

# TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Notre Dame vs South Carolina

Thursday, December 29, 2022

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

## Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Marcus Freeman JD Bertrand

## Jarrett Patterson

### Press Conference

TOM NORTON: Good morning. We will get things kicked off