

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

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Arlington, Texas, USA

Coach Brian Kelly

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly.

COACH KELLY: First of all, it is such a great honor to be here at the Rose Bowl. Obviously we want to thank the great city of Dallas and partnering with the Rose Bowl to give us this unique opportunity to play this game.

As I had said earlier, it was so important for us to make certain that we got our players' parents to be part of this special game. And again I want to thank the College Football Playoffs for making this happen. And so on behalf of Notre Dame, a really big thank you for putting this together to allow our student-athletes the opportunity to really be celebrated by their families, to be at this game here at AT&T Stadium.

So, once again, thank you to the Rose Bowl, Capital One and certainly the College Football Playoffs and, as I said, the great city of Dallas for giving us this opportunity to play this game.

Now on to the game. We're very excited to be back here. And this is, for us, a journey that we've been on since June. Our players have come through like all other teams that have been on this similar journey, through so many things during the pandemic.

And I couldn't be more proud of a football team. I'm sure Coach Saban feels the same way, and anybody that's been asked these same questions, how they feel about their football team. This is a unique team, a bond that you build with a team that's unlike any others when you go through the things that we've had to go through relative to COVID and testing and changing your lifestyle and habits.

And I just love this team, and I love what they're about. And I can't wait to watch them play. They're going to perform at a high level. They'll need to because this is an



outstanding football team. And, again, want to congratulate Alabama for, again, being here and being part of the playoffs.

And we know the challenges in front of us, but we welcome those challenges. That's why we go to work each and every day to put ourselves in this position. And we're going to keep knocking at the door. We don't listen to the narratives about what Notre Dame can and can't do.

We're just excited that we're going to keep banging at this door and we're going to get through. We're going to keep putting ourselves in this position. And we're excited about the opportunity that we've got for us tomorrow.

So with that, we'll open it up to questions.

Q. Where would you say your team's mindset is going into this game? You've had two really huge games this year with Clemson. How would you compare their mindset going into this game with Alabama to where it was in those games?

COACH KELLY: Well, I'd say it's much more similar to the first time we played Clemson, right? The second time, look, Clemson beat us. They were the better football team that day. There's no doubt about it. But the mindset was different. And coming into this game, playing in the playoffs, your mindset shifts and changes to one where you know you have to play your very best. And if you don't, you go home.

That wasn't the case the second time we played. And unfortunately it crept into the way we played. No excuses. Clemson was the better team that day.

But, having said that, I can sense the way we've prepared, this team will play, our football team at Notre Dame will play with a similar mindset that they did, and they'll need to, in the first game that we played against Clemson.

Q. First, you mentioned that you had hoped to come to a decision on center by Monday's practice. How did that turn out? The second thing is Kyren Williams really accelerated once he got to the top of the depth



chart, he just kept going. Wonder if you could describe the relationship between Kyren and Lance and Lance's role and kind of the way Kyren's developed during the year?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, I think both centers are prepared and ready to play. I think that will be a game-time decision. I think Coach Quinn and I and Coach Rees have talked at great length about both of them, and they're both extremely capable of playing at the position. I think it's going to be a game-time decision. And both could actually play for us.

I think the maturation of anybody has to do with relationships, right? And also knowing when their time has come. And both of those things are what we're talking about with Kyren. Kyren knew that it was his time. We had the graduation at that position. And it was his time.

But he's built a great relationship and Lance has done a great job of developing that with Kyren. So I think anytime you see a back or any position, not just running back, you know, show themselves in their first year, I think it's the individual who says, it's my time and I'm going to go take this, because I think that that has to happen first. They have to believe in themselves.

And I think Lance has done a great job in building a strong relationship with Kyren and, quite frankly, all the backs, not just Kyren because we've seen Chris Tyree play as a true freshman. We've seen C'Bo really blossom in his time -- with all the backs, and I think he does a great job preparing them.

Q. You guys started off the season 10-0. How do you keep your team focused week-to-week when you're winning week-to-week? On top of that, does a loss to Clemson kind of serve as a means to recalibrate that focus heading into the Rose Bowl?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, we revert back to a process, because obviously we're coming off a very successful season the year before. And then an undefeated season in 2018. So we won 12 consecutive games in '18, undefeated season, then we come back in '20 and win 10.

You have to have a process that allows the team, the organization, everybody associated with it, to fall back on that to check their work, so to speak, from week to week in terms of how are we following our process so we're prepared for anything that comes our way.

And so I think we do a really good job of not thinking about outcomes as much as we think about what our process is and how we do that on a day-to-day basis -- how we eat, how we sleep, what decisions do we make on a day-to-day

basis as it relates to going to class.

And I think all those go to a process we have in place that our guys have done a really, really good job of following through on.

Q. Notre Dame is not just a great football school but it's great academically as well. Ranked highest amongst the top 10 teams in graduation percentage. How difficult does this make recruiting when you're limited to only a certain amount of kids?

COACH KELLY: They're challenges. We'd like to have Notre Dame maybe be in a warmer-weather climate area, too, if we could arrange that, too.

But these are the challenges that we embrace. We embrace the challenges because it gets us a student-athlete that is committed to the academics of a great university like Notre Dame.

So we've embraced these challenges and we've taken them and we've still won football games. And we've still done it with great graduation rates. And I think we've shown that you can do it. You can do it with great student-athletes, with challenges geographically in recruiting, and still have an opportunity to win a National Championship. So we're proud of that.

Q. Could you share some thoughts and things that you've seen that maybe we haven't seen about Ian Book and the way he goes about preparing for games, going through the season, his relationship with players and coaches and things like that, little things that we don't know that speak of who he is?

COACH KELLY: That's a tough question, John. Because you guys know everything. I'm kidding, obviously. But you opened yourself up to that.

I would say the things about Ian, in particular, would be his personality. The way he comes into the building every day, you would think that he won the lottery. Upbeat, positive, interacting with everybody from the person that's serving food to the person that is spraying and cleaning in the building, support staff. It doesn't matter who. He brings in such an energy on a day-to-day basis.

And that's kind of what people don't see about him and that's why he's so respected and loved by everybody. And why everybody pulls for him.

If there's a negative thing to say about him, it's kind of like say it to me because we've got Ian's back, because he brings that on a day-to-day basis, regardless of what

happened to him or how he feels, he brings that energy every single day.

Q. Did you have any interest in recruiting Jahleel Billingsley, the No. 19 tight end from Alabama? And has the tight end always been a preference in your offense? You have a great group yourself.

COACH KELLY: Yeah, he's a fine player. I can't recall where he fell on our board, in particular. There are so many factors, but we knew about him and know how fine of a player he is.

The tight end happens to be an area that we've had great success going back to 2010 with Kyle Rudolph and Tyler Eifert and Troy Niklas, Durham Smythe. We continue to turn out great tight ends each and every year -- Cole Kmet, our latest. And there's so many and I'm missing a couple, unfortunately, that have played for us as well. I can't think of everybody at this time, and that's a good thing.

But because of that, in developing tight ends, we've got a lot of young men that want to come to Notre Dame to play the tight end position because we utilize them. You can see it in our offense today, right? We're using two and three tight ends quite a bit.

So people -- tight ends are quite attracted from the high school ranks in seeing the utilization and how they can develop in our program at the tight end position.

Q. You had mentioned challenges and you can embrace challenges or try to push back against them and maybe change them. I'm curious, since the last time you played Alabama in the BCS Championship how your perspective on challenges around Notre Dame have changed, like embracing them maybe more as opposed to trying to change what Notre Dame is, and if you think that's been a big part of the success really over the last four years?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, Pete, I think so. Look, we're not going to change at our core who we are in terms of the student-athlete and the premium on the student-athlete in terms of what is the right fit here. I think you know that. You follow us as closely as anybody. But I do believe there's some merit to the fact that you're not going to fight who we are in terms of the recruiting process.

I think once you decide that, look, these guys fit, you can then go and make the case for those young men that are going to do the right things at the university. And maybe if they fall a little bit below the line relative to some of the numbers that you need here at the university, they make up for with outstanding traits. They're great in the

community. They're going to be great representatives of the university. And I think you embrace it from that perspective. They've got great emotional intelligence.

So I think there are other ways to really embrace that than strictly saying, well, he doesn't meet this criteria relative to a particular GPA or test score. But what about his character and really digging in deep about that. And I think embracing that and understanding that there's guys out there that can meet it from that perspective certainly helps quite a bit.

And I think, really, that this pandemic has given us another glimpse at how we can build earlier relationships even through Zooming and Facetime before they even get to our campus. We saw it with this recruiting class, which I think is going to help us moving forward, that it doesn't always have to be we have to get them on campus.

We know we're in South Bend, Indiana, which is not the first destination on everybody's map. But when you do get here it's a beautiful campus. But we can do so much work here now having gone through what we've gone through this past year by touching these families a lot sooner through Zooming and Facetime.

Q. You had a good season this year. Only lost came to Clemson. If you were able to make it to the title game and Clemson made it to the title game after winning the Sugar Bowl, what would it mean to you and your team to have another shot at Clemson and at that national title?

COACH KELLY: We'd love it. I mean, rubber games are what it's all about. Each team wins one; you settle it with the rubber game. And that would be a great scenario.

We've got a great Alabama team that we've got to handle first, and that's where our focus and energy is. If Clemson's fortunate enough to beat Ohio State, we would love that.

What's important now for us is how we perform against Alabama. But what's important next would be a matchup against Clemson or Ohio State. It doesn't really matter to us. We'll take either one of them.

Q. It was a great segue into my question with the WIN acronym. That kind of work for the team all season, how does the WIN acronym -- What's Important Now, What's Important Next -- work as the window tightens the season?

COACH KELLY: Well, in a lot of different ways. What's Important Now is certainly our focus -- not being distracted

by guys going to the NFL, are they coming back, when will I get a chance to see my family again, what's the schedule look like next week? When we win, are we off a couple days? So you can understand that that acronym in relative terms doesn't necessarily always revolve around football.

Anything that can distract any of us, right, and that being a schedule, for example. And our guys need to know sometimes what's next, as well as what's the next 24 hours look like.

So it applies in so many areas. When we're dealing with young men that want to know what's the next 14 days look like for me. Am I going home? Are we staying here for Christmas? What's the schedule look like? Those are important conversations to have as well.

Q. Daelin Hayes was one game just perfectly with that shoulder injury last year. If it had been one more game he wouldn't have been able to come back. What will you remember about his second chance of kind of having a final chapter there at Notre Dame?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, great question. Embracing a second chance in a way that he really, I think, opened himself up to being complete as a football player and as a person. He wanted to, I think, reach his potential. And I don't mean just as a football player, but as a person.

I think he opened up himself to being vulnerable as a player and as a person and we saw the growth of a young man in this past year that is, for me, why we get into this business, right, to see young men grow up the way he has and grow up to be a captain and a leader of our football team. And so just a great chapter, and one as a coach you live for those moments.

Q. What are the challenges that defending someone like DeVonta Smith, what are the challenges defending a player like that?

COACH KELLY: Well, first of all, they do a great job. I mean Coach Sarkisian does a great job of utilizing formations and motions and really putting them in a very good position and really taking advantage of some matchups that can be problematic for you. So I would say first and foremost, a lot of credit to the way offensively they're utilizing magnificent players.

As it relates to him specifically, he can do a little bit of everything. I think the first thing everyone thinks about is explosiveness, which he is. Great ball catcher. Tight windows, it doesn't matter. Great concentration, route runner. He's just a complete player.

And I think they use him so well and so smart in the way they use him to get great matchups. I think it's a little bit of both. I think they should get a lot of credit. I think Coach Sarkisian should get a lot of credit in the way they've used him in particular.

I don't know where he came in at the starting lineup, the start of the year. I don't know if he was the featured guy or not. But to kind of transform into the featured guy through the season the way he has is a credit to him and the coaches.

Q. Wanted to ask you quickly about the defensive coordinator hunt whenever the season ends, I don't know if you have a timeline for that, but also I was also curious, is consistency and scheme your first priority there considering the success of the defense and how you've recruited over four years?

COACH KELLY: We'll get moving on it pretty quickly. Obviously there's some competitiveness involved in this. There are other openings for coordinators positions, so we can't be sitting on our hands as we look around the country or even internally.

We have to be able to look at this from a perspective of there's candidates out there that are being looked at by other schools as well. So I've got to have that in mind. So relative to the process, we've got to be on top of it.

As you know a lot will begin in its beginning stages through Zoom and Facetime because of where we are with the pandemic. And then you're probably closing after that by bringing somebody on campus. So that in fact has changed a little bit. So we've already begun putting those kind of protocols together for the interviewing process.

As it relates to scheme itself, we've recruited to a base four down. That doesn't mean that we can't play three down, because we do. As you know in our nickel and dime package, we're primarily in a three-down package.

So as long as the system can marry with our recruiting, that's the most important thing. As long as it marries with the recruiting we've been doing over the last three and four years, I'm open to what the system looks like. It doesn't necessarily have to be always four down. We can be in some three down and some four down.

But it can't be -- we're not going to a 3-4 defense. And that's not going to happen. We will be a team that is continuously looking at our personnel that we've been recruiting to match the scheme.

So, long story short, you'll still see some four down and

you'll still see three down, which is pretty much what's going on except for some that have gone strictly to three down to match who they're seeing in their conference. And that's not the case as an independent where we need to be in three down because we're seeing -- we're not just seeing spread offenses; you've got to defend the triple option and power offenses. That's why we'll match it with what we recruit and what our schedule looks like.

Q. There's always been a long association between Alabama and Notre Dame, dating back to Frank Thomas was the roommate of George Gipp, I believe, and then he was the head football coach of Alabama, of Coach Bryant. Coach, you have Jay Bramblett from Tuscaloosa, your punter. Howard Cross III, his dad, Howard Cross scored a touchdown against Notre Dame in '86. And then Lance Taylor, the running back coach. How did all those associations materialize?

COACH KELLY: Well, I think when you talk about historic and tradition, Notre Dame, Alabama, those two schools are going to keep coming up. And when you talk about the names that you brought up, they're going to gravitate towards those great programs.

And so I think there are always going to be connections between the great programs in the country. Whether it's Alabama and Notre Dame or it's Notre Dame and USC, there's always going to be some kind of connections or Alabama and some of the other great programs around the country. Obviously Alabama and Clemson comes to mind with Dabo.

So I think there's always going to be those connections with the great programs throughout the country.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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