

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

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Arlington, Texas, USA

Offensive Coordinator Tommy Rees

Notre Dame Fighting Irish



COURSE role, how much of what the offense kind of currently looks like did you have in mind, or was this kind of your preferred style versus just playing to the strengths of the current team? And what allowed you to make the "player to coach and not just GA coach but coach with a lot of responsibilities" transition so quickly?

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with offensive coordinator Tommy Rees.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about the strengths you see in the Alabama defense, in particular, certain players that stand out to you. And where do you think you need to be more consistent in what you're doing coming off your last game?

COACH REES: I think the first thing that stands out just before personnel-wise is how well coached they are on defense. They're structurally very sound. Their players play with an extremely high IQ and are able to adjust and make checks when you give them different looks, which is a sign of a well-coached team. Tackle very well, as well as anyone we've played, which shows how tuned they are in the fundamentals.

Personnel-wise, for me, it starts with No. 2, probably as good a corner as I've seen in college football any year, to be honest with you. We played them in '12, and they had a real good corner, Dee Milliner.

But Surtain is special. He's probably the strength of their defense in terms of an individual. 32, obviously, extremely talented inside backer who can really play on all three downs and cover you sideline to sideline. It presents a great challenge both schematically and personnel-driven.

For us, just being more consistent on first and second down. Not getting off schedule, not getting behind the chains and putting ourselves in third-and-long situations is something that we've tried to refocus on over the last 10 days or so.

Q. When you came to Notre Dame in 2017, you came back as a QB coach. When you took over the OF

COACH REES: The first part, I think we're always going to play to our strengths, and something I believe has put our team in the best position to be successful, not just offensively, but the entire team. And heading into this year, we knew we were going to be really good up front. We have tight ends that could do a lot of different things for us. We have veteran quarterbacks who we wanted to play to our strengths there.

I think in terms of offensive vision, it's blended from the time I was a player and then each stop along the way coaching. Each system I've been under, each system I've been a part of or learned from has contributed to what you see now.

And, again, what we're going to be going forward, that will, again, be all about how to put our team in the best position to win games.

And then for me, I think just coming here as a young coach, I think anytime there's some skepticism there, you really prove yourself by your work ethic and the way you build relationships. And that's something that I've always tried to put first and foremost, is just how can I make sure that I'm doing everything I can to show that I'm here to work and that I'm here to make this program better.

And starting as a quarterback coach, building a relationship with those guys, and then as your role increases and you become the coordinator, increasing that relationship and that trust with the rest of the position groups.

And I think it's really just being authentic. If you have some authenticity to yourself and if you're true to your word, true to who you are, those things are easy. The fortunate thing for us is we have such coachable and good kids here that it makes our jobs much easier.



Q. As you map out how you guys can win this game, what does it look like for Ian? What does he have to do, in your mind, for you guys to be successful?

COACH REES: I just think he needs to play within himself and within the system. I don't think there's anything heroic he needs to do that's going to single-handedly win us the game. I think if he operates the system and makes decisive and good decisions to put our offense in the position to be successful, then we're going to have a chance to win the game.

I think, again, like I said earlier, staying on schedule and giving us as many positive plays in a row as we can have. I know that sounds simple or it sounds almost elementary, but I think when you play great teams, the more positive plays you can string in a row, the better you're going to be.

And for him it's not doing anything outside of what we're asking and just manage this thing in a positive way, and we're going to have every chance we need.

Q. You were a player obviously the last time Alabama and Notre Dame played. What's changed the most with the program, and what did you learn from that experience of playing Alabama?

COACH REES: That was a long time ago for us. And I was there. I remember it. And it wasn't a fun night, obviously. I think the program's come a long way under Coach's leadership. I think the way we've recruited, the way we developed within our program has increased.

And then I think just we've been in this situation now multiple times and there's a belief within the program that we're consistently one of the best five teams in the country, and we handle ourselves that way and we have that belief.

And that's really the standard and the work ethic that we come into this building with every day. And I think Coach has built that consistency here over the last 11 years. And it's been really exciting just to see this place grow into where it's at now.

Q. You already touched upon being more consistent on first and second down, but you guys have been great on third down offensively. Alabama struggled in that department a little bit. How do you take advantage of that and how do you free up Ian Book in the running game after Clemson flattened things out for him?

COACH REES: Look, part of it is just understanding, hey, there's some things we have to operate from the pocket. And then part of it, too, is if there's some ways to create

opportunities for him with help in the run game. It can't just be him on his own all the time.

