

CFP Semifinal at the Rose Bowl Game presented by Capital One: Alabama vs Notre Dame

Monday, December 28, 2020
Arlington, Texas, USA

Coach Brian Kelly

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to questions for Coach Kelly.

Q. Kyle Hamilton, did he come back from the injury as you had hoped? And I wanted to ask you about a couple of your wide receivers. Braden Lenzy, I think there was hope he might be able to give you a boost at the end of the season. Is that still a possibility? And then I know Kevin Austin is not going to play, but how is his rehab going?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, I think that Kyle has done a nice job. We've really only had two practices. We'll have our third today. But he's done well. We got him some rest, which he needed. But I think he's done well, and I think he'll be able to play at a high level, which he'll need to, obviously.

Braden Lenzy will help us. He's got speed, which you will need against this outstanding Alabama football team. He brings that element, and I think we'll be able to see that on Friday for us.

I think just from that perspective, Kevin has managed the best he can in a difficult situation. He tried to get himself back in. Now we're going to have to opt for the surgery. And like I said, he's going to come back from this and he's going to come back stronger. But it's just one of those things where he tried to come back from the break again and just wasn't going to be able to function at the level of that he's capable of playing at.

And so we'll have the surgery after the season.

Q. Offensively you've been very good on third down. That's an area where Alabama's defense has struggled a little bit. What have you seen of that on film? I'm sure, like it does for your defense, it starts on first and second down. And secondly, is there a competition between Correll and Lugg at center, or have you



decided on that?

COACH KELLY: Third down is -- as you know, it's about what's the distance, right? The percentages for success range greatly, you know that, right? So it's certainly about that. It's about first and second down and managing third down to make it so much more of an advantage from an offensive perspective. So we'll need to do that. We'll need to be better than we were in the last game that we played.

So too many negative plays on first down and the last game we played put us in longer third down situations. So clearly we understand that. And it's something that will have to occur in this game for us to manage third down better.

Zeke and Josh are still at it. Haven't made a decision yet. We're getting closer to that. I think another day today will probably put us at a decision as to who will be that starter. But they're both competing. They both have been getting first team reps. And, quite frankly, I think after today we'll make a decision.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about the strengths and particular personnel that you see in Alabama's defense, and where do you need to be more consistent in what you're doing coming off of your last game?

COACH KELLY: From a defensive perspective, big and physical up front, which is the model that they have built, and Nick has built on defense. Certainly athleticism at the linebacker position. And probably the best corner that we've seen in Surtain in all areas.

Both corners are outstanding. Fundamentally sound in every area. They have all the answers in terms of what they want to do. And they do it very, very well.

It's not an overstatement to say that they're well coached. I know it sounds like coach-speak, but they're well coached in all areas, and what they do they do extremely well with really good football players.

So that falls back on us to be much better at what we do. And we have been during the year. We played 11 games



and one of them wasn't up to our standard. We'll have to play up to our standard in the games that we've played well. That will be the kind of execution we'll need against an elite football team.

Q. Do you guys have something to prove as a program after the BCS game of 2012 and the Cotton Bowl in terms of postseason performance?

COACH KELLY: No. No, I mean, we're knocking on the door every year playing really good teams and great opponents. And there's elite football teams. I don't know why this narrative continues to pop up when we're always in the games.

No, we haven't won a National Championship, that's correct. I'm not changing the record. But we are there every single year and we're grinding it out just like everybody else. And only one team gets to celebrate at the end of the year.

And we're going to keep banging it, and we're going to keep getting back here. And that's our job. And that's our challenge each and every year is to compete for a National Championship, and we'll continue to do that.

Q. Now that you have a couple of years in the bank with Kyle Hamilton, I'm curious, when you look at him, is there a player you've coached like him? And just structurally what has he allowed Clark to do defensively to really take advantage of his skill set but also do some things that are unique defensively?

COACH KELLY: Certainly he creates a bigger call sheet. You can do a lot more with somebody with his range, his ability to come down and play close to the football, but yet play deep in the middle of the field.

That's a unique skill set that he has. His range and coverage doesn't hurt either. There's a lot of things he does extremely well, and there's things he's going to do better as well. He has not reached the level that he's capable of playing at.

He's going to get stronger in the offseason. There's going to be -- I think you're going to see him in the weight room do some things that's going to allow him to grow his game even more.

So as good of a football player as he is right now, I think you'll see next year somebody that can possibly take his game to an even higher level in terms of blitzing, giving us some additional calls on our call sheet when we insert him into our defense.

Q. Since the last time you and Alabama played in the BCS title game, for different circumstances and reasons, you've retooled or rebooted, maybe isn't the right word, but tweaked some things, even in different things that have brought that, I'm curious have you seen any similarities in just things that have kind of opened your eyes as far as little tweaks you need to make from being in an already pretty high level to trying to find that "top of the top" one, for lack of a better term?

COACH KELLY: Look, if you're not getting better every year in everything in life, you're getting left behind. So you need to look internally at what you're doing. Even after going undefeated that year, we lost in the National Championship game, and we were looked at as not a very good football team. We needed to look at the things that could help us grow. And we've been doing that each and every year.

So are we a different football team? We're a different program. We have to be. You have to change and you have to be able to stay up with the current trends and things that are occurring every single day. We all do, right? Whatever business we're in.

So, yeah, we're a different organization. We're a different program. We stand for the same things. Our mission is still the same, to graduate champions. But the way we go about things on a day-to-day basis, you know, how we develop our players, who we're looking for in the recruiting process, they have to still fit Notre Dame and what we stand for.

But you've got to be ever changing. You've got to be able to keep your pulse on what's going on in college football. That's just the nature of it.

Q. I wanted to ask you about tempo. You've been good at time of possession all year long. How much does that factor into a game against an opponent that nobody has really stopped their offense? Do you have to change anything, or is it just kind of how you've gone about that element of the game all year and just applying it to a game like this against Alabama?

COACH KELLY: Certainly we're cognizant of the fact that this is an electric offense and scores bushels and bushels of points. And we want to be able to play complementary football. That is, keep Alabama's offense off the field while we're certainly scoring as well.

So I think we're not running the Princeton four-corner offense, but we are trying to run our offense, which has been one that has traditionally been a ball-control offense.

So that still has to be in our mind in terms of we can't come into this game and change who we are, but the nice part about it is that's kind of been our DNA this year.

So we'll need to continue to do that. We can't be three and out. We want to hold on to the football, because we want to play complementary football and keep Alabama's offense off the field as best we can.

Q. This kind of builds off what he just asked you, but I think, to me, maybe the biggest difference that I saw in your two games with Clemson is the one at home you guys were able to run the ball almost at will, and then in the rematch they were better at that. We know Alabama's going to score a lot of points, but how essential is it to you guys to be able to run the football and to be able to try to run the football even if you're unable to do it early in the game?

COACH KELLY: I think it's very important. I don't believe that -- I think we've seen that there's really only a couple teams that have been able to run the football against Alabama, and those are the teams that have been in the game. Georgia and Ole Miss in particular had some success running the football. And those are the games that really were contested, if you will.

Not that Alabama had much contesting going on. Other than, again, maybe back a little bit, Florida was extremely competitive throwing the football against them and not running the ball. So I guess that's the one outlier there.

We want to run the ball. We need to run the football. Based upon who we are and how we have operated this year, we will have to run the ball more effectively than we did the last time we played.

Q. The semifinal games in general haven't been very close. Eight out of the twelve decided by 17 or more, three-touchdown spread by average. Please understand this is not a Notre Dame question, I'm just asking you as a coach, as an observer, why do you think that is with supposedly the elite teams gathered in one spot?

COACH KELLY: I really couldn't tell you. Certainly the number one team has been -- if you look at it, our game against Clemson was a closer game than they had against Alabama. So, I mean, if you do that kind of a comparison, it shows very little in terms of what the disparity is.

I think it goes to who is playing well at that time. And they're all elite teams because they wouldn't be here if they weren't. But if a team that is really, really good gets on a roll and is playing well and executing at a high level, it's

really difficult to stop these teams, because they, all of us, have the ability to really play at a high, high level.

Q. Alabama has kept the door open for Jaylen Waddle returning at some point before the end of the year. How much have you prepared for him, and what did you see from film on film from earlier in the year?

COACH KELLY: Another electric player. Somebody that can change the game around quickly. Certainly as a special teams player, he can certainly do that. But as a wide receiver, he takes a lot of answers off your sheet because you can't place all the emphasis on just those two receivers in Smith and Metchie. So it makes it difficult, even more difficult of an offense to slow down.

Q. What do you think -- when you look at DeVonta Smith, what do you think is his greatest strength as a receiver?

COACH KELLY: Details. Extremely detailed in the route running. I think everybody knows about one's speed and hands, but just somebody that is that young that has the ability to run such precise routes and understands the game so well. His football intelligence, I would assume, must be off the charts in terms of the way he plays the game.

So just reminds me of a veteran in everything that he does in terms of playing the position at such a high level.

Q. You mentioned last time out that Lawrence's ability to keep it and run was the true stressor on your defense. I appreciate this could be a long answer, but what is Alabama's biggest stressor on a defense? Is there something you can take away without being murdered by the other things?

COACH KELLY: Not really. I mean, it's the balance of Najee and his ability to run and catch the football coming out of the backfield. And then Smith and Metchie. Smith is just that good of a player that you know playing one-on-one against him is very difficult.

So, when you're doubling him, you're losing one in the box and now you're putting Harris in a very favorable situation with a very good offensive line. So not a lot of good answers there.

Q. You mentioned earlier that coaches have to be ever changing. Nick Saban has led the nation multiple times in total defense, may lead it in total offense this year. What have you seen in his evolution as a coach?

COACH KELLY: Well, I think it's probably just that. You



know, an explosive offense that has all of the trappings of today's college offense, NFL offenses. I think we're seeing a lot more of NFL resembling college today.

But you're seeing all of those things. This is not pro I, let's run it up inside and play great defense. They're still playing fundamentally sound defense, but with the offenses as they are today, you know, it's very difficult not to give up some yards.

So you're seeing fundamentally sound defense. You're still seeing the same principles. You're seeing at times elite play in certain position groups at Alabama. And then an offense now that can rival the very best college offenses in the country.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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