

College Football Playoff Media Conference

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Notre Dame Fighting Irish Marcus Freeman

CFP Media Conference

BRETT DANIELS: I'd like to welcome everyone to the College Football Playoff head coaches' media availability. Joining us here today is Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman. We will begin with opening remarks from Coach Freeman and then we'll move to an Q & A session.

At this point in time, I'd like to turn it over to Coach Freeman for some opening remarks.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Thanks, Brett.

First off, I want to recap this last weekend and the great Orange Bowl experience that we had in the hard-fought victory over a tough Penn State football team. Being that it was the semifinals, victories are short-lived as we prepare for this last opportunity together with this special group.

Ohio State will present a tough challenge; we know that. We're looking forward to this opportunity to playing in the College Football National Championship game.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. I know you guys really pride yourselves on playing man-to-man press coverage. Ohio State has obviously got really good receivers. What's the challenge there? I'm not expecting you to give the game plan up, but how inclined are you to stick with that as opposed to changing it a little bit?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, as you watch film, not many teams are successful just sitting in man coverage versus these receivers. We'll obviously have to mix some things up and come up with a great plan to try to limit what they do in the passing game. You're not going to be able to stop their receivers totally. They're a talented bunch. So we'll come up with a plan and be able to adapt and adjust based off what's going on in the game.

Q. Marcus, does this feel like a full-circle moment for you to be coaching against Ohio State in the National



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Championship game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: In terms of this season, yeah, from where we started with the start of A&M and the loss to Northern Illinois to now you're saying we're getting ready to play for the National Championship, yeah, it's full circle. This has nothing to do with the past and where I went to school. This is about this opportunity that lies right ahead of us.

Q. Marcus, Anthony Knapp, Rocco Spindler, how do you anticipate them coming through this week, and if Charles Jagusah is an option either at tackle or guard or only at guard moving forward?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, Knapp will miss this game. He had a high ankle sprain and won't be able to make it back. But we expect Rocco to be able to -- we'll see how he progresses this week of practice. But I know he'll give everything he has into making sure he's prepared.

As far as the starting lineup, we'll do what's best for our program. We've got to figure that out. We have a week of preparation to make sure we get the right guys to start this game, and we'll see what that is here in the next couple days.

Q. Obviously the Ohio State defense has been stout all year, but when teams have had success against them, specifically where have they been able to make inroads? What have they done?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think each team can be different. For us, we have to be able to run the football, and we've got to find ways to do that. At the end of the day, you're going to study teams that have had success against your opponent, but you still have to do what your team does well.

Again, for us to have success, we're going to have to be able to run the ball, and we're going to have to be able to stop the run. Obviously you know me well enough, I've said that, for every game we play. But it won't be any different for this game.

Q. I wanted to follow up on Jagusah, a guy that's



... when all is said, we're done.®

missed a ton of practice in two years at Notre Dame and yet has played in some hugely consequential games and played well for you. Can you speak to that and how he's able to do that? Also, the flu, do you feel like that's run its course with your team, that it's not a factor anymore?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, as far as Jagusah, again, unfortunate injury that occurred in fall camp, but he worked his way back. You know what, in the past few weeks or maybe the last month, he's just been practicing and preparing. If he did get an opportunity, he didn't know if he would or not, and he went out there and did an unbelievable job, did a great job just like we thought he would. Credit to him and Coach Rudolph for being ready for when his number was called, and then he went out and executed at a high level, so it speaks volumes to him and his preparation.

As far as the flu, I'm sure every school -- Ohio State is probably dealing with it, too. I think really probably over half of our team has gotten it already, so I don't think it will have an impact on this week's game.

Q. I wanted to ask you, now that you've gotten to this point in the bracket, what your overall feedback is on the 12-team playoff from ranking to seeding, as Notre Dame as an independent to where you are now, to the toll it takes. Everybody is getting banged up. What are your thoughts on the start-to-finish 12-team playoff this year?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think maybe after this thing is over, I can give you a better opinion of my overall thoughts. Right now you're just so lost into preparation for each week. We're getting ready for our 16th game, and you know, there's some injuries, there's some guys healthy. That's part of football. My focus has really been to say, okay, what can we do to prepare in a way to execute as well as we can when it matters the most.

But I have not spent a lot of time thinking about my overall thoughts of the playoff since I'm just trying to get this team ready to win. That's what I'm going to continue to focus on.

Q. Kind of a role reversal this time. You got to watch your future opponent last week. Obviously that was already set, and you guys were the team that Penn State was watching. I'm curious what you got out of watching the Cotton Bowl, being able to watch that in real time?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, you don't get any schematic things out of watching it on TV. You obviously can see playmakers, you can see big plays, and that was

evident in that game.

But you have to go back and you've got to watch. You've got to really evaluate the coach's copy of the film to look at schematically how you want to prepare for this game. But I saw some guys on both sides but specifically Ohio State's side making really big plays on offense and defense, and they have playmakers all across the board.

We know it's going to be a challenge, but we look forward to it.

Q. Marcus, I was wondering, what are your favorite memories you have with James Laurinaitis over the years, your playing years, and even these days?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think there's so many moments when you play together. But he was in my wedding and I was in his wedding. Those are special moments, obviously the days you get married. But we had some great moments when we worked together here at Notre Dame. It's a unique situation where a guy you're working with is one of your best friends.

We've got a lot of great moments and probably some that I won't share on this press conference, but he's a great friend.

