed in between.

I think it really boils down to the position group. If you get a position group that is loaded and you don't think you're necessarily going to get to one of those freshmen, you might put him in a game where it gets out of hand where you can get him some experience; whereas if you've got a position group that's thin and you need to rely on that guy at some point, you want every bullet that you can to be able to utilize him to help your team win.

So I don't think there's anybody that's got an exact formula on how to use it right now, but I think the biggest criteria is where you are as a position group

with that kid.

Q. What is it going to take to break through to reach that next level.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we've been competitive. Had a chance to get to the championship game a couple times, have not capitalized on that opportunity. That's the next step of our evolution as a program, in our estimation, is getting to that championship game. Every team in the conference wants to get there.

I've heard it over and over we're the only team in the South since we joined the league that hasn't gotten there. But we own up to that. We're not trying to hide from that. It's just something that needs to happen.

Like I said, it's the next step for us as a program.

Q. To sustain the program and the success you have had, you have to have good coaches. And beyond just hiring guys that know football, what are you looking for from assistant coaches?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, assistant coaches, I think there are three real main factors I look for -- intelligence, character and energy. That supersedes experience, supersedes a lot of things. If you get a guy that's really smart and a high-character guy with a bunch of energy, if he's not already, he can evolve into a very good football coach.

We've been fortunate to have a lot of continuity on our staff. For the most part we've had issues at offensive coordinator, but every other spot on the staff has been solid and a lot of consistency.

With Troy going into his second year with the offense, we feel good about the direction the offense is heading.

So this particular year we lost no coaches. We added Gary Anderson as our tenth coach when the NCAA allowed you to add a coach. So the continuity of our staff we feel really good about.

Q. How does the addition of Chip Kelly change the landscape?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The addition of Chip Kelly to the conference, first of all, I think all five guys new to the conference are tremendous football coaches. I think there are just a bunch of great coaches in this league, and that's great, and that's something that will enhance the league, but it still boils down to players.

Players are what it's all about. I'm more interested in what players are on which teams rather than who is coaching them.

Q. When Chip first got to Oregon as coordinator,

his use of tempo was something that not a lot of us had seen, especially at the Power conference level.

Is tempo what it was, or has it sort of evened out?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think tempo, everyone has become accustomed to it. The high tempo is the tempo now. It's no longer a changeup. That's the norm. When you get somebody that slows down, that's when it becomes a change for you.

So when it initially came on the scene, what, five, six, seven years ago, it was certainly something that defenses have not been accustomed to and weren't adjusted to. But now we practice at such a high tempo with our defense that it doesn't bother us anymore.

Really offense is all about execution. The most lethal offense is an offense that can go high tempo and execute. If your execution is suffering because of the speed at which you're going, then I don't think the tradeoff is worth it.

But the tempo offenses are certainly the rule rather than the exception anymore.

Q. What positional group needs the most work, fall camp now?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I would say the group that needs to step up are the wide receivers. We have a lot of inexperience at wide receiver. We lost Darren Carrington and Rae Singleton. There are a lot of very good players in that group that are unproven. That is, in my estimation, the biggest key to how our offense goes this year, is how the receiving group comes along and becomes and performs for us and contributes.

Q. Is there an alpha in that group?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Britain Covey is a tremendous player. It was great to have Britain back. Siaosi Wilson is a guy that I think is ready to have a breakout year. We have three or four other guys that really they're under the radar that we're excited about.

Q. You must be thrilled to get Coach Anderson back on staff. There must have been a tug of war for him?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The day after he stepped down is about when it happened. Me and Gary are close friends. We've been great friends for years and years. It was very shortly after he stepped out of Oregon State that we decided he would be a great fit at Utah.

Q. The BYU game is now at the end where Colorado had been for years, is this going forward with BYU or just a one-year thing?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: To my knowledge, it's a one-off, kind of a quirk in the scheduling, where it was the conference that made the suggestion that if we could

move the game to the last game of the season.

But to my knowledge, going forward, that game will always be played in the first three games of the year.

Q. With Britain and other guys coming back from missions, how do you get them back into game shape?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, Britain has been home since April. So he's had a pretty good timeframe there to get himself ready and get up to speed. Looks great in the summer conditioning. I haven't seen him run routes and catch balls yet, but we'll do that next Wednesday.

When you deal with the missionaries, it's a timing thing on when they get back. Also the position they play plays into it, the readiness based on the position there that they're playing. So I just know it's been a big positive for us, the mission program at the University of Utah has been a big plus for us and given us a lot of -- we've reaped a lot of rewards from that program through the years.

Q. Thoughts on Nick Ford?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Nick Ford, red-shirt freshman this fall. Gifted player, big kid. 6'5", 320 pounds. Brought him in originally as a defensive lineman, made the move shortly there after to offensive line. That definitely is his home. You're going to see him in the rotation this year.

Q. How do you decide who gets to make the recruiting trips to Australia?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The guy that has Hawaii is automatically designated the Australia guy. I guess that's the closest guy to it. So Lewis Powell has logged a lot of miles.

He's gone to Guam, the Philippines, Australia, and he's a Diamond Medallion at Delta, and he did that in about a month. So he's the guy, and it's all based on geographics.

Q. Talk about that Northern Illinois game that kind of sticks out. Did you have to go on the road to play a non-Power Five opponent?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, a good non-Power Five opponent. Blue collar, tough, physical outfit. So that's something that is on the schedule. I never really worry about the schedule. I don't complain about it or analyze it too much. You just play them as they unfold. It is not the norm to do something like that, but that's out of my hands.

Q. With the College Football Playoff now in its fourth season, do you think that you have to

reexamine your scheduling philosophy?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: With nine Pac-12 games, I don't think so. I think that if you're an eight-game conference schedule, then I think that getting a game within those non-conference opponents would be a high-profile game would be necessary. But with a nine conference game schedule, like I said, there is a danger in overscheduling. There is a danger in underscheduling. So I think we've been balanced throughout the years.

Q. Do you think there is an imbalance with some conferences playing eight conference games?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I sure do. I'd like to see a uniform, standardized Power Five schedule throughout all the Power Five conferences. Doesn't matter if it's eight, nine, ten, as long as it's uniform, and everyone is on the same playing field and under the same guidelines.

Q. You've got some of your toughest opponents at home this year.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we do.

Q. What sort of advantage -- I've been out to Salt Lake a few times for games. It feels like the crowd is on you.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The crowd is on you.

Q. What are some of the advantages that you guys have there against some of your Pac-12 opponents?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think we've had a big home-field advantage. We've had a great crowd. We've had 50-plus straight sellouts that go back some eight or nine years. We're proud of that. We have a MUSS student section as good as there is in the country. We feel it's a tough environment to play in, and it's loud. It may be only approaching 50,000, but it's a loud place.

Q. TJ Green, red-shirt, what do you expect him to bring to the table? How would you like to see him step up?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, TJ's going to have to be a factor for us this year. He's going to be a red-shirt freshman. We did sit him out last year. We've got Zack Moss and Armand Shyne, our one-two guys right now. Beyond that, TJ will be battling for that next slot and see if he can get the third spot. We have five scholarship running backs coming to camp this fall, so we need to establish a pecking order behind Zack Moss and Armand Shyne.

Q. What can Solomon Enis do to earn a spot as a true freshman?

A. Yeah, Solomon Enis is a great addition to our

football team. Depending on the service you look at. He's either the best or second best player coming out of Arizona this past year. Talented kid. Nearly 6'3", 200 pounds. Runs like a gazelle, and we're excited to see what he can do.

We did not have him in spring. He didn't get on campus until last month. Excited to watch him as well as a bunch of other guys in practice a week from today.

Q. Talking about Chase Hansen, he had an interesting career --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Am I supposed to be answering these into the mic, or just talking to you? It's kind of weird. Into the mic, but no one knows the question? Okay. Never mind. Good set up. Can you guys hear him ask those questions? Okay. Let's keep going.

Q. Chase Hansen obviously came to Utah as a quarterback, safety, linebacker. Just talk about how he's adjusted to all of that. Obviously injuries derailed him a little bit --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, Chase Hansen is a -- by the way, the two players I brought: Chase Hansen, a linebacker, former safety; Lo Falemaka, a sixth-year offensive linemen.

Speaking of Chase, he came as a quarterback originally. We knew and had conversations throughout the recruiting process that if that didn't seem to be the best fit, we'd move him over to defense about two-thirds of the way through his freshman year.

It became apparent that he was going to be better suited to be a defender. We moved him to safety. Did a great job, kind of outgrew that position. He's 235 pounds or bigger right now, so his future at the next level, and his best fit for us, we felt, was going to be a linebacker. His job description at safety was part linebacker. It was about a situation where he was probably down in the box 60% of the time anyway.

So it's something he's been doing part-time. Now something he's going to do full-time. He's been beset by injury, and we're hoping that's all behind us now, and we're hoping he has a big senior year for us.

Q. He said he wants to make a hundred tackles?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We hope so. If he makes a hundred tackles this year, that's a good thing for us. He's a physical kid. Always around the football, and he's one of those guys that has a knack for making plays.

Q. What are your thoughts on the new rule changes

this year?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: There are a lot of them. Which one do you have in mind?

Q. Fair catch rule?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: It's interesting. I think that is a precursor to doing away with kickoffs altogether. If it goes down how I think they envisioned it, the kickoff return will all be but eliminated from the game, unless you need to squib kick or on-side kick, some departure from the norm. But the normal kickoff with the normal kickoff return is going to become a dinosaur.

Q. Are you in favor of that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, I like the kickoff. I'm a special teams guy. But I put an asterisk there because if the evidence points to player safety, which I think is the impetus for the rule, then, yes. But from a strategic standpoint, no. From a player safety standpoint, yes.

Q. Will that be something you practice, both return-wise and coverage?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. That's something you've got to practice. And now kickoff return guys that have never fair caught kickoffs, because you don't fair catch a kickoff down in your own territory, are now going to have to be able to be schooled up when to make that fair catch, how to do it. It's commonplace for a punt returner, but it's new territory for a kickoff returner.

We've got to decide that, what we're going to do. A lot of that will be determined by how good you feel about your kickoff returner. If you have a ball that hangs up pretty good, drops at the 5-yard line, you want to give that guy a chance to get the ball in his hands, or do you want to take the safe play and put it on the 25.

So that's another thing, much like the red-shirt rule, to be determined on exactly how it's going to be played out.

Q. Have you gone over scenarios of the red-shirt rule?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Oh, yeah, over and over and over. Every scenario possible. The conclusion that I've come to personally is it's more based on your position group depth that that kid is -- whatever position he plays than anything else. If you feel like you're going to need him because you're thin, you're going to save those bullets until later in the season. If you're loaded in position and you want to get experience as soon as you can, because you don't think you'll get to him, then you put him in as soon as you can.