

# CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Tuesday, January 14, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Ohio State Buckeyes

### Jim Knowles

Defensive Coordinator

Press Conference

**Q. Big topic from the last game was the goal-line stand. Could you go through each of the four plays really quickly? For historical sake.**

JIM KNOWLES: First play we got into big people, boom, stopped them.

Second play, we were still in big people which leaves you vulnerable to some crack tosses and things, and our guys practiced it and they read it and Caleb Downs pulled his trigger exceptionally and everybody rallied.

Third play, we were in a red-zone coverage that we haven't used before. So I think we had a good thing there. And Jack actually got pressure on that play, and we had all the routes covered.

And then I decided to stay in the same call in the next play and it worked.

**Q. What happened to the first play, the play J.T. made**

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JIM KNOWLES: Yeah, that's how you coach. Just playing on a bad ankle, just dominated the block and got off the block and made the play.

**Q. We talked a lot this season with the offense, especially about pacing itself. How has that affected the defense throughout the course of the year?**

JIM KNOWLES: That's huge. It's huge. I've been in situations where your offense is hurry up and trying to get as many plays as possible. And that can take its toll over the course of the season on a defense.

Coach Day, with a lot of forethought about a long season, really a great strategy and it's helped us a bunch.



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**Q. Looking at Notre Dame, I know you're not worried about their defense, but you have the top two least scoring defenses, top two defenses overall. You come in here wearing a hoodie, drinking coffee, looking old school football. Do you embrace a game like this, a potential 14-10 championship game? And what do you think about two hard defenses facing off?**

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah, I think it's important to recognize that, and that's how I led with our guys. We have to outplay their defense. They're obviously very good in all aspects in that area. Our mantra has been, since I've got here, to be able to win games on defense. So, yeah, we embrace it.

**Q. You talked so often about how the offense gets going it allows you to call more aggressively. How helpful is it for you and maybe a goal for you guys to allow the offense to be aggressive, to go out there and set the tone on defense so that they can do what they want?**

JIM KNOWLES: That's always a goal. It's always been a goal since I got here that everyone can look at the defense and know no matter what the situation is in the game that we're going to be okay.

Fans, you men and women, everyone, we want everyone to have that confidence in the defense. And I know when an offense has that confidence in the defense, they can be more aggressive.

**Q. One thing that Texas did very well is screening. Is that something you can expect to be used against you? And what was it about that that they were able to exploit or use so well?**

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah, I do. And they're really good at it. Screens are hard. That's why people run them. You saw our offense run a pretty good one. They're difficult. They're hard on defenses. And we do our best to get better at them and recognize them. But that's all you can do. Recognition is key.

**Q. The second half of this year, but especially in the postseason, this D line has really statistically made an**



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**impact. I know coming out of the Oregon game you guys talked about that. What has maybe unlocked some of the potential that we knew was there, but now we're seeing the statistical production go along with some of the other stuff?**

JIM KNOWLES: I think we've disguised our coverages better and able to put them in better situations to execute the pass rush.

But they've been great. In my mind they've been great and they're always doing their job. Sometimes the numbers don't show that. But it's nice as a coach to be able to see them get their due.

**Q. Your first play as Ohio State's defensive coordinator was sending Denzel Burke on a blitz against this very team. And it felt like, over the last few years, it's been you trying to find that balance ever since when to be aggressive, when to maybe scale back, and there's been wins and losses where it's always been questioned. As you get back on this field with this team it's a full-circle moment. Do you feel like you as a play caller have found that balance, but also the personnel you've put out there has allowed you to maximize whatever you're calling on a play-by-play basis?**

JIM KNOWLES: Yeah, it's a constant -- it's just constant. I don't think I ever feel good about it. That's why I keep working. I won't take any days off. You're always fighting for that balance.

I don't remember all the plays, but I remember that one. We hit the quarterback right in his face and then missed a tackle, right? And it went a long ways. Then we held them to a field goal. It's constant work.

**Q. Watching (indiscernible) that Jordan Hancock has played really well. Where have you seen him take the biggest jump (inaudible)?**

JIM KNOWLES: I'm glad you noticed that. Jordan Hancock had a great game last game. I don't know how much it shows up, but I'm glad you noticed it because he was really exceptional. And I do believe it has played more into his skills to be able to do some different things with it. He's really embraced it. And you just see him getting better every week.

**Q. You mentioned Caleb's trigger with the goal line play. Curious two things. How special is that to see (indiscernible) because I don't think there's many safeties that can make that play, (indiscernible) trigger? And, two, how that transitions into the**

**amount of work he puts in before the game, (inaudible)?**

JIM KNOWLES: That's just who he is. You're right, he is exceptional. He makes those plays all the time. I mean, and they show up. And it's because he's very talented but he also studies and he recognizes the play before it happens.

When you can be a player of his talent who also has the kind of work ethic that he has and preparation, you see things and you're able to react even faster. So, very skilled but also a great student of the game, too.

**Q. Do you guys pay attention? You're ranked number one. They're ranked number two. Do you pay attention to that going in, bragging rights on the line?**

JIM KNOWLES: No, not really. We just, every game takes its own form and shape. And the statistics, they don't get you any sacks or TFLs or anything going into the game. You've got to earn it.

So, it's just a matter of executing the game plan and finding a way to win. That's a big deal.

**Q. The defensive line has had, I believe, 11 pass breakups in this CFP. How much of a point of emphasis has that been? And what do you think it's allowed those guys to do so well in that specific area?**

JIM KNOWLES: It's a huge emphasis. Tips and overthrows. Gotta have those. Our guys know that. We repeat it. It's been a mantra since I've been here. And I think you're just seeing a lot of that hard work and habits of matching the hand and the things we've worked on consistently and Coach Johnson has worked on consistently since I've been here. I just think that's paying off. It's all about your habits.

**Q. Have you adapted at all how you guys want to defend or match personnel with 12 personnel? Seems like you're not going to that 4-3 as often when teams put a second tight end on the field.**

JIM KNOWLES: It really depends on the game plan. Really depends on the game plan. It's week to week.

**Q. You've mentioned before, sometimes you face 12 personnel that doesn't play like 12 personnel. I think that might apply to some of the opponents you played so far maybe doesn't apply to Notre Dame. What's the difference in the challenge there?**

JIM KNOWLES: If they're going to line up big and just try

to run the ball in standard sets, that's when you've got to get the nickel off the field. So it's just a matter of seeing what they do and preparation and matching that. But you've also got to be able to adapt during the game, too.

**Q. Going back to Caleb, he had another tackle in the Texas game, seemed he saved the touchdown. He's had a million of those this season (indiscernible). Why is he so good in the shoestring tackles where it seems like he flips the guy and makes huge plays?**

JIM KNOWLES: That's a good question. I don't know if I have an answer to that. Great players make great plays. You just can count on them in those critical situations. And he's shown it time and time again.

**Q. You almost predicted the Sawyer sack, somebody made a comment about Texas going in here and you're like (inaudible)?**

JIM KNOWLES: I can't say I predicted the strip sack. That would be bold. But I just know how our guys think and how we've trained them and that if you said to them give us an inch, they would say, we'll defend it. They just have that attitude. So I'm going to have that attitude, too, and believe in them.

**Q. The physical nature of Notre Dame's run game, what do you see?**

JIM KNOWLES: I see a physical nature of their run game. The back's really good, the line. They challenge you in a lot of different ways in the run game.

**Q. Jim, I'm curious how much your familiarity with Steve Sarkisian helped in the Cotton Bowl. As defensive coordinator, would you rather teams try to trick or finesse you at the goal line instead of playing smashmouth football?**

JIM KNOWLES: I've only coached against Sark one time at Oklahoma State. So I had some familiarity. It helps. It helps.

Would I rather have them smashmouth or trick? Hmm. I don't know if I have an answer to that. I think when you see the tricks and you recognize them, you know, you have a real good shot to be successful.

When it's just smashmouth, it's a fight for every inch. So, to me, it's a little bit less predictable when it's just smashmouth.

**Q. Obviously the strip sack and the return for the touchdown for Jack Sawyer puts him on the map to a**

**lot of people around the country. But just what can you say about his day-to-day, on-and-off-the-field, lunch-pail mentality, his faith and who he's been to this team outside of just simply one play?**

JIM KNOWLES: He's done it since I've gotten here. He's just a great young man -- personality, respect, work, smiles, can be tough when it's time to be tough, he can have fun when it's time to have fun. He's the kind of guy you want to coach that you can always count on because if it's a fistfight, he'll fight. If it's a finesse, he'll finesse.

If somebody needs to be talked to on the team or if something in the locker room, he'll do that. So he's just a consummate team guy.

**Q. Similar question about your three years with Lathan Ransom. What have those been like for you and what can you say about the journey he's gone through since you've been here?**

JIM KNOWLES: Lathan loves the game. He loves his teammates. He's had his ups and downs, both on the field and with injuries.

That's just a guy that you always pull for because, you know, he's experienced both ends of it. And you just love to see him do well because he's earned it. He's fought through the adversity.

**Q. Jermaine seems like a confident man. What's your experience like coaching him? Does the confidence make it challenging to deal with him at times, fun? What's it like to work with Jermaine?**

JIM KNOWLES: All of it. I like it. Again, I'm from Philly, so I like that confidence. But it's challenging. Jermaine is one of those guys that if you say something to him in practice, he will bark back at you, which I'm okay with because he's competitive. He's a competitor. And he is fun to be around. He's got personality.

**Q. The player that made that big play when you had Denzel blitzing was Lorenzo, obviously.**

JIM KNOWLES: That's right.

**Q. And he's playing against his old team now. Obviously what have you seen from him? First of all, do you sense the excitement with him? And just how valuable has he been?**

JIM KNOWLES: He doesn't get that excited. Both he and his brother, what a great family, the way they've been raised. They just show up for work and they want to be

coached. Lorenzo is the same. They want to be coached.

They'll do everything you'll ask them to. If they're off on a play, they take the coaching and they want to get better. They're just really coachable guys.

**Q. I know you're just focused on Notre Dame. You're not thinking about big picture, but you came up the hard way. You've never even been close to this situation coaching for a national championship. That's why you came here. What's it like for you? Are you even allowing yourself to think about that?**

JIM KNOWLES: Nope, just staying in the process. Just the game plan, formulating a plan, teaching, preparation. I'll think back on all that some day when I'm old.

**Q. Special teams have been real important for them this year. How much have you reflect, keep the defense on the field (inaudible)?**

JIM KNOWLES: A ton. Their special teams do have a lot to them, nonstandard things that you need to prepare for. We've been practicing it a bunch.

**Q. Coordinators, you and Chip, you take your share of abuse from outside these walls, but you get shielded, compared to the head coach it's pretty minor. How satisfying is it to see that people are back on Ryan Day's bandwagon, the abuse he took after the Michigan game, and now it's like a lot of it is forgiven? As somebody who is close to him.**

JIM KNOWLES: I'm happy for our coach. I mean, he really is a great head coach. He's involved in all aspects. He's in touch with the players. He knows your problems. He knows your struggle. And whatever was going on there, I don't get to pay attention to it because I'm involved in my own world, but thanks for telling me people abuse me, too. I didn't know that.

I tell that story, I have teammates in town, college teammates, one of them owns a restaurant, one's a big lawyer. In the beginning, they'd say: Hey, don't worry about everything everybody's saying about you. I'd say: I didn't know they were saying that about me; thanks for telling me, though.

But in terms of our head coach, there's not a person in this building, no matter what your job is or anybody who knows him, doesn't -- we all know he would do anything for the team or the players and he works extremely hard. He doesn't let anything from the outside world affect us. He's very protective of our job and the players and making sure that we have it the best that it can be.

So, yes, I'm very happy for him. He deserves it. He deserves all the recognition and support from anyone -- anyone who is a fan of this program, if you had any -- if you saw inside how Coach Day works and the feeling the players have for him and how consistent he is and supportive, and then look at the players -- I mean, we have really good kids, really good kids. Well, they're young men. But, I mean, so how the players operate in the community and all the good things that happen and the negative things that don't happen, the kind of discipline and selflessness we have in the program, that's all a function of Coach Day's effort and what he puts into it.

**Q. How would you describe how you're deploying Caleb Downs on this defense? Almost looks like a hybrid Mike at times. How would you describe it?**

JIM KNOWLES: I'm not going to divulge any of that information.

**Q. How is Denzel Burke doing. On Sunday Coach Day said he expects him to play. What's the latest with Denzel?**

JIM KNOWLES: As far as I know. Again, that's above my pay grade. But as far as I know everything is good. Minor thing that he's working through.

**Q. How has it benefited -- your defense is much fuller this year. Everybody, with the exception of Caleb, is a junior or senior. What's been the benefit of having that much experience to get to this point?**

JIM KNOWLES: I don't think you can really quantify it. It's amazing. It would be hard to put it into actual words. Everywhere I've ever been, when you get in the system and you learn it and you can see what's happening before it happens or why I'm calling things, it just pays off in dividends. It's a veteran group I trust completely.

**Q. Sort of the recognition, is it week-to-week, is it in-game?**

JIM KNOWLES: It's both. It's week-to-week. It's learning the game plan while we're doing things. And there are always unscripted plays about the game. I mean, there are things you practice all week and they never happen, and then there are things that you didn't know were going to happen and they happen. So how they react to that and how they handle that is huge and much better with a veteran group.

**Q. The Sawyer play, the right tackle doesn't appear to even do much to stop him. Is that a case where you**

**guys have worn them down over a four-quarter game and the battle of attrition, kind of? He just doesn't even make a play there to try to stop him. Is that what you guys talked about being a four-quarter team?**

JIM KNOWLES: I don't know. I don't consider what they did. I consider Jack making a play and never think about it -- I don't think about it from that standpoint. But there is four quarters, and what Coach Mick does in the weight room and everything these guys prepare for, we knew that was going to be a slugfest. And we expect that this week. First two games we got ahead, but let me tell you something, Texas is really good. Really good. Really good.

**Q. I don't mean to be a smart aleck here, but did you write on the bulletin board or chalkboard, your first meeting back, wheel route. Did that bother you to give up two wheel routes? What's the lesson learned there, I guess?**

JIM KNOWLES: Coach better. That's the lesson learned. You need to coach the wheel route better. It's not the kid's fault, it's my fault. Thanks for reminding me.

**Q. But I wanted to ask you, with Notre Dame, what do they present specifically that's a little bit different? Obviously Riley Leonard will run or throw. He's been effective with it everywhere he's played this year and stuff. And the great running back they've got and stuff, what jumps out at you?**

JIM KNOWLES: Great running back. Great quarterback who is an incredible competitor. I know him from Duke. He came in after me. But the way everybody talked about him there, he's a guy that, you know, he'll scrape himself off the ground and keep playing. He's just going to keep coming at you. And he's tough and he's fast.

So you've got the running back, but then you've got the whole quarterback run game, which is different, and the scramble game, where he makes a lot of plays.

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