

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

Friday, January 1, 2021

Arlington, Texas, USA

## Coach Brian Kelly

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Alabama - 31, Notre Dame - 14

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly. We'll begin with an opening statement.

COACH KELLY: It was certainly a disappointed locker room. I think I'm probably more disappointed about the fact that I don't get a chance to see these guys, many of them, as they move on and graduate, because it's just been an incredible group of guys to be around on a day-to-day basis, what they've committed to and sacrificed to be playing this year. So from that perspective, the game aside, it's a pretty disappointing feeling that we've played our last game.

Congratulations to Alabama. They're a fine football team. They made the plays today. Today was about making plays. They made them on the perimeter. Their skill players showed up today as they have all year. Made it difficult for us.

We battled. I thought we did some of the things that we wanted to today. But we simply didn't make enough plays. We're going to continue to battle, continue to recruit, and continue to put ourselves in this position to win a National Championship.

So, again, proud of my guys. Proud of the way they battled today against a very good football team. And just wish we made a couple more plays when we had the opportunity.

**Q. After admittedly, obviously, getting better and getting back to this place in the playoff, how frustrating is it to just be sort of in the same place competitive-wise?**

COACH KELLY: I don't know what the question is. What's the question?



**Q. How frustrating is it to get to a playoff again and lose by this margin?**

COACH KELLY: The margin is not the issue. Losing is losing. I don't know really what the inference is. This football team battled. And they made a few more plays on the perimeter.

I'm not sure, really, what the question is. When you lose football games, you know, there's a few more plays that you have to make. We had the opportunity. You watched the game. I watched the game.

We did not score in the red zone when we had opportunities. We moved the ball into the red zone. We missed a field goal. We had two opportunities in the red zone to score, where this would be a competitive football game. And we didn't make enough plays.

This wasn't a matter of getting knocked off the ball or not having enough players to compete against Alabama. This was about making plays.

And so, you know, I guess everybody needs to continue to carry this narrative that Notre Dame is not good enough. Look at the scores of the games that Alabama has played all year, and I think we need to start to change the narrative a little bit.

This team was out there competing and having a chance to win. And I'm proud of the way our guys competed.

**Q. As you look at it, you feel like the program has gotten a lot closer, what's the first next step you feel like you guys could take or need to take?**

COACH KELLY: I don't know how I need to -- I really don't want to continue to go down this path. We're going to keep getting here, okay? And we're going to keep banging at it and you guys watched the game, didn't you? They made plays on the perimeter. They made some dynamic plays.

They had the college football player of the year who made some dynamic plays. We battled. We were right there. So we're going to keep getting back here.



And I'm sorry if you don't like it or if the national media doesn't like it, but we're going to go back to work. We're going to keep recruiting and we're going to put ourselves back in this position again. And I think our kids battled and played really hard and physical. We ran the ball today.

And I'm not taking it personal, because these questions keep coming up like we have to reinvent ourselves. We were physical today. They were dynamic on the perimeter, like they have been all year. This is a really good football team. And we're just going to keep recruiting and keep playing and we're going to keep putting ourselves in this position. And that's all we can do.

**Q. Congratulations on a successful season.**

COACH KELLY: That would be nice if our local people felt that way. But they don't use any of those kinds of those terms. This is always about where our program needs to go. So I appreciate that. Thank you.

**Q. I was hoping, since now you've played Alabama and Clemson, how do those two teams compare, Coach?**

COACH KELLY: That's a good question. I think both of them have dynamic players on the perimeter. I think overall they're really closely matched teams. Both have explosiveness, I think, on the offensive side of the ball.

And I think defensively, I think that whoever really plays the better defense will probably have the edge. Now, I don't know much about the Ohio State situation -- and you didn't ask me -- but that would be how I compare those two teams.

**Q. At the end of the second drive, you had a QB run in third-and-seven. Was there a consideration of going for it on fourth down? Did that impact the third down at all?**

COACH KELLY: Which one are you referring to? What quarter are we talking about?

**Q. First quarter.**

COACH KELLY: Oh, yeah, yeah. I think we were being probably, from an analytic standpoint, we took the suggestion of analytics in the first and second quarter relative to field position and pinning the field position. I think I reacted off of what our analytics had called in that situation.

**Q. If this is indeed the last game for Ian Book, what do**

**you think what his legacy is for the program? Obviously most wins of a starting quarterback. But what do you hope people will remember Ian Book for, I guess?**

COACH KELLY: He's a winner. He's won more games than any quarterback in Notre Dame history. Period. End of discussion. The guy's a winner and we're going to miss him. He just wins football games. And there is no other story, just a winner.

**Q. On the interception to Mayer in the third quarter, what did you see on that play and how do you feel that swung momentum a little bit?**

COACH KELLY: Ian got flushed out of the pocket. And he just need today put a little bit more on that, kind of floated it a little bit. I think if he had another shot at that he probably would have put -- that would have been a fastball instead of a level two with some touch to it.

I think he felt like he was in a better position than he was. And a good play by Alabama in that situation.

But it's one of those where he's trying to make a play. And I told him, I said, listen, I don't fault you at all for trying to make that play. I just think the selection of the type of throw in that situation -- and he gets it. He's trying to make a play in that situation.

**Q. As you said, you ran the ball in the first half and you possessed the ball. Did you feel like taking a few deep shots would hurt your ability to continue to possess it and control the clock and control the running game?**

COACH KELLY: Yeah, it's a slippery slope, Tim. I respect the question, and I think it's a good question. And that's what we're talking about all the time, right, in terms of taking the shots versus possessing the football.

We felt like we were going to be able to control it as we had with some of the spacing throws that we had. And then trying to get it set up. And then we lost Tommy there on some of 13-personnel throws that we had set him up for, which kind of put us back a little bit.

So, yeah, Tommy and I were having that conversation virtually every drive as to when we wanted to take our shots. And we had to balance that with ball control and limiting possessions.

**Q. To follow up on that, what were your thoughts on Kyren's performance today? He had, I think, 24 touches. It got away from him a bit but may have been**



**a result of the scoreboard as the game went on. What did he show you especially in the first half?**

COACH KELLY: I thought he was solid tonight. I thought he played the way he's capable of playing. He would admittedly tell you that he was probably not in his zone against Clemson. But this was the Kyren Williams we had known to see for ten weeks during the season -- caught the ball out of the backfield, he ran tough, he was physical, protected well. He was a complete back tonight. And I thought he was good today.

**Q. Just on the first three Alabama possessions, they made a lot of spectacular plays with great athletes there. Were you misaligned in any of those situations, or was that just them making better plays?**

COACH KELLY: Well, I would say no, we weren't misaligned, but we felt we could get and rally to them a little bit more physically. As you know, they exploited some matchups into the short field where we thought we could get out and box that a little bit better. And it didn't happen.

And then the bubble to the field -- essentially what happened, I would just be clear with you, is that we were a little tentative. We shut our feet down. And you can't do that against highly skilled players. You have to be aggressive and attack those skill players in space. If you shut your feet down for a second they are gone.

Now, we got better at that and started to swarm to the football better. But it put us in a hole early on by not being decisive and aggressive on some of those boundary throws and then the one that got outside Lewis to the field.

**Q. What's the latest on Tommy Tremble's status? And how do you think his injury impacted the game once he was out?**

COACH KELLY: No ligament damage. No fractures. He had an MRI and an X-ray. He's good to go. Ankle sprain.

Tommy's an important part of our offense, but we've got to be able to overcome it. But the margin is very fine when you lose an important piece of our offense. But again, we had other guys step up. I thought Mike Mayer was an absolute beast tonight, the way he competed for every pass that was thrown his way.

We just needed more firepower, quite frankly. And we just came up short with the firepower. That's it. There is no other wider story than we just came up a little short with making a few plays. And they made a few more plays than we did today.

