

College Football Playoff Media Conference

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Notre Dame Fighting Irish Riley Leonard

CFP Media Conference

Q. Riley, how do you keep this game smaller despite it being the biggest game of your career?

RILEY LEONARD: That's a good question. I don't know. Really right now, nothing has changed for my schedule. Stayed in the same place, go to practice, go to the football facility.

Nothing really changes as far as like my lifestyle and my daily schedule goes. Really right now, there's no difference. I'm sure when we get to Atlanta I'll have to do a good job of locking in and taking everything into consideration and focusing on what's important, but right now it's absolutely the same thing I've been doing the past 15 weeks. Not too bad, not too hard.

Q. You weren't a part of this game last year, but how has Coach Freeman sort of (indiscernible) the pain of that loss similar to NIU?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, he doesn't really have to mention the Ohio State loss to give you any extra motivation because it's the National Championship, so if you're not motivated enough, you're tripping.

He doesn't really need to bring up their loss, their loss the past two years. He's playing it around the facility so we understand the pain, but if you need any extra motivation for this game, there's something up with you.

Q. Did you think this was possible, attainable when you came to Notre Dame?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I absolutely did, and I thought this would happen. That's why I came here. Even my girlfriend, I was talking to her the other day, and a bunch of people were texting her like oh, my gosh, I can't believe you guys made it, this is crazy.

Even she was like, like, Riley this isn't that surprising. Like we expected this. It would be one thing if -- I don't know. I



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think people get surprised whenever things they don't expect happen in their lives, but when you expect it to happen, it's just like, yeah, we've believed this for a long time. I definitely thought it would be happening.

Q. What about after Northern Illinois? Did you think --

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, after Illinois, that's when you start to think, like, dang. At that point it was like, shoot, we've just got to -- we weren't even thinking about the playoffs at that point.

So yeah, kind of a double paradox there. But after that game it was like, shoot, forget being the best team in the country. You've got to be on the best team on the field every single week.

But definitely grand scheme of things, that's why I came here, to compete in a National Championship.

Q. What makes Ohio State a difficult match-up?

RILEY LEONARD: I think they know who they are. They do a really good job at what they do. They'll get to the quarterback on defense, they've got speed in the back end, and they're a veteran team back there.

I don't really delve too much into their offense, but I know their defense is a really good unit.

Q. Coach said you guys probably wouldn't watch their game against Texas today, but when you go back and look at the game what do you see from them defensively? Second part of my question is how has this team rallied around you as the leader?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, to go to the Texas question, we watched that a little bit individually, and one thing I saw from Ohio State was once again their ability to get to the quarterback specifically on 3rd down.

So I've got to really be good with my protection adjustments and know what I'm getting, make sure the O-line is sliding in the right direction. They did a good job just playing good defense, one-on-one defense whenever they needed to in the back end.

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Then how does the team respond to me being a leader?

Q. At this point in the season, this is the end all be all.

RILEY LEONARD: Maybe that's a question you've got to ask somebody else. I don't know. But I think maybe in the way that we play and the way that we respond, especially after a mistake by me. If you see the other guys' body language, it's probably pretty positive because we know how to respond at this point and fix our mistakes.

Q. Will Howard talked today about your time as roommates at the Manning Passing Academy and he said both of you back then, you guys really never talked about something like this happening. What was that experience like and what's your relationship with him?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, at the time we weren't really the big names at the camp. We were just two dudes hustling, trying to compete and make a name for ourselves kinda.

It's really cool to have those late-night conversations with him just about life and whatever. To see where we are now, it's really cool because he's a person I respect a lot, and obviously I always try to root for other quarterbacks in college, especially after I meet them at that camp because you realize we're all just dudes, all just kids trying to play the best for our teams and our universities.

Any chance I can to see how he's doing, I try to look.

Q. Was he a good roommate?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, he was a good roommate, clean guy. We were only there for like three or four nights, and most of the guys are always just looking out for each other. One guy is going to get food, bring back food for the rest of the guys, stuff like that.

Q. What is it about Marcus Freeman's leadership style and messaging that's resonated so much with this team this year?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I think he's just an extension of the team. He seems like a veteran teammate in my eyes. Before we hit the field when he's hyping the guys up, it feels like it's just a senior captain talking to you a little bit.

He does a good job of balancing the hierarchy of things. He does understand that he has to carry himself as a head coach, and we obviously see him as our head coach, but we feel him in a different way. He really does a good job of resonating to us as players.

There's a lot of leadership styles about him. I think one thing in particular, if he doesn't have an opinion or something, he'll let us make the decision. A lot of people are egotistical in this field, and I don't see him as a guy that has any type of ego.

Q. If you guys do this, if you guys win this, what will that mean to you personally, and what do you feel like that'll mean for Notre Dame, which hasn't won it since 1988?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I mean, whenever you expect -- I don't really know. Obviously it would mean the world to me. It's kind of something I've dreamed of my whole life. To be at a school like this and be able to represent a school like this and lead them to a National Championship so far, it's truly an honor and something I don't take for granted.

I take a lot of pride in wearing the blue and gold. I know our fans for a very long time have been very loyal to this program, through the ups and downs since 1988. It would be an honor to deliver them another one.

Q. I'm not Marcus Freeman, but when I say there's no need to be nervous, it's a seven point game, it's a fight, how do you -- does that replay in your head, halftime at Penn State?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, it absolutely does. Anytime I've been down throughout my career I always do a good job of responding. Whenever he says something like that, you've got nothing to lose. You've already made it so far. You can live with no regrets as long as you go out there and play your game, let the ball fly around.

I made some mistakes last game, but I never get mad at myself if I miss a throw. I get mad at myself if I miss a read or I'm off with myself or hesitate on a throw. The interceptions last week and the way we played in the first half, I was seeing the field great; just wasn't executing.

But I knew at some point we'd get things turned around so Chris Freeman's speed helps us out.

Q. (Regarding Jaden Greathouse.) Explain his confidence.

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, he's a very quarterback friendly wide receiver. He never really says too much, but he's always going to be in the right spot when you need him to be.

Everybody sees the highlighted plays, but the plays where



nobody really sees are like the 3rd down where I escaped to my left, he just does a good job of feeling the hole and understanding my scramble abilities but also being able to find me whenever I'm outside the pocket.

There were a couple 3rd down conversions when I was able to find him and extended the drive. He's a smart kid, smart player, and obviously when the time comes, when he needs to make a play, he's going to make it.

Q. If you could, just talk about the journey coming from Fairhope. Didn't have a whole lot of big offers coming up during COVID, and getting to this point where you're one game away from a National Championship.

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, wasn't heavily recruited; never took an official or unofficial visit to any school. Really only got the Duke offer because of David Morris in Mobile.

Played for Coach Cutcliffe at Duke whenever he was at Ole Miss back in the day with Eli Manning. So Coach Cut was doing him a favor and offering him and I took full advantage of it. It's crazy to think where I am today because I went 3-9 at Duke; wasn't heavily recruited.

I think the one group of people that did believe in me throughout my entire college career was Fairhope and all the families back home. I think that's because they don't really see me as a quarterback. They kind of just see me as who I am as a person and they're going to have my back no matter what.

It's crazy to think that we're here now, but very grateful to be in these shoes and represent Fairhope, Alabama, where I come from.

Q. Your relationship with David, what it meant to you working with him. He's done a lot for a lot of quarterbacks over the years.

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah. I don't really see him as a coach or anything like that. I see him as a friend at this point. He's always been there for me. I started seeing him in like fifth grade, and he always saw something in me that a lot of people didn't.

He believed in me and he's been there every step of the way for me. Anytime I'm down or up, he's always going to shoot me a text and remind me of the little things that are important in life because I really see him as a good friend.

Q. I wonder if you could speak to the anxiety of transferring. I'm weaving Will Howard into this, as well. Going to a new opportunity, a better opportunity.

But at some level, do you think, boy, how is this going to go?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, it's a good question. I didn't like being in the transfer portal. It was really a weird feeling because I think of myself as a loyal person, then there I am in the transfer portal leaving my best friends at Duke.

So I kind of just wanted to get out of it as soon as possible, and I was very quick to commit to Notre Dame because I knew it was the place for me.

But yeah, you've just got to trust beyond knowing. You don't really understand the magnitude of going to a big time school until you kind of live in it, and I tried to prepare myself for every situation possible, but you've just got to go through it to understand what it's like to play quarterback at a blue blood school.

Obviously Duke was a great program and everything, but there were just different expectations whenever you transferred to a big time school like this, and I've learned a lot throughout the last year for sure.

Q. I don't want to make this into a cliché, but I wonder if you've thought about all the things that had to go right or did go right to get here. You lose a starting defensive lineman I think in the first game against Indiana, you're down 10-0, Angeli comes in and gets a field goal and that sparks everything. I watched Jaden's catch against Penn State and he comes off the line and the corner falls down like he's been tasered and he didn't give him a move; then he gives that safety a move that looked like a rec league basketball game head fake. Not to say you guys were fortunate but just along the way that had to happen for you guys to get here. Have you considered that?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I try to think about that a lot. At the same time I also try not to because I guess like in any sporting event, you can look back and think, oh, if this would have happened or if that would have happened, but I truly think that those things happened for a reason. I think not only us, but Ohio State, as well.

I think we're the two main teams to just publicly display our faith the most, and I don't know if this is some divine teacher who put us here, but I truly believe that Jesus was looking over both of our shoulders throughout the whole season and put these two teams on a pedestal for a reason.

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