

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 24 2019

Kyle Whittingham Utah Utes

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Getting close to the kickoff. This always signifies the -- for me, anyway, that football is here. It's time to get going.

We're excited about this year's team we've got coming back. Obviously we were -- did very well in the polls, and I think that works both ways. It's a positive in the respect that we've got guys that acknowledge that we've got some good players coming back on our team, and it's really an accolade for our players and a level of ability that they have.

Can be a negative if you read too much into it. We know it's not going to do anything for us during the season as far as helping us win a game. All it can do is get us sidetracked if we let it during our preparation. If we handle it the right way, it can become a positive.

Brought two players with us to the Media Days. First of all, Zack Moss, our running back. If Zack has the type of year we hope he has, he'll lead as the leading rusher in Utah football history, which is a pretty great accomplishment when you consider all the talent level, the backs that we've had come through there. And then Bradlee Anae at defensive end who, if he has a big year, could conceivably be the all-time sack leader in Utah football history.

So got two great representatives. They'll both have their degrees in December. And that's really the main reason why they've come to the University of Utah, so we're proud of the fact that they're going to be graduating this December.

Questions?

Q. What were your thoughts when you saw that schedule?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, we never fret too much about the schedule because we have no control over it in a lot of respects. We just play them as they unfold. I think the positive is all our non-conference games are up front, which is how we like it, getting those three games out of the way and then playing Pac-12 the rest of the way. Playing the rivalry game, the out-of-conference rivalry game as the opener, that's something we've never done before, so I'm not sure, I can't give you a good answer on my feelings about



that.

But I know last year it was very odd to play that game at the end of the season after you've played the Pac-12 schedule, then play that game, then go to play a championship game. So that seemed a little bit out of place.

But, you know, the rivalry game being the opener certainly has the attention of our players, but we go about our business the same way as we always do throughout the course of fall camp and getting ready for the season.

Q. How has the offense grown and matured over the last few years?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we think we're going to hopefully take a step forward this year offensively. Getting Andy Ludwig back as our coordinator is a big plus. He's a proven commodity. Did a great job for us when he was here the last time around. Players really embraced during spring football what Andy was bringing to the table schematically and how he operates.

And I think that's probably the biggest thing, is the buy-in factor from your players. And right now we've got great buy in, and they believe in what he's doing.

Q. Obviously being the projected favorite in the South, how do you not allow that to be a distraction for your team and stay focused on your job at hand?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we started these discussions with our players two or three months ago because we felt like we were going to have some preseason hype and that type of things, and so we wanted to make sure that we got out ahead of it and talked to our players about just ignoring the noise and just staying focused.

We all know that the Pac-12 Championship is our goal, as I'm sure is every team in the Pac-12, so the focus is not on the goal, it's how are we going to achieve that goal. That's the key, is to take the process day by day and just worry about what you've got to do that day to take a step in the right direction to achieve what you want to achieve.

Q. You've got the two teams in the South playing on a Friday night on a travel week for you guys.

How do you look at that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, the old adage one at a time, I haven't even really thought about that much right now. We'll address that when we come to it. But we think the schedule is fairly favorable. We have seven home games, five away, and we have the five home games in conference as opposed to four away. Really I don't think there's anything in the schedule that we have any complaints about.

Q. There's talk that there might be a morning kickoff, and it possibly could be 10:00 a.m. --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Would love it. The only thing better than 10:00 a.m. is 9:00 a.m. or 8:00 a.m. The sooner we can get the ball in the air, that's great.

Q. No concern with sleep?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No, we'd adjust. We've played those games before. It's been few and far between, but we've had those 10:00 a.m. kickoffs in the past. Jump at the chance for that.

Q. Have there been discussions about that at the school?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Not to my knowledge, but I'm just focused on getting the team ready. There may very well have been discussions, but not that I'm aware of.

Q. You brought back offensive coordinator Andy Ludwig who's been with you before. What were some of the things you like that he was able to accomplish at Vanderbilt?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, I think Andy has had success everywhere he's been. I know he has. And last time around, the '08 season, we were 13-0, last time he coordinated our offense. I've got a great deal of respect for Andy. We're very similar in the way we approach the game. There's a lot of compatibility there, and he's a meticulous, detail-oriented guy, which fits right in line with the way I played.

Q. And you lost two linebackers from your defense. Can you speak on some of the transfers like Manny Bowen from Penn State and some of the other guys expected to fill into those roles?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we have a ton of production we lost with Chase Hansen and Cody Barton departing. Great players for us, great leaders for us. But we feel like we've got a chance to be pretty good there again this year with Manny Bowen and Francis Bernard, both of them transfers into the program.

