

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

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Defensive Coordinator Clark Lea

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

THE MODERATOR: We're starting with Coach Lea.

Q. You guys have been so good with your run fits all year. The last couple of games it got away from you. Why do you think that happened, and what do you feel like you can do to get that back, when going against Najee Harris and that group?

COACH LEA: Obviously we have our work cut out for us. I mean, you can watch Alabama play, I understand that, but it's a combination of things. I think the first thing that we would look at is, say, where we deviated from our personality just in the execution of our defense and our defensive structure. And I think that came into play in the Syracuse game.

And then I think a little bit in the Clemson game might have been guys pressing to make plays and not just singularly focused on doing their job. And I know that sounds a little cliché, but I think what I want to point out is just when guys function as 1 of 11, it streamlines their processing in snap. And when you streamline processing within a snap, you're able to play at your physical best, because you're just exerting your strength and power through your technique.

And that was a part of it. But Clemson did a good job, too, of putting our structure in compromised positions, and that's when I have to step up and help as well.

So I think obviously focus on execution, focus on being 1 of 11, focus on playing fast and physical, getting to our technique faster than the opponent is a part of it. And obviously, as the games get bigger and the opponents get better, when you have small lapses or small issues, they become big and you can get exposed really quickly.

So we have to be on point. This is a really good offense



we're playing. And we're excited to go at it with them. But we're definitely going to have to shore up some things on our end and, again, play to our level best.

Q. I was curious how you managed the Vanderbilt job while preparing for Alabama. And then from a personnel standpoint, as a defensive coordinator, what a player like Kyle Hamilton lets you do with your call sheet when he's at his best and how that changes the kinds of defenses that you can run.

COACH LEA: Well, to your first question, you know, my singular focus has been on preparation for this game. And I know that may be hard to believe, but this is too big. I mean, whatever is to come next for me will be there when this season's finished.

But this is a culmination of four years of investment for me. And it's not just about me, obviously. It's four years of investment with these players.

And so I'm excited about the future, but this is the discipline just to stay focused on the task at hand. But emotionally the investment, all the things that we've done over this time, it makes it easy.

There's a group of people that are in place in Nashville that are helping me navigate it so that I can be singularly focused. And I just appreciate that. And that was really -- in the process of evaluating the job, that was an important part on both ends.

If we're going to be about commitment, let's be -- let's function with integrity and allow for commitment to be seen through here.

So not been an issue and won't be an issue. And obviously with an opponent like Alabama, you can't -- every bit of my mental and emotional energy has got to be put into this game plan.

To your second question, I think Kyle -- Kyle makes a difference. He makes an impact by just being on the field. I think that his presence is felt. I think teams will plan around him, his length, his range. He fills up a lot of



windows.

Obviously he's proven over his career to have the ability to attack the ball and make plays. So that obviously is impactful just from the start. When he's playing at his best, he becomes a difference maker for us.

And I think when you look at big games like this, you need your best players to come out and play their best. And I know that's what we've been pushing him for. And that's been the message from Coach Kelly, and that will be fun to watch.

I'm excited for him to have this opportunity. One thing that's lost is that he was a recruit in 2018 when we were playing in the playoffs. And I can remember talking to him before the game, you know, about being to this point when he's playing here. And here we are.

So having all these guys take advantage of the stage and enjoying this level of competition and going out there and representing ourselves the right way.

Q. You were here for the beginning of Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah's time at Notre Dame. He goes from scout team to one of the best players in the country, winning all these awards, it seems like, every day. What has allowed him to succeed and grow through this program over the years?

COACH LEA: Well, I think there's a willingness to be coached and developed. There's like a humility involved in that, where it takes a certain personality to step back and say: Hey, this is something I really want; I'm not where I need to be; and, Coach, how do I get to where I need to be?

I mean, that's never easy. And it's certainly not without hiccups along the way. But for Wu, his development off the field has been as important as -- really has kind of translated into his development on the field. And I'm talking specifically just about structuring his day, just being on top of all the little things that this program demands of you, the attention to detail.

And I think as he's really flourished on this campus, that has absolutely transferred to his on-field performance. And so it's allowed him to reach for his potential as a player. And I still think that we're continuing to push for that highest level for him. That's what's exciting for him moving forward.

But it's been fun to be part of that process. I think these are -- I mean, these are the stories that, as a coach, they fuel you. And I'm excited for Wu. I'm excited for what his

future holds. I'm excited for him to play on Friday. I know this is a big game for him, and he's ready to go out there and compete at his highest level. But it's been a great time with him here at Notre Dame. Very proud of what he's accomplished.

Q. What has allowed Drew White to be a steady force for you guys in the middle of the defense?

COACH LEA: Well, Drew is kind of like the against-all-odds member of the defense. He was counted out early on. I mean, he was hurt when he came in. He got hurt again. Then finally he was able to kind of scratch the lineup against Navy in 2018, and he hung in there for the remainder of the year.

And then we graduated two really good players. So he was going to have a chance to compete. He gets hurt again. So he's really had to battle.

But what makes Drew special is his character, his personality, his competitive spirit. He's a guy that -- he is every day pushing himself. I don't know that I can think of a day where I remember taking the field -- in practice, I'm talking about -- and worried about where Drew's mind was or whether or not he was going to give everything he had.

He is as consistent a player as I've ever coached in that respect. And then it's not just about that, though. Like it's not just about the steadiness, right? That's important, but at some point you have to have an edge. You have to have a switch that's flipped.

And for as pleasant and as, like, awesome this guy is off the field, he's maniacal on the field. And you'll take that on your team every time. So that's really what's allowed him to flourish in this system is a skill set. He's got a skill set. He's a very good short-area player. He's a physical player, even though he's not the biggest.

But honestly, it's the combination of this relentless preparation and focus and consistency off the field or in preparation. And it's this maniacal attitude on the field where we always joke, like I said, he almost kind of blacks out during the game and just plays. And it's fun to watch, and he's been a lot of fun to coach.

Q. As a defensive coordinator, I wanted to ask, there was a time -- there was a reason why the wishbone isn't run anymore, the veer isn't run anymore. Will defenses eventually, I guess, quote/unquote, catch up to the spread and RPOs and maybe get even with them? Or is this just something that's going to stay?

COACH LEA: I think as long as teams have the ability to

spread the field out, and in particular to run the quarterback, you're always going to be forced to defend with all 11 players, meaning like every single person. You'll be zeroed out. Every person is going to have a responsibility.

Until you have a guy that can cover two responsibilities, then you're one for one across the board and you better win your one-on-ones.

And that's where offenses have become so complicated is that they've found ways to isolate you. And if your DB is one step behind or if your linebacker is leveraged an inch off the body and the ball's caught, he can run into a lot of space.

And I think, too, with offenses, what I feel like I've seen, is just the willingness to continue to push the envelope for what's possible. I mean, what these teams are asking of their quarterbacks, how they're using tempo and then hard counts and scans to undress shells, it is relentless.

That said, I do think that what we're seeing is like the spread offense, kind of like -- what would it be -- 15 years in or so. I think we finally got to the point where teams that were just running zone read, you know, and pulling the ball with the quarterback and at times throwing a bubble off it, I think we found ways to restructure to account for that, at least good enough.

But now you're dealing with this whole new version where the side of the read, the movement of the back, and like I said, the running of the quarterback, I mean, you're requiring your players to win their one-on-ones, to be impeccable when it comes to the execution of the defense and their responsibility. And then you pay with explosive-play touchdowns when you miss in the execution.

And, so, I do think that as, you know, with every year, you have time to study in the offseason and you pore into new ways and creative ways to change the way we can diagnose, to change the way we recognize formation.

And I think defensive football is still going to be about playing fast and physical and swarming the ball. That's always got to be a part of the recipe. But certainly we will catch up, and I also think that offenses will continue to evolve.

And that's what makes this fun. It's what makes it an exciting line of work, is as a teacher, there is no such thing as a concept set in stone. It may be set in stone for a year, but someone somewhere is going to find a way to break that concept and you're going to have to adapt it to stay

relevant.

And so that's the challenge of a defensive coordinator, and that's also what's exciting.

Q. Is there any offenses you've seen that look like Alabama's in the season so far?

COACH LEA: Schematically, we've seen variations of what they do. I think every opponent we play is in some way unique. Obviously I think the Clemson offense is a highly skilled outfit that has multiple ways to move the ball and multiple ways to find explosive plays. So, from a personnel standpoint, there are similarities there.

But every offense is uniquely itself. And Coach Sarkisian does a great job. It's not just about, for them, about their players. I mean, he does a very smart job in designing scheme to create matchups and to create problems on defense.

And then you combine that with the fact that they have like a really talented group. I think it starts in the O line. There's a toughness there and a physical approach that we have to match and exceed in our game and our style.

And then they have skill at every position outside the O line. And it's going to force you to win in coverage, to win your one-on-ones. And they've got a quarterback that can deliver the ball.

So there's a lot for us to have to work towards in terms of finding our success on the field. As far as defending an offense that's similar, I think we've seen parts and pieces through the year, but Alabama is unique just like every other team is unique. I wouldn't say it's any different in terms of our preparation.

Q. Wanted to circle back to Hamilton and Owusu-Koramoah. Did you decide to build your successful third-down package around their varied skills? And is it a situation where they make a lot of the players in that package better around them because of their versatility?

COACH LEA: With everything we do we're trying to find the right combination of people and the right combination of skill sets. So obviously they're a part of that. Yeah, we looked to design around the strengths of our players, and in particular how our strengths line up against the opponent's strengths.

So we know that they're assets, but we feel like we have other guys that we feature as well. We just try to do the best we can to design in a manner that puts our guys in the

best possible position.

And if this thing is going the way it should, then every player on the field -- we always say this. Before anything else, your responsibility is to make the other 10 guys better on the field. So how do I do that? By communicating. By playing hard and fast. By being 1 of 11. By executing my responsibility.

If I set the edge as a force player and I do it to ball level, then the ball gets funneled in. And we trust in our pursuit to finish. If I don't set the edge as a force player and I don't get to ball level, then the ball runs away from our pursuit. And if we're going to an effort-based unit, which we are, that's counterproductive to our purpose.

And so, again, not to be evasive in the question, I think we always look at what we have. We know the skills and the strengths of our players. You've got to be really careful not to give too much because, again, how do I slow players down, is by weighing them down with scheme and adjustments.

And so we constantly are looking to design around the strengths of our unit, particularly as they relate to the strengths of the offense, and then just put our guys in position to be successful.

Q. What were you looking for when you guys were trying to find a grad transfer corner, and what Nick gave you in those areas, and specifically what you kind of have seen out of him that was maybe a little harder to see when you were just recruiting him over film and virtual visits?

COACH LEA: Well, the first thing that we tried to protect here is the brotherhood and the relationships we've created. There's nothing worse than feeling like you might be bringing someone in that would be disruptive to the organization.

And I'm not talking about in a negative way. I'm talking about in a personality way. You want someone who is going to be willing to be a part of something.

And I think with the grad-transfer market in general, things can get very transactional, because sometimes it's just for a year. And so you don't want to have someone that comes in and just tries to take all the resources without building in first.

And I think the thing with Nick that stuck out was just how committed he was to being a part of this. And that was important to us. I mean, his personality, his character was evident through the process. Even when we were unsure.

We weren't sure what he had, but he kept -- he was always there. He was always ready. He was always excited about the potential. And that goes a long way.

Obviously we had film on him. We knew he had played a lot of football in the ACC. He had been a captain. We knew he had battled injury. But we felt like that injury was -- he was going to work his way through that and be fine. And so we weren't sure that he would come in and be the starter at all.

I think he had to earn that. And from day one it wasn't guaranteed. But early on in fall camp, he asserted himself as an alpha, as a player on the field. And he made it an easy decision for us as far as who was going to play that boundary spot.

And he's been incredible. Again, for a guy to come in and just really tie into the fabric of our defense, he is completely a part of who we are. And so we're grateful for his efforts. We're grateful for him choosing to come here and we know that it's been mutually beneficial for him. So those things work out. But we're very, very proud of Nick.

Q. All of college football world is trying to figure out how to stop or slow down DeVonta Smith. Could you just give an assessment of what you're dealing with there on Friday?

COACH LEA: He's tough. He's very tough. He's just a football player. He plays on teams. He does so much for that team. And I've got a ton of respect for him.

But I think the one thing that stands out is he's got another gear. When he hits his accelerator, he has a chance to separate. And the number of times you see that on film, you understand pretty quickly that every snap there's an opportunity for them to score.

And so we have to be leveraged properly. We have to have awareness of where he is all the time. And, you know, we're going to have to win to have a chance to be successful at the level we want to be successful at.

And I think, again, when you talk about one person, that's -- we've defended teams that have one or two pieces, we've done that, talented players. I think the compliment I'd give Alabama, it's a really strong unit. It's a strong team.

There's a lot of people that contribute to their success. And so you can't -- you have to account for the most explosive player, but you can't only defend one guy because there's other guys that can hurt you.

So, it's a unique challenge. But I've got a ton of respect for, like I said, Coach Saban, Coach Sarkisian, that staff, what they've done.

The players work hard. They play together. They're clearly cohesive. And that's what you're going to get in these games. And so what we need to do is we need to execute on our plan. We need to play hard and play to our personality.

We need to have fun out there. I want to see our guys having fun and playing fast. And, look, Alabama is going to make plays. We're going to make plays. We've got to keep battling, and that's the spirit of our unit anyway.

So I know the guys here are excited for the chance to get out there and compete. And we have a ton of respect for them, but we also believe in what we do. And so we're just excited for the opportunity and want to maximize the chance.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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