

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

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Hollywood, California, USA

## Utah Utes

### Kyle Whittingham

#### Press Conference



**KYLE WHITTINGHAM:** First of all, it's great to be back live Media Day. Most years I wouldn't say that, but after last year's debacle and challenges, it is great to be back here in some sense of normalcy.

We're excited about our season at University of Utah. Brought two fine players with me in the back, Devin Lloyd, our outstanding All-American linebacker, and Britain Covey, our slot receiver/punt returner/kickoff returner. Both those guys will be juniors in eligibility this year due to the COVID delay in eligibility. We're looking forward to them leading our football team this year.

Feel pretty good about where we're at as a team. Good depth. Maybe the most depth since we've been in the Pac-12. That's a pretty bold statement. We've been in the league 11 years, but we feel like we've done a good job recruiting and are in a position right now where each position group is solid, like I said, has two or three guys in each spot that we feel good about.

Excited for the season to get going. Hoping and praying for a normal season. It's going to be great to get fans back in the stands. We have a huge home-field advantage at Utah. We've had 10-plus years of sellouts in a row, which spans some 70 games. We've just added a south end zone expansion to the stadium to bring it up about 5,000 or 6,000 more seats. Looking forward to that home-field advantage that we have at Rice-Eccles.

Questions. Ready to roll.

**Q. You said during the spring the running back position would likely be by committee. Now that we're almost through the summer, do you still feel that way?**

**KYLE WHITTINGHAM:** Most likely. That could change. The running back position was rebuilt. Of course, we had the tragic loss of Ty Jordan, which was a huge event in our program. But we were able to add T.J. Pledger from Oklahoma, Chris Curry from LSU, we have Micah Bernard

returning. Going in there's going to be equal footing for three or four of the running backs. If one emerges as the top guy, we'll make the adjustment. If each one brings something to the table, then we'll make the best of that situation as well.

Right now there is no leading candidate to be the primary ball carrier, so we'll see how that evolves.

**Q. Are you dedicating the season to Ty or is your team doing anything special?**

**KYLE WHITTINGHAM:** We have some things that we're going to do this season. We have a scholarship that will be the Ty Jordan scholarship that will be awarded in fall camp. When I say 'awarded' it may be a player already on scholarship, but he's recognized as the recipient, or maybe a walk-on earns that scholarship. It will be the player that best exemplifies Ty, his work ethic, his passion for the game. That's something we definitely will be honoring Ty with as well as some others in game during the season.

**Q. You've been around quite a while for the Pac-12. You've got a lot of new coaches as your peers. Is that more of a challenge this season because you have all the new coaches coming in with new schemes maybe?**

**KYLE WHITTINGHAM:** That's always some unknowns, brings some unknowns to the table. Seems every year there's a certain amount of change and turnover. You just get used to it. You really don't really pay a lot of attention, especially in the Pac-12, because you typically play your three non-conference games early. By then you have enough material on the teams that you're going to play even if they're new coaches. You got good game film footage to watch and study.

**Q. You talked about the south end zone expansion and renovation. Have you been able to take a tour of the new facility? How do you feel that will benefit you as a program?**

**KYLE WHITTINGHAM:** I have had the opportunity to take a tour. It's been a while, though, about a month, month and a half ago. I know it's changed dramatically since I



took the last tour. Going to go through it again this week as we need completion. We're probably two, three weeks out from completion.

It's going to be a huge benefit, not only on game day but for recruiting. It's a phenomenal facility. It has a restaurant that will be open year-round in it, so it's going to be a great recruiting tool.

It really finishes off what was an outstanding stadium is now going to be even that much more of a home-field advantage and enhancement to the atmosphere and the environment. Our players after last year playing in front of nobody are elated to be able to be able to play in front of 50,000-plus fans in that stadium.

**Q. With the loss of Ty, can you explain or go into detail if you've talked to any of your athletes about mental health?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yes, mental health is a big part of our program as far as offering resources and support. That's something that our players, it was tough to deal with the Ty Jordan situation, still is. Fortunately our administration is committed. We have a full department that's committed, that's dedicated to mental health and counselors that our players can talk to and visit with.

