

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Saturday, January 18, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Al Golden

Press Conference

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: This is where you're at in this time of the season. Not a lot of room at the top of the mountain, at the peak. These guys exemplify that. A lot of answers on the perimeter and the wideout game, two big-time running backs, three tight ends that rotate in and a quarterback that's playing really well right now.

So, no doubt about it, challenge vertically, challenge horizontally and good running game as well. So, it is.

Q. (Question about being aggressive on the defensive side of the football and what it means being an aggressive defensive coordinator?)

AL GOLDEN: Just trusting the players. It's just the way we've kind of grown into that over the last year and a half. And really that's what got us here -- being aggressive, being on body as much as we can, changing some of the looks up.

And so it's hard at this stage of the season to do anything else. So that's our focus. That's who we are. That's part of our DNA, and we have to challenge.

Q. (Indiscernible). What do you remember about your time there?

AL GOLDEN: Learned a lot that prepared me for this moment and this journey. I've shared that with the players, just the succession of the playoffs and then being in this format and how quickly you have to turn around.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I believed in my heart, I believed it in my heart then. He talks about it all the time -- trust without knowing. And I had faith and I trusted without knowing how this would turn out.



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And as it turns out, I think we've won 13 in a row. Everybody's rallied around him. Just the way he operates every day. He's a selfless leader. He's a servant leader.

He empowers his employees, his staff. He empowers the team. He chooses an incredible message each week, not just for the opponent for life, that you can learn from. That's what endures. And, to me, that's why we are where we are, because he's a tremendous leader.

Q. They present a lot of challenges (inaudible)?

AL GOLDEN: Where do you want to start? I mean, just it's great football, right? Like, this is where we're at. And whether you look at their schedule and who they played and who they have beaten -- I was just talking to our guys, if you said in June we were beat A&M, Florida State, USC, Georgia, Penn State, think about that, what we've created in college football.

That's really awesome. And the game is stronger than it's ever been. And that's what we're trying to defend right now in Ohio State.

If you try to take the slot away, you've got 4 and 17 on the perimeter. If you're light boxed, they're big and strong enough to run it inside. If you leave the tight ends alone, it's a tough one-on-one match-up. So there's a reason why they score like they do.

I think the biggest change I see is that I don't think they're in a rush. I think they're really doing a great job of getting into the correct play at the right time. And that's a credit to the coaches and the leadership that Ryan has provided them.

Again, just hats off to them. And that's what we're getting ready for. But there's a lot that keeps me up right now.

Q. Uncharted territory for 16 games. How do you not just manage it, but plan for it early? How have you seen the toll on your team at this point?

AL GOLDEN: Obviously it's been harder to manage because we have so many guys that are out. It's not like



we're gaining guys back.

So we're a little bit lighter there in terms of our depth. But Coach Freeman does an unbelievable job just using the sport science to plot the course. And not every week is the same. And they can really determine the load that players are taking, the hits that players are taking and how to manage it.

And I think Coach Freeman has done a brilliant job along with our sports science group. And that's the only way to get through it. I think what we've learned during this journey is how deep you have to be in college football right now to come here, to get to this point.

We've had a lot of guys step up or we're not where we are right now.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Ohio State's offense is prolific. I think anybody can see that. In terms of, our defense has to keep us in the game, we're complementary football. That's what we're built on. It takes all three phases.

Everybody looked at -- I can't remember what A&M scored -- was it 13, something, early in the year. But everybody forgets that our offense had that drive at the end. Everybody forgets that.

We needed them to do that. And everybody forgets that we had a lot of time to fix things against Georgia because our offense held the ball, or that special teams stole a possession or blocked a punt or pressured a punt.

So it's complementary football. That's the way we're built. And really no unit is different than the others. We've got to do it together.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: It's a blessing. I've grown with Jack. Jack, obviously, all three years that I've been here has been here. And he's just a blessing to coach. He's a tremendous human being. He's a great leader. He's playing his best football right now. And really that's how you get to these games.

You have a lot of guys like Jack Kiser on the field that can make those decisions, get you out of problems on the grass. And just blessed and honored to have the opportunity to coach Jack Kiser.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: We've got to dance with the date that got us here. Like at the end of the day, it is who we are. It's part of our DNA. We understand the challenge, but we also can't abort and change course radically at this stage. But you've already said how talented they are.

Q. (Indiscernible). Is returning to the NFL anything you would consider after this year?

AL GOLDEN: I think the biggest thing right now, it's humbling that your name is mentioned because of the team success or the success of our defense. It's a reflection of Mike Mickens or Max Bullough, Al Washington, all of those things.

But at the end of the day this is not the time or the place. This is about the kids. There's always time to reflect on all of that after the season.

The biggest thing for us right now is just understanding the enormity of this game. And as I said to the players, really when this thing started, it's really hard. Like, we played Indiana, the game finished -- I'm looking at Sarah back here -- but she made me do the media afterward. I got home at 1:00 o'clock, but I wasn't going to change my schedule the next day. And I told the players why.

I was in there at 7:30 because how grateful that I am for this opportunity. And I don't want anything -- and anybody out there that doesn't understand that, I probably don't want to be a partner with.

There is nothing that's more important than our players and our performance in this opportunity because, look, there's a lot of teams that they hit an upright and they're not here, they didn't get in. They had a quarterback injured. They didn't get rated high enough to be in but they were right on the cusp, you know what I'm saying?

So to me, that's our focus and all that other stuff we'll deal with in the future. Right now we've got to concentrate on winning today and having a great Thursday practice in our mind today.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: That's a good question. Chip and I go way back. Obviously Ryan worked for me at Temple. And I'm so happy for him and Nina and just the job that he's done.

And Chip, when Chip was in the NFL he would come visit us at Miami and share ideas.

But I don't think I've ever coached against Chip. But go way back to recruiting in New England, those circles. But

just the incredible amount of respect for Chip Kelly.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Amazing, amazing job. Everybody's fast to say "players," but it's one thing to have talented players but it's how they're utilizing them and getting the most out of each one of those talents.

I'm talking all the way through the skill positions on the offense. So they've done a great job of creating schemes and getting in the right call against certain looks and that's a credit to the offensive staff led by Chip and obviously Ryan.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: It's a credit to them. And it's not just that, it's the redshirt freshmen. I've said a couple times to Sean McDonough and Greg McElroy, because they've done the games the last couple of weeks, I've said to them, there's times we'll be in a staff meeting and I'll stop the tape. And there will be five freshmen or redshirt freshmen around the ball.

So somewhere along this journey, we've gotten to be very young, but I wouldn't say it's caused us any decrease in performance. And that's what's really important.

Yes, those guys have to study and get caught up quickly -- Bryce Young, Kyngstonn, Leonard Moore -- but the standard is the standard at Notre Dame and when you play defense at Notre Dame.

And we're not moving that line. And if you're good enough to join that line or rise above that line, then you're welcomed with all arms. And those guys have all answered that call right now.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: You know, I feel badly that Ryan has taken some of the criticism, because when Ryan -- I'll tell you a quick story about Ryan Day -- Ryan comes on his interview and basically everything he owned was in a duffel bag.

People that said he had it easy, that's all nonsense. He worked his ass off. He rose above some hardships, some tragedy. Worked his way from Temple to BC, back to Temple and then into the NFL. It wasn't going great. I think at one point they got let go. He ends up at Ohio State. And the rest is history.

So I couldn't be more happy for anybody because of his work ethic and what he's become.

All the critics, at the end of the day what is he? He's a great coach. He's a tremendous father. He's a great husband and he's a leader of men. So I'm happy for him. I really am.

And we both want the same thing right now, and that's competition. That's where we're at.

I just wish him the best and obviously hope our guys play our best. And that's my job.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Just every piece of it. I think the quarterback is playing really well. They're hitting on their downfield shots. They're creating. Their first-down efficiency is really improved. They're not in a lot of third-and-longers.

They're just operating at a really, really high level. They're running the ball well. Their running backs are great competitors. The quarterback's making good decisions. Tight ends are really doing a nice job. And then obviously the vertical threats.

And whether it was Oregon, Texas, Tennessee, like all those games, they really played at a high level.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Again, I said last week -- because that was obviously the prevailing question last week -- and all of those experiences make you who you are. So when God closed that door for us, then I went on a different journey and I learned a lot on that journey. That's what's prepared me for this.

I think that's what I can share with our team and our defense and individual players.

And it's a blessing to be here. It's a blessing to coach at Notre Dame and to represent the university and have this honor of playing in this game. But I've learned a lot on the journey since then.

I said this to Andrea maybe a month ago now, I said I wish Mario the best. I think he's the right guy at the right place at the right time for Miami. And I know he'll get it done.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: You know, again, we have to do what we need to do to win the game. I think what we learned last week is it wasn't perfect. It wasn't perfect.

But when you scratch and claw and you hang in there and you give yourself a chance to win, sometimes great things happen.

So I think we're beyond the stage of thinking it's going to be perfect. They're really good. They're going to make plays.

There's a certain way we want to conduct the game. Obviously we're not going to share that with you, but we'll see how the game evolves.

Nine days is a long time to get ready for somebody. So maybe there will be different things we haven't seen yet. But I just think we have to adapt and adjust as the game goes here.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Drayk Bowen is a warrior. He loves football. He's an athlete. He's an athlete first who is in a linebacker body.

He was a prolific baseball player. Great athlete in high school; hand-eye coordination; instincts; FBI -- football intellect -- really, really high; cares. We call it the "give an S" factor. It's high with him. Like cares.

Can play physical. Athletic enough to win on the perimeter, big enough to take on guards inside. Plays well with his hands.

I can't say enough about his growth and the development that not just Max Bullough, but the linebackers in general. They're so cohesive that they help each other grow.

And he's done a tremendous job. I just couldn't be more proud and really thankful that he's on our side because he's that kind of player.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think you have to, especially the space tackles. There's a certain way that you have to drill it, and that's the difference between what you're saying, like, you hear a lot, oh, he made a play.

When you make plays consistently, that's your culture. And what I mean by that is, if you turn on the tape and Leonard Moore closes in space, and JC, who has just gotten here nine months ago, closes in space to make a tackle and the linebackers do the same thing, then that's part of your culture.

And I think they do a really good job of understanding leverage and being confident. Because if you're not confident you're going to spread your feet, you're going to break down and leave space. And you can't leave space, whether it's 4, 2, 17 -- if you leave space with these guys, you've got an issue.

So I think that's a credit to those guys buying into the techniques.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think you always want to start fast. I don't think there's a coach out there that wouldn't say that. But I would say, more than anything, you have to adjust and you have to play with poise because it's a long game.

I think what we did well -- again, I thought Marcus was awesome at halftime last week because it wasn't perfect last week. It wasn't pretty to be honest with you. And our guys settled in, and the defense ended up with a three-and-out and a four-and-out. And that ended up being the only seven plays we defended in the third quarter. That allowed us to get back in the game.

So we have to start faster this week against Ohio State than we did, on defense, than we did last week. But it is important.

I think what's more important is to play with poise, adjust, fix some things as you go, and just know that it's going to be a long journey.

Q. You replaced, like, nine or 10 starters a year ago that graduated or went on to the NFL. How did you manage to get better? How did you replace so many veteran defensive players?

AL GOLDEN: I think it's a credit to our leadership, obviously Coach Freeman's program. And just the buy-in. It's an honor to coach these kids. They want to do what you ask them to do.

But you never have to ask them to do it full speed. You never have to ask them to give everything they have because that's part of their DNA.

And that's the beauty of coaching at Notre Dame. So I have the honor of saying, okay, guys, this is the plan. But then they're like, okay, coach, we've got it from here. That's the beauty of it.

The leadership in the room, the leadership up the middle has been awesome -- the linebackers and safeties. So much credit has to go to the players and how they react on

game day.

Q. (Indiscernible) decades of experience. How do you take that --

AL GOLDEN: It's part of the culture. There's certain systems in place -- there's a standard there and it starts to get handed down. It's not me up in front of the room anymore; it's them in the locker room. It's them when they're by themselves on the practice field. It's them saying, no, no, no, that's not how we do it. Think about doing this next time.

No, I think that's the only -- culture is the only thing that sustains this time of year. I could say the same thing about your fundamentals, right?

If things aren't going well -- and trust me, at some point Monday night things are not going to go well -- do you play with poise? Do you get back to your fundamentals? Or does it come off the rails?

We've got to really, really, one play, one life, stay in the moment. Don't worry about the next play. Don't worry about the last play, just focus on this one right here.

Q. (Question about what you're going to focus on Monday night)?

AL GOLDEN: That's a great question. I think a lot has to do with how the game unfolds. But there are certain things -- and they know. They know there's certain things that we feel like we have to take away. And we know there's certain things that they think that they can make hay on, that they can exploit.

