

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

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Ben Skowronek

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Q. After the Louisville game you talked about how Ian Book's approach kind of changed how he got focused, really kind of mad at himself, got into the film room, and really just had that laser focus. And I'm wondering what you've kind of seen from him these past couple of weeks since the Clemson game, if it's been kind of similar or what you've kind of seen from his approach.

BEN SKOWRONEK: Like I mentioned after that game, he's been in the film room every day, working just to get better every single day and just having that mindset of improvement and growth. So if you're in here after practice at the Goob (phonetic) late at night you'll probably see Ian. He's in here every single day just working to get better and improve his overall game mentally and physically.

Q. Tommy Rees talked about situational execution being a problem in the ACC Championship game and a focus going into this game with Alabama. Can you give us some examples of where the situational execution broke down in that game and what you guys have been working on?

BEN SKOWRONEK: If you look at that game, I think the first three drives, we were moving the ball really well. We just need to execute better on third downs and in the red zone. We wholeheartedly believe that if we score touchdowns on those early drives of the game the outcome would have been completely different.

So, yeah, our focus these past couple days, workdays and practices has been third down and red zone. We just need to execute down there. All the teams that win championships are able to execute in the red zone, execute on third downs keep drives alive. It's been a point of emphasis all season but especially these last couple of weeks.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your decision to transfer



to Notre Dame last year and what this last year has been like for you. Are these the type of games that you wanted to play in when you transferred? And how excited are you to be playing in the playoff?

BEN SKOWRONEK: Yeah, 100 percent. When I made that decision to transfer, I talked to the people close to me, especially my family. And being a kid growing up, just being a college football fan, I wanted to play in the College Football Playoff. I wanted to play in games like the Rose Bowl, games like early in the season versus Clemson where it was one versus three.

Games like that, you watch those games growing up and you can just imagine yourself as a little kid in those shoes making big plays in those games.

The decision to transfer definitely wasn't easy. But I knew the destination I wanted to play at, I wanted to play in games like these. There's a handful of teams in the country, year in, year out are playing in the College Football Playoff.

I'm very happy with my decision to transfer. It hasn't been easy going through a pandemic, missing all of spring ball, missing a lot of time to learn everything, build relationships and all that. But at the end of the day I'm very happy with my decision and this year's been unbelievable in spite of everything that's gone on.

Q. I've been asking your teammates, this obviously has been a very weird year. Are there things that personally you've missed or that have been maybe a little more frustrating or difficult to deal with than others as you guys go through all these protocols and restrictions to get to play?

BEN SKOWRONEK: I think obviously everybody in the world, they've have been missing stuff. But for me it's just spending time with my family, all that stuff. Spending time with other people's families as well after games and just kind of building relationships, getting to know people and all that.

But also just the small things, like eating together as a



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team. We do it with a glass divider in between us. So it's just different this year. I miss those meals and just getting to know people in the locker room, all that stuff. It just all looks different. There's definitely a lot of stuff we all miss. But it's definitely those relationships for me.

Q. Wonder if you could tell us what you've seen so far in preparations for Alabama, what kind of defense they've got, any particular players? And how does their defense compare to some of the teams you've played this season?

BEN SKOWRONEK: Just the first thing that pops out on film is their team speed. They have a lot of team speed on defense, being one of the top defenses year in, year out in the SEC, you're going to expect that. But obviously their secondary, led by Patrick Surtain. He's a heck of a football player. He'll be drafted pretty high in the next draft.

I'm excited for the opportunity to line up against them. But overall, they're a really good defense. We're going to have to bring our A game on Friday.

Q. You mentioned Surtain. Talk about him and what makes him the best cornerback in the nation in your opinion?

BEN SKOWRONEK: I think it starts with his feet. He has really good feet, able to mirror routes. But when you combine that with his length and over athleticism, that's going to make him a top cornerback prospect for the upcoming NFL draft. He has all the tangibles. I'm excited to go out there on Friday and compete against him.

Q. Could you talk about the respect or lack thereafter of the team going into this game. You guys have arguably the top win in the nation this year. You were in the top five all season long. And yet I know you don't look at projections or point spreads, but you guys are maybe considered the largest underdogs this bowl season. To what effect does that motivate you guys?

BEN SKOWRONEK: Obviously we're going to have motivation, having a chip on our shoulder and all that. But games like these, where people are talking about it, you turn on the TV, see all these promos, commercials, people talking about it. We tune all that out.

I couldn't tell what you the narrative is around this game. I know we're the underdog, obviously -- they're the No. 1 seed; we're No. 4 seed. But it's up to us to go out there and compete, compete every single play and go out there and get the win. We're not worried about the spread. We're not worried about all that, I couldn't tell you what it all

means. But we're excited to play in the Rose Bowl and the College Football Playoff and compete every single play.

Q. How similar is Alabama to Clemson defensively and what you've seen on film?

BEN SKOWRONEK: Alabama keeps it a little more I don't want to say simple, but Clemson has some pretty exotic schemes. So you never know what you're going to get on each third down. But obviously they both have great players on defense. They have a lot of future pros on defense. So the talent level is pretty similar between a Clemson team and an Alabama team.

Q. What is it like going down to Texas to play in the big stadium, AT&T Stadium, it's like the biggest scoreboard. Are you going to be awed at all playing there?

BEN SKOWRONEK: I don't think so. I've played in pretty big stadiums in my career. Certainly it's one of the biggest, but at the end of the day it's a football game. It's the same 100-yard field, same dimensions of every other field we've played on.

I think when you first walk in for the walk-through you might have a little reaction, but when it's game time you don't worry about the size of the stadium. You don't worry about the fans and all that. All that matters is between the lines.

So, like I said, it's the same dimension as playing on a high school field. It's nothing different than pee wee football and all that. It's the same football field.

Q. What's the difference for you playing against a relatively smaller cornerback and a cornerback with some length? And then also you transferred from Northwestern and the Big Ten to -- they played the ACC schedule this year, Notre Dame -- what is the differences in those two leagues?

BEN SKOWRONEK: To answer your question, I'm a big receiver. So going against a smaller cornerbacks obviously jump balls are definitely in play for me every single play. But I think a good cornerback, I don't think it matters, their size or their stature, at the end of the day. You just got to measure it with heart and play-making ability.

To answer the second part of your question, yeah, there's definitely some differences between the Big Ten and the ACC. The Big Ten it was a lot of defensive-heavy focus -- run the ball, stop the run, all that, just some hard-nosed football, especially in the Big Ten West where I played, playing schools like Iowa and Wisconsin, year in and year



out you better stop the run and you better be able to run the football.

ACC was a mixture of that. There's some teams that aired it out. There's some teams that ran the ball a lot. You just never knew what you were going to get week-to-week, but I haven't had one year of playing against these teams, so it's not like I knew exactly each year how the teams would play in the Big Ten. You had a pretty good feel Wisconsin was going to run the ball, Iowa was going to run the ball, that stuff.

But it's been fun to adjust to a new league and just learn different styles of play and all that.

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