

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Saturday, January 18, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Howard Cross III

Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
ATLANTA 2025

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's still a big deal, but I would say it's like less of, like, a -- not less of a deal, but it's less of a freak-out, you know what I mean? Because, obviously, for games if you lose one -- prior to this year, if you lose one game, LSU, Georgia, Alabama, or Ohio State, you're out.

Again, like if this was a four-team playoff, us or Ohio State wouldn't have a chance to play in this game. It's cool, and it keeps the ball rolling, you know what I mean?

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Yeah, because, again, prior to this year, Ohio State lost to Michigan, we lost to NIU. Our season would be over. Now we have a chance to play in this game.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Feels similar. It's a National Championship game. I'm happy to have this opportunity.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's fun.

Q. Playing in this venue already, does it give you any sort of advantage?

HOWARD CROSS III: It's just like every other game. We've played here. We know it. We know the environment. That's a little bit of an edge, but it's a new game. One game at a time. We're looking at it like this.

Q. How far has this team come since the game with Georgia Tech?

HOWARD CROSS III: We've progressed. Every game,

we get better. It's the mindset. I think we have. I'm proud of us, happy with what we've done, and I'm excited for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: No, no. I call myself a really realistic guy. Like I know -- like I never even dreamed about being -- I never thought I'd be in this position until after the Duke game last year. In high school, when I first went to high school, I thought it would be cool to play on varsity. When I was on varsity, I thought it would be cool to get an offer. When I got here, I thought it would be cool to get on the field.

I didn't come with expectations outside of getting an education and working hard. No, I did not think I would be in this position at all.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: So, obviously, it sucks. It's bad for any head coach to leave. At the same time, obviously, first person I called, my dad. My dad's like that sucks, but it's part of it, you know what I mean? It's a business. There's no fault. Coaches leave all the time. It's unfortunate, you know, not great. At the same time, it's part of the business.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: I wish I could tell you something different. All I know is after he left, we all stuck together. It was a point of no matter who comes in, no matter who's our coach, we're still going to be the same team.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: The culture, for sure. It was very team mentality and team including the coaching staff. So team including the coaching staff. Kelly was a great coach. Everybody has different coaching styles. Freeman's very personal and player focused, you know what I mean? Kelly was a strategist. Coach Freeman is a players' coach. It starts with him first.

Again, somebody could obviously mess up and it could



... when all is said, we're done.®

definitely 100 percent not be his fault and he'd say I did something to allow that to happen, you know what I mean? So we're happy we have him for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: We all liked Coach Freeman before. When it came out, it was hectic. Immediately, everybody was like why doesn't Freeman just be the head coach? Immediately, everybody agreed. Everybody was like -- then person talking about it and somebody of authority asked somebody else of authority on the team, and they're like we want Coach Freeman to be head coach. They listened to the players, which we're happy about for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Yeah, for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: He's got the mentality of just keep pushing, you know what I mean? It's tough for any head coach to take a job at a big university like this one and to fill the culture around it. It's a big university. A lot of expectations, a lot of people breathing down your neck telling you what you can, can't do, what you should, shouldn't do. He's done a fantastic job to get us to this point for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Again, it's not a controversial pick by any means. Coach Freeman is a great guy, and we all love him.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Growing up, my dad was very big on you can kind of play what you want. If you do something, just make sure you're good at it. I said I wanted to play football, and he supported me for sure. He's the first person I call after a game. He's the last person I call going into games. So he's been there every step of the way football-wise, making sure doing drills with me, helping me watch film, making sure I do better, what I shouldn't be doing, everything like that. I'm definitely happy to have him.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: This season? Probably the drive, I think it was Stanford where I had two sacks in a row, which, I'm not gonna lie, completely by accident I was

pushing the pocket and the quarterback ended up in front of me. I was like, ah, finally. That was fun. That's for me personally.

For everybody else, I think it was the kickoff return a couple games ago for a touchdown or something like that. Or a punt return for a touchdown. That was also really cool. It was against Georgia so that was also really cool.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Just enjoy yourself. God, country, Notre Dame. For anybody in my position, for being undersized D-tackle, for being told that, again, Notre Dame took a chance on me and I'm never going to forget that. A lot of schools said they are not going to take a chance on me because of my size. If you're my size and playing in my position, and you're small, keep pushing. The way you play is going to outshine the size you are. I promise you that.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's going to be very corny, but it's really just play technique, sound football. You know what I mean? Stay off the ball, stay low, use your hands, do the gap. Because the teams they've lost to, it's specifically been they played to their standard, you know what I mean? They don't make any mistakes. They have every gap full. So it's be as perfect as you can for this game.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Yeah, yeah. But, again, I really do think it's more of just play technique, sound football. If nobody makes mistakes and everybody does the technique that they've been taught, I think that we're going to have a good game.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: From what I've heard, it's natural leverage. A lot of guys larger than me have to get to a certain height to play at a certain level. I'm naturally a little smaller, even though when I tell all my friends, like, you're not short. But on the field, I'm short. But, yeah, natural leverage is definitely something that I have and as I've noticed some offensive linemen try to stop me with that.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: They're a bunch of very big talented guys. Like I said before, just technique and playing your gap will for sure most certainly make us have a better day.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's very technique, sound. It's a chess match. If you don't have the gap, somebody else has the gap. If that person doesn't, somebody else has the gap. It's basically being a piece in a chess match is the way you view it, basically. It's like all the stunts. You stunt, somebody else in your position, somebody else takes their spot. It's kind of crazy if you see it from a bird's eye point of view. It's like playing in a chess match, basically.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's crazy. I've never been in this sort of defense before. I love it. But it's crazy. There's somebody for something. There's a backup plan for a backup plan for a backup plan.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It just comes from the mentality of our program, especially the defense. I've said it before but, like, if there's something bad happens, like a pick or a fumble or they make a lucky play and it's the red zone, before we go out, Coach Golden always says the same thing. We've got them right where we want them. Even if they're two yards from a touchdown, we've got them right where we want them. That's the real mentality. No matter where we are on the field, what situation, that's what we're going out with.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It was the New York Yankees game to hype us up. Getting a lot of Sopranos, a lot of Meadowlands, Hoboken. Talking about we're going to pop their kneecaps, you know what I mean? But it's a lot of fun for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's awesome, you know what I mean, a coach of that caliber being able to get ahold of us and just more fuss around what it means to be a great defense. We all, for sure, see that to a tee for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: My favorite purchase? I don't really know if I've got that much NIL money. I'm just very big on experiences. I like visiting family. I got to visit, I guess, my cousins in Seattle. Never been to Seattle. Seattle is a very nice city. It's very out of the way. I grew up in the Twin Sister so I saw a lot of Twilight movies. So I don't know. It was a little dark and scary a little bit in the forest,

but it's a nice city so that was kind of cool.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: I would probably say just, like, a little less -- I feel like players should be able to -- it's a hot topic, but I think players should be able to express themselves with celebrations.

Coach Freeman has this thing called well better learn or something like that on Fridays. It's just plays or something like that where dudes will do something stupid on the NFL or in college, and he's like, hey, make sure you don't do this.

More often than not, it's celebrations or something really, really dumb. I think one time, one dude got up and flexed and got a flag or something like that. I think players should be able to express themselves when they make a play or something like that.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It's been a roller coaster for sure, but it's the playoffs. We stay grounded and he helps -- Coach Freeman helps us stay grounded by saying, hey, this isn't just -- obviously, yeah, it's a college football playoffs, National Championship game. It's great. But it's literally any other game. We're going to have the same week. We practice the same. We're preparing the same. We have the same mindset going into the game. We're not going to make it bigger than it usually is. Again, National Championship. It's the game. But, like, in order to have success, we can't let the lights blind us. It's like every other game.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Jack has been routinely one of the smartest people that I know. He's head of the defense for sure in terms of directing everything that we do, seeing everything. More often than not, when the D-line is trying to figure something out in practice or in meetings, it's the same answer. Just wait for Jack to tell you what to do. It's always funny to have that answer, but that's a real answer. We know when Jack tells us to do something, it's always right.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Okay. Ready for this? I don't know where that came from. I never played wrestling in my life. No, no, because I keep seeing that, and everybody is like he's a state championship wrestler, but I don't know where this came from.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Any senior has, but I have my own preparations as well as anybody else in my position. Mine's a little different considering I have a couple weeks to prepare. Most people have had about two months. So, you know, it's going to be exciting. For right now, take care of business first.

Q. Do you visualize success? Can you imagine what the moment would be like holding the trophy?

HOWARD CROSS III: Anybody has. Anybody in this building has, as well as the other team. As much as we want to dream that, everybody has, believe me. Everybody is currently probably now. But you've got to do a lot of things before you get that trophy.

Q. There are some stories out there, real or fake, seems like the championship (indiscernible) always finds its way into celebrations. Are you going to embrace that as well if it happens?

HOWARD CROSS III: Oh, of course, of course.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Again, all we hear is -- oh, my God, sorry. I'm losing my train of thought here. Like you said, it is a big factor. Momentum. That's the word I was looking for. Momentum is a real thing. Way more of a thing than people realize. If an offense gets going and really, really get going, it's hard to stop.

If you have a play, say an offense drives, I don't know, like has three or four first downs in a row and then you bat a ball down or someone picks it off, it's over. Like the momentum is done. They have to start over the momentum again. So it is really demoralizing to have a momentum killer for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: He's a good quarterback. Personally, for me, in all my years of playing, he has probably one of the best traits a quarterback can have. No matter who's in the pocket or who's about to hit you, you're still going to make a throw for 40 yards. Personally, that's one of, if not the best, trait for a quarterback to have. Annoying for me and the defense, but a great trait for him to have. That's going to present a challenge for us.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: We have obviously practiced it. It's not like anything we haven't done before. We played big quarterbacks. Again, it's the same preparation every single week. Just make sure you get two hands on, make sure you wrap and roll because he's a big quarterback. He's going to be hard to tackle. But we're prepared for it.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Yeah, we did. It was one of the freshmen, I think.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Drayk is for sure full of tenacity. Anytime you see a Drayk highlight, it's him running at full speed no matter who's in front of him and lowering his shoulder, whether it's an offensive lineman, running back, or tight end. It's always fun to watch. He definitely is a symbol of what we want our tenacity on defense to be.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: I don't remember. I don't remember what game it was, but I do remember a game of him running -- I don't know if it was this season. I know he's a great dude, but it was during a game this season where he cut through the line. It may have been Texas A&M, I think, where he cut through the line and, like, toppled one of the running backs -- no, he toppled one of the -- I do remember, actually. He ran through the line and, like, lowered his shoulder and blew up an offensive lineman and hit him so hard that the offensive lineman fell back and fell on top of the running back who had the ball. It was a crazy play. That set the tone of who he was for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It would mean a lot. A dream come true, obviously. As a kid, being allowed in those spaces and seeing those dudes and seeing just like, oh, this is larger than life guys. You know what I mean? Dudes who I couldn't even comprehend being anywhere near who they were. Now I possibly have a chance, and that still hasn't registered with me. It's a dream come true for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: I say it a lot, but anybody that says they're 100 percent that's been playing is lying. They're lying to you. Let's be real here. Offense, defense, Ohio State, anybody, they're lying. Especially this long. Nobody, including Ohio State or any of the teams in the past, have played this long. It's uncharted territory for everybody. But you've got to keep pushing. At this point,

it's just who lasts longer, you know what I mean? And we have a really good mentality of just pushing through it.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Not really. At this point in the season, it's like I know I'm going to be shot regardless. I'm not going to be annoyed by whatever's on the screen or shocked if it's low numbers or not. You've just got to keep going at this point.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: Anybody in my position, just train and pray to make it to the next level.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: No, that's something I was trying to figure out currently. You know what? Got to take care of business first and figure it out after.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: It means a lot. Obviously, I've been around for -- I've been around -- the year I started was the year after they went to the playoffs, but they lost to Clemson. Yeah, they lost to Clemson. My sophomore year is when we played Alabama in the playoffs. We didn't make it.

But we actually made it and we've beaten teams that would have been National Championship caliber teams. So it means a lot, obviously, for me. But for the program, for the Notre Dame community, it means that we've progressed as a school and as a program and I'm just really, really happy and grateful for that for sure.

Q. (No microphone).

HOWARD CROSS III: I think -- it's kind of hard to pinpoint. I say Kelly was a strategist, you know what I mean? I tell you what, he wasn't a players' coach, but he knew how to make a great team. He knew how to surround himself with great coaches.

Freeman's a players' coach. He puts himself last kind of on and off the field. If anything happens, he puts himself first in terms of -- again, it could be something crazy like somebody just dropped the ball or something like that. He's like, you know what? He looks immediately, like, I somehow allowed that to happen and he lets us know that. And not like in a mean way. He's, like, I need to work on something to make sure that doesn't happen again. He's a head coach.

There are some things where it's completely not his problem. No matter what it is, he looks at himself first, what can I do better to fix it? He lets the team know, what can I do better? What can the coaches do better? We're extremely helpful and grateful that he's got our back for sure.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports