

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

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Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Marcus Freeman Press Conference

Q. Marcus, obviously a lot of Ohio ties for you, but I want to ask you specifically about your relationship with James Laurinaitis. I talked with him earlier, and he said you're just the kind of best friend he can count on. What's it going to be like coaching against him and against your alma mater?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, it won't be something you'll think about once the game starts. But again, you talk about a guy that you care about more than the game of football, and we have a personal relationship. Our wives know each other really well. Our kids know each other really well.

He's a friend, and at the end of the day you care about friends. But when the game starts, the game starts. It's going to be about winning, and look forward to the opportunity.

Q. What do you learn from defending these guys and from watching the Michigan game in particular, and how do you defend Jeremiah Smith?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, it's not just one thing you can do to defend Jeremiah Smith. He's one of the best receivers I've ever seen in the college football game at a young age. He's a dynamic football player. He's physically a big presence, but he can run and he can catch.

You're going to have to do some different things to try to keep him off balance but also keep the rhythm of the quarterback off balance.

But the other part of that is we've got good players too. We got to do what we do. And we're going to trust our guys to get the job done no matter what we call defensively.

I still believe strongly we have to stop the run. We've got to do some things defensively to make sure we can stop the run, and we've got to be really good in the red zone. That's



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going to be something we have to be, is really good in red zone. And then we've just got to do some things to make the quarterback try to think and not keep him in rhythm.

It'll be a difficult challenge, but we're looking forward to it.

Q. Are those things that you mentioned things that you saw from Michigan or overall things?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think there's some things that happened in the Michigan game that Michigan did really well and Ohio State maybe didn't do so well, but what you can't do is look at another team's defense and say this is what we're going to do. You have to do what your team currently does really well.

That's the nature of the game. Any coach that tells you they just followed somebody else's plan is probably not going to be that successful. We've got to make sure that we can take some ideas from what other teams have done to have success, but really implement them based on how they fit within our system.

Q. I was talking to James earlier, Laurinaitis, and you guys are big wrestling fans. How many Wrestle Manias did you guys go to? And when you found out who his dad was, was that an immediate magnet for you?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I grew up a wrestling fan, and he came in the year after I got to Ohio State. And when I found out the son of the Animal was coming in, I was a fan. I'm a wrestling fan.

Then we did go to a lot of Wrestle Manias together. I can't remember how many. But now my kids are fans.

If we can get to a wrestling event and I can take my kids there, we try to.

Q. What is the last time you went to one with your family?

MARCUS FREEMAN: We went to one in Chicago. I can't remember when it was, a couple months ago. It might have been before the season. But we went to a Friday



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Night SmackDown event in Chicago.

Q. What do you like about wrestling? What got you into it?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I grew up watching it. I liked it. I don't know, the characters. I think at different phases you enjoy different things. When I was young, everything was real. You ended up thinking, idolizing the Hulk Hogans and Ultimate Warriors and all those guys. And then as I got to go to some Wrestle Manias with James, you got to know some people. And now it's about seeing your kids happy. And if my kids want to go see wrestling, as a father I would try to do that.

Q. Coach, what was the Notre Dame presence like where you grew up playing football? Obviously there's a lot of big Catholic schools in that area. Have you noticed it's increased in Ohio when you're looking for players down there now?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I mean, Notre Dame has always been a national brand. I can't tell you how many -- I don't know how many Notre Dame fans I knew growing up in Dayton, Ohio. There's probably a lot at some of the private Catholic schools. I don't know if it's grown. I'm not back in Ohio. I live in South Bend, Indiana. The Notre Dame fans, the Notre Dame network is national. It's worldwide. But I don't know if it's grown in Ohio or not.

Q. You made it here to the big lights, you made it to Atlanta. How do you stay humble? How do you keep the guys humble here in Atlanta under the big lights? And what's on your playlist for the week?

MARCUS FREEMAN: As far as how do you keep yourself humble, I think the reality is when you realize you don't get to this point by yourself, it's easy to be humble. When you realize that it takes everybody in this program to get their job done for us to be in this situation, it's easy to stay humble.

That's the reality of this football program. We understand this is not about one person. It isn't about one player. It's about all of us getting our job done.

What's on my playlist? It depends on what day. It depends on what type of mood I am. I'm not a huge music person. I mean, I'm a podcast guy, things that help me really get my mind to a place it needs to be for that day.

But it's a little bit of everything. I'm a melting pot, that's the reality, of what I need that day.

Q. What kind of challenges does Caleb Downs present

to your players?

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's dynamic. We recruited Caleb before he went to Alabama, and I've followed him just because he's a great young person, has a great family. He's never out of position. That's the thing about Caleb; he's never out of position. He plays the game under control. He's a really good tackler.

But he sees the game in a way that puts himself in positions to always make the play that he has to. Man, he plays big. Physically he might not be the biggest, but he plays the game big, and you've got to know where he's at at all times.

Q. I'm curious, when you think about the kid from Wayne High School sitting here at the National Championship as a head coach, what goes through your mind?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know what, I've been blessed to have a lot of great mentors and a lot of great people around me to help me grow. I think about my time growing up in Huber Heights, Ohio, and the many coaches and mentors and teachers that all had a part of me developing my foundation as a person, and my parents, obviously my brother, and then as I went to college and so forth.

But Dayton, Ohio, is always going to be a special place to me. Obviously my parents still live there. But the foundation of who I am as a person was developed in Huber Heights. There's a lot of people that get thank yous for putting me in the situation I'm in now.

Q. We were talking to Kirk Herbstreit and a lot of our players. They're torn; they love Ohio State, but you're the hometown kid. For fans in Dayton, Ohio, that don't know who to cheer for this weekend, can you help them out a little bit?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Listen, I've got a job to do to make sure this group is ready. You cheer for us or you don't. It is what it is; no hard feelings. But my focus is on making sure this team is ready to perform on Monday.

For all those that are cheering for us, we appreciate it.

Q. Have you decided what you guys are doing on the offensive line, and are you willing to share any of those plans?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we've been working Charles Jagusah at the left tackle but also playing some guard. We have an idea of what we're going to do starting on Monday, but it's something I think we could wait until Monday to just

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say this is exactly what we're going to do. But he's been playing a lot of left tackle and playing some guard, too.

Q. What can you say about the faith that this team has and the fact that they share it so publicly? Secondly, what Riley has done to lead this team since he came in.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think being at the University of Notre Dame, it's a place where growing your faith is encouraged. It's not only in Catholicism, it's the reality of you having a faith and a belief in something bigger than yourself.

That's something that we talk about amongst our football program. We have mass. We have our team chaplain. It is promoted, and our players have Bible study and different things like that.

I have a strong faith, and there's oftentimes we talk about you have to trust beyond having evidence, trust beyond knowing, which is another motto for having faith.

We're not shy about it. They're not shy about it, and it's important for us, and each individual makes his own decision on how he wants to discuss it or grow in it or any type of thing like that.

But Riley has been huge for us as a leader, as a football player, as a competitor. He is a great young man. But he's a great competitor and a guy that's been continuously improving from the time he's gotten here.

It's difficult when you have high expectations the minute you step on campus, but he's kept a level head. He's put the work in. He's doing great things.

Q. Coach, when you were at Ohio State, was that when it initially popped in your head about maybe a future in coaching --

MARCUS FREEMAN: No. No.

Q. When did that happen for you?

MARCUS FREEMAN: It happened when I was in the NFL. When I was in college, I wanted to be an athletic director. I studied sports management. I actually GA'd my last year under Gene Smith and Pat Chun in the sports administration field.

Then when I was in the NFL and I figured out that I wasn't going to be able to play anymore, that's when I talked with Coach Tressel about the possibility of getting into coaching. I didn't know what coaching was when I got into

it. I thought it was a chance to stay in football, be on the sidelines. But it's so much more than that.

I figured out early in my career that coaching is about leading people. It's about serving others. That's how you fall in love with it.

Q. Would you happen to have any Haitian American athletes on your team?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we have Charles Du, who's Chinese; Jordan Botelho, who's half Hawaiian, half Korean. Haitian? I don't know. I don't want to speak wrongly. I know we have -- I don't know if they're Haitian.

Q. What has RJ Oben's contribution been to the team?

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's been great. RJ doesn't speak a lot, but he works his tail off, and at the biggest moments, he's shown up. He's a big reason why we're in this position. He's been doing a great, great job for our defense, making big plays. You look at the play he made versus Georgia, we're going to need him to play big versus Ohio State to have success.

Q. Does it help you guys, the fact that you were here in this same stadium not too long ago playing against Georgia Tech? And what does it mean to you to be here, being a first African American, first Asian American, but the story line not about that, instead most people talking about the job that Marcus Freeman the coach has done at Notre Dame?

MARCUS FREEMAN: The first question about us being here previously, by the time we get to Monday, both teams will have two days that they can practice in Mercedes-Benz Stadium. I don't think it's going to be an advantage. We're going to be on the opposite side of the field than we were when we were here.

Is it an advantage for us? No, I don't think so. I think both teams will be comfortable with where they are. It's the team that can handle everything outside of the game and keep that in perspective and get their job done.

Second part of your question was again?

Q. What does it mean -- we're coming here Martin Luther King holiday, and the story line about you being a first has really kind of been secondary. It's been more about Marcus Freeman and what he's done as a coach. What does it mean to be in that season where even though the story line is still about you being a great coach of one of the greatest franchises in college football?

MARCUS FREEMAN: That was a two-parter of your second question. I know the second part, but -- oh, MLK day.

What I don't want to do is lump the National Championship game with what Dr. King has done for our country, right. January 20th, MLK Day, is about celebrating the life of Dr. King and the impact he's made on our country. None of that light should be taken away by this National Championship game.

The example he set for so many others of not only to talk about the beliefs you have but to actually put those beliefs into action and to make change and to fight for what you believe in is a legacy that I hope to follow and every person in our program follows. And no matter what the color of your skin is, the example he set for Americans I think is tremendous.

As far as the attention being on this football game and not me being the first, I think it's great because when you start putting the focus on me being the first African American or me being the first Asian American coaching this game, that takes away from the team. I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for the team and everybody getting their job done.

I know that's what the media or perception has to be. There has to be a person or cause and effect for why we're in this position, but the reality is it's everybody. It's everybody in this program getting their job done.

I like to make sure the focus stays on the team and not just one person.

Q. You mentioned often that Pat Wood was a huge mentor in your life, going back to your Dayton roots. If he was in the locker room with you before Monday night's game, what do you think he would say to you?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Pat Wood? How do you know Pat Wood? You must be from Dayton.

Coach Wood was my first defensive coordinator/linebackers coach when I was at Huber Heights, Wayne, and it's crazy he was a huge Notre Dame fan.

But I couldn't act the way he acts -- he acted now, or I wouldn't have a job. But the impact he made on my life and who I am as a coach is tremendous. There's times I laugh that that guy -- I've got stories for days about Pat Wood.

But I still think about him to this day. I try to make him

proud -- sometimes there's thoughts in my head I'm trying to make him proud. He's had a huge impact on my life.

Q. I asked him the same question, and he said, "I would tell Marcus to keep a steady hand before the game."

MARCUS FREEMAN: He didn't do a great job with that, back when I was young.

Q. I said, "Coach, are you going to wear your Notre Dame hat that Marcus gave you?" He said, "Yes, I will be wearing it." He'll be sitting on his couch, and he'll wearing it. A follow-up. I know your family is going to be there on Monday night, but anybody else special in your life who is going to be in attendance at the game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: No. The only thing difference about this game is that my mom and my dad are going to be there, which they haven't been to many games. And I thought it was great that they made the decision to want to come down here. I didn't know if my dad was really going to come, but he said he wanted to come. I won't see them; they'll be in a box or somewhere.

But the normal, my wife and the kids, my brother and his wife, and that's probably about it.

Q. Your relationship with Coach Ivy, could you just describe that relationship and why maybe it's been beneficial for both of you as relatively young coaches?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think at Notre Dame, it's a small community, and what you do is you become support system, fans of those other coaches, not just Coach Ivy but all of them, Coach Shrewsbury. There's many coaches that I've become close with.