But again, I think the weeks we've been really good on third down, we don't put ourselves behind the chains and we don't put ourselves in situations that are harder to convert.

I think a couple weeks ago they did a great job with their plan of keeping everything in front and trying to make them operate from the pocket and give some different looks coverage-wise. But one thing that our guys have done a great job of is, week-to-week, buying into whatever the plan is.

Third down has been something that's unique to us, week in and week out, and our guys are going to prepare the right way and make sure we're hitting on all cylinders.

Q. Your offense has been ball controlled but also able to speed it up when needed. How important is that ability to go fast or slow offensively? And also, how much is that aided by your relationship with Ian Book?

COACH REES: I think just from a holistic standpoint, not specific to this game plan or any other game plan, I think when you have the ability to change the tempo on a defense, it presents challenges for them, whether you're in the huddle and breaking from there or you're on the ball right away or you're scanning to the sideline.

I think, from an offensive philosophy standpoint, just being able to change that on the defense presents challenges. You can lock them into certain looks. You can lock them into certain personnel groups.

There's a level of trust with a veteran team and veteran quarterback and offensive line that allows for some of that growth. I think even at the wide receiver position where we're veteran there. We have three seniors that play the bulk of our plays. So there's a lot of trust there. And there's a lot of trust to add things that you know that they can handle.

And so the relationship with Ian is critical, but it really takes all 11 to be on the same page to be able to handle those circumstances.

Q. I know you were frustrated with leaving points on the board, especially early in the ACC Championship game. What steps have you been able to take not only on the practice field but in the film room to make sure that doesn't happen again?

COACH REES: I think it's critical to -- as a team, as an

offense, to understand where those points were left, how did those points get left on the board, and how as coaches can we put our guys in better positions to make sure that we're finishing drives with six.

We talked about it after the game. Those first three drives we were moving it great, but they account for three points. So at the end of the day, all those plays that got us down in a great position, they don't mean anything.

So how do we make sure that we're able to stay on track and then execute in the most critical situations? Because if there's situational execution there on the first three drives, it could be 13-0 going into the second quarter or whatever it was.

But those are all things that we're focused on. Those are all things that matter and make a huge impact in the flow of the game and something that is -- situational execution has been emphasized in practice, in the film room, in meetings. Not just since we got going, but re-emphasized over the last 10 days.

Q. How much more comfortable have you gotten as a play caller since the Camping World Bowl? And when did you know, hey, I could be pretty good as a play caller?

COACH REES: Each week is a new challenge. Each week presents different opportunities. I think the cool thing is you grow with the team as the year goes on. Like for me, I can -- the Camping World Bowl until now, you have a season for a body of work here where you know if you need a play, hey, what is Ian really like in the situation as the years have gone on. Or if we need, hey, what is the line, if all else fails, I know I can call this and they'll make it work.

I think you kind of grow with your team. And that builds a level of comfort in terms of what you know you can call in certain situations. And they believe in the call, you believe in the call, and they go execute it.

Because, listen, the most important thing is that your players understand what the call is and that they have belief that it's going to work. And that's something that we've built throughout the year.

I think the jury is still out on where I am belief-wise, but I'm confident in my abilities. I'm confident in the team. And, again, we have a great staff that puts together a great plan every week. We have tremendous players that buy into the plan and go execute it.

So this is not a one-man army here. It takes every player.

It takes every coach. And it's been fun for me and special for me to see everyone buy into the vision we've had and continue it into the playoffs.

Q. You guys played Georgia in 2019 and 2017, and there's obviously some defensive carryover schematically from what they do to what Alabama does because of that background. Are there any lessons you guys can learn from things that worked, maybe some things that didn't work that you would like to try that you can carry over into preparation for a game like this?

COACH REES: I think that's a good question. There are some similarities. It's not the same defense. And if you go back and study obviously what Alabama was in the past, you see a lot more similarities to what Georgia was in '17 to '19.

There's certainly some carry-over. I'm not saying there isn't. But it's funny you mentioned that, because going into the game, that's kind of what I anticipated was, hey, it's going to look a lot like Georgia.

And there are some differences there. There are certainly things formationally based, personnel-based that are the same and some things that we've done over the last four years here that will be staples and carried over.

But I think this team presents a different challenge and they certainly have enough wrinkles in there that it's not just a complete carry-over, if that makes sense.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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