So we're trying to neglect ours and exploit theirs. And they try to do the same thing. We'll see how the game unfolds.

But this is the beauty of where we're at, and I want the players to enjoy the battle, enjoy the competition, and know that it's not going to be easy and it's going to be all day. It's going to take all day and everyone. And you just gotta find a way.

Q. (Indiscernible). This year you have unsung heroes. What's it meant to have those younger guys merge with those older guys?

AL GOLDEN: It means a lot. It starts with Coach Mickens. His undying commitment, relentless commitment to improve each of them as individuals.

I've said this before, but Coach Mickens' office is right next to mine. And if I'm watching tape or on a game plan I hear

him talking. I get up and go get a coffee or something, and he's got two or three guys in there, and they're watching third down or they're watching the red zone.

And I can give you examples. I think about the back-shoulder fades versus Indiana and how that was a focus this week and how we played them so well. Just every week it's something different because there's different challenges.

So it starts with Coach Mick. And then you have the leadership with Xavier and Ben Morrison before he got hurt. And then the welcoming into that position group by those guys. And then the confidence that those guys have to step up and make a play.

But Christian Gray, are we hear without Christian Gray? USC, last week? Probably no. Are we here without Leonard Moore stepping up? No, absolutely not. That was a hard week.

We got bad news on Ben and lost one to the portal. So that was a tough week going into Louisville. And that young man answered the call and the rest is history.

But it's not as simple as that, right? Because he was ready for his opportunity, just think about that. And Louisville's wide receivers were good and he stepped up and did a great job.

So, my hat's off to that group and the way they nurture each other and improve each other. And it's going to be a great challenge for them Monday night.

Q. (Indiscernible). You were able to slow them down (indiscernible). Why is that?

AL GOLDEN: I mean, I think our kids executed really well. Obviously we gave up some explosives in that game. But we offset that with some turnovers, which is really important in a game like this.

I thought we tackled well, tackled well on the perimeter. We weren't fighting the battle on all fronts. We had the run game, we were doing pretty good against the run game. It wasn't like we were battling the run game, having an issue in the slot, having an issue at X.

So you can't solve everything and you've got to limit your issues. And I thought we did a good job of doing that in that game.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think he works really hard at it. He's not



conflicted at all. It's not that he wants to call the plays one day and the next day he wants to be the leader of the organization.

Like, he is the leader of the organization, and we're all held to his account. And more importantly, it propels us to want to be our best version for him and for the players.

He's done a masterful job of creating a culture, one of the most overused phrases in sport. It's one of the most evasive things to put your finger on. He's got a great pulse of it. He's established a great culture, whether you're in nutrition, you're in the weight room, you're on offense, defense, special teams, he's involved in every aspect.

He's selfless, just makes you want to be his best version. I can't stress to you enough how blessed we are to work with him in the fact that he empowers us to be our best.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think Marcus is one of the most consistent humans I've ever been around. When you think about being that in the backdrop of Notre Dame, that's the most impressive part of him, in my opinion, because the stress is huge.

If he at all felt the stress or displaced it after NIU, we're not here right now. He shouldered it. He started with himself, asked us all to reflect on what we need to do better and, more importantly, plotted a course.

I think there's a lot of leaders that fall short on that last part, you know, because it's easy to get angry. It's easy to hold people accountable. It's easy to put up the screen and say we've got to do this better, but then you've got to plot a course, and he plotted a course for us that everybody could have a piece of, have a hand in, and one win.

Again, I think I said it to you, Andrea, never been more stressed than going into that Purdue game because we didn't know what we had at that point. We felt really good after A&M, but it was so demoralizing, we didn't know what we had, and then the kids showed us what we had.

So one win, two wins, Louisville at home, catch fire and just never let go off that little piece. So I think he deserves every credit, every accolade. It's one of the best examples of human spirit that I've witnessed.

Q. (Question about defensive coordinator, what strengths does he have)?

AL GOLDEN: Number one, he's my go-to guy on game day coverage-wise. We're always talking about all right,

Mick, where are we going on the next three and six, where are we going on whatever the next distance is. What do you like on early downs? That kind of thing. I think he's got a great -- I think that's where it starts, right, he has a great idea and a big picture concept of how we need to conduct the game and what changes we need to make.

I think he's got excellent relationship and rapport with the players, but he's not their friend, you know what I mean? Does that make sense? They respect him; they want to play hard for him. He's their leader. He's their alpha in a lot of ways, and he's not afraid to make an investment in time. Time's one of the most overlooked assets you can give a player, and he's constantly committing time to their growth, to their development and to make sure they see the game really fast on game day.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: This was the goal. I told Coach Freeman when we came this is the goal, and obviously the job's not finished yet. This is a big one coming up. There's no one that's satisfied. There's no one that came here and said, we want to get to this game and that's it, or we just want to win 13 in a row; that's not it. Our whole focus is on getting better.

When I came here I didn't know Mike Mickens. I didn't know Al Washington. I didn't know Max Bullough. But I believed in Coach Freeman. I believed in his program and his values and I believed in Notre Dame and what it represents. And I feel like it was a great match for me. I'm excited to have this opportunity and coach the next 72 hours or however many hours that we have left here, get ready for the game.

Q. What's it mean for Notre Dame in college football to win a National Championship, given being questioned whether Notre Dame could win a national championship game? And looking at the match-up, how much did you study Michigan State, seems like there's some similarities, the way they played (inaudible)?

AL GOLDEN: I think there's an expectation, to answer your first question, is that we want to be in this conversation. We want to be in the playoffs. And you have to get in the tournament to have a chance.

So we have to build our team accordingly. We have to understand the type of depth that we have to have, and I said it when we were 1-1, we have the right leader at the right time to build that type of program.

I think there's always going to be naysayers, I think there's



always going to be detractors, but I think what doesn't get enough credit is how many kids that we have that are graduates or in graduate programs, how well our kids do in school, the commitment that Coach Freeman has made to develop them as people.

I said this last week, because someone asked me about Coach Paterno, I think that's the secret sauce with Coach Freeman, he spent so much time developing the person, developing a culture where kids can succeed in every facet of life that it bleeds over to the field. So, no, I think this is where we want to be. We want to be in that conversation.

In terms of studying Michigan, there's several games. You're studying every single game this time of year. We just have to make sure we're not over-studying because I think they've plotted a little different course since that game.

We just have to have an idea who are they now versus who they were versus Michigan or maybe who they were versus Oregon the first time, but we take all of that into account.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I'm here to serve Coach Freeman and I've said it countless times, he is the leader. He's got a great idea of what he wants the program to look like. And what he has around him is a lot of unselfish coaches that will do anything they can on any given day to give him what he wants.

And from Jack to Pete, to Coach Freeman, to Mike, Marty and myself, to the position coaches, to the leadership in the locker room, you have alignment. When you have alignment on every level, that's when you have strength. That's why I think we're built to endure. We're not built to be a one-hit wonder.

So if coach ever wants to run something by me, that's great. If he's opening up the table for ideas, that's great. Other than that, my job is to work as hard as I can every day to give him what he needs on the defense and then collectively how to develop players.

Q. So much has been made about Texas, limiting yards (inaudible), how can you approach that challenge (inaudible)?

AL GOLDEN: Tough. Well, I can't give you the answer, but I can just agree with you that it is a great challenge. And if you do that, you do what they do, you might do it at the peril of allowing the other two to have an enormous game or allowing the two running backs to have an

enormous game.

You've got to pick and choose. You've got to really study to see when you can take chances and when you can't. It's tough. I mean, that's why we're here. That's why we are where we are and they are where they are and we've got to find ways to slow them down.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Now we're talking. No, man, I still go back there every summer. Some people go on trips. Some people go take vacations. Some people go to Europe. I go to New Jersey. That's it. Man, leave me alone. People see me with my cigar on the boardwalk, and that's it.

I love golf, but I love hitting balls and having a cigar, like that's summer for me in my mind. Jersey is an incredible place. Where I grew up, I still have all my family there, just unbelievable place to grow up, to raise kids, obviously to visit.

There's a toughness to it. There's a competitiveness to it. My mom and dad grew up in Jersey City, and there's a toughness to it.

You've got to rise above. I don't think I am where I am, I don't think I've made the journey without being raised there, going to Red Bank Catholic High School, listening to Bruce Springsteen, it's all part of it. That's who we are, where we're from. And Jon Bon Jovi, I can keep going on and on. But the guys back home will know what I'm talking about.

Just good times. Just keeping it simple with people and cooking some food and just relaxing and enjoying each other's company. That's how I feel, what I think of New Jersey.

Q. Going through this experience, how has the college postseason --

AL GOLDEN: Excuse me, I feel we've been in the postseason since week three.

When you think about, since our Army game, this is our fifth road game in a row, our fifth out of sixth; is that true? Five out of six. So you have to pack your bags now to go win a championship, like, you've got to go and gotta go set up camp at the hotel and you can't have bad morale and you can't have guys saying, oh, we're tired, we've got to go to Media Day again. No, you've got to be grateful for it. You've got to be grateful for the whole thing.

Can't just be grateful for the game, gotta be grateful for the



whole thing and know that, okay, we're having this meeting. Well, this is like being in our facility on a Thursday. That's our mentality. We go to a different stadium, have a walk-through.

So those are all the things that you have to experience. And I think once you experience that, you can carry that forward, and I think that's really going to help us moving forward in the future.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think we have a certain profile that we look for in the boundary and maybe a little bit different profile for the field. But the good ones can do both.

Cam obviously can do both, but if you can have that length and that physical presence into the boundary, it really is an asset to your program, because a lot of times that's the quickest throw, that's the easiest throw, not the easiest throw, but if you give the quarterback the read he wants, the ball can get there in a hurry, whether it's a slant, a glance or a fade over there.

So you have to be long over there, and then at the same time you have to be physical enough to show up in the run over there. And I think that's where Leonard has done a good job. That's the one thing, when Cam came back, you're talking about Cam, we challenged him on a couple of things.

He said, okay, now coach me, what can I get better at? Cam got so much better at being a physical presence in the run game.

And I hope he feels like we helped him develop that part of the game because he just got so much better these last nine months in terms of using his hands, beating the block, showing up in the run game, being more physical in terms of his jams.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think Will is playing really good right now. He's making good decisions with the football. He's distributing the football. I think he's using his weapons really well.

I think he's playing at a high level, and obviously it's the confluence of all that that is coming together right now that we have to try to pull apart, that we have to try to defend, and that's what's making them formidable right now. It's skill. It's running back. It's tight end. The O line is playing well. They've overcome some injuries there and Will is pulling the trigger for them. So we have to do a great job

combatting that.

Does that answer your question?

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: First of all, Max does a great job with the linebackers, but Max can't always be with them. And that's where Jack takes over, whether it's in the locker room or calling a quick 20-minute film session. Hey, let's watch this, let's watch the red zone. Let's take a look at this. I think that's where Jack has been masterful.

It's easy for guys when they get older to say, well, you're just a freshman. That's is not Jack. Jack has embraced those guys, and I don't know if we would be here if he didn't embrace those guys, if he didn't bring Jaiden along, if he didn't bring Drayk Bowen along and really stayed persistent with Jaylen Sneed, because Jaylen, you can argue, is playing as good as anybody on our defense. So I think a lot of that goes back to Jack, his leadership.

He's a Notre Dame icon. He represents everything that we want to represent in the classroom, in the community, on the football field, everything that he's experienced right now is really well-deserved. And I know he's this, he's been a blessing in my life.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: First of all, I think they did a really good job. But you can overcommit. If you overcommit to one guy, then Tate has a big game or 2 has a big game or the running backs have a big game.

We're just going to have to pick and choose how we want to defend and when we want to take chances or be aggressive. But it is a formidable group; but, no, we try to learn a little bit from each opponent they play, but at the end of the day we are who we are, and we have to be our best, play our best.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: You're making me smile because we were at practice earlier in the week, and we introduced our spring weight room interns and our kids were like, what do you mean? Like, it's spring semester, it started.

So it's long. I think Coach Freeman does a great of keeping the guys fresh, changing the message, changing the dress for practice, all of those things, I think, are important. New challenges. And I think it's uncharted parties, whether it's Ohio State, us, whoever it is, but you can learn a lot. You can glean a lot from this.

I know our program, moving forward, is going to learn so much from this. There's going to be how many guys on this team next year that are going to be able to go and pack their bags and go to New Orleans or pack their bags and go to Pasadena or pack their bags and go to, wherever it is, and learn how to do it and play with poise and stay focused and block out the noise.