Q. After your win in the Orange Bowl, you said that great people continue to get opportunities to lead young men like this, and it's not just about you but it's about us. Watching your interviews of not just you but your team, y'all have created this amazing culture of not just individual success but the team success. As a coach what are you doing to keep that momentum carried over to the National Championship game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: That mentality has got us to this point. It's every person in this program putting this football program in front of itself. That's what we continue to do and we demand of each other is that everybody outside of this football program will find ways to give individual glory or individual praise or whatever it is, but we know inside this building that every person has a vital role for us achieving the results that we have.

That's what's going to be as we prepare for this game. Your roles will be determined as we get finished with prep here soon, and we need you to execute your role, whatever that role is, to the best you can to make sure that we can achieve the results that we want. That's what we'll continue to preach.

Q. For you specifically, being in Atlanta, coaching for a national title, being one of the Black coaches to do



that, during Dr. King's observance of his birthday, what does that mean for you to be in that moment with that as well as being a Black head coach? Do you feel like it gives opportunities for other coordinators and position coaches to have this opportunity when given?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I sure hope so. I hope that somebody gives the right person an opportunity.

I was given an opportunity by our former athletic director Jack Swarbrick and Father John Jenkins. They made the decision to give me an opportunity. What I continue to hope is that people get opportunities based off their actions and not the color of their skin. That doesn't point to just one group of people, but we want to make sure we continue to give the right people opportunities to lead our young people, and I believe in that.

If me being a Black and Asian head coach in the college football National Championship gives others that opportunity, that's awesome. I've always said this; I don't want this to be about me. I want this to be about others and about others getting an opportunity and our team.

As far as playing in the National Championship game on MLK Day, to me the attention should be on MLK Day and what he did for our country and the progress he made for equal rights and progress for all people, the courage he had as an individual to stand for what he believes in. That was with his words and his actions.

Martin Luther King Day is about celebrating that man and the impacts he's made on our country.

Q. I wanted to ask you about something that J-Love said after the Penn State game. He said that you guys wanted Ohio State, that you feel like you should have won that game last year and you didn't. How much is that going to be a motivating factor entering this one?

MARCUS FREEMAN: If you need that to motivate you to get ready for this game, then you're not the right person. That's the reality of it. We don't need motivation to be prepared for this game.

We've got a chance to play in the National Championship game. This isn't about the past. This is about this opportunity we have right in front of us, and we'll continue to focus on this opportunity right in front of us.

If there's learning opportunities from other games or previous games, absolutely we're going to use them. If that's going to help us be more prepared for what could happen in this game, we're definitely going to use it. But it isn't for motivation at all.

Q. You mentioned the offensive linemen. I wanted to check and see if there's any limitations on Love and Collins. Obviously a pretty good list of injuries right now for everybody.

MARCUS FREEMAN: No, J-Love is good to go. J-Love will be full go. Beaux is still healing from -- he has a calf strain, so he'll work back into practice here in the next couple days. But as long as he progresses, he'll be good to go for the game. But we've got to make sure that he progresses as we go through this week.

Q. You look at the offense kind of periods against Georgia and at the beginning of the Penn State game, seemed to have trouble getting going. Second half you really took off, 261 yards. What let to that improvement in the second half, and are there things that you think can carry into the game against Ohio State?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think you're talking about two really good defenses that we faced, two of the best in the country, as this one we're going to face this week will be, too. It's a game of adjustments and a game of taking care of the football and taking advantage of the opportunities that are presented, and that's what we did versus Georgia. We took care of the football, and we took advantage of opportunities that were presented and found tough, gritty ways to get 1st downs.

Penn State early in the game was giving us some unique looks and probably were running the ball into some difficult looks that we hadn't seen going into the game, but we had to make some adjustments. That's what this game is going to be about, is okay, everybody is going to have a plan going in, how do you make adjustments, how do you find a way to get the tough yardage that you need to get a 1st down and keep the sticks moving and take care of the football. We didn't do a great job of that versus Penn State, and that's probably one of the couple reasons that the game was really close.

We've got to take care of the football, and we've got to find ways to run the ball.

Q. After the game, Riley said a couple of times that he felt a little wobbly in that scenario. I wondered, how does the protocol work for you guys with the in-game cognitive testing? Who exactly has that great responsibility to sign off on a player's return to play in game, and how is that process different, if at all, in a CFP scenario? Is there anybody independent of each program who's there to sign off?

MARCUS FREEMAN: No, there's nothing different with a CFP game. We have a medical professional team of athletic trainers and doctors that will do a thorough evaluation of our players when they think they have a concussion. The health and safety of our players are more important than anything. I want to make sure that's clear. So they would never put a player at risk if they did not think he was physically ready to play in a game, and they made the decision after a thorough evaluation that he was okay to return to the game.

You have to trust your doctors, and there's times that they say a player is not available to come back into the game, and you've got to trust your doctors. We have professionals that handle the evaluation, and they felt like Riley was good to return to play.

Q. I know you don't want to make this about yourself, so I'll frame the question this way: What do you think a National Championship would mean for the University of Notre Dame and for your players and their legacy?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Oh, it would be something special. Obviously this place hasn't won a National Championship since 1988, and every year the aspirations are to win a National Championship. That's why all these players choose to come to Notre Dame, one of the reasons, is to be a part of a program that can win a National Championship.

I think it's something that they'll be able to say for the rest of their lives is they were part of a National Championship football team. There's a lot of work that goes into getting to that outcome, and that's what we've got to focus on, but it would be special for this university and for these players that have poured so much work into getting the results that we have.

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