

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Saturday, January 18, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Ohio State Buckeyes

Will Howard

Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
ATLANTA 2025

Q. Will, what's the best play you've seen Jeremiah Smith make in practice?

WILL HOWARD: He made one yesterday that was pretty crazy, climbed the ladder and caught one with one hand. Man, I don't know if I can single one out. He's made some unbelievable plays in practice over his career. A couple in the spring that made a lot of us kind of jaws drop a little bit. Kind of realized like, oh, shoot, this dude's the real deal. There's been quite a few.

Q. What's it like when he makes those one handed catches in a game?

WILL HOWARD: It's crazy, man. He's one of the most talented dudes I've ever been around, to be honest. It really doesn't surprise me anymore just because he does it so often in practice.

Q. Ever since you walked off the field in Texas you guys have said the job's not finished. What does it take to get to Monday night?

WILL HOWARD: Everything. This team is a hard fighting, hard working team, so it's going to take everything. We can't leave any stone unturned. We've got to put our everything into this fight. It's going to be a bout, man. It's going to be a fight. It's going to be a war, and it's not going to be given to us. We're going to have to go earn it out there.

Q. Just in general, what about the challenge? How do you go about working through that injury?

WILL HOWARD: The hand is good. It's just a weird bruise thing on my hand. It didn't hurt at all. It just looked terrible. I didn't even realize until after the TV realized that my hand was pretty blown up.

In this new day and age of the playoffs, I kind of knew

coming into this season that no matter what I did, I was probably going to play a longer season. If we were going to consider the season a success, we were going to be playing 16, 17 games.

We kind of came into this thing expecting it and knowing that we were going to be in for a long ride, but it is still kind of weird doing it for the first time. The last couple years, I've only played 12 or 13 games every year, and this year, this is, I think, game 16.

Yeah, it's a longer season. You've got to make sure you're staying on top of your recovery and whatnot. Man, I'm just having so much fun. It hasn't even -- it's felt faster honestly than any other season.

Q. I'm curious as far as just the whole concept of making it to this point. (Question regarding Riley Leonard)

WILL HOWARD: Yeah, no doubt. Riley is an unbelievable dude, man, and somebody I have a lot of respect for, just the way he goes about his business, the way that he has his faith in the Lord, everything that he kind of embodies. I feel like we get along really well, and he's a great dude, man.

It is kind of crazy to think about it. We originally met two years ago at that camp, and when we were both at Duke and K State respectively. It's kind of crazy now looking back at it, when we first met to where we are now, it's cool. It's cool to think about.

Q. Ryan has said he wants to win it for you guys. I've heard players say they want to give Ryan Day that championship. What's the emotion on this team?

WILL HOWARD: It's a true family, man. We want to do this for each other, like everyone in the building, in the Woody. We kind of had a moment the other day at the end of practice and kind of just thought about, man, like all the work that we've put in to get to this point and all the stories that have been written but need to be told.

We talked about that last week, the way that your story gets told is you win. We want to win so that all of our

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stories can be told -- individually, Coach Day, all of us players, and then as a unit, man. We're in this thing together at the end of the day.

Q. You talked about the story there. The Michigan game is part of the story this year. Would you guys be in the same place had the Michigan game not gone that way?

WILL HOWARD: I guess you could say one way or the other. Not really sure, but we're worried about the National Championship right now.

Q. (Question regarding former teammates and coaches at Kansas State University)? What have they said to you?

WILL HOWARD: Oh, yeah, I stay close in touch with my guys over at K State. All my coaches have been great. Coach Klieman has reached out, especially during this playoff run, and Coach Riley, and even Coach Klein down at A&M, all the coaches. Definitely my guys, the players that are still there. Like my brother is actually a freshman there. He plays there. Got the K State hat right there.

Then I got still some of my best friends in the world that went there. Some of them still play for the cats, but a lot of them are moved on now. Man, those guys and the relationships I made there, I'll never take that for granted. They're all still my brothers for life, and I love Kansas State.

Man, it's just God's blessed me with the opportunity to go to two really, really amazing universities. I'm just really lucky.

Q. I want to ask about the offensive line. You've had a lot of guys come and go, but they still protect you pretty well, two sacks the last five games. What have you seen from those guys?

WILL HOWARD: They've done an unbelievable job, man. I'm so proud of the way that they've attacked these playoffs. I feel like they were kind of being challenged when we came into the playoffs a little bit. People had a lot of question marks about them, but I think they answered in a big way.

I'm just so proud of those guys and the resilience and the way that they overcame a lot of those struggles that they had, all the shifting around that they've had to do. Donovan Jackson is playing maybe some of the best football of his career, and he's playing left tackle, and he never played tackle before.

It's unbelievable. These guys have just stepped up and

done what the team has asked them, man, no matter what maybe they want to do. I'm sure Donovan coming into this year probably wouldn't have expected to be playing tackle and probably wouldn't have preferred to play tackle, but he's doing it because that's what we need for us to win this game and for us to win all these games.

They're just unselfish, an unselfish group of guys, a group of guys that I love and care about so much. They keep me safe, man. I've got to give all the thanks and the credit in the world to those guys.

Q. At this point in your college career do you feel taking that longer road through Kansas State and making the jump here can help you in this playoff?

WILL HOWARD: That's a good point. I talked about it a lot when I was at K State, the fact that experience is invaluable, and when you go out there and when you do things, it may not be perfect, but the reps and being out there and just getting that experience is invaluable.

I feel like there's few ways to really practice being out there other than actually doing it. I've played a lot of football in my career, and I think it's taught me a lot.

There's been situations even this year where I've learned from. You're never done learning, and the more that you can go out there and feel different situations, understand how to deal with it, not just in the moment, but mentally, emotionally, after it. I've dealt with pretty much almost every scenario that a quarterback could probably deal with in terms of playing, starting, backing up, like I've done pretty much all of it.

I just trust that God has a plan and just continue to work hard and believe in myself, and here we are, man. God is good. Just keep your head down and keep working, man.

Q. Your connection with Jeremiah is strong, but how do you balance that? How do you try to get him the ball once you see what the defense is giving you?

WILL HOWARD: Obviously after the first two rounds of the playoffs, we knew he was going to draw some attention in that game. They did pretty much everything they could in the Cotton Bowl to eliminate him and not let him beat them. I thought our other guys stepped up really well.

There are ways to get him the ball. You've just got to scheme it up and figure out different ways to attack it. Obviously it's a different style of defense we're playing, so there's maybe different wrinkles wreck throw in there. It's all part of the game plan. We've just got to look at it and figure out what the best way to get the ball in his hands

and all of our play makers.

The thing that can work out to his ability there too is he can take two or three guys out there. It's a good thing sometimes. Sometimes you want to get him the ball. There's a lot of different ways you can work with it. I definitely would expect him to attract some attention.

Q. What would you like to work on over the summer? (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: I think he's just a really down to earth guy, a really, really truly faith driven, good values, good family. You can just tell. You talk to him, and he just feels like pretty similar to me.

I just really respect the guy that he is and the person that he is, first and foremost. Then seeing the way that he plays, I feel like our games are a little similar in a way. He's a really good leader. He plays with some passion and some energy. I love that, man.

I think we're pretty similar guys, and I'm just really -- it's crazy that we're here. A couple of months later, and we're here in the National Championship. It's kind of wild. You've just got to thank God and be thankful, man, and do everything we can to win this game.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: The transition was definitely interesting. Coming from a place where you're there for four years and you're very comfortable and you know everyone, coming into a new system where you have to kind of -- I didn't know anyone's name. I'm just learning everybody's name when I first got here.

First and foremost, I wanted to get to know -- I don't know how he went about his transfer. I didn't talk to him a ton about it. We obviously had a couple of minutes together at the Manning camp, but we haven't talked a ton.

At least for me and the way I went about my transfer is I wanted to get to know everyone first and come in and not be trying to lead everyone and bark orders right from the get go, man. Just coming in there and saying, hey, I want to be a part of this. I want to be a Buckeye, like I want to understand what it's about. I didn't want to come in too strong, come on too strong.

I tried to really just show them and earn their respect and show them that I wanted to be here and I wanted to be a part of this thing. Going from there, man, like we just had so many good guys that took me in and appreciated me. I feel like I gained their respect.

Really in the summer, I think I was able to kind of step into more of a leadership role and just get more comfortable out there.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: First of all, Notre Dame's defense, I mean, I think that the hardest thing about them is that they play really, really hard, and they are just -- they don't take plays off. Sometimes you can watch on film and look around and see, oh, man, these guys take a play off here and there, but these guys play hard. They're tough.

They're going to do everything they can to disrupt me, the passer. They're going to move up front. Those guys are active. I think their linebackers are really instinctive players. Their DBs are good cover guys. They're smart. The safety, No. 0 and No. 8, I think they're both really, really good players. They've got a lot of talent and a lot of heart. I've got a lot of respect for that, man. So we know it's going to be a fight.

The second part, the mystique of Ohio State, I guess, me coming from a different program, like the brand of Ohio State is just so big and so kind of just -- it is what it is. It speaks for itself. It's the Ohio State. So coming to a place like this, man, you kind of understand what that is, and I try to just kind of buy into it as much as I could because I'm only here for one year.

I love it. I love it here. I love being a Buckeye, and I'm trying to just make the most of the year that I have here.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: That's a good question, man. I would say probably my sophomore year of high school was when I started to realize like, hey, man, this football thing I think is what I'm going to probably end up doing. I think I might have a real shot to do this thing.

I started getting some offers. It wasn't anything too high. I was kind of just thinking, man, maybe I can work my way into playing somehow at the Division I level someday. I always believed in myself. I never really expected to -- I never expected my career to go the way that it would. I obviously wanted to make it to this point at some point.

If you were to ask a 19-year-old or an 18-year-old Will Howard if he'd be at Ohio State playing in the National Championship, I think he'd probably say you're crazy, man. You've got to continue to believe in yourself no matter what and adapt and change. That was one of the biggest stories of my career was just dealing with the change and

dealing with adversity and dealing with success and being able to balance that and just continue to work hard and keep that chip on your shoulder through all of that.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: I would say probably not that much honestly. When I came into the transfer portal, it was really between -- at the end of the day, it was really between going to Ohio State and then there were a couple other schools on the docket, but it was really the NFL was what my other option was.

I had a Senior Bowl invite. Everything was teed up for me to kind of go into the draft process. Obviously the NIL money, it was nice to get it as kind of more of like a almost insurance kind of thing, but that really didn't -- if I would have been in it for the money, I probably would have been somewhere else, to be honest with you.

I came to Coach Day, and I said I want to go somewhere that I can develop myself into a better player and win a National Championship. That was really what the ultimate motivation was for me.

Yeah, the NIL is nice. It wasn't there when I was coming into this thing. It's a nice add-on, but it wasn't why I came here.

Q. (Question regarding TreVeyon Henderson)?

WILL HOWARD: Tre? Oh, man, that's a really good question. He's one of the most underrated guys in college football. That dude is an explosive guy when he gets the ball in his hands.

I think one of the most special things he does is without the ball in his hands is pass pro'. That guy is unbelievable in pass pro'. As a quarterback, it's cool because he takes so much pride in it, and he loves -- he's like, man, they're not touching my quarterback, man. Man, I love that, a dude that -- especially a running back that's unselfish enough to be that caring about not letting dudes hit his quarterback, that's special.

He and Q do an unbelievable job in pass pro'. What they do with the ball in their hands speaks for itself, but that's one piece of his game on the field, I would say, that it's special and probably overlooked.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: Yeah, obviously I wasn't here for that, but I know that a lot of people around the building still ache at that one. Definitely it will be -- if he were able to get this

one done in this building, it would be a little poetic. That would definitely be a great feeling for a lot of people in this building.

Man, that Ohio against the world mantra, that's kind of what we try to embody. We talk about Ohio against the world, the Woody against the world, really just us believing in ourselves. That's really what it is. It's not us against -- obviously we say it's us against the world, but it's more us bringing each other together and saying, man, like we're going to hunker down and kind of say this is all we've got, this is all we need, man.

It's more of that, I'm going to go out there and fight my butt off because I love the guy next to me, not because I hate the guy across to me, but it's because of that love for the guy next to me. That's really what I think we're trying to portray with that.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: That's definitely the human element starts to kick in at this point where you get a little tired and it's late in the year. You've got to shake that off, man, because it's a National Championship. At the end of the day, none of that stuff matters. None of that human stuff matters because we got 60 minutes really for the rest of our lives. This is it. This is all we've been working for.

This playoff, it's been long, it's been a grind, and it's been kind of a crazy ride because, when we started off in this thing, a lot of people were writing us off, not really giving us a chance at home against Tennessee. All of a sudden going into the quarterfinals, we were like the favorite.

It's just crazy, man. I think the thing we've done a really good job of is not changing who we are because of what people are saying about us and trying to just believe in ourselves, stay true to what we are and who we are, blocking everything out, and just continuing to work and have that same chip on our shoulder every week.

Q. You got to Columbus this year. What's your relationship like with Coach Kelly?

WILL HOWARD: Coach Kelly has been awesome. The more that we've been together this year, we've gotten closer and closer. I give him a hard time. He gives me a hard time. We have fun in that room. I think we just have a really, really great quarterback room, really great guys, Riley and Billy in there helping out too.

We just have a lot of fun in that room. You can tell that Coach Kelly truly wants to be here, man. He just enjoys being around us and having some one-on-one time with

players. He hasn't gotten that in a while, and that's what he told us when he got here.

It's been awesome, man. Overall being a Buckeye, like looking back to a year ago, coming to Ohio was really the best decision I've ever made in my life. I've gotten closer to the Lord. I've met some of my closest friends here. I met my girlfriend here. There's been a million different things I could speak to. Obviously we're sitting here in the National Championship.

I'm just blessed, man. I really am. I'm just so thankful that God led me here to be a Buckeye, and I'm just blessed.

Q. With the arrangement of the offensive line, where have been the biggest strides? Can you kind of brag on your linemen?

WILL HOWARD: I love to brag on my line. I'll talk about them all day. Those guys are -- they're road graders man. We've looked adversity in the face all year. I think Josh Fryar said, screw you, we're going to go do it. I love that mentality.

We need that edge and when those guys have that edge and they play with that edge, they're tough to beat. They know they have a challenge ahead of them in Notre Dame, but I feel like they've gone against three really, really talented fronts in the last three weeks, and we know that it's just getting harder every single week.

I think that Cross is a helluva player inside. They've got some really good D ends. These guys are a really, really good front. I've got all the faith in the world in my guys, and I know that they're going to step up to the challenge and do their job, keep me safe, man, and I'm just so proud of them, the way that they've handled everything this year.

Q. (Question regarding Luke Montgomery)?

WILL HOWARD: Luke Montgomery, he's done a heck of a job, and a guy that didn't play much football all year, and then all of a sudden in the playoffs, a guy that's been asked to step up. Talk about competitive excellence and being ready when your number is called.

I think Luke stepped up in a really, really big way in that Tennessee game. He's brought that mentality to that O-line. He's banging his head in that game, and he's fired up. Those guys are all fired up. That was awesome. I think he brought a little juice, especially in that first game, and kind of showed people like, hey, man, I'm here. He made a statement with that game.

He's been playing some really, really good football.

Definitely we all need our best game on Monday night, though.

Q. Coach Knowles said that after Oregon he felt like there was something going with the defense and then after Michigan there might've been something in the offense. Ultimately everybody came together. Did you sense that? Was there a team meeting? What brought you guys ultimately together?

WILL HOWARD: After the up north game, we had a team meeting. I know we talked about that a little bit. Yeah, we got together, and we really hashed some things out. It was really a truth telling time.

The facts were laid out there. People were challenged. Everyone, including myself, had to kind of look in the mirror a little bit and say what can I do better? How can we fix this thing? The thing that we clung to was that we still have this opportunity out in front of us to really right all these wrongs and go play for a National Championship. Here we are, man. We're right where we wanted to be.

A lot of people wrote us off, but we really just believed in ourselves. We tried to come together, rely on each other, and come together for this purpose of winning a National Championship. When we clung to that and we looked at that, we said, man, I think we really got something here.

Q. (No microphone)?

WILL HOWARD: Yeah, that was a big thing when I was at K State for sure. I wasn't actually able to get it started here this year. We just didn't have the time. Hopefully maybe next year we can start a registry drive.

Something I felt really passionate about when I was at K State. I met Coach Andy Talley from Villanova when I was in high school actually, and he started the Get in the Game, Be the Match Program for college football programs. I ended up talking to him at the Maxwell awards a couple of years ago, and we ended up getting the program started at K State, myself and Coach van Malone, who's our defensive backs coach and assistant head coach.

They just do unbelievable work over there. My mom, when she was -- before she had me, she worked as a pediatric PT/OT at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and she worked with a ton of kids who had leukemia, lymphoma and she kind of shared some of that with me. It was something I felt really passionate about and wanted to help out with all I could.

I'm still trying to do some work with them and stay locked in

with those guys because they do some unbelievable work. All those kids out there -- all those people out there -- it's not just kids, it's people all ages that have these blood cancers and diseases that need donors and need bone marrow transplants and stem cell transplants.

The more I can shed light on that, the better. If you can go out there and get your mouth swabbed for the Be the Match -- all you have to do is swab your mouth. It takes about 10 seconds. You mail your swab in, and they see if you're a match for somebody on the registry. It takes like no time, but you can save somebody's life.

That's what I loved about it. I just want to as much as I can bring as much attention to that.

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