

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

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Arlington, Texas, USA

Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah.

Q. Alabama has a ton of weapons. How do you try to slow down guys like Najee Harris, DeVonta Smith and Mac Jones?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: All great guys, all great players. Every great player can be contained, every great player can be limited. Their ability -- you just have to find their weakness. That's been our challenge all throughout the week is to find each and every guy that is explosive, which is nearly everybody they have on their offense, man. The linemen, you have 22, you have 4, 6, 19, 8 -- all of them are great players. And our challenge is to find a weakness in each one of them. I don't think I should get into specifics on how we are going to stop them, but we just have to find the weaknesses and make sure we execute on those.

Q. Sticking with Alabama's offense, the number one third-down conversion in the country. When you see it on film what's the secret? Obviously down and distance is important when it's third and short. But what's the key to limiting them on the field once in a while?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: It's to start fast. Whether we're talking about at the beginning of the game or whether it's first down, second down, just trying to get them behind the sticks. If you get them behind the sticks then they're looking at a harder, more limited playbook rather than third and three, third and five, where they can open up the entire playbook.

The key is just to stop them on first and second down and get them behind the sticks to make it even more difficult for



them to dive into their playbook and just run whatever they want to run. I think the issue here or the challenge here is just to control the narrative.

Q. Wonder if you ever grew up -- kids grow up saying I want to be the best quarterback, the best running back. Did it ever enter your mind growing up, I want to be the best linebacker in the country?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: First of all, all praise to the most high. Thank you for that. Growing up, I never really thought about being the best linebacker. It was more like, man, I want to just be the best football player or be the best quarterback. And I wanted to be a wide receiver.

As a kid you don't really think about defense. You think about offense because that's the person that's getting all the praise and the touchdowns and stuff like that. So not really for me -- linebacker. And all throughout high school I thought I was a safety. I thought I was a corner. I thought I was everything but a linebacker. But all glory to God for the award and the acknowledgment. I'm thankful.

Q. You talked a little bit about high school, growing up playing at Bethel High School. How did growing up in the 757 prepare you to be the athlete that you've become, especially from going to scout team to All-American and winning all these awards? Talk about how growing up in the 757 kind of molded you to be the player you are?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Good coaching. You're a product of your environment. And coming from the 757 is just a competitive environment, especially coming from Bethel High School with a lot of guys looking up at Allen Iverson's competitive nature. And it's kind of rooted in the guys that are coming from that place, whether it's Michael Vick or any of the other guys, even some of the younger guys, like Ricky Walker, guys that went to Tech and stuff like that.

We always were looking up to those guys and always looking to compete to find the next person. Am I going to be the next guy to rise above that loop? Am I going to be the next guy to rise above that standard?



When you come into a place which the word is compete, the word is attitude, you just always wanted to excel those -- you want to go past the sky, want to go past the stars, you want to go past anything that's set in your way. And in high school that was always the goal, to find something to separate myself from those that came after me and ultimately to leave the place better than I found it.

Q. Being that this could be maybe your last season at Notre Dame, just wondering if you've tried to do anything these last couple of weeks or in the week leading up to this game trying to take in the moment and just kind of enjoy the process and the journey that you've been on. And then also you mentioned him but Allen Iverson, wondering if you reached out to him this week or if he's reached out to you. If you've talked or gotten any advice from him about how to handle these last couple of games?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: To your first question, man, it's been a lot going on these few weeks with my name out there. So it's always about the man in the arena. You have a lot of people, and the crowd, you have a lot of people that's -- even close to you that want to get in contact with you. A lot of people just coming out of the woodworks saying congratulations.

I'm all appreciative and I'm all thankful, but even to that extent, my due diligence is what's in front of me. My due diligence is to handle what is at stake right now. What is at stake is the National Championship, is the playoff game.

So it's just been about blocking the noise out. I know it's a cliché saying, block the noise out, but it's really an extensive process of having to turn your phone off some days, having to limit your social media use some days, having to focus on certain things, focus on film and stuff like that.

So there's a lot of things you have to do to be able to block out the noise to understand that you are the man in the arena; the man that is important right now is the one that you're looking in the mirror at.

But to your second question, I haven't reached out to AI. I don't think AI has reached out to me. I've gotten in contact with some of his close friends and stuff like that. I was talking to Michael Vick on the phone a couple of weeks back. But that's about it as far as those guys.

Q. Wondering with all the hype surrounding Alabama's offense this year, is it an exciting challenge for you to be able to go against them in this game?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Yeah, I mean, it's something you dream of. It's almost like you're not really playing the guys that Alabama has. It's almost like you're playing a franchise. It's like you're playing the team and the program because it's been so successful. It's been so high praise and prominent.

You want to face the team that's the best. If you say you're the best, you want to go against the best. And that's been the saying in everything.

So when you talk about playing Alabama, it's a great honor. It's a great privilege to be able to be on the field and compete with those guys that believe that they're the best. I believe I'm the best. You believe you're the best. And let's see who comes out on top.

Q. Brian Kelly and Coach Lea have talked about recently how you've risen through the ranks, from scout team to Butkus Award winner, and you've always had that want to be great, to become who you've become. How hard was that sitting, watching for a while, for a couple of years, and then getting your first opportunity really to play last year and now becoming the player you are today?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Man, sheesh, it's been crazy, just to look at the way that I kind of progressed over time, from going to scout team and having to play D end, having to play D end against Mike McGlinchey and playing middle linebacker and rush against Quenton Nelson and guys like that.

Just going through that process and kind of watching the guys, how they handled themselves, even Brandon Wimbush. Just watching those guys on the defensive side, when I was in scout, not really having the ability to be in the defense, being in the game plan and stuff like that.

It was an opportunity where I got to learn. I would say that process was needed. It was a beautiful process. There's beauty in the struggle, as J. Cole says. But I loved it, honestly. I wouldn't have it any other way. Like I wouldn't have it -- you know, I start off this great guy, this beautiful guy, and then I couldn't be relatable.

Now I can be relatable to some of those guys that are on scout team. Now I can be relatable to some of those guys that aren't where they need to be or where they want to be.

And ultimately, that ultimately allows me to be a type of leader I want to be, because, you know, how can I guide you down a path I haven't seen before?

Q. Clark Lea talked about the humility that you've had

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

to learn, to be willing to learn at the position. Number one, can you tell me what the main thing you've learned from Clark Lea is to make yourself better? And, number two, how gratifying was the reaction of your teammates when you were named the Butkus Award winner?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: I gotcha. To the first question, I think the biggest thing I've learned from Coach Lea is probably the art of words. He always talks about the art of words, how it can be a distraction, how it can cause you to ultimately live in a different world and forget about your true talent, forget about what got you to the place that you're in right now.

I think I've learned that, what I just said before, always to leave the situation that you're in, the program that you're in, better than you found it in some way, shape or form. And I think Coach Lea is a good mentor and a good representation of that.

I think those are the two key things that I take away from Coach Lea, is the art of words and how it can distract you and how you have to focus on yourself and not let the compliments, you know, get to your head, not let the compliments overshadow who you truly are. Because ultimately what matters is the performance. So you have all the words, and then you have leaving a place better than you found it.

To the second question, I believe I was speaking too much and talking too much. What was the second question again?

Q. Regarding the reaction of your teammates when you won the Butkus Award.

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Man, it was good to know that guys are always behind your back. Guys are always lifting you up. Even if I didn't win the award, guys would still be behind me. This is a brotherhood. This is something like nothing before that I've been, in the four years that I've been playing here.

It's always a great feeling when you have the guys closest to you, the guys who you spend dang near 11 out of the 12 months with always behind you, always picking you up and always cheering you on. So the glory goes to me, but the glory also goes to them as well.

Q. You look at the results, stopping the run the last two games, not the same as earlier in the year. As you've turned on the film, is there anything that has stood out that you believe is going to be necessary to be fixed leading into this match-up against Alabama's

run game?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Man, that's the most simple question I've got all day. It's just about execution. It's about the small things. It's about whether I'm going to get reached or whether I'm going to fit my gap full speed or whether I'm going to pat my feet. It's in the small things that we didn't execute on in the last two games. It's in the very small things.

I think when we go back to watch the film, we key in on those things and find the fundamentals and get back what we had. We had an edge. We have to get back to that. I think once we find that edge again, which I think we are, looking at these practices we've been having, there's been some great practices, we'll get that edge back and we'll key in on what we need to key in on, and we'll ultimately execute to lead to being that defense that stops the run as well as the pass.

Q. You mentioned how your experiences on the scout team made you a better leader, and some of your other teammates, like TA, praised your leadership abilities and positivity. Is being a good leader something you make concerted effort towards, or is that something that kind of comes naturally, especially being so positive?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: You know what I'm saying is you're born a leader. I don't think you can form somebody as much as you want to try. I don't think you can form somebody into being a leader as much as you try to teach them and do all these certain things.

You have -- take a look at nature. You have a lion. A lion's not the biggest, not the fastest, not the tallest person, but what makes him the king of his kingdom was his attitude, and that attitude was instilled in him at birth.

I think it's a thing where I hold it as a high place to be at, just to be a leader, but also I don't want to be in the limelight all the time. I want to be that leader that talks to the man one on one behind the scenes, talks to the man, go sit down for dinner, that type of guy.

Ultimately, that is the type of guy you want on your team, the type of guy that you want in your program; that doesn't do it for the lights, doesn't do it for the cameras, but also does it behind the scenes.

Q. You touched upon Coach Lea, and you mentioned about the (indiscernible) awards, but can you just encapsulate what Coach Lea has meant to you and the role he's played in your development?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: Well, he's been a difference-maker. He's been a different type of coach. I've never had a type of coach like Coach Lea. He doesn't yell much. He doesn't complain much. He's really a guy that's hard-nosed and is truly gritty.

All my life I've had coaches that had that aggressive nature, that yell, and that has what made me who I am today and I'm appreciative of that. But Coach Lea has a different style. He's more a technical, analytical type of guy who wants you to understand the philosophies of the world, wants you to understand the philosophies of football.

And I think that approach has ultimately made me reach this kind of almost holistic football player. I haven't got there yet, nowhere close. But I think that's ultimately led me in the right direction with him being a difference-maker for me in every area of my life.

Q. A lot of people focus on the football side of preparation, but how are you preparing mentally for a game like Alabama in the Rose Bowl?

JEREMIAH OWUSU-KORAMOAH: How do you prepare mentally? I was asked the question similar to that I think on my Instagram one day. And I said the challenge is not to be nervous. The challenge is not to have butterflies. It's to key in on your responsibilities, key in on you.

If you're nervous, you've got butterflies, that's half of the battle you've lost. I think the number one thing is when you are getting ready for a game like this is to not focus on Alabama. You watch too much film, you're like, hey, these dudes, amazing. They've got it, and all this stuff -- you start to get certain mindsets.

But if you key in and you focus in on the things you're supposed to key in, if you focus on yourself, if our team performs how our team is supposed to perform, everything else will handle itself. The key is not just to focus on how good he is or how good this guy is, but just to focus on yourself and your development and ultimately that process will drive you to meet that opportunity and to ultimately succeed in your performance.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports