

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Saturday, January 18, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Riley Leonard

Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
ATLANTA 2025

Q. (Question regarding Ohio State defense)?

RILEY LEONARD: I think they're very talented. They know exactly who they are and what they do. They do a good job of getting to the quarterback, setting picks, and landing home.

In the secondary, when you think of a stereotypical DB or what a good safety looks like, they got it. When you play in the National Championship, you're going to play against great defenses -- very fast, very skilled. Like I said, they're very coachable, and they know what they do.

Q. (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: One thing we always try to do as an offense is focus on ourselves. We're going to have one game plan for the way we want to play football and then adjust off of what is given to us.

I don't think it affects us too much. We're just going to do what we do best and go out there and execute.

Q. Riley, what do you remember from your last trip to Mercedes Benz Stadium? What stands out about that game?

RILEY LEONARD: A lot of fun, obviously a great environment. It's a futuristic place to play. It's incredible.

A lot of fun out there, though. All three phases of the football kind of complemented each other last time we played here in Mercedes Benz. I'm excited for it. It will be fun.

Q. Was there any discussion back there in October between the players, did the coaches say anything like, hey, guys, remember this place, you could be back here?

RILEY LEONARD: No, I had no idea this was where the National Championship was. We were living one game at a time this season. It was like don't worry about being the best team in the country, worry about being the best team on the field.

We were really going one game at a time.

Q. Alabama is just over 300 miles from here. How excited are you to put on for your home state, your home city, just the state of Alabama?

RILEY LEONARD: I think I'm the only person from Alabama on the football team -- actually, I know I am. It's just a beautiful place to be from. I'm a product of my environment, so the way I carry myself is just the way that others carried themselves around me when I was growing up.

Very fortunate to be here and represent Fairhope. A lot of people from Fairhope get mad when I mention them because it's growing so rapidly and nobody wants more attention on them. Yeah, it's a great spot, and I'm happy to represent it.

Q. The night before leaving for this trip, you went to the Grotto. Can you tell me about that experience?

RILEY LEONARD: How did you know?

Q. Because you posted it on Instagram.

RILEY LEONARD: Sorry about that (laughter). I don't even remember.

I always try to give thanks to Jesus every time I can. I remember just sitting there this time and tried to think back to when I first started playing football, and it kind of hit a little differently this time, just knowing where I am right now and my career. Going 3-9 my freshman year to all the injuries I've had to where we are now.

I don't think I necessarily deserve it, but God's put me in this situation, so I'm going to do everything I can to glorify Him.



Q. You and Howard have a longstanding relationship. Do you have a moment that sticks out to you that shows his ability as a football player and him as a person?

RILEY LEONARD: Me and Will, the first time we met, I don't know if it's necessarily a funny story or anything, but it was late at night one time, and we didn't even talk about football. We just talked about life and who we are as people and families and our goals in the future and things like that. So it was just a genuine conversation.

We were both kind of underdogs at the time. We met two years ago actually at the Manning camp. A lot of people counted us out. So to be where we are now kind of just turned that conversation into fruition, and it's really cool.

Q. I know you've talked specifically about Ohio State. What's that mean to you sharing that with them?

RILEY LEONARD: I think it's very special. I've actually had conversations through social media with a couple of their players, just praying for them, praying for safe travels as they make it down here, and just praying for a safe game on both sides of the field.

For both of these teams to publicly display their faith throughout the season and their trust in God and Jesus to be on a platform that we are now, I think it's for a reason. I think both sides have a very clear understanding that we're not here because of ourselves and Jesus put us in this situation for a reason, so we'd better thank him.

Q. Can you talk about your experience to win the trust of the guys in the locker room?

RILEY LEONARD: It's tough being a transfer. I hated being in the transfer portal. It was honestly a very uncomfortable situation for me. I like to think of myself as a loyal person, but whenever I had to chose to leave Duke, I understood the repercussions that came with that.

But whenever I got here, these guys just welcomed me in because I came here on crutches my first day here. I was actually on a scooter and crutches, and these guys welcomed me with open arms. So it wasn't really me trusting them, it was more them trusting me because it's hard to have a big time transfer quarterback come in and he has three surgeries since the time he gets there, like that's hard to trust.

But they believed in me, and I'm very grateful for them.

Q. Are you somebody who visualizes success? Have you ever seen this type of moment up the line

preparing for this?

RILEY LEONARD: I think that's a really good question. I absolutely have seen myself on this podium before. I don't know, I think I believed in myself throughout my entire career, and that's helped me go a long way. If you don't believe in yourself, nobody will.

Yeah, I've definitely seen myself on this platform before. It kind of feels like deja vu a little bit just sitting up here. Yeah, it's a good question.

Q. When you watch No. 2 Caleb Downs defense on video, what jumps out at you about his football acumen?

RILEY LEONARD: Caleb Downs, I think he's probably one of the faster players I'll have played against throughout this year. Obviously a guy who's just been around the game for a long time. I know he's got relatives that have played in the NFL. Obviously his brother torched us whenever I was at Duke and he was at North Carolina.

He's obviously got a football family, knows the game, sees the game really well. He has great instincts.

Q. Could you have imagined 15 months ago when you went down, ironically against Notre Dame, that you would be here playing for a National Championship?

RILEY LEONARD: Isn't it crazy? I was telling people, you break it, you buy it. So they broke me, and then they paid for my surgeries.

No, whenever they took me out, that was the last thing on my mind. I didn't want anything to do with Notre Dame after that game. Shoot, here we are. It's a crazy story. I can't even believe it.

After getting to this place, I know it's a huge brand and everything, but once you get into this place and realize the people that you're always around every single day, you start to realize how much like home it feels like. So these guys are great.

Q. (No microphone)? Do you think getting to the National Championship was just your trust in God?

RILEY LEONARD: I remember talking to you a long time ago, my man. It's crazy. During my recruiting process, I said I never took an official or unofficial visit to any school. Notre Dame in the transfer portal was actually my first visit and last ever.

So I wasn't really heavily recruited. I remember when we



were talking I was just begging for somebody to give me an offer, and this was going into my senior year, senior year summer. I mean, I just can't believe where we are today.

I remember sitting in my room and praying at night like Jesus, Lord, would you please just give me something, give me an offer. The next day I woke up, and He delivered.

I don't even know. If you were to tell me this like five years ago that I'd be sitting here today, I'd say you're dang right, but at the same time, I would say how did we get there, dude? Yeah, it's been a crazy ride.

Q. Riley, when you were deciding about going to Notre Dame, how much did the NIL weigh in your decision?

RILEY LEONARD: Obviously NIL in college football today is something that players are able to take advantage of, but I think, when you come to a school like Notre Dame, that's like probably number four or five on the list of why you made that decision.

Obviously we take care of our players, but that's not what Notre Dame prides itself on. You think Notre Dame, you think of the 40-year decision. You think of the education, the type of man you're going to become, the type of man you're going to become spiritually, the type of teammate you're going to become. And after that, you're able to benefit financially off of it.

I think one thing we do really good here is learning financial literacy with NIL. We're going through classes. We have a player development guy who's always teaching us about taxes and things like that. So that's been really good.

Then another thing, like a lot of these guys are able to pay for family travels to come to our games where in the past those close family members of them haven't been able to come. A lot of this money that we receive in NIL goes directly back to family travels and whatever it may be. We don't keep -- it's not like we're out here buying all of the flashy things that you probably see online because buying your parents plane tickets isn't going to make the news headlines.

Q. Some of your high school basketball highlights have gone viral recently. Needless to say, you got some dunks. Of everybody on the team, who do you think would win a Dunk Contest?

RILEY LEONARD: A Dunk Contest? You'd have to ask somebody else that. I've got my answer, and I know him pretty well.

Q. You can say yourself.

RILEY LEONARD: I'm not going to say myself, but Eli Raridon can throw it down pretty well. He's a freak.

Q. What does having Beaux Collins back mean to the offense?

RILEY LEONARD: First and foremost, his leadership has been incredible. Obviously he's a veteran guy who got here just like me, and really throughout the whole off-season going into the season, even in fall camp, he just put his head down and went to work. He's got a dog mentality to him and brings some type of energy that's just like an underrated, not going to say too much, just going to go out there and play ball.

I think that's kind of how he proved himself to this team. To have him back will be a great help. Obviously he's a very physical receiver that is willing to do whatever it takes to put his body on the line or help the team out. Whether he's got one catch, six catches, it doesn't matter. You're going to get the same version of Beaux.

Q. What's the favorite thing you've gotten with NIL money?

RILEY LEONARD: I've been able to take care of some guys, you know, just give them little gifts here and there. It's always fun when you can go golfing with the offensive line and pay for their rounds, little things like that are something that they really appreciate.

I don't know if it's anything I've gotten for myself, but I think being able to take care of family members and their travel is also something that is really cool.

Q. Riley, what have you seen on film from Caleb Downs? What makes him so special?

RILEY LEONARD: Like I said, he's one of the fastest players I've played around all year. That I'll have played against this year and very instinctive. He sees the game really well. He's been around the ball for a long time and obviously has family members that have played. So he gets it. He's a good player. He's got great instincts.

Q. Was there a single play or moment that you encountered that made you realize that, wow, this is classic football, this is the playoffs right here?

RILEY LEONARD: That's a good question. The first throw of my College Football Playoffs was a pick. That wasn't fun. That probably snapped me into it.

I'm going in there, it's just like any other game, do my thing, and then boom, tipped ball, and they pick it. So I really had to lock in. That first play -- I think it was the first play of my College Football Playoff career. So that snapped me into it.

Q. Did you watch the Ohio State championship game last year? When you were watching it at the time, what was your reaction to the game?

RILEY LEONARD: I remember watching it on the plane. I forget who we played, but I was watching it on the plane ride back. Obviously we were going to play Notre Dame the week after, so I was watching that game. I saw two very physical football teams who take a lot of pride in just being blue collar teams that just put their head down and go to work.

It didn't seem like either team was too flashy, just straight ball is what I felt from both of those teams. Obviously both teams played really good defense that game, and it came down to the wire. I've heard stories of about that game throughout the week.

Really there's no need for any more motivation for this game.

Q. (Question regarding Coach Freeman)?

RILEY LEONARD: I think number one thing about Coach Freeman is he's very humble. So if there's a decision he doesn't care about, he's not going to make it just to put himself out there as the leader of this organization.

For example, like the uniforms every week, he could care less about what uniforms we wear. So we'll sit in the captains meeting, and he'll be like, all right, what do you want to do? Alright fine, you got it. A lot of coaches want to have it their way, their way. He's just very humble and offering these little things to us. What travel suits do you want to wear? Do you want to wear suits? Do you want to wear sweats to the games? All these little things that he doesn't have an opinion on, he lets us decide.

I think that resonates with us a lot, and it lets us know we hold a lot of power in this organization and he trusts our opinion as well.

Q. The offensive line, I guess, had to go through the ringer with injuries. The offensive line, Charles Jagusah in preseason, people didn't think he'd come back to play. Second game in a row he's not expected to play at all. Can you talk about his journey?

RILEY LEONARD: I think when you come to Notre Dame

as an offensive lineman, you've got something to you that a lot of other schools don't. You just have a whatever it takes mentality, just gritty. These dudes like to get their hands on guys and just play ball.

As bad as the weather can get, the more excited they are. So I think whenever adversity hits that room, it's just another day at the office for them, next man up. They have a great culture in that room, and nobody ever has their head down. Everybody's looking out for each other.

You look at Pat Coogan, a guy who was a backup to begin the year, with Ashton Craig being the starting center, Pat was coaching Ashton more than anybody else on the field trying to improve his game. Just the unselfishness in that room really speaks to where they are today.

Q. And about Charles?

RILEY LEONARD: Charles, yeah. He's extremely healthy, feeling great. He came up to me this week after practice, hey, how do you like me out there? I'm feeling good. I feel real good. I can't wait to protect you. There's little things. You know, when Jag speaks up, he means what he says.

Q. How about Tyler?

RILEY LEONARD: Tyler, he's been a great addition. I remember when Coach Freeman called me this summer and told me, hey, Tyler's going to be joining the team in the fall, I could not have been more happy because I understand what a college quarterback has as far as his mindset and all the things that he had been through. I just knew immediately he would be a great addition to this team.