Manny has not played for us yet. You saw what Francis

could do last year. He got extensive playing time. So we think between those two guys and Devin Lloyd, who's been in the program, this will be his third year now, we've got a good nucleus to start with at that linebacker spot. It will be critical to develop two or three more guys, young guys, as we go through fall camp to give us some depth there.

Q. Do you feel like this is the best defensive line you've had?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Could be. You know, this defensive line we've got coming in, we lost three seniors that headline it, Bradlee Anae, Leki Fotu, and John Penisini, tremendous players, and we're surrounding those guys with six or seven other underclassmen that we feel are very talented. On paper, could very well be as good a defensive line if not the best we've ever had, but you've got to go out and prove it every week.

Q. What was Zack Moss like in high school, and what was the connection you felt like --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, Zack Moss in high school I felt like was a terrific player, underrecruited, very underrecruited. I couldn't figure out why the SEC wasn't all over him, because we sure liked him. We call them the Hallandale trio. Zack Moss and Tyler Huntley, our quarterback, and Demari Simpkins, our wide receiver, are all in the same graduating class from the same high school. Coach Dennis Erickson was the one that went down there and found those guys and got them to Utah. Of course Dennis has tremendous network and connections down in Florida, and so give him all the credit for getting those guys to campus.

And ever since those guys got on campus, they've been great. They're all three graduating. They've stayed out of trouble. They've done everything the right way, and can't say enough good things about all three of them.

Q. What was he like physically there?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Zack was very similar to who he is now. He wasn't 220 pounds. He was about 200, 205, to the best of my recollection. Great balance, great vision, could run inside, could run outside. Just all the things you see him doing now we saw him do in high school. Like I said, it was a mystery to me why he wasn't more heavily recruited.

Q. Who did it come down to?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I believe it was us and Louisville, if I remember, at the end.

Q. The program has been very successful, has made the transition to the Pac-12 very well. How many years in advance of that did you say we're

going to have to do things differently?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, right when we got in the league we knew the bar had been raised in every area, from facilities to recruiting to everything. The personnel that we had. When we first got in the league, we felt we matched up really well at the line of scrimmage but not so well in the perimeters. So it took us a lot of years to continue to recruit and develop and get the roster where we needed to get it to be competitive.

We're still not a finished product. I don't know anybody that is. But we feel like we're certainly better equipped right now than at any time that we've been in the league to be competitive.

Q. When you recruited those playmakers, what were the main selling points?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, we just hoped they saw the trajectory we were on, just taking steps forward every year and ultimately to the point where we win the Pac-12 Championship. Now, we won the South last year. We fell short in the championship game. So obviously the next step for our program is to try to win it all. That's -- I'm sure every team in the whole conference is thinking the same thing, but that's the next logical step in the evolution of what we're doing here at Utah.

Q. Are you surprised to be the favorite in the preseason poll?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, not surprised, and we're not -- it's not like we're upset that we're the favorite. I mean, like I said, it's good to be recognized, but we knew that we had a chance to have some preseason hype, I guess you could call it, because we had a pretty good team last year and we had a great deal of returning starters from last year's team.

Q. I know you recruited California before you got in the Pac-12. Does this make it easier to recruit California?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, the Southern California area has been a huge recruiting ground for us ever since I've been at University of Utah, and when we got in the Pac-12, it was -- it just elevated the targeting, who we were targeting down here. We were able to stand toe to toe with some of the bigger schools, whereas in the past, some of the bigger schools were on some of the kids we were on, we knew there wasn't much of a chance, but now we feel like we can win some of those battles.

Q. Is it fair to say you have a budding rivalry with Washington? What makes the programs so alike and so --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I like to think we have a

rivalry with Washington because they're so good. We think that's a show of respect if that's how it's viewed, because we have all the respect in the world for them and what they're doing up there.

We haven't been able to beat them very often since we got in the league. I think once or twice. I can't remember. But Chris is doing a great job there. They got us twice last year. Any time you beat the same team twice in one year in football, that's a pretty good accomplishment.

And so it seems to be a great match-up every time we play them. It seems to be a battle to the bitter end.

Q. How many times have you watched Byron's interception in disbelief? Or how would you describe it?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I saw it live, and I probably watched it one other time, and then I try not to watch it anymore.

Q. Is it frustrating knowing -- because it's pretty close. You guys are really getting closer and closer --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, we feel we are. Yeah, we feel we are. And got to find a way to get over that hump, because getting close doesn't really make many people happy. You've got to have that breakthrough.

Q. (No microphone) you're the dean of coaches.

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Well, the North for the past several years has won the -- in fact, every year but one they've won the championship game; is that right? If you want to get more respect, you've got to win more games.

And so I think that we've got good football in the South, we've got good coaches, we've got very good players, but in order to be more in the conversation, I think we've got to have a better showing in the championship game.

Q. Looking back, is there one moment where you really felt you broke through in the Pac-12?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, I think so. I think it would be when we went to Oregon a couple years back, two or three years ago, and just played lights out and just -- it was like -- because they're a heavyweight. Oregon is a heavyweight in the Pac-12. There's no doubt about it. They're a quality program. They're winners.

And to go up there and to be able to win convincingly, I think that was a breakthrough in our program, that, hey, we can stand toe to toe with anybody, home or away, and if we play the way we're supposed to play, we've got a chance.

Q. The home-road disparity, how were you guys able to build that mentality where you feel the same on the road?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, in order to win championships, you've got to win on the road. You've got to win at home, that's a given, but you've got to win on the road to win a championship. We take the us versus the world mentality on the road. It's circle the wagons, and that's kind of the approach we've taken.

And nothing better than to be on the road and in the fourth quarter the stadium is emptying out and you've got a victory and 75 players have shut up 60,000 fans. Not a lot more gratifying than that.

Q. With so many returning starters, is there any unknown or question mark you have?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We've got a couple question marks. Offensive line we've got some holes to fill. We came out of spring with three guys that we know are going to play for us, but we've got to find seven or eight guys that are going to be in that rotation up front on the offensive line that we have confidence in.

So those questions have to be answered during fall camp. As well as the placekicker. We don't know right now who our placekicker is going to be.

It's been a lot of years since that's been a question mark. So hopefully we come away with a kid that can get the job done. We're confident that'll happen.

Q. Your former boss is back in television --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah.

Q. Do you think he's back there for good?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, Urban is one of the -- obviously one of the best coaches in the country. Just got so much respect for him, learned so much from him when I worked under him for those two years. He's not all that old. He's only 50 something. So I don't want to speculate, but I know, if he decides to return, that he's got a lot of years left in the tank, if that's what he wants to do.

Q. Do you think there's a chance he comes by campus this season?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: He's going to come in August. He's going to come see us in August. Already got that scheduled.

Q. How is the player leadership do you feel like with this group?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Outstanding. I think we've got a great group of seniors and some underclassmen, as well, that have really stepped into leadership roles. I've

never been around a great team that didn't have great leadership. This team seems to have that so far. Time will tell. We've got a lot of work to do. But teams where the coaches lead, usually pretty average; teams where the players lead, they've got a chance to be great.

Q. Guys aren't letting each other slack off --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: They're holding each other accountable to this point, which is great to see, and that needs to continue. We've got a lot of work to do between now and the opener. But if we can keep that same mentality and that same mindset, then that's going to help our cause.

Q. I know you said the schedule is what it is, but having to open conference with USC --

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, at a place we haven't won for, like, 100 years or something.

Q. How does that affect your thinking about that game?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, that's down -- in coaching terms, that's light years away. That's so far away you don't even think about it.

In the Pac-12 every week is a challenge, and you'd better bring your A game every week because this league is so competitive and so balanced that if you don't play your best, you don't have much of a chance to win.

Q. In a way is it good to play them first so you know you have the rest of the season?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, that's a tough question. I don't have a great answer for it. I know they're always loaded with talent. And even though they're picked No. 2 in the South right now, their talent level is as good as -- in my estimation, as good as it's ever been. So it's going to be a tough match-up for us.

Q. How much has your staffing change from the analysts, recruiting department, compared to five or six years ago?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: How much has ours changed? Tremendously. We're growing every year, exponentially we're growing. And the recruiting department, where it was -- when I first got to Utah 25 years ago, it was one guy who did recruiting and operations, and he wore about five different hats, to now where we have a separate recruiting department on its own that's staffed by about eight to ten people, and three or four guys in operations.

Everything has grown. In fact, we moved into our building, brand-new building, five years ago and thought how are we ever going to fill this place up.

Now we're out of offices and scrambling to try to find places to put people.

It's definitely grown, and I think everyone pretty much is experiencing the same thing.

Q. Is there ever too much information?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, there is a saturation point, yeah, there is, and I think we're reaching to the point where that might start to creep in. But, you know, the one place that you can always use the help is recruiting. I mean, the more eyes you have out there and people studying film and scouring the country for talent, that's the place where you can really utilize extra help.

Coaching-wise and administrative-wise, you can get too many people there and just seems like everybody is underfoot and you've got too many bodies. I don't think we're at that point. I don't want to paint that picture, but you can get to that point.

