

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Sunday, January 19, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Coach Ryan Day

Ohio State Buckeyes

Coach Marcus Freeman

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Coaches Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
ATLANTA 2025

have put everything into this opportunity that we have right in front of us.

We're looking forward to this one last guaranteed opportunity that we have versus a terrific opponent in Coach Day and the Ohio State Buckeyes, and we look forward to the opportunity coming here on Monday.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning and welcome to today's College Football Championship head coaches' news conference. Before we begin there are a few reminders. Please silence all electronic devices. We have our friends here from ASAP Sports that will be providing the transcript.

Following the coaches' opening remarks we will get through as many questions as we can. We do have microphone holders located in a number of different sections. Please get their attention if you'd like to ask a question, and before you ask your question, it would be very helpful to give us your name and affiliation.

It is now my privilege to introduce Ohio State head Coach Ryan Day and Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman.

Coach Day, we'll start with an opening remark from you.

RYAN DAY: It's an honor to be here. Our team is really, really excited about this opportunity and playing in the National Championship against a great opponent.

Both teams have had a great journey to get here, two historic programs. We know it's going to be an electric atmosphere at Mercedes-Benz Stadium on Monday night, and our team is really focused on their preparation right now and playing our best game.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Freeman?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I want to first thank the CFP staff and all the work they've put in to put on this event. The welcome was amazing, the city of Atlanta. We're grateful to be here.

As Coach Day said, it's been a long journey. It's been a fun one. We've got a great group of players but staff that

Q. For both coaches, you both have added the occasional player out of the portal, and they've been very impactful football players, but I don't think you would be here without the retention strategies that you're using to keep good players on your football team. What are you guys doing to keep good guys around without immediate playing time nowadays?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, our philosophy when it comes to that is that we want to recruit high school players, develop them, and then retain them, like you said. I think a lot of people -- there was a lot of conversation early in the season about our roster, but when you look at our team, the majority of our team are guys that have been here for a long time, fourth- and fifth-year seniors, and played a lot of football.

We always want to use the transfer portal as an opportunity to fill holes that may come up now with the way things are designed within college football. We do that. But we also try to make sure that we're using a lot of great judgment on who we bring into our program. So when you look at guys like Will Howard and Caleb Downs, Seth McLaughlin and Quinshon Judkins and the guys we brought in, I think we only ended up with seven transfer guys this year, they all fit but they all made an impact on our team.

You don't just walk into Ohio State or Notre Dame one of these programs and think you're just going to get on the field. So they had to earn the respect of their teammates during the off-season, during the spring, and then during the season as time went on. Then as it goes, you start to build that team.

But this playoff system has allowed us to grow and build as a team. When you get to this point right now, you don't feel like they're transfers at all, especially when they get here in January. But ultimately, we want to make sure we



... when all is said, we're done.®

continue our culture, and by doing that, you have to recruit high school players and then develop them and retain them.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Freeman?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, very similar philosophy, and we're going to major in high school recruiting and the foundation of our football program will be from high school recruiting, and we'll minor in the transfer portal for specific needs that we need for our roster.

It's not an easy answer to say how you keep young people part of your program. But if you can get them to feel like they have value and you can get them to understand that whatever role they have determined for them in that week or this season is going to be a part of us reaching our full potential, then I think you can more so than not get them to stay.

I think young people want to be valued, and that's important. So I think you've also got to show them stories of examples of guys that have stayed the course and have turned into great football players.

You look at a guy like Xavier Watts that redshirted and moved to wideout his first year and moved to DB his second year and played very little, and then his first year starting was just okay and his fourth year he wins the Bronko Nagurski award. So you have to use that example just as much as the example of seeing a Leonard Moore, a true freshman that ends up starting at corner.

Everybody's journey is different. And if you can convince them that your journey is your journey, don't compare your journey to his journey, that's hopefully a way to get young people to stay.

Q. Ryan, so many Buckeyes from the state of Georgia; how important has that area been to building the program?

RYAN DAY: Well, Georgia has great football, and we want to be able to first build our foundation from the state of Ohio. That's very, very important to us. But we also want to recruit nationally.

Georgia has really, over the last decade or so, continued to build and grow and develop young players, and it's great to see our guys come back to the Atlanta area. Most of our guys who are on the roster from Georgia are from the Atlanta area, and when they saw that the National Championship game was in Atlanta from the jump, they were excited about that opportunity if it arose and we reached this game.

They're excited. A lot of chatter in the locker room about going back to Atlanta, and they'll have a lot of friends and family here.

Q. For both coaches, Ryan, y'all start a home and home with Texas next year; and, Marcus, you have a return match with A&M. Are we in danger of seeing fewer marquee games like this because of the playoff, and do you think the College Football Playoff hit a home run, or is it more like a triple?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I have no clue who we play next year. I'm not thinking about that. (Laughter).

I really don't have a strong opinion right now on the playoff structure. I was asked that previously, and that's going to be something maybe after the season I can spend more time really thinking about, my opinion of the pros and cons. Right now you just try to figure out a way to get your team prepared for this opportunity you've got right in front of you.

That's what the focus is on is this opportunity, and we'll deal with next year and opinions on the playoff structure, I think, once this thing is over.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, agreed. I think there's a lot of things we're learning about this structure, what comes with it, and those are all great conversations for after the season.

I do think that playing some of those games during the regular season, though, allows you an opportunity to learn, and with this structure, your team can grow and build, learn from those types of games, whether they're on the road or at home, wins, losses, and then you build as the season goes on to help you maybe become more prepared for the playoffs, which is maybe a little bit different than it has been in the past.

Q. For both coaches, just what you can say about -- we live in a kind of "me" society right now. The we in your team to get to where you are right now with the NIL and the transfer portal and everything going on, what you can say about the culture of both of your programs and how you've created a we in this "me" society?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, first off, I think as coaches we get too much of the attention a lot of times. This journey for us has been about our players, our staff, our coaches. They're the ones who are on the field. They're the ones playing, and they're the ones -- there's a bunch of guys who decided to forgo an opportunity to go to the NFL or whatever it was, other schools, to come back, to have this opportunity to chase this goal, and right now the focus is on finishing the

mission of winning the championship.

But anybody who's around our players and speaks to our players or interviews our players is quick to recognize what a special group it is, how mature they are. I believe that being at Ohio State, you have to up your game across the board, and every day that you're there, every year that you're there, you just grow up faster, you learn faster, you have to hold yourself to a higher standard. The expectations are extremely high, and that's the way it is, and you embrace it.

But this group has been through quite a bit of ups and downs and twists and turns across the way, and each individual player has their own story about where they're at right now, just like Coach Freeman was talking about, each guy has their own journey. But then also as a group they've had their own journey. Each class has had their own journey. The senior class has got a great story to tell.

Like I said before, those stories are not told unless you win it. So that's our focus right now, is winning the game.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think very similar to the answer I said earlier, the ability to make sure everybody feels valued is so important. To get people to commit to something bigger than themselves, they have to feel like their determined role is important, and then they have to make a choice that no matter what, us achieving team glory is more important than what I want as an individual. I think it's a choice that every coach, every player, every person in our football program has to continuously make.

But I think if they can see the value they have in us achieving our ultimate goal of team glory, then they're more willing to continue to give everything they have to the program.

I think it's an everyday message. It's an everyday constant reminder, and it's an everyday choice that we all have to make.

Q. Question for Ryan: When you talk about the fourth- and fifth-year guys on your roster, that experience they've had, where do you think that's benefitted you the most throughout the year to get here?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I think just maturity, physical maturity to be able to withstand the length of the season, mental maturity to be able to wipe the slate clean on a week-to-week basis and start a new game plan.

And then just the emotional maturity of handling the ups and downs, and certainly we know we've had a few of those this year, and being able to steady the boat and get

back to work and learn from those and rally the troops. And I think it's a great example for our young players.

Q. I just wanted to ask the two of you, you have a lot of international players on this team, whether it be from Germany or from Australia. How important do you think is an expanded playoff but also college football growing to expanding the game of American football?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think back to last year when we opened up the season in Dublin, Ireland. What an opportunity of a lifetime. It was a great experience, and for me, even being the head coach, it was the first time I was out of this country. To be able to take our program to Dublin, Ireland, and to really showcase the game of football and expand the game of football.