We try to make it a point of emphasis to our players that it's not a sign of weakness to seek mental health assistance. That's part of life. It's the same as being physically ill. If you need to get help, see somebody, there's no shame or no stigma attached to that. I think our coaches, our assistant coaches, have done a really good job of conveying that to our players. Our players seem to do a really good job of taking advantage of the resources that we do have.

**Q. From a mental health standpoint, how is that part of your job changed in the last five or 10 years?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, it's become an increasingly -- a bigger part year to year. When I played, that wasn't even a topic. I mean, it didn't exist. When I got into coaching, it didn't exist. The last five, six, seven years it's started to come to the forefront. I think it's really benefited. I know it's benefited a bunch of our players. Again, it's something that we continually try to educate them that, Hey, this is nothing to be ashamed of. It's not a sign of being weak or not tough or any of that stuff. It's reality.

Let us know when you're hurting and when you need some help and we'll make sure we get it for you.

**Q. You're the longest tenured coach in the Pac-12.**

**You seem to be doing more with less. Not that you don't recruit at a high level, but you develop your players like none other, make them NFL draft picks. Can you give us the secret recipe behind your longevity?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Bringing good players into the program is the number one secret to that. I appreciate your comments. I think that really speaks to our assistant coaches. They're the ones on the front lines, going out and evaluating and projecting the talent that we're looking for.

Recruiting, at least for us, is more a projection. It's not where is the player now, but where is he going to be in two or three years. I know our assistants have done a phenomenal job of finding those, I don't want to call them diamonds in the rough, but the guys with the big upside that we can bring into the program, develop them, make them into the type of players we need them to be, maximize their potential.

Another big part of that is our strength program. We have a phenomenal strength program. We get guys coming into our program at 6'5", 215 pounds, two years later they're 270 pounds. Our strength staff deserves a great deal of the credit for that.

**Q. Since you've seen it all, been here so long, what are your thoughts on the NIL? Do you think it's taken the power out of the NCAA and the conference hands and put it into the student-athlete's?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: First of all, I'm all for it. I'm all for anything the players can get within reason. I'm all for it. They are the game. It's not about the coaches, not about the administration. It's certainly not about the NCAA. It's about the players.

If they can take advantage of that, of their name, image and likeness, ease their financial burdens. I know people say, They're on scholarship, what burdens do they have? The reality is it's tough to make it in that situation. I'm a pro NIL guy.

We're still not sure what direction it's going to go. Ultimately there's a lot of details that still need to get worked out and refined. I'm in favor of the concept without a doubt.

What was the second part of the question?

**Q. Do you think it took the power away?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The NCAA, they've acquiesced some of that power. I don't know, maybe 'power' is not the



right word, but the model, the NCAA and amateur model is not what it used to be. I think it's going to get further away from the amateur model. I think there's a lot of change that's going to happen, Oklahoma and Texas to the SEC, this realignment stuff. I think that's just the tip of the iceberg. I think we're in for a huge change in the landscape of collegiate football. It's migrating and gravitating more towards a minor league football than collegiate football. I think that's the direction it's going.

**Q. You talked about your ability to project two to three years in recruiting. This past off-season you were quite active in the transfer portal.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Right.

**Q. How has the transfer portal kind of shifted, if at all, your mindset in terms of bringing in talent to the program?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: That's a good point. The transfer portal is one of those things, something like the NIL, is really impactful, has changed college football to a certain extent.

I liken it to the high school players or your draft, the transfer portal is your free agents. If you have an immediate need, if you lose a guy or two in the transfer portal at a certain position group, you need to supplement what you have, those are guys that are expected to come in and help immediately. They're not developmental guys, not guys that are going to come in and develop for two years. Most of them only have one year left.