He does a lot of work behind the scenes that nobody really gives credit for. I talked about him after the NIU game and how he helped me out a lot. Just in the offense in general, his signaling, some people might chuckle at that, but his signaling and getting everybody together and making sure that everybody is on the same page helps us out a lot on game day.

Q. What did he tell you?

RILEY LEONARD: He kind of shared with me his story and the regrets he had had in the past and how to be a Notre Dame quarterback, who to listen to, who not to listen to. Just these little things about adversity kind of just help me out a lot.

Q. What's your favorite play this season?

RILEY LEONARD: Favorite play this season? Probably



Mitch's field goal the last game. That was great. Yeah, probably Mitch Jeter knocking down that field goal to beat Penn State for sure.

Q. What about your own favorite play?

RILEY LEONARD: My favorite play? Shoot, I don't even know. I like -- as much as I run the ball and have rushing touchdowns, all my passing touchdowns mean a little more to me because I'm able to share success with my guys. So any time I can share love and give other guys touchdowns, those are my favorite plays probably. I don't know for sure one specifically.

Q. (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: I think Coach Denbrock gives a lot of freedom to the quarterback in his offense. There's a lot of leeway, a lot of different adjustments I can make and adjustments I probably wasn't making at the beginning of the year are kind of second nature to me now.

Whether the result of the play is a success or not, as long as he's seeing what I'm seeing presnap, he's got no problem with it. I think he's very quarterback friendly. He allows me to use my legs when I need to, and when I don't, he finds a lot of different ways to give our good players the ball.

Q. (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: I don't know if I need to say too much. I've always kind of carried myself in a way that like actions speak louder than words. So I think these guys kind of understand or will understand through my actions and the way that I've prepared for this game how much it means to me.

Like I said, if you need extra motivation for me to get you fired up for this game, something's wrong with you. So I don't know what the message would be, but it would probably be more action based.

Q. (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: One thing I learned, you can never prepare the speech because the moment you prepare the speech, it starts to become robotic, and it don't ever work. You start stuttering on your words and start thinking about what you were going to say, you just got to let it ride, man. Whatever you're feeling, let it flow.

Q. When you first got to Notre Dame, what did you do to kind of fit in? Make sure not to step on toes and had to learn the offense, but what did you do to kind of fit

in?

RILEY LEONARD: I tried to be as humble as possible coming in and not put myself above anybody. There was a lot of attention on me probably when I walked into the doors, but I made sure to reflect that attention right onto everybody that was around me. Any chance I could to hang out with whoever it was on the team or talk to anybody on the team, I was doing that. It didn't matter who you were.

Obviously I learned the names of all the players, which I think I got a lot of credit for, but I think it's just common sense. Whenever you go into a new program, you should learn the names of your teammates.

So every little thing I could to find a relationship with a different player, I did.

Q. Do you still wear the famous wristband? I know you told the story, but could you talk about it.

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I still wear it. My mom, the you suck wristband. That's kind of blown up, but it was never really supposed to. It was really just something my mom and I started to do in high school because you come from a small town in Alabama and you have success on the field and on the basketball court, everybody just tells you how good you are all the time.

I would just get so sick of it because I needed the extra motivation. I didn't really have much adversity at the time in my life. I lived a blessed life, and I just wanted somebody to tell me I suck to give me a little extra motivation. So my mom gladly took that and ran with it.

If you see my high school locker on Senior Day, it just says you suck all over it. It's kind of just been our thing for a long time now.

Q. Obviously with the semi-relationship you have with Will. Since the Manning camp, do you guys talk or text during the season? (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, we haven't texted like individually, and that's not due to any reason other than the fact that we both understand we're really busy during the season, but he's a person I'm sure down the line that I'll have a great relationship with for a long time.

We're in group chats and Manning camp group chats, and every week somebody usually sends an encouraging message that we all relay. It's just like, hey, you all let it fly. Good luck this week. We're always rooting for each other.

Q. Riley, what has this playoff run, experience been like for you and your team and just this entire season? Second question, what is it that makes Coach Freeman so likable? You see players latching onto him.

RILEY LEONARD: Sorry, what was the first part of your question?

Q. Just the experience.

RILEY LEONARD: Honestly, love the 12-team playoff. This is our fourth game, and I'm trying to play as many football games as I can. I love like not having a bye. I just want to play as many football snaps as I can. So it's been incredible for me.

To be able to travel to all these different cities. You got the home game, then you go to New Orleans, Miami, and now Atlanta, it's just a really cool experience that we're all able to be a part of.

Then what makes Coach Freeman so special? He's just a players' coach. Everywhere he goes, he's kind of like one of us. You'll see him today, he's just wearing a jumpsuit, chilling with the boys, hanging out for media day. Then he knows how to flip the switch, and he has our respect too.

It's not like he's one of our teammates. He's definitely our coach and we respect him a lot. But I think he just leads by example. He's very humble. I think the nation just latches onto humble people, and he's definitely at the forefront of that.

Q. Riley, when did you know this team was capable of winning a National Championship?

RILEY LEONARD: When I was in the portal, I knew. I took a visit here and there were a lot of people on the edge of leaving for the NFL, and when I went out to dinner with them, they told me they were coming back, and at that point, I knew. Because I played against them. I knew what their defense was like. Defenses win championships. When I played them last year, they were really good when I was at Duke.

So I knew, when those guys said they were coming back, that we were going to have a really good football team.

Q. Your basketball highlights went viral on Twitter throughout this playoff. If you had to pick a starting five of your teammates to play in a basketball game, who would you pick?

RILEY LEONARD: That's a really good question. We had some -- this was easier at Duke because I played

basketball like every day there, but I haven't played basketball since I've been at Notre Dame for obvious reasons.

At the point, at the point, we're going to go Jordan Faison. At the 2, who's a good shooting guard? Who's got a good shot? Absolutely not. Give me Kenny Minchey at the 2. At the 3, I'll take the 3 spot. Micah Gilbert is definitely up there too. He's a hooper. And at the 5, Eli Raridon. Oh, Tae Tae.

Give me Tae Tae up there too. Tae Tae at the 1, Kenny at the 2, me at the 3, Micah Gilbert at the 4, and Eli Raridon at the 5. We're going to roll with that.

Q. (Question regarding Manning Passing Academy)?

RILEY LEONARD: I think the Manning Passing Academy taught me a lot about how to be a quarterback, not really on the football field, but off the football field. One thing I learned from Peyton and Eli is every single kid there was coached by Peyton, and we're talking 2,000 kids. They were coached by Peyton and Eli at one point, and oftentimes, multiple times during that camp.

It didn't matter who you were, they were going to treat you with respect and every single person at that camp.

Another thing, with all the quarterbacks, there's a lot of stereotypes and brands that people build and have around their name, but once you get there, you realize all these dudes are just good dudes. Like we're just people like everybody else. It's cool to see these big time names just go to Thibodeaux, Louisiana, and put their head down and go to work. So it's a fun time.

Q. (No microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: Who mine is? Oh, my gosh. I can't compare -- that's a good question. Paolo was by far the best player I've ever played against. So whenever we were able to go to Cameron, it was always a fun time. Who would my comparison be? I don't know. I don't have enough handles to be compared to anybody.

I think I probably attacked -- anything you say -- maybe DeMar DeRozan or something like that.

Q. You have two incredible dream kids here. (No Microphone)?

RILEY LEONARD: What's your names? Very nice to meet you guys, first and foremost. One thing I would say to you guys, I hope you know every time I step on the field, I kind of remind myself that I'm playing for those who can't, and

I'm always thinking about everybody who would probably dream of being in my shoes.

I also want you all to know that as cool as it is to sit on this podium, there are a lot of things in life that I appreciate a little bit more. Like number one, my relationship with Christ, that's something that's free. I feel like leaving church or seeing one of my family members get baptized or something like that, I feel a lot more gratitude after that than winning the Orange Bowl against Penn State.

I know it sounds crazy, but all I can offer you is perspective, and that's my perspective. So like all the little things in life, like y'all already, you're as rich as anybody. Y'all keep enjoying it because as cool as these flashy lights are, they're only going to last me so long. In a couple years, we're going to be in the same boots just looking for happiness in life.

I'm praying for you guys and appreciate you coming.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports