

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Penn State vs Utah

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Pasadena, California, USA

Penn State Nittany Lions

Coach Mike Yurcich

Press Conference



Q. What makes their defense so successful?

MIKE YURCICH: I think they're a team overall, and looking at them defensively, that I think they have a really good culture. I think their coaching staff has really done a good job of sustaining success there, and I think you see that when you put the film on, I think you see a tough, disciplined football team. I think it starts there. I think that's what makes them, in simple terms, a really good team, is that they play with physicality, they know their assignments, they're disciplined, they're very well-coached, and they're a team that has done it repeatedly and had success. It makes sense, right.

Q. Are they similar to anybody you've played this year?

MIKE YURCICH: They remind you of a Big Ten team. I don't know specifically in comparisons, but the way they play, I think their physicality by nature, there's going to be a lot of carryover.

Q. Your last couple weeks of practice, what have you gotten out of it?

MIKE YURCICH: It's been great. Early on you kind of phase it. You try to develop your younger guys as much as you possibly can, so the reps get shared, and you get to rest the older, more experienced players, guys that maybe are dinged up, but maybe guys that are so well-versed in the offense like Sean, to where you can sacrifice some reps there early in bowl prep to where it's more developmental, get back to the basics.

Then as you get closer, you get more game-plan specific and get your guys that are going to be significant contributors the majority of the reps.

It's another -- I don't know, whatever it is, 16 practices, so it's additional spring ball, so you've got to utilize it and try to maximize your development as much as possible with that.

Q. Having said that, how do you guys get off to a good start against this team?

MIKE YURCICH: Well, you get off to a good start by playing fast, and so no hesitation and call the plays that we feel will keep us on schedule. At the same time, the plays where we're going to be explosive, as well. We've got to get our running backs involved. We've got to get our tight ends involved. We've got to get our receivers involved. So trying to make sure that we have a good balance with that and trying to find the mismatches and trying to create space, playing with some tempo at the same time. All those sorts of things help in starting fast and making sure that we're doing a great job of getting on top early.

Q. Back in State College James said he was hopeful that Kaden and Olu would be able to play. Do you have a sense --

MIKE YURCICH: Did he already address that with you.

Q. He did, that he was hopeful that they were going to be --

MIKE YURCICH: Good.

Q. Do you have a sense for where that is, and what would it mean if they were able to come back and play?

MIKE YURCICH: Well, it's what Coach said. It hasn't changed with that. I'll let him be the voice there.

Tremendous players, right? Athletic, talented, good leaders. I mean, every team wants to have that and to have those guys contributing. Those guys are inspirational to us. They're great from a mental standpoint and a physical standpoint, their talent, but it's also everything else. It's the brotherhood, as well. Very important.

Q. What has Brenton Strange meant to this team this year and also the entire room. Can you describe their impact on this team?



MIKE YURCICH: Brenton Strange to me is one of those guys that -- he's very intense. You know he's going to rise to the occasion. He loves when the lights are on him. He's just a really, really tough competitor. He's tough as heck mentally, and you know he's going to fight you. He does a lot of things very well. He's a very talented guy.

I love being around him. He's just one of those guys that I'm very fond of because of what he's all about. So what he's done as far as leadership-wise, he's a guy that sets the tone in that room.

But all of those guys, I think they're very competitive, so it's kind of like, okay, he rises his play and the next guy rises his play, and that's kind of how it goes, and that's what your room should be.

It's the same as the quarterbacks room. I say all the time, everybody wants to be the quarterback. Everybody wants to be the premier tight end. But at the same time they're good teammates. They compete against each other but they're good teammates. That's just what you want to have.

You've got to give Coach Howle all the credit in the world for developing that room and for keeping that brotherhood together and keeping it tight.

Q. What would you say is the leading factor in your players choosing to play in the bowl game despite already declaring for the draft?

MIKE YURCICH: Well, I think it's all individual. Whether one guy wants to and the other guy doesn't, it's whatever their individual preference is, whatever their thoughts are, their family discussions and that sort of thing. It's very individualized so I couldn't speculate on that further.