But it has been long. I think as a staff, we came back July 21st, and we've been in camp for a long time. It's been an interesting year.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: It does. I remember, was it last spring -- my first spring -- he was doing, like, tax clinics at his house. He'd have a bunch of guys over and just -- I think since then we've moved it kind of in-house and we have great with Amir and those guys they do a great job with all that.

But before that was in place and the NIL was coming up, Jack did a great job of getting the guys together and say this is what you have to do and this is where you should be saving and investing and doing those things. He's a smart guy. He's a fun guy to talk to on game day. He can solve problems. He asks questions. He's a great human being.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: I think you're right. I think Coach Freeman does an unbelievable job of measuring their load. I'm talking scientifically, sports science, measuring the load, measuring the number of collisions and then plotting a course.

Our game week going into Georgia was dramatically different than our game week going into Penn State. This one's different than the Penn State week.

They're all different. But at the same time just changing it up, keeping it fresh, and challenging the guys because that's what they want. We have to keep elevating. We have to keep forming at a high level. We have to be better today than we were yesterday, otherwise it's going to catch up to you.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: It's hard. I think as I said earlier, the confluence of those guys with how Will is playing is what's made them so proficient during the postseason, and it's a tough challenge.

There's very few teams out there that have weapons in all

three spots and then the two running backs and the tight ends. They present a lot of different challenges, and our job is to manage what direction that they go and how we adjust on game day and adapt.

Q. Wanted to ask about the pressure on quarterbacks. (Inaudible). How do you feel about doing that early?

AL GOLDEN: I think you have to. I think you can't let anybody be comfortable back there and whether that's generating four-, five-, six-man pressures, however it manifests, we just have to find a way to not let him be comfortable, and to be honest with you, we need, when it's time to rush the pass rusher we need to have a good pass rush. We need to win. But that's definitely an underlying challenge in the game.

Q. Offense has so many different receivers, and it can be a Lucas or Tate's day or Jeremiah Smith's day, what's that challenge like, that everybody is tight on their feet, doesn't give anything up?

AL GOLDEN: Part of it is understanding that we're at the point in the season where guys are going to make some plays and you have to adjust and adapt, where are they going, where do they want to go with the ball, who is the guy, the hot hand right now, do we have to take him away? What will the better answer be? Just enjoy the competition and enjoy the battle, just know it's not going to be perfect. We have to make more plays than them and try to attack the football.

Q. What's the biggest key, you talked about 13 games in a row to get to this point, the team's used to winning. What's the biggest key to get keep that going and (inaudible)?

AL GOLDEN: Coach Freeman. Clearly Coach Freeman, his leadership, not letting us forget how we lost focus in week two and just staying humble and hungry and continuing to elevate, continuing to improve every day and not listening to the outside. And that siren got us one time. That siren got us. It got in our building and it stung us, and don't let go of that. Don't let go of that. Just be humble, hungry, prepare, be the best version of yourself, understand that we do things collectively for team glory, and we're not here if it's not for all three phases.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Well, probably last spring when I told the guys in defense that just block off December 20th because we're going to host. I don't know if we ended up hosting on the 20th or the 21st, but I can't remember, but that was our mindset.

Now, Hollywood wrote the script. I didn't quite see it happening that way, but we did have confidence that we had the type of team that could get into the tournament and do what we're doing.

I think the greatest thing that -- just think about how awesome this is. I was looking at the teams that -- just think about how awesome this is, the teams that Ohio State has beaten or played this year. Could you ever imagine Notre Dame, in a single year, you beat Texas A&M, you beat Louisville, you beat Florida State, you beat USC and Southern Cal, you play Indiana in a playoff game, you beat Georgia, you beat Penn State, like that's what has been created in college football right now, and it's been awesome.

So, no, this was the goal. This will remain the goal at Notre Dame because we have the leadership and not just in Coach Freeman but systematically and just cultural alignment from our president on down to be in this fight every year.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AL GOLDEN: Well, I can't say too much, but I think it was a residual of a lot of guys being locked in, and when we do our two-minute presentation of saying, okay, guys, now look when they have this and this into the boundary, expect this to the field.

I think Christian did an amazing job of understanding that and bringing that to life. That's our job as coaches is to put guys in the right position, but what their jobs are as players is to receive information, kind of become empowered and trust it, execute it on game day. And that's where you can't place the value on guys like Christian Gray and how much they care.

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