That's something where if you have an immediate need, unforeseen circumstances arise, you go to the portal. For us, we've lost two or three guys in the portal, but we've gained far more than we lost. I know the net result for us at Utah through portal has been a plus, we're on the plus side of that ledger.

**Q. In your decade plus of coaching in the Pac-12, how has the league changed most significantly in your opinion?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I don't think it's changed a lot. Every single year seemingly from top to bottom it's been very competitive. There's no weeks off. You look at some of the other Power 5 conferences, there's some teams in the bottom half of the league that you just got to show up and you're going to get a win. That doesn't happen in the Pac-12. It's a challenge every week. I think that's one of the reasons why we haven't been to the CFP for several years, is we cannibalize each other and beat up on each other through a nine-game conference schedule, which is

another factor in the whole thing.

I think the Pac-12, since we've been in it, has remained and maybe even gotten more competitive as the years go by. I think that's really the reason why we are not a presence on the national scene in the CFP, is because of the balance in the league. I hate the word 'parity' but I think we're very balanced.

**Q. The commissioner said making the CFP is a priority for the whole conference. Do you see that balance being lost as a result of that?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: We'll see. I don't know. I'm not trying to make an excuse. We got to be better. I'm not trying to make an excuse of why we're not in the CFP. I think that's an underlying factor. I think in order to gain the respect I guess you could say of the rest of the country, we've got to have a presence there. We just simply haven't over the last three or four years.

**Q. We have tailback you, quarterback you, what do you think of front seven you?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: For us?

**Q. Yes.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I think we're in that conversation. Through the years we've had a great deal of success, particularly on defense, and particularly in the front seven. Although our secondary in 2019, all five of the starters we play a nickel secondary, all five of those players are in the NFL. We have a good case for the entire defensive unit to be in that same conversation.

But we've been blessed with very strong front sevens, it starts up front. I think a lot of the time our defensive line has been so good that it makes the linebackers even that much better.

But we've just, again, through recruiting and through evaluation, we've just developed a reputation I guess you could say that if you want to be at one of the elite defensive line schools in the country, we're definitely in that conversation.

**Q. Do you think the pipeline into the South Pacific has something to do with that?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Absolutely. We're a unique team, the most diverse team in America. We have almost exactly one-third African American, one-third Polynesian, one-third Caucasian, which not one team in the country can make that claim as far as the ratio. The Polynesian aspect has

been a huge reason for our success.

**Q. You talked about the depth season on your team. Do you think that's going to be not the biggest difference but a big difference between this team and your past teams that have challenged for the Pac-12 title?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: I would say yes. Then another factor that is present every single year, if you're going to have one of those championship teams, you got to be able to stay healthy. That's sometimes beyond your control.

If you look back, we've had two really elite teams at Utah over the past 15, 20 years, the '04 team, '08 team, both those years, if my memory serves me correct, we started the same 22 guys in the bowl game as we did the first game in the season.

Staying healthy, getting breaks along the way, having depth, three big factors in having a special season.

**Q. Nate Landman got injured in your game last year. He's back now. What kind of difference do you feel he makes at Colorado? Also Carson Wells.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Kind of drowned out. Which players are we talking about?

**Q. Nate Landman and Carson Wells.**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: Yeah, great players. Productive, tough, hard-nosed guys. Again, you go back to staying healthy and having enough depth to cover up some of those injuries. Sometimes, I mean, there's dropoff between the one and the next guy. Those are two outstanding football players. I'm an old linebacker myself, so I pay particular attention to linebacker play when I'm watching film. I'm very impressed with those guys. They're good players.

**Q. You were part of the last college football realignment. Any thoughts on what has been going on in the current landscape?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: The only thoughts I have is it doesn't surprise me one bit. It's just the beginning. There's going to be another big wave of realignment and movement. The landscape is going to change dramatically.

**Q. Do you have any advice for programs that are moving conferences?**

KYLE WHITTINGHAM: No advice (laughter). Recruit your

butt off. That's about it, yeah.

Thank you. Appreciate you.

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