Q. Do you have someone assigned to the transfer portal?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We do. Absolutely. Watches it every day. Every day. And he reports to me. And the transfer portal is not really well organized. It's just kind of haphazardly put in there. It's not broken down by position or anything. There's no real systematic approach to it. They just throw names in there. So it's a tedious job.

But to answer your question, yeah, we have a guy that is the portal expert, I guess you could say, that has his eye on it every day.

Q. Do you see that changing your roster management?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. Absolutely it changes the thinking there, and in years past we've tried to fill up every year -- every signing date by the second signing date, which now there's two signing dates, but now we try to hold two or three or four scholarships back for the transfer portal guys because it's changed the game.

I mean, it's just been a situation where recruiting -- they're recruiting now up until fall camp, essentially, or until your initials run out, whichever happens first. But we definitely hold back scholarships in the hopes that we'll have some transfer portal guys or grad transfers come into the program.

Q. With the transfer portal, do you feel like you have to recruit your own guys to stay?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, yeah, that's true, as well. The portal has changed the game, not dramatically

because there still was movement before that, but certainly that movement has been enhanced.

But I think that it may slow down again because I know there's a lot of guys in the portal that got no place to go right now. The portal is still stocked with guys that don't have any place to go, and they can't go back to the original institution because most coaches take the same stance that we do: If you go to the portal, then you're done here. There's no coming back. It's not shop yourself around, if I get a better deal, take it; if not, I'll come back.

And so I think in the future, players will see what happened to some of the guys, maybe be a little bit more judicious about making that decision to enter the portal. My own feeling. I don't have anything to support that other than gut feeling.

Q. How valuable is a player like Jaylon Johnson out there at cornerback?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Huge value. I mean, the biggest value for a defensive coordinator, there's two things: a dominant edge pass rusher and a shut-down corner. Those are the two most sought-after commodities that a defensive coordinator looks for.

And shut-down corner, that term gets thrown around pretty loosely, there's not very many of them. He is one of them. So that allows you to do so many things in coverage, roll the coverage away from him, man him up. Just so many options when you have a guy like that. So, yeah, it's a huge advantage.

Q. And then Julian Blackmon moving to free safety, how has his transition been and how confident are you that he's going to make that switch?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: 100 percent confident. I think based on what we saw in spring ball, that's not speculation because we have tape of him playing safety all spring long. He's got great ball skills, which a free safety in our scheme, we have that center fielder back there, we've had some really good ones, Robert Johnson, Marcus Williams, he's right in the mold of those guys as far as his range and his ball skills.

He's a physical kid. He's up over 200 pounds now. He played at corner at about 185, so he added 15, 20 pounds to his frame. But he has ball skills. I'm convinced if we played him at receiver, he could function there as a legitimate receiver. That's how good his ball skills are.

Q. What's been your message with this team, the thing you keep telling them throughout this off-season?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Just to stay focused and block

out the noise, don't listen to everything that's out there. Because, like I said, we're getting a lot of preseason hype, I guess you could say, and it doesn't mean a thing. It does not mean a thing. It's not going to help you win any games.

So just stay focused, ignore what's out there, and just continue to respect the process that we have in place.

Q. What was your own reaction this morning when you see that or hear about it?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: You know, just it is what it is. I mean, what can you say? As much as I hate that statement, it is what it is, you've heard me say that before, but I don't think it's a negative thing. We're not running from it or trying to hide from it. It's just you've got to handle it the right way and understand that, at the bottom line, it doesn't mean anything.

It's just a lot of people that think a certain way. That's all it means. But it is a nice acknowledgment for our players in the program that, hey, people think you guys are pretty good players.

Q. It's a sign of respect?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Exactly, it's an accolade for the players in the program, which is the best thing about it, but again, you can't get hung up on it.

Q. Which would you choose: your home stadium or a neutral site to play the Pac-12 title game?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Our home stadium. I'd rather play anybody in our home stadium. No question about it.

Q. The conference has discussed having games at 10:00 a.m. Mountain Time. Would you be up for that?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: 100 percent. As coaches and players, you want to get up and play right away. Sitting around all day, and as great as our atmosphere is at Rice-Eccles at night games and as electric as that place is, it's tough to sit around all day waiting to play. Players are champing at the bit, and if we can get some early games -- I'm not saying play at 10:00 a.m. every week, but we wouldn't mind playing a 10:00 a.m. game or two every season. We'd see that as a positive.

Q. After spring practice, do you consciously say we need two offensive linemen?

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. Yep, those are predetermined and decided -- not predetermined, but determined after spring ball where our deficiencies based on what Andy wants to do, based on our personnel, what we lack. And like I said, we have three or four scholarships we hold back to fill those needs.