We've had great players from Germany, as you've said, obviously our punter now is from Australia. I think the game of football continuously grows, and that obviously started with the NFL, and now you see it's trickling down to college.

The enhancement of the game, the growth of the game of football is something that we all support. I think these are just small steps to seeing this sport and this game, no matter what level you're playing at, continue to grow.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, it's exciting to see it reach the global stage, and there's great athletes across the globe. These guys are hungry for an opportunity, and the same thing, we've had guys from Germany, different parts of the world, Australia, and they just maybe didn't grow up in a football environment, so once given the opportunity, you can just see how hungry they are to go play the game.

As it becomes on a national stage, it just provides for a better game.

Q. For both coaches, this is game 16 for both of you. No college football program has ever played 16 games in a season. When you heard about the expanded playoff, did you do anything differently to try to make sure that your guys were healthy to be -- to be healthy at this point in the season because of the extension of the season?

RYAN DAY: Yes. Yes. I think you have to. When you look at the number of games that you could possibly play, you have to plan for that and work your way back. That's sort of how we did that. We started at the end of the season and worked our way back. So there was a lot of things that we put in place to try to help with that.

I don't think it's a secret anymore, but one of the things in particular was on offense we didn't play as fast to cut down on the number of overall snaps to make sure our depth was where it needed to be, the way we practiced, the sports science of it all. There was a lot of things we took into consideration knowing that this would be the run we would look to go on.

We'll see. It's all been up to this point, and it was all working towards this moment right here on Monday night.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think before the season, you spend some time really coming up with a great plan for after week 12. For us, we knew there was no chance of us having a first-round bye, so we also knew that we weren't going to play in a conference championship, so we had to maximize those two weeks, week 13 and really the week before the first round of the playoffs.

That was something we spent some time doing. Then as you got to that moment, it was about preparation. You had to prepare for the opportunity to play four games. It wasn't like a bowl game where everything was going to go into one game and this was the last game. You had to have a big-picture approach to the next four opportunities, even though you didn't know if they were guaranteed or not.

I think each week you kind of get with your sports performance team and have some discussions and make a plan for what you feel your team needs physically and mentally for that week. It's worked pretty well for us, and we've got one more opportunity to see how well we prepared.

Q. Coach Freeman, obviously so much made of your crossover, having played at Ohio State, and James Laurinaitis, that angle is there, as well. But Al Washington is also a guy that has that crossover. I'm curious what he's meant to your program. Coach Day, if you could comment on his time at your program, as well.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah. The first part of your question about relationships and my time at Ohio State, yeah, friendships are friendships. It doesn't matter where you're coaching or who you're coaching with. Friendships are friendships. James isn't the only guy that's in the Ohio State program that I have a friendship or relationship with. Everybody knows where I went to college.

But as I've continuously said to our program and everybody around our program, it's that this opportunity is about this opportunity. This isn't about where I went to school. This isn't about the last two times we played Ohio State. This opportunity is about this opportunity, and we've got to

make sure we focus on that because this opponent is this current opponent. It's not the last two that we faced.

It's going to be a great challenge.

As far as Al Washington, he's been a tremendous asset to our staff. We had the fortune to work together at Cincinnati for a year before he left, and I knew him before that. I know the type of man he is but also the type of coach he is. He is a developer of young people. He's done a really good job of recruiting and developing the defensive line. We're grateful to have him part of our staff.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, first off, everybody at Ohio State respects Marcus and the fact that he went to Ohio State and had a great career there, and certainly have a lot of respect for what he's done in his coaching career and what he's doing. He's a tremendous coach and does an unbelievable job.

I know James' and his friendship goes back a long way, and like Marcus said, it really has nothing to do with this game, but I know they're very close.

In terms of Al Washington, Al played at Boston College when I was a GA. And my first opportunity to be an offensive coordinator at Boston College, he was the running backs coach. We met at a Dunkin' Donuts, and Al never knew anything about coaching running backs.

And I sort of talked him into becoming the running backs coach, and he said, "I don't know anything about coaching running backs."

I said, "Well, we're going to sit down and figure it out. The first thing you've got to do is take care of the football and run vertical."

He said, "All right, I can figure that out." Then we went into pass protection. And then that year Andre Williams, his running back, became the Doak Walker Award winner that year at Boston College. In one year.

It just went to show you that it didn't really have anything to do with the position, it was his ability to motivate players, his passion for recruiting, his energy. His wife, Melissa, is great, and I have nothing but respect for Al Washington.

Q. For both coaches, these are two traditional historic programs from similar parts of the country. Do you feel like there are any similarities between Ohio State and Notre Dame and how you guys go about your business and the success that these programs have had?

RYAN DAY: Well, similar to what Marcus said, I really don't think that any of those things really have anything to do with what's going to go on on Monday night. This is an excellent team that has just found a way to win week in and week out. I think they have over 140 points off of turnovers. They play great in all three phases.

You talk about offense, defense and special teams, these guys are really good on special teams. They keep you on your heels all the time. They fake punts, they fake field goals, they find different creative ways to get guys in the game. They've done onside kicks. They've done reverses on kickoff return. They're very, very good in all three phases.

It's a big challenge, and really the focus is about executing and making sure we prepare for this game, not the fact that it's Ohio State versus Notre Dame. Nothing in the past matters and nothing moving forward matters.

I think to answer your question, the fact that these are both Midwest programs, large fan base, alumni base, have an opportunity to recruit nationally, I think there's a lot in common there, and certainly everybody on our program has a lot of respect for Notre Dame.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, when I think about the similarities, more than anything I think the expectations that both programs have for themselves. Every season you go into the season wanting to be national champions. Obviously Ohio State has achieved that goal in more recent years than we have, but those are the expectations, to be at the mountaintop.

I think there's not a tremendous amount of programs that can truly say that every year. I think that's part of the reason why we're both at these places. We want to be a part of a program that every year has expectations of being the best, and they're willing to do whatever it takes to try to achieve that result.

The other thing I hope is that we continuously do it the right way. I know Coach Day and a lot of people on his staff that have integrity and do things the right way, and it's about building young people and helping them grow, helping them be better individuals because of the time they've spent with us. I think that's important, is that you can aspire to win National Championships every year.

But you can also make sure that the young people you're leading are better because of the time they spent with you. I think that's a reflection of both football programs.

Q. I've got a question for each of you. How much time would you say your players spend each week on game

tape or film? And is it as important or less important than it's ever been?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I don't know the exact hours, but there's a tremendous amount of time spent watching film. That could be with coaches and without coaches. That could be in the football facility or at home. Yes, it's more important than ever to watch film, and I'm a firm believer in that and the preparation.

There's only so much you can do physically, but mentally I think there's always a nugget you can grab as you prepare and watch film.

RYAN DAY: Agreed. Each guy is different. I say it all the time. Each unit is different; what is your routine, how many hours do you need to watch of film by yourself, 5, 10, 20, 30, 50. But the more film you watch, eventually you find something. You find a way to get a 1st down, you find a way to get a stop, you find a little tip that may help you get that one inch.

You think about some of these games, it can come down to one play. That's what it is. And having the discipline late in the season to be able to watch -- all right, let's put the film on, watch one more hour of film. And for young players to understand how important that is and how that can help you win the game.

Q. It's a speech that every coach dreams of; for both of you, if you could describe the preparation and emotion that will go into your pregame address tomorrow night.

RYAN DAY: Well, I think for us, the playoff has been a natural kind of ramp-up to this game and has allowed us an opportunity to get into a routine. I think when you start to make it bigger or change what you've done over the last few weeks, I don't think that's good. So what we're going to do is the same thing we've done for the last three weeks, have the same routine and focus on our execution.

There will be plenty of emotion running around on Monday night. So I think there's a back-and-forth of recognizing what's at stake but also just making sure we recognize the fact that it's about our execution on the field. Certainly we know what a great opponent we have and how good they are, and so that's it. That's what we have to focus on.

But being in the locker room is a special moment. It is. But you all of a sudden can't just like ramp a guy up in the last second to get a guy to go play really, really hard. It's a buildup that usually starts at least 48 hours out to get your body, your soul, your mind ready to go play in a game like this.



MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, it's probably the last thing on our minds, what we're going to say to them pregame that's going to help them win the game.

So much goes into preparation. It goes into days of preparation. Sometimes maybe outsiders can think that, oh, it's a pregame speech that's going to help your team win. The reality is very similar to what Coach Day said, what you've done to get you here is what you've got to go out there and do.

For us to come out and before the game say something that, hey, you've got to do something different tonight that didn't help you get to this point is crazy. It will probably be something along those lines, is you've got to do what we've done, and you've got to do it better. We're facing a great opponent. You're in the National Championship game. You might say it with a little passion. You're getting ready to play for the National Championship. The natural emotions will come out in that moment.

But our guys got to continuously do what they've done to get them to this moment.

Q. Ryan, you've talked this year a lot about leaving no doubt. That mentality that you're trying to get into your team to buy into or have bought into, what's behind that thought, and for you, why are you talking that way, and how do you feel like that's helped your team?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, it's something we talked about all year and in the winter. There's a lot of messaging that happens. When you play this long of a season, there's different messages that you can come in and out of during the season, but we try to keep them as consistent as possible.

The idea of leave no doubt is don't leave it to one play, don't leave it to one call, don't leave it to the photo finish, don't leave it to the judges to call at the end of a boxing match. That's it. Not that that's easy, but that's the reason behind it.

Q. Riley Leonard made the point that the last two teams standing are also the two teams that have been the most outspoken in their faith this season, and I wonder if each of you could offer some perspective on what you've seen from a cultural standpoint and how that's had an impact on both of your seasons.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think when you're at Notre Dame, faith is something that's openly talked about, obviously being at a private Catholic university. Amongst our football program, it's promoted. I'm not saying you have to be

Catholic; we're saying we want our young people to grow in their faith.

When you have a leader like Riley Leonard who is very outspoken about his faith and is very intentional about putting together Bible studies and helping his peers grow in their faith, I think it's big. It's huge. It promotes a culture where you're comfortable as an individual seeking out ways to grow in your faith.

I'm a believer, and I have a strong faith. That's my personal opinion and beliefs. But I think we have a team of leaders that do a really great job of promoting and helping young people grow in their faith.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I had an opportunity to be at Boston College for nine years and experience what that was like and what an amazing experience going through the Jesuit education and seeing what that's like on a daily basis. All three of my children were baptized there.

But then going to Ohio State and being at a state university, it's a different experience. But it's been amazing to watch this team grow spiritually, and I just think those three pillars of your body, your mind and then your soul and spirit.

We have Bible studies and reflections that we have that we'll have folks come in and speak at, and we have been for a long time. But then also seeing our players lead them in those moments, but then there's also times where I'll walk around the corner and see a bunch of guys in a room together that we didn't even know about that they're having a Bible study, talking. And the impact they've made on our community and even nationally is significant here, and I'm proud of where those guys have gone in their journey.

Again, I think it's a great example for some of our young players.

Q. Marcus, we've heard you talk about guaranteed opportunities throughout the year, and then as you switched to the playoffs it was 60 minutes to earn another 60 minutes, and then this week finally you said we've reached our final opportunity. I'm curious, to you, what does it mean to have maximized your opportunities this season, and then furthermore, what would it mean to watch your guys deliver a National Championship for Notre Dame after all these years?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, when I think about this journey and this season, there's a lot of gratitude I have to be on this journey with not just the players but with all the coaches and the staff, the men and women that are involved in our program and the efforts they've put into us

being in this position.

When I think about this last guaranteed one, we started the season talking about reaching our full potential, and we've got one guaranteed opportunity to do that.

Let's continuously put all the work we can into these last 48 hours or however many hours we have left to prepare for this moment and then go play. Go play. You've got a chance to play in the National Championship game. Enjoy the opportunity.

It's going to be a difficult one. We know that. But listen, go out there and enjoy it, and don't let the things outside of those white lines affect the way you play. That's probably what's most important.

I'm grateful for this opportunity and looking forward to it tomorrow.

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