**Q. I know you are probably tired of this narrative and it's not necessarily a Notre Dame-specific thing. But does college football have a top-end talent issue between 1, 2 and 3 and the other teams in the top 10?**

COACH KELLY: Look, we beat the No. 1 team in the country. Now people will say, well, the quarterback wasn't there. Still, we feel like we're really as good on any given day as a top team in the country.

There's certainly a few teams that have a couple more weapons that can be explosive. But you don't necessarily have to walk around and be the best team every week. You just need to be the best team on that given day.

And I think there's more than just two or three teams that can be the best team on that given day. And I think that that opens it up to more than just two or three teams.

So I would say that we're both right. I would say that you're right in assessing that there's two or three that have prolific, prolific weapons and more than some. But I think there's enough balance with this others teams, and Notre Dame would be one of those included, that have enough to beat you on any given day.

**Q. You guys have some premier talent. You've also played some of the best players in the country week in and week out, a bunch of Heisman finalists -- DeVonta Smith, Max Jones and Trevor Lawrence. I'm curious, after playing all these guys in big-time games, if you had a Heisman vote, where would it go?**

COACH KELLY: Boy, I'll tell you, Lawrence, Jones, Harris, Smith, those four guys, they influence the game in a manner that you could make the case for any one of those. I think those -- are those the finalists? Those are the four finalists?

They're all capable of handling that trophy without feeling as though they shouldn't have it in their hands. They're that good, all of them.

Harris is multidimensional, physical at the point of attack, soft hands, runs great routes, makes you work to get them down on the ground as well as any back that we've seen. So I would put him right in that category as well.

**Q. With DeVonta Smith, the wide receiver for Alabama, if you had to vote for the Heisman, would he be your vote for the Heisman Trophy?**

COACH KELLY: Were you not paying attention to the last answer?

**Q. Yes, I was listening, sir. He's so good, dynamic.**

COACH KELLY: Okay, then I'll give it to him.

**Q. You keep on reiterating the point about Alabama just made more plays in the game. For you, where do you guys have to go to maybe get players that can make those plays in these big games to get over the hump? Is there something recruiting-wise, player development? I'm just curious, what is the next step? I know Pete asked that earlier, but what's the next step to get those playmakers in the program, I guess?**

COACH KELLY: You guys are killing me. Big games, big games. You mean when we play Alabama and Clemson, right? And those are the big games. Those are elite, talented teams that have elite players. I just mentioned four players that are going to be vying for the Heisman.

When they're on the perimeter, nobody has shut them down. Tell me who has tackled those guys. Everybody has the same problem that I do. It's tackling those guys and getting them down. And it's the same issue.

I don't have a unique problem at Notre Dame. I think you need to look at the scores that everybody played against Alabama and Clemson. Everybody's got the same issue.

So we're going to keep recruiting. We're going to keep getting back here and everybody can keep saying, you know, Notre Dame is not good enough. You know what? You're going to have a problem because we're going to keep winning games and keep getting back here and we're going to break through. And then I am going to be terrible to be at a press conference with. Terrible.

**Q. Following up on that with the firepower aspect you mentioned, does that mean -- and the fact you're saying these guys have the elite talent -- can Notre Dame get to that elite talent pool, or is that just the obstacle that you face being with academic standards at Notre Dame, that you're just going to be in that uphill battle to get to the level of Alabama and Clemson and where they're currently at?**

COACH KELLY: No, we think we can get there. Look, we were physical. We ran the football. There wasn't a physicality issue out there. Last time we played Alabama and Clemson, I felt like there was a physicality issue. We've got that -- we know where that story needs to end.

We have to continue to find more playmakers. And we'll keep working at it. We're committed to doing it and we're not going away.

So great year. It's not where we wanted it. We wanted to win a National Championship. But Notre Dame Nation, you guys can get some sleep, recharge your battery. And we're going to get ourselves back in this position again. So you don't need to jump off a bridge, a building. We're going to keep working. We're going to rededicate ourselves in the offseason, back in the weight room. And we hope to get right back here in Dallas next year.

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