

Indiana University Football

Media Conference

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Mike Shanahan

Press Conference



Q. Curt was in here and said one of the kind of differences for the offense here is one of the focuses he had the last couple years, kind of improving on the red zone, finding new concepts, what's that been like and how has that developed? What's been different with your red zone approach maybe than few past years?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I think it started in training camp in August. We definitely spent a lot more time in that field zone and practicing different plays. We added a few things that I think have helped us, but we want to be aggressive when we get down there. Sometimes that means throwing the ball into the end zone on first or second down when typically teams might be expecting you to run the football.

We have a variety of plays. We still RPO. Then I feel like we've stuck to what we've done well with the personnel that we have here and find ways to create matchups down there that are favorable for us.

Q. You talked about RPOs there. It's a little bit simplistic, but how important has Kurtis been in terms of the trust you guys give him -- I'm not asking for a percentage of plays, but it just seems like more than maybe most quarterbacks he's getting the option pre and even post-snap to decide what happens, how plays run. How has he earned that trust, and how important is his decision-making in those moments?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I would say he earned the trust since he got here in January. He had some experience with it at Ohio as well. Just the amount of reps that we accumulate on those throughout spring ball and then into training camp and then throughout the season. I feel like he's become really comfortable with all those things we're asking him to do.

Then his decision-making has been obviously very on point throughout the whole year. He knows when to hand the ball off. He knows when to give a receiver a chance. He trusts some guys to win versus man-to-man at times. He's very smart with the football.

Each and every week that we've gone through the season, I just feel like he's felt more comfortable with it and definitely has gained our trust from a very early stage in practice.

Q. Notre Dame's played well on defense this year. Talk about facing what you've seen on film. Do they remind you of anybody you guys have played this year?

MIKE SHANAHAN: They have really good personnel. I would say their personnel is going to be very similar to the Michigan's and Ohio State's. We've seen countless other good players throughout the year, whether that's in the secondary or on the D-line, linebackers. They're going to be up there with the best that we played.

They play really fast. They keep you off balance. They don't make anything easy for you. They challenge you on the perimeter. They're physical. They're always running the football, and they've created a ton of turnovers.

We've got to do a good job of controlling the line of scrimmage in the run game and in protections. Obviously protecting the football is a key every single week, and then we've got to find a way to create some explosive plays.

Q. Notre Dame Coach Marcus Freeman said yesterday that Howard Cross will be back for this game. I know he hasn't played lately, but I'm sure you've prepared for him. What does one guy kind of -- how can one guy kind of change the way the defensive front looks? I don't know if that changes your preparation, but how much do you kind of account for that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: We'll be very aware of when he's on the field and making sure that we're calling in that situation our up front, if we're able to get some double-teams on him, we'll take advantage of that if we can.

He's a proven guy. He's very active for a bigger guy with his size. He moves very well. He's quick. He reminds me of some of the D-linemen that we have here on our team, and he's very disruptive.



We'll have to do a good job of getting double-teams on him, like I just said, but also we'll try to stick to what we do well and maybe change some schemes up where we might be able to get the ball on the perimeter or maybe not run it right at him.

Q. You brought in Sarratt and Price to make an impact, and they certainly have. What makes them stand out?

MIKE SHANAHAN: They're both extremely competitive. They work their butts off throughout the week in their preparation. On the field they're really good. Smart football players as well. They have the ability to adjust what the defense is giving them and find ways to get open.

I would say that with a lot of guys playing on the perimeter, Ke'shawn Williams, Miles Cross, Coop, Coby and those guys, whenever they're in there. I've been very fortunate with that whole group, and Miles and Elijah have had really good years up to this point.

They're always hungry. They're hungrier to find ways to continue to get better, and they've just been able to make a lot of different plays for us with the ball in their hands or down the field in the pass game, and it's been good to see their hard work pay off throughout the year.

Q. One thing that stands out about you guys is downfield blocking by the receivers. It gets a lot of praise. PFFs are referenced in it. At what point did you guys decide, hey, this is going to be a point of emphasis for us because it can be really impactful. What's the genesis of making this something that's really important?

MIKE SHANAHAN: That starts from day one. That starts with Coach Cignetti and myself demanding it from those guys.

I've put it like this to them. There's about 70 plays in the game roughly. Usually if you get five to ten footballs thrown your way throughout the game in the pass game, you feel pretty good about it, but that still leaves about 60 other plays in the game where you may not be getting the ball, so how are you making an impact without the ball in your hands?

I'm always very -- I like to point out whenever we see the running backs pick up a blitz in protection or a tight end make a key block for them on the perimeter after the catch, things like that where their teammates are busting their butts to help them get a catch or make a big play, we should be doing the same thing for the other guys.

Q. I know you guys have started fast, but you actually have more points in the second and fourth quarters. I'm curious in a game like this, what's more important, executing that script and starting quickly or adjusting to their adjustment of you in that second quarter or maybe later in the game?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Definitely equally as important. With this time off, one of the things we're always trying to get a gauge on in that first series and into the second quarter is what is their plan against us? Is it man coverage? Is it zone coverage? Are they blitzing? Are they just rushing four? How are they trying to affect the passer? Things of that nature, we're trying to get a gauge on and then make the proper adjustments from there.

Really at the end of the day, it comes down to our execution. In this time off, we've been able to prepare for these guys for a couple weeks now and also give our players not only their main couple looks that they like to run on defense, but some of the one-offs as well, just so whenever things come up in the game, we're able to talk about it and get it adjusted.

Q. I want to see you mention OSU and UM and just how challenging whatever it was. When you look at Notre Dame, what have you guys maybe learned from the two challenges then that you might change here this week?

MIKE SHANAHAN: The Ohio State and the Michigan game were a little bit different for us. Really some of it was winning one-on-one matchups, some of it was maybe we dropped a couple passes that we typically don't drop or missed a throw, missed a read, things of that nature. Sometimes it was mental errors with assignments. So it was a combination of all those things.

I felt like our guys really learned a lot over those last two weeks, and you saw the response that we were looking for in the Purdue game. So I'm looking forward to carrying that over from what we put on tape against Purdue and learning from those past experiences against Ohio State and Michigan and being able to go out there and execute at a high level on Friday.

Q. On that Ohio State game, what are some of those things that you guys learned from yourselves in that road and hostile environment, and how prepared do you guys think you'll be for that in South Bend?

MIKE SHANAHAN: We learned that mistakes that we made were definitely magnified in a tight ballgame against a really good team. A lot of those things were under our

control and things that from an execution standpoint, we just weren't -- we just didn't get it done.

I think our guys learned from that film. The crowd noise did play a little bit of a factor in that, but at the same time, we're ready to respond and get another chance to play in a big time atmosphere like we will be on Friday and prove that that wasn't us in some instances where we fell short against Ohio State.

Q. Zach Horton can be kind of an unsung heroes in the offense at times, in terms of the snap count, one of the higher usage tight ends in the country. What makes him such a valuable piece to your offense?

MIKE SHANAHAN: He brings an edge. He brings toughness. He's a guy that's very detailed. He wants to do it exactly the way we're asking him to do it every single play.

He's in incredible shape. For him to play as hard as he plays and the amount of plays that he's playing within a game, I've always been very impressed with that part of his game.

Just his versatility. He can block the defensive ends in the box. He can block linebackers and DBs out in space, and he does a really good job catching the football whenever a pass comes his way. He's really just an all around, really good player, complete player, and a guy that we have a lot of trust in.

Q. Specifically with Kurtis Rourke after the Ohio State game, what were some of your conversations like with him, and what do you think he took away from that game?

MIKE SHANAHAN: We just evaluated it the way we did every other game throughout the year. There's always room for improvement. There's always things we can do to be better. Not only him, but just everybody on offense, myself, everybody involved.

We just evaluated it really closely, learned from it, and moved on. I think, like I said, just a little bit ago, you saw the result that we had the following week and the response was everything that we wanted it to be.

That's in the past now. It's all about us being able to go out there and do it all again this Friday.

Q. The secondary of Notre Dame are obviously very, very good, one of the best around. What is it you need to see from your run game to have a bigger impact for the offense in totality?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Definitely controlling the line of scrimmage. It starts up front with those guys. Being efficient whenever we are running the football, keeping us in positive down distance scenarios. We're going to have our one-on-ones on the outside at some point or the other. They like to play a lot of man coverage.

They challenge you. They make every throw is contested. They make you be accurate with the football. They make you have to be great with releases, top of the routes, things down the field to be able to create separation and get open.

So relying on that run game because the thing about playing a lot of man to man is sometimes, when you can break through that first and second level, there's opportunities for explosive passes, explosive runs there as well. Being able to stay ahead of the sticks, I think, will be really big as far as just our whole operation on offense will go.

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