But I think it's encouraged because of how small the school is. 8,500 kids, you get to see everybody.

But sometimes only coaches know what coaches go through. If I can text her after a big win, I do, but more than anything I make sure to reach out to her after a difficult loss because sometimes you just need to hear, it's going to be all right, get better.

I remember we were flying home from USC, and they had just lost in some type of tournament to start the year, and I remember saying, They're looking at you more now than they ever have. So pick your head up, let's go back to work.

But it's great to have that type of relationship with people that understand what you're going through as the head

coach of a program.

Q. What's Beaux Collins been able to do in practice this week, and what can you say about his status?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, he's progressing exactly the way we thought, in the right way. He practiced yesterday pretty much for the majority of the practice. The first time he's really done that in the last couple of days. So as long as there's no setbacks, he's progressing in a way that we think he'll be ready to go, full go on Monday.

Q. Through this extended playoff now, this is a month where you guys haven't been able to be on the road recruiting. What has that challenge been like for you and your staff?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we've often said the best recruiting we can do is keep winning. That's the reality of it. This is going to be the best recruiting we can do because the lights are on our program, and that's great for parents and high school recruits to see.

But we also have a great recruiting department. Chad Bowden, who is our general manager, and his department has been on the road in high schools, getting transcripts, talking to coaches and figuring out the character of high school prospects. So we're not sitting back and not being on the road recruiting. We're just having other people in our program do it.

We have two females which I think is great to put the spotlight on: Zaire Turner, she's on the road recruiting, and Rebecca Sites. So two women that are in our recruiting department are actually on the road, recruiting in high schools.

And I think that's amazing because, one, they do a great job; but, two, you're not going to see many women recruiting in high schools and scouting and doing those things. So I think it's great for the growth of recruiting departments but the growth of women in football.

Q. Do you remember anything special about the recruiting process for Jaden Greathouse, getting him out of Austin, Texas? And was Penn State a breakout moment in his career?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, Penn State might have been a breakout moment for outsiders to see, but that's Jaden Greathouse every day he's been in our program. I've often talked about playing the wide receiver position is one of the most unselfish things you can do because you can do everything right, you can be perfect and not get the production to coincide with what you do in running your

routes.

But we make sure to point out how well you do on that play, no matter if you get the ball or not, no matter if you get the individual plays or not.

He's done that for a while in our program. He just had the production to go with it versus Penn State.

His recruiting? You had to fight to get him out of Austin, Texas. He was a kid that after a couple times of visiting our campus, he said, This is the place I want to be. He's stood strong. He had a lot of people pulling at him, even after he got to Notre Dame.

But he's a great, great kid, and we're great to have him in our program.

Q. In prep for this game, Ohio State is likely to facilitate a lot of their offense through Will Howard. He's had a lot of success in these College Football Playoff games. In watching film, what's gotten your attention and jumps off the page about his game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think he's elite at making good decisions. He's got a good arm, and he can extend plays with his legs. He takes care of the football. Those are traits that any great quarterback possess, and this moment isn't too big for him. We know he'll be ready to go on Monday, and he presents a huge challenge.

Q. Coach Golden just said that you gave a really good speech at halftime of the Orange Bowl game. What was your message to your team? Secondly, for this game, Ohio State has outscored its opponents 42-0 in the first quarter. How important will the first quarter be in this game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, the first quarter is important in every game. It's how you start, how you win the middle eight, how you finish. Every play is important.

Having a good first quarter is the result of winning that play.

We often talk about people say you guys do good in the middle eight. Well, you've just got to win that play. You've got to finish. How do you finish? You've got to win that play. We don't spend a lot of time saying you've got to start fast. Yeah, everybody knows that. You've got to win that first play, and then guess what? After the first play is over, you've got to win the second play.

We don't try to think about an outcome. You don't think about the future. You think about this place. If you do that

enough and you do it well, you're going to start fast. You're going to win the middle eight, and you're going to finish.

As far as some speech, there's no speech that I'm going to give that -- these guys understand what's at stake, and they understood what was at stake at the Orange Bowl. Maybe it was at halftime was me to remind them: Do not play scared. I just felt like in that first half we weren't playing with the aggressiveness that we usually play with.

Now, Penn State did a really good job on both sides of the ball, but I wanted them to go out there with the mindset, listen, we're going to attack, we're going to be aggressive. This is what we do. We've been in this position before.

It's funny because you're often tested with little tests before you get a big test, and versus USC we were tied at half. That was the first time we had been tied or down since we lost to Northern Illinois, and that was the first test, to see, okay, how do we respond being tied at half.

Then you're down seven versus Penn State. That was the next test.

We've shown that, hey, we couldn't handle it versus Northern Illinois being down. USC we responded well to being tied. Then we were down again against Penn State.

There's a belief in our guys now that they know the different tests that are going to occur throughout the season that you have to pass in order to be in the situation that we're in now.

Q. Do you really think you're going to escape without a question about the NFL? What is your interest in the Chicago Bears or a head coaching job in the NFL?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know how busy we've been preparing for this opportunity. Here's the reality, is that with team success comes individual recognition. To hear that the Bears have interest, it's humbling. It's the NFL. But it's also a reminder of with team success comes individual success.

I have put zero thought into coaching in the NFL. All my attention has just been on getting this team prepared for every opportunity we have in front of us. Probably not the answer you're looking for, but that's the answer you're going to get.

Q. You've often referred to Riley Leonard as a fighter. In the second half of the season, when you guys have been on this winning streak, was there a moment between you two where not only did the trust increase but you realized he was willing to do anything?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, there's not one moment. That's just who Riley Leonard is. He's a guy that in the most crucial moments wants the ball in his hands, and he wants to make a play, and most of the time he does.

That's how he was raised. He's a competitor. Getting a chance to talk to him and getting to know his story a little bit, you realize he was raised that way. He's a competitor, and he's going to find a way to will us into winning.

Q. Let's go back in time. In 2006 you were an Ohio State player, you beat Notre Dame and reached the final, but then you lost as a favorite. What lessons do you take from that year going into this year's game on Monday where you guys are underdogs? What motivation do you guys need as an underdog to beat Ohio State?

MARCUS FREEMAN: There's zero motivation that is necessary to prepare for a National Championship game. I was a kid. I was a young person. I can't go back and remember what was going through my mind, but we were playing for the National Championship, and I was a part of a team, and I just wanted to do my job.

We got beat.

When I think about college and I think about the relationships, I think about the great players I had the fortune to play with. But at the end of the day, the maturity level of who I am today versus who I was back in college in 2005 or '06, it's completely different. You see things from a different perspective.

That was then. This is now. There is nothing that I can use probably from that game that's going to really resonate with this team. This team has to make sure we focus on preparation these last 48 hours, and when the game starts, we've got to do what we've done all year but probably do it better than we ever have.

Q. I wanted to ask, a lot of this team made their debuts in Ireland last year. What do you think the growth of this team from that game up until the game coming up on Monday is?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, there's some players on this team that weren't even in Ireland. But when I think about the Ireland experience, it was amazing. I think we've all grown through experience from that point to where we are now.

But I just think back to that experience in Dublin, Ireland, and that will be one of the great experiences I have as a

head coach in terms of that was my first time being in Europe, being outside this country. It was pretty special. It was special.

Q. (Indiscernible.)

MARCUS FREEMAN: Listen, that's for people above my pay grade. But yeah, I would love the chance to go back to Dublin, Ireland, and play. That was amazing.

Q. When was the last time that you talked to Jim Tressel? He told me he's coming, he's looking forward to it. What advice has he given you about this game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I've talked to him recently. I didn't know he was coming to the game. We don't talk about things like that. We just talk about probably some -- I'm able to ask him questions, and he gives me his opinion. That's probably what's most important. Somebody that I hold very high, somebody that has experience in games like this, somebody that can give you a perspective from a previous head coach in terms of how you performed last game.

We talk often. But I know it's a unique situation for him being that he is a part of Ohio State but also a part of my life. I wouldn't put him in a position that he has to choose. But he's been great for me all season long. I'm excited for him to be here.

Q. In the breakdown of this game, so much is made of playing styles and how you guys want to play a certain game and Ohio State wants to play a certain game and who can win the battle of sucking the opponent into playing their game. How much do you see that, and what is the key in your mind of getting Ohio State to play a lower scoring smashmouth-type game the way we all envision the way you guys are built to play?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think more than anything, each team has a plan to do what they do well. Again, we know we've got to be able to run the ball and we've got to be able to stop the run, or it's going to be a long day on Monday.

That's the reality of when you talk about playing in this game, you have to do what you do well and do the things that have given your program a chance to be in this situation. That's we're going to do.

You have to be able to make adjustments. If your plan going into the game isn't having success, then you're insane not to make adjustments to try to give your program a better chance to succeed.

This game will be about, hey, who has the best plan going in, but how you make adjustments in terms of having success on offense and being able to stop them defensively.

Q. You've played Ohio State your last two games. What's different about the Buckeyes team this year, but more importantly what's different about your team this year coming into the National Championship game?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, it's two different teams. You're talking about two years ago, their team and our team was a lot different than this year -- I mean, a lot different than last year's team, and it's going to be a lot different than this year's team.

I've told the team all week, this isn't about the past, this isn't about where I went to school, this isn't about the two previous games, this is about the opportunity right in front of us.

That's what you've got to understand, where this program is now and who we have, it's about putting these guys in a position to have success and do what they do well. Same thing with Ohio State. Their team this year and what they're doing right now is different than the team we played last year and two years ago.

The focus is on having a plan to have success offensively and defensively versus the opponent we're playing on Monday and really not focusing on the past.

Q. You've got guys from Wayne High School on each side the game, you and Coach Mickens. What does it mean to represent Wayne High School and Dayton, and what does Coach Mickens bring to your program also?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Coach Mickens is a tremendous asset to our program, the ability to identify talent, to recruit the talent, to develop the talent. I mean, he's been a heck of a coach. He's done a lot of great things for this program and even our time in Cincinnati together. He's a heck of a football coach.

As far as where we grew up, I think everybody has a piece of who they are because of the way they were raised, and our four years at Wayne High School has a big impact on who we are as men today. That's a special place. It's a special place to me. There's special people there. There's teachers there. There's administration, there's coaches there that all have an impact on who I am as an individual. So I'll always be a Wayne Warrior.

Q. What was that turn on your path that you think was the one that was key to getting you to this point? I remember first guy I saw when Luke Fickell's introduction at Cincinnati was you.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I don't think you can point out to one person or one situation that got me to this point. I think everybody, everywhere, every person that I've been a part of, Darrell Hazell in our time at Kent State, those two years there that we were able to win, that second year going 11-1, and go to Purdue and our four years at Purdue, I learned valuable lessons, valuable lessons in terms of -- our record wasn't great. I think we won nine games in four years.

But I learned valuable lessons from Darrell Hazell as a leader and through some losses and through some players and the coaches I was there.

Then my four years at Cincinnati with Luke Fickell, who was also my position coach, the ability to take that program -- I think we won four games our first year, and then we won double-digit games the next four years, his leadership -- those little bits and pieces that everywhere I've been have a part of who I am and why we've had success.

We've had success because we have great players here that have committed to something bigger than themselves. That's important. We've got a whole bunch of individuals, coaches and players, that say, you know what, us achieving team glory is bigger than individual recognition. And that's why we're in this position, and that's what we're going to continue to thrive to do from this opportunity, but also as we move forward.

Q. When Brian Kelly called, did you hesitate at all, or did you think that's the move for me?

MARCUS FREEMAN: When Brian Kelly called me at Cincinnati? No, I visited Notre Dame, and then I went down to LSU the following day. And it was a difficult decision, but I guess I made the right one.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the pregame mass for you and the team? And what does it mean to you and the team to be a Notre Dame man, and what kind of values are you trying to instill in the players?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I remember being a recruit and coming to a Notre Dame football game and watching -- I was in high school and watching the team come out of the basilica for pregame mass, and I thought that was the coolest thing. I remember seeing movies about it.

Again, I didn't follow much of Notre Dame football until I got back, until I was hired in 2021 as a defensive coordinator. And I remember that year, we didn't have pregame mass. I think part of it had to do with COVID the year before, but we didn't have pregame mass.

So when I was made head coach, it was something that I had talked to the administration about, about when that decision was made to not have pregame mass and what we had to do to change it, and it was something that was important to me to change that for multiple different reasons.

What was the second part?

Q. What values are you trying to instill in your players, and what does it mean to you, in a few words, to be a Notre Dame man?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think more than anything, it's selflessness, like the ability to put others before yourself. I think that's one of the greatest traits humans can have is the ability to put somebody else in front of yourself.

As I tell these guys all the time, yeah, it's going to make us a successful football team, but it's going to make you a successful husband and father and person. If you can put others before yourself and work extremely hard, those are two traits that I believe will help you have success no matter what you're doing in life.

Q. Can you walk me through a little bit of your offensive line is a little in flux. It sounds like you're going to make the decision on what to do Monday. Walk me through that process of what you're looking for and reflect a little on Charles.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, he's been playing left tackle in practice, a little bit of guard. We'll make the final decision by Monday, but I think it's going in a direction we all kind of see. But he's been getting more reps at left tackle than he is at guard. Take that as you want.

Q. Reflect on him a little bit and his journey back.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, again, he was a guy that we made a joke -- I was sitting in my office with his parents after he had surgery, like, Hey, you're going to make it back for the playoffs, haha, and all of a sudden he did, and we continued on this run to a point where he could actually help this team.

Now, he was a backup going into the Orange Bowl. He was a backup. Then Knapp goes down, and then Rocco Spindler goes down. He was huge to be able to fill in at

that right guard position. He did a great job, as well as did Tosh.

As we go into this week, now you had to make the decision what's best versus this defensive line that we're facing, but it's been great to see a guy that started the bowl game last year as our left tackle, came in with all the expectations to be our starting left tackle, tears his pec in fall camp and then make it back for some of the most meaningful games of the season, it's amazing.

Q. When you were recruiting Drayk Bowen, he had the reputation of being a vocal presence in that class. What was his impact in your first recruiting class, even before he got to campus?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, Drayk did a really good job at recruiting some other players, high school recruits. And I often tell our biggest recruits, like Drayk was, Great players want to play with great players; so if you want to play with some great players, get on the phone and start recruiting them.

He's done a great job. He's a vocal leader even now. Same way he was in recruiting. He's a big piece of that recruiting class that he was a part of.

Q. You have faced a lot of adversity all season. From walking into Kyle Field sold out week 1, Texas A&M, prime time, coming off the loss to NIU, the Sugar Bowl, having to play a game the next day, the Orange Bowl, how is your team and culture so special to get up off the mat and respond to adversity and you're here now and fighting hard and you're so good at responding to adversity?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Man, life -- this season, but life includes pain and adversity. Life includes unpredictable things that you don't expect to happen. Your ability to handle the unpredictable things in life is what's going to determine your success.

There's some unpredictable things that have happened in our season. There's unpredictable things that happen in a game. The ability to handle them but also get better from them. Nobody thought we were going to lose to Northern Illinois. We lost. How do we handle that loss and continue to move forward, but how do we learn from that loss?

I think those are all important things, is as you look at our football team, our football season, but also life, it's that unpredictable things are going to happen. You've got to pick up the pieces and move forward, but also you've got to be able to learn from those difficult moments.

Q. What do you think makes your team so close-knit?

MARCUS FREEMAN: They make the choice. They make the choice every day to put the team in front of themselves. It's not something that you can take for granted because every day you've got to make that choice.

Q. Every game day Instagram and Twitter always talk about your fresh fade. Is that a part of your game day routine?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Shout out to Julio. Julio Rodriguez, my guy. He cuts the hair of a lot of our players, and he takes care of me. That's who gets the credit for that.

Q. As the calm before the storm, what do you think your message will be to the team on Monday night?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I don't know exactly what my message will be. It will be something that I usually always say, and it's about you're ready for this opportunity. Don't hold anything back, and go attack and be aggressive. That's what you've got to do.

