

# CFP First Round: Notre Dame vs Indiana

Friday, December 20, 2024

Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

Notre Dame Stadium

## Notre Dame Fighting Irish

### Marcus Freeman

#### Postgame Press Conference

Notre Dame 27, Indiana 17

MARCUS FREEMAN: ... and about what this team did to achieve the outcome that we all desired. I want them to celebrate that. I want them not to look past tonight. Celebrate tonight. Celebrate this victory that they worked tremendously hard to achieve and obtain.

Then I told them they'll have tomorrow off. They can take one day off and we'll get them back on Sunday. Then we'll start thinking about the Sugar Bowl and the opportunity we have at hand.

You don't get enough time in life and enough time in situations like this not to enjoy it. I was reminded of that by a couple people I talked to but also just talking to the team. Enjoy this. Enjoy this. Don't look ahead. Enjoy this, and then we'll move forward.

Proud of the way they played. I told Coach Cignetti after the game, I think that's a heck of a football team we faced that obviously showed wouldn't quit until the end. Some good teaching opportunities for us. We're going to use that fourth quarter defensively. Special teams-wise we've got to learn from some of those situations that happened in this game because we have to be better because of it.

I'm actually kind of glad it did happen because it's going to be a chance for us to humble ourselves and get back to work and work on ways to improve as we get ready for this next opportunity.

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

**Q. How big is a run like the one that Jeremiyah had as a tone setter right out of the gates?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Huge. Backed-up situation. We just threw an interception the drive before, and it was 0-0 at that time. Just threw an interception, we get an



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interception on defense, and that first play to go 98 yards was huge just for everybody. Yes, the offense, but the overall confidence of our team. To go up 7-0 with that type of touchdown.

We know he's not 100 percent. We're just going to keep getting him healthy. But he showed on that play whatever percent he is, once he breaks through that third level, it's hard to catch Jeremiyah Love.

**Q. You mentioned the interception, Xavier Watts. How good was he tonight in setting the tone for the defense?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, he was major. He made some big-time tackles, tracked the ball carrier well, was close to getting a couple balls out, had the interception. He's a leader out there. He gets everybody lined up. He communicates. He plays the game the way you need him to play. He is a huge part of what we're trying to do and a very important piece.

**Q. Marcus, along those similar lines, you've talked often about complementary football and that first sequence was about as complementary as it gets. How do you assess the way this team has absorbed all the challenges to have the identity that you want from them?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, you had a lot of good from all three phases tonight, and you've seen that throughout the season. No one phase was perfect, and that's what we strive for is perfection. No one phase was perfect. But what happens is when one's phase isn't getting the job done, another phase picks it up, and we'll need that as we continue to move throughout these playoffs.

That's what it's going to take to achieve the goals that we aspire to have. It's not going to be offensive, defense or special teams, it's going to be all three phases playing complementary football.

**Q. You started the season in the tunnel at Texas A&M sort of getting the attention off your team and getting it to -- taking the pressure off them and being emotional in that moment and then your team adopted your**



**personality over the course of the season. The way they played so physically tonight, how much does that reinforce the way that you guys are coaching and preparing them?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I believe in playing this game with a physicality that hopefully is unmatched. That's just what I believe in as a head coach, and we demand it. We practice that way.

These guys at the end of the day, these guys are pleasers. You ask them to do something, they're going to give you everything they've got to try to please you as a coach and do what you ask.

In order to achieve the things we want, you're going to have to play a physical brand of football, and that's our mentality. That's our culture. That's what they display on that field.

**Q. Marcus, you've talked about having confidence in Mitch Jeter for a while now. To see those kicks go through, obviously the one later was blocked, but what did that do for you guys to see him make those field goals tonight?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: It was huge, especially the one I think was 49 yards before half. That was huge because not only was it an important field goal, but the length of that. He's been doing it in practice, but to go out and do it in a game in cold weather, we needed that confidence in him and he needed that confidence in himself. It was pleasing. It was really good to see him make those big field goals today. We've got to fix the one that was blocked. I watched it on the sideline, looked a little low. I think that's what ended up being the issue.

But we've got to attack that and fix that because that can't happen as we move forward.

**Q. Jordan Faison made big plays on offense and special teams. What allowed him to impact the game the way he did tonight?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's a playmaker, man. I often tell you that stats sometimes do not tell you the impact somebody makes on a game. The wide receiver position is one that is so important to understand. He can grade out 100 percent and have one catch, and perception is he maybe had one catch, but the reality is he did exactly what he was supposed to do on every single play.

Today obviously he was rewarded and targeted intentionally in certain situations, and he made some big-time contested catches. He is a weapon for us. We

obviously used him on the kickoff return reverse, and we had a little bit of doubt saying, okay, there might be a guy that can see it. Well, the guy saw it, but we had a lot of faith that Faison can make him miss, and that's what he ended up doing.

**Q. After struggling defensively at USC, what were the biggest keys for that unit to snap back to form tonight, and how much was Howard Cross a part of it?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, Howard is a huge piece. I've said this before, I believe you have to be strong up the middle. To have Howard and Rylie in there really being disruptive up the middle was huge for us.

We knew going into the game we were going to have to control the perimeter. They were a perimeter running team with so much stretch plays, some screens, and our mindset controlling the perimeter was attacking and having all three levels defeat blocks in the perimeter, and then we wanted to be aggressive.

We have an aggressive mindset. We called the game aggressively. They played aggressively. It was good to see our guys on defense play well today for the majority of the game.

**Q. Now that this is complete, now the first home game of the playoff, all the extras that went into it, how did it work from your perspective as a head coach? What was the experience like?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Unbelievable. Probably should have shouted out everybody that had a part in creating that environment. I've never been a part of an environment like that. It was special.

The crowd played a factor. The noise played a factor. It was a special thing to be a part of.

I didn't really get to take it all in because you're focused on doing your job, but pregame I did. I took a minute to take it in, and obviously right now just thinking about what we were able to experience, it's something special.

Not many times in life you're the first to do something, and as I told the group in there, we were the first to win and play a playoff game in Notre Dame Stadium. That's historic. Something we'll cherish for the rest of our lives.

**Q. This isn't technically a first, but I think 12 wins matches the most wins ever by a Notre Dame football program. Curious what that means to you right now.**

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, we wouldn't be in this

situation if we didn't have 12 wins, so I'm grateful to be a part of a program and a team that has been able to accomplish this.

But you know I'm greedy, and my focus is -- although I don't want their focus to be on it, my focus is going to be on find a way to get 13. That's what matters. That's what's going to be important is to enjoy this thing but get ready for the next opportunity.

But you know what, I'm fortunate to be a part of a special, special football program, a special group of people from top down, from our president, to our chairman of the board, to our athletic director, on down to the people in our football program. This is a special place. It's a special program, and I'm fortunate just to be a part of it. I know I'm the head coach. You're going to get some praise. You're going to get some criticism when things are down. But I'm a part of something special with a special group of guys.

**Q. This larger playoff we're in is new for everybody, but how important do you think momentum is for the teams still playing and how much momentum do you think you have right now?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, momentum is going to be important, but more importantly it's going to be elevating, getting better. You're going to have I don't know how many days, January 1st -- today is December 20th, so 11 days, 12 days. So that's crucial because it's not a normal game week. We have to find ways to elevate and improve during that week.

I told these guys when we got ready for this game, I said, there has to be a consistency into the way we prepare, the way we prepare for a game. We know it's a big game, but with that consistency, how do we do it a little bit better. Every week, how do we do it a little bit better.

To get 13, as you mentioned 12, to get 13 we're going to be a little bit better, and we're going to have to find a way to prepare in a way that makes this team better.

**Q. When we first talked to you when you became a head coach, you talk about offensive line/defensive line driven programs. Can you speak to how that showed up tonight, especially with missing a piece for a big chunk of the game on each side of the line?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah. That's what I'm always going to believe in is O-line/D-line driven program. Being able to run the ball on offense and to be able to stop the run on defense with your guys up front.

Our offensive line had a huge challenge. That was a heck

of a rushing defense. One of the best I've seen as I prepared for a game. Some of the unique things they do, some of the players that they have, and our offensive line did a heck of a job of finding a way -- I know they had the big run, but the rest of the yardage was ugly. You had to claw and scratch for every yard you got, and they battled, and they battled, and they battled, and they battled.

Really pleased by that group, Sam coming in and filling in, and defensively the D-line did a heck of a job stopping the run. Rylie made some huge plays, Howard obviously made some plays. We're going to continue to be an O-line/D-line driven program through recruiting, high school recruiting, and if we've got to supplement in the portal we will, but we are going to be an O-line/D-line driven group.

**Q. Your wide receiver group came out without their shirts on in the warmup. I'm wondering if that was the kind of statement you wanted to make?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: They must not have been cold because as I told you, there's no such thing as cold tough guys. They'd better not have been cold. They'd better not have been out there shivering. I'm glad they put some clothes on for the game. It got kind of cold out there at a certain point, but man, when you're into that game and you're enjoying that moment, you don't really think about the weather, you just think about enjoying this thing, and that's what I'm going to think about the rest of the game. I'm going to enjoy this thing.

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