Q. There are a number of guys who declared for the draft after the bowl game was played last year, and this year you had a number of guys who announced that decision before the game. Is there a difference in the decision to put that out or is that also individual?

MIKE YURCICH: There's so much to think about as far as everything is concerned. My job is to get a good game plan and call a good game against Utah and win the Rose Bowl. That's where my focus is at. All the other stuff to me is just all smoke and mirrors.

Q. They've got a cornerback who's out who's an NFL guy, Clark Phillips. Could you do anything to target his replacement?

MIKE YURCICH: Well, sure. You've got to make sure that

if there is anywhere on the field that you feel you have an advantage, you'd better make sure that you target that.

A lot of our offense is based on pure progressions, and so if one guy is double covered we go to the guy that's one-on-one. Basically that's as good as you can get one-on-one unless they bust.

But there's going to be certain plays where you're going to get certain guys scot-free, but against this type of defense and as much man as they play you're going to get one-on-one coverage, and our guys are going to have to rise to the challenge and win those one-on-one match-ups. I know they feel good about their plan and who they have behind him, and they're going to be competitive, and it's like anything, it's like this is an opportunity for the next guy to step up and to prove what he can do. It's going to be a great competition, and it's going to be fun to see.

Q. Last year at this time you were getting a lot of questions about the short-yardage situations and how you guys struggled last season. This season obviously it was a much different scenario. What do you attribute that improvement to?

MIKE YURCICH: I think just a little bit of -- a really good package that we've come up with. But it's not just plays.

I think the plays are kind of secondary really. It's about the players' attitudes and their belief in one another, their ability to come off the ball. I think our backs have done a tremendous job. I think Sean has done a great job making sure that we're in the right plays. Our staff has done a tremendous job game planning and helping me out and making sure that we're taking advantage of whatever front that we see.

It's a collective deal, and there's a lot of shared ownership on it from players and the rest of our staff who have been tremendous throughout the whole season.

Just going back from -- it really starts in the spring. You want to make sure that what you're repping in the spring and what you're repping in fall camp, those situations, because when you get -- the tough part about short yardage is there's only so much banging you can do, and to put your hand in the dirt and get 22 personnel or 13 personnel or whatever you're in and to muscle up and to go full speed and get a really quality rep, that's very, very hard to come by, and they're very valuable, so you've got to be careful at the same time because you want to be healthy.

That's always the fine line of how much of short yardage you can rep during the week. Those are important things, but I think those are the most important parts of why we've

improved.

Q. Both Nick and Kaytron have seen a lot of work this season and had successful seasons but ultimately only one can be out there for that first series --

MIKE YURCICH: That's not necessarily two. We can go two tailbacks in at one time.

Q. Typically it's been one.

MIKE YURCICH: You're right. I'm just trying to throw Utah off a little bit.

Q. How do you guys make that decision? Is it game by game --

MIKE YURCICH: I lean on Coach Seider. He knows the room. He's got the closest relationships with those guys, so he manages that room and I'm hands off with personnel as far as that. He's done a hell of a job with it.

Q. Do really good running backs make an offensive line look better or does an offensive line make the running backs --

MIKE YURCICH: It goes hand in hand. It's team. It's the same thing with run and pass. The better your pass game, the better your run game, the better your run game, the better your pass game. It is the one sport that it's so -- maybe not the one sport. I don't want to sound arrogant as a football guy. But it is a sport that to me is -- it represents a lot of different things. From a family standpoint, from a group work standpoint, from an organizational standpoint, we're in this thing together, and we need all 11 guys doing their job together so we can all eat.

If one guy doesn't do his job, we don't eat.

I think it's a really important thing that you brought up that I think is the crux of football and team and organization and family, and I think that's dead on, what you said. That's a good point.

Q. At what point did you realize -- Theo was telling us in the spring that Nick had a big run and that the buy-in was there, and Theo at that moment was we can run the ball, we can run short yardage well. Was there a moment for you that all right, we have the guys to do it and we're going to do it well this season?

MIKE YURCICH: I don't get to that -- it's always about, okay, we've got to get better. We've got to win the Rose Bowl. We've got to beat Utah.

So okay, we're going to be -- I don't do that type of thinking. It's like, okay, how can we get better, how can we get better, how can we get better, what can I do? Practice-wise, formationally, are we getting enough reps with this? We do a good job with our A-list runs, making sure we're getting a lot of reps there, and B-list runs and C-list runs, making sure that -- those are the things that occupy our thoughts is the process.

I know it's coach-speak and I know you guys are like just another coach saying "process," but really it's about that, because good things will be a result, because otherwise if you start thinking about, oh, okay, we're now a good run team, well, somebody is going to catch up to you and it's a humbling game. Football is a very humbling game and you don't want to get down that road of thinking anything other than how can we improve.

Q. Was there a moment where you're like, okay, we're good now, Nick had a good run --

MIKE YURCICH: I think it starts in practice. It's not just about games. You see things in practice. If you're practicing hard and you're going against a really good defense in practice, which we do, you start to see things, that in spring ball, fall camp, it starts to add up. But you don't want to sit there and say, we've arrived. We've got to continue to scratch and claw and do whatever we've got to do to get better.

Q. Yesterday James said not every player is going to play all the plays in the Rose Bowl. How much do you guys as a staff think about players declaring for the draft and such as you plan for players' workload?

MIKE YURCICH: I think we do a great job of communicating with the position coach and the players in their room, those conversations and making sure that we're all on the same page. I think Coach Franklin does an unbelievable job as a head coach of listening to his players, and it trickles down to his assistant coaches and I think that's the key with that topic.

The relationship part of it, which is really important to have, because there's a lot at stake for everybody and we all know that. At the same time, this is a wonderful opportunity.

Q. How did the recruitment of Jackson play out for you guys? Obviously somebody else decommitted, but how did that pick up so quickly, and can you talk about him as a player?

MIKE YURCICH: Yeah, he's a really exciting guy to get to know. When you get to know him as a person, you get to

know his family, hear his history, talk to the high school coaches, everything just adds up, quarterback trainer and his work he did at Elite 11. All those things, they just start to add up. You get to know a little bit more of the intangible side of it.

He's got a really good story and has worked through a lot of adversity. He's a really tough kid, a competitive kid, so he's a really tough football player, and then he's a really good quarterback on top of it, a great student. He's a great fit for Penn State.

Then just you put the game film on, which is very, very important. You've got to have that, as well, and then it all adds up.

I don't remember the second part of your question.

Q. How did that come together so quickly for you guys after you had a decommit and then you were able to come through with another good quarterback?

MIKE YURCICH: Well, I think you're always planning and you're always trying to be ready for any speed bump that you might encounter. It is recruiting. Crazy things happen. You've got to have plans ready to go.

I think you have to credit our recruiting staff. We've got a really good, well-organized staff that Andy Frank does a heck of a job for us, but there's a lot of people involved. So you have a lot of assistants at the same time.

Q. When you kind of look at needs moving forward and I know James has said that he wants to add a receiver and Taylor said two receivers, how do you kind of weigh in? At what point do you process there's a guy in the portal, we like him. At what point do you enter that conversation?

MIKE YURCICH: I kind of went down the road with Jackson maybe I shouldn't have with the question, and now you're going down the road while I'm here for a press conference on the Rose Bowl and beating Utah. I want to keep it about that.

Q. When you look at Utah's defense, they feel like there are some similarities between your offense and what they practice against and they feel like that helps them. When you look at your defense does that help you prepare for --

MIKE YURCICH: I think, yeah, absolutely. Based on a four-down, like the challenge you, physical up front, defensive ends that are physical that can rush, can play well against the run. The biggest thing is pursuit, the

tenacity and just how they run to the football, how they tackle, their aggressiveness in coverage. Yeah, same as them. Feel the same way.

Q. When you look at their defensive line, and they create pressure in a lot of different ways. How would you prepare for that so far, and what do you think your strengths are in that regard to help fend them off?

MIKE YURCICH: Your game planning all starts with how you're going to find ways to run the football, what are your best runs and how are you going to pick up any problem blitzes. So those are the first things that you go through. So how do you do it? You start with the analytics and the numbers and the breakdowns and what's their highest percentage blitz and to what formations.

So if you can try to manipulate a formation to avoid a certain blitz to a certain protection, you try to do those things and match all that up, there's a lot of work that goes into it.

At the same time, you've got to work them. It starts in the classroom, and we've got to present it the right way. Phil does an unbelievable job with our blitz pickup and so does Ja'Juan Seider so you've got the running backs coach and O-line coach making sure we've got a solid plan, so it starts there in the instruction in the classroom, and then you take it out to the field and we'll have walk-throughs, so slowly, so it's like instructional and then it's more visual and spatial in the walk-through and then you've got to get the full-speed reps.

Our defense doesn't run exactly the same blitzes as their defense, so there's a mix and match with that, and then your scout team has to be on point.

You talk about development and having depth, and that's a big part of it because those scout team guys, our developmental squad does an unbelievable job each week of giving us really good looks and playing with speed. They're not -- the mentality is we're going to challenge the offense. They have a big part of what we do. They're a reason for our success, and they understand that. I think that's part of Coach Franklin and his culture and how we practice, how you practice.

If you came in and saw us practice, you would maybe have a hard time telling ones and twos apart from the developmental squad from an effort standpoint.

Q. Is that an invitation?

MIKE YURCICH: Oh, that has to come from the head man. You're always welcome as far as I'm concerned.

Q. In 2020 obviously you were in Austin, but a lot of that physical stuff wasn't there.

MIKE YURCICH: And you're wearing a mask now, too, so it's like flashing back.

Q. What did you learn about how you teach guys during that COVID year?

MIKE YURCICH: That's interesting. That's an interesting conversation right there.

I think the hard part when you're doing virtual is evaluating how efficient the teaching is and how they're grabbing the material. Now, there's ways to try to grab it and ask and make sure that they can spit it back. But to get on the field and see how it translates was the difficult part.

But from a feedback standpoint, a back and forth standpoint, you can get that information, like okay, he's getting it. Just like in anything with learning.

But when it goes to the on the field, you just can't -- like in a normal spring ball, you're teaching and then you're on the field. Then you can see, okay, it translated to the physical movement.

That was difficult. Then as a teacher you're always trying to figure out how do they learn so I can adapt my style and I can try to teach to the student as best they learn, maybe he's a spatial guy, maybe he likes video more, maybe he has to actually walk through it. So you are always trying to evaluate how they best learn. Do I have to say it a different way to this guy? So that was the hard part. You couldn't touch it and feel it.

Q. For some guys, it might have hindered their physical development a little bit. Have you seen a big jump in some of the other young guys specifically now that things got a little more normal?

MIKE YURCICH: I think our strength staff does an unbelievable job, and it's amazing to see certain guys develop. The fun ones are always the long, skinny guys because there's just so much ceiling. I think our staff does a tremendous job of developing that.

But I think along with that, strength development, you've got to have a great nutrition program because it goes hand in hand. I think we have Leanne Loudon does an unbelievable job with our nutrition department, and our guys are well-fed and our athletic program supports us very well, our athletic department I should say, so it's a great situation to be in as an assistant coach, to watch all

these people that are helping those guys out.

You recruit the talent, and you can see where they're going to be in two, three years, and you put those pieces in place and watch it grow.

Q. CV going to Pitt, what was it like for you? Quarterback is such a different position but you spent a lot of time with him. What was the process like for you?

MIKE YURCICH: As a position coach, and I really want to talk about Utah, but you want the best for your players. I get it; it's part of the deal. He was always -- he did it the right way. He communicated very well with Coach Franklin and myself, so support him as much as we possibly can and want the best for him moving forward.

Q. How have you seen Mitch Tinsley's development this season and how much has it meant to give you wide receiver help?

MIKE YURCICH: Tinsley has been awesome. He comes from an offense at Western Kentucky where they threw it about 60 times a game. So coming to Penn State and wanting to go against the best of the best, you're transferring from Western Kentucky to Penn State, and then the transition from their wide-open air-raid throw it 60 times a game to our offense is significantly different because we have tight ends we have to feed the rock to. We've got really good tailbacks we've got to feed the rock to, and then we're going to throw it to the receivers at the same time, so we're a very multiple offense that likes to distribute the rock. Not one time was there any indication of him being salty or not getting the ball enough. He's just a team guy, loves to compete and has caught on to our offense very well. He's a smart guy, very dependable, can do a lot of different things for you. He's been top-notch. Love that kid.

Q. For some teams bowl games are kind of a look toward the future, a cap to the season that finished. Last year you had a lot of opt-outs. Not really the case this year. How are you balancing your offense, especially the quarterback room, with trying to use this extra time for the young guys versus capping off what was a successful 2022 season?

MIKE YURCICH: Yeah, I said it early, and it's okay. You phase it. So early on in bowl prep you're trying to develop as best you can the young guys because you have time. Then as you melt into the game week, you're tapering those reps a little bit more to the guys that are going to play.

It's a lot about development early, and then as it gets closer to game time, you've got to get ready for the game and win the game.

Q. During the early developmental period, how have you seen Drew kind of grow?

MIKE YURCICH: It's just a little bit quicker with both of them. It's just little things that used to take three seconds at the line of scrimmage, now are there. It's just a whole process mentally, from run checks to RPOs to protection, progressions, all that stuff. It's not one thing. It's just been an overall developmental improvement.

Q. Utah is probably one of the more physical teams that you'll see. How far has this team come since Michigan do you think in being able to meet the challenge of a team like Utah?

MIKE YURCICH: Yeah, I think it's interesting when you look at our ball club. I think we've gotten better throughout the course of the season, and that's what you hope for. You want to see it go like this.

Anytime you're going like this, there's going to be the plateaus, right, but steady improvement, I think our guys are driven. I think it speaks to our culture and what Coach Franklin is -- the process and being able to practice every day with purpose and intent and be very intentional about what you're doing, whether it's in the weight room, in the classroom.

I think all those things add up, and being disciplined and being tough just doesn't happen. It takes daily habits, and it just adds up.

I think what you see is the product of that.

Q. With Deuce moving on, how key was it for Hunter to get some opportunities at center this year, and who else is going to be involved in that conversation moving forward at center?

MIKE YURCICH: Yeah, really important for Hunter to get those reps. We think the world of him. He's very tough. He's very physical. But center is a difficult position by nature. You think about it, how hard is it to block a 300-pound zero nose guard all day playing odd team, or how hard is it to reach a two technique, a guy that's lined up on the guard. Now on top of that, besides during all that, you've got to snap a ball between your legs, and oh, don't forget it's on two, right?

So those are all the things that you think about. Really happy for Hunter and to see his progress.

Q. Anything we didn't hit on on the notes?

MIKE YURCICH: No, I'm good.

Q. Is Nick somebody that we should --

MIKE YURCICH: Yeah, Nick has done a great job and very dependable. Great leader.

Q. And he can snap a football.

MIKE YURCICH: Oh, he's good, yeah.

Q. In terms of Hunter obviously making the transition going from guard to center, how much does guard experience help a guy when they're doing all the things you talked about? How much do those experiences at guard help?

MIKE YURCICH: This might be silly, and I'm not a musician at all, but if you play the guitar, you can also play the drums and then maybe there's -- like certain instruments kind of like help the learning curve, and there's just a faster, but then you understand a little bit differently, and I think that's a lot the same with playing guard and then center, center and guard. There's just carryovers, overlap. It helps you understand big-picture concepts. I think that's part of it.

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