My focus right now is maximizing these 48 hours that we have from now until Monday night. Like if I sit here and daydream about Monday and about what that opportunity is going to be, then we're not going to get the outcome we want, and we're going to lose this moment that we have right in front of us.

You have now. You have today's practice. You've got meetings. You've got tonight. You've got tomorrow. So focus on this opportunity, staying in the moment that you have right in front of you. And then when Monday night comes, you've got to be ready to roll. But we cannot waste valuable time of preparation just daydreaming about Monday.

Q. When we talked in November and you said that -- I asked you about the mystique of Notre Dame, you said that you did not believe in ghosts. The way the season has gone, do you think there's some kind of mystique that's helping you guys along the way?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I said I don't believe in ghosts? I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in God. You know what, I'm a faithful person, so there's a part of me that feels like God has His hand in everything that goes on in life.

But what you can't do is sit here and say, I'm just going to let God handle everything and not do the work. That's the reality of what we focus on, is putting in the work that gives this program the best chance to have success. And that's what everybody has been committed to doing, and that's

what we'll continue to do.

Q. I know you've said that Martin Luther King Day and the historic implications should be focused on the man and the players, but Jeremiyah Love has just said he's so proud of you for what your position means for Black players, Asian players, all players. Talk about the players looking up to you.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I do not take for granted that I am a representation for many guys on this team that look like me. I hope they can look at me and say, okay, work hard, try to do things the right way, and you're not going to be judged by the color of your skin. It's going to be by the way you work and how you treat people.

So I want our young people to be able to look at me and say, hey, if I want to be the head coach at Notre Dame, dangit, if I work hard enough and do the right things, I've got a chance to do it because look at my head coach.

The whole point of me continuing to take the attention off of me, though, and putting it on the team but also putting it on Dr. King -- like Martin Luther King Day is about the great legacy that Dr. King has left in our country, and I don't want to take any of that light and put it on myself but also the National Championship game because what Dr. King has done for our country has been tremendous.

The ability not just to talk about change but to have actions that incorporate change. He made change through his actions and his words, and the courage he has as a leader is something that I still am impacted by, as I study his life. And to do it in 38 years, that's just -- the impact that man made in 38 years is just humbling to even think about.

That's what I want to make sure. Anybody that talks about me on this day, on Dr. King's Day, let's point the attention at Dr. King, the person who really made change in our country.

As far as me being the first Black or Asian head coach to be in this game, again, I am grateful. I am so grateful to help represent a lot of guys, especially our players and coaches that look like me. But I'm going to make sure the attention is turned on the team because I'm not in this position without the team and without the other coaches getting the job done.

Q. Playing in this game and having this experience a couple of different times, was there anything you could share with your team, hey, here's what it's going to be on the outside?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I explained to them when we

got into the start of this week that I played in two of these games and I lost both of them, and one was to you. You know, those are the memories that I have of being a part of this game is losing both of them.

Now, I'm in a different position than I was in being a player. But that's the memory I have of both National Championship games. Those aren't great memories.

Listen, this opportunity is about this opportunity, and that's what I tell them all the time. This isn't about where I played in college. This isn't about the previous two games we had against Ohio State. This is about this opportunity right in front of us, and we've got to stay focused on putting ourselves in a position to have success on Monday.

Q. I know you have to appreciate the way y'all got here. You're playing physical teams, but you have bullied a lot of bullies here on this path. I've heard a lot about savages today. They live by the too gritty to be pretty we always talk about.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Listen, our brand of football is what this team needs to have success. The thing I've learned more than anything as a head coach is the plays you've got to fall in love with on offense and defense are the plays and calls that your players can do well.

It's not this great scheme and that you've got to be able to find ways to get guys wide open or bring this exotic blitz. You've got to be able to call things and run things that your guys do well.

And that's what we do. And part of what we do is have to have a mentality of being a savage, of being aggressive and being physical and being willing to fight no matter what happened on the last play or what situations in the game. It's an attack mindset on all three phases. That's what we're going to have to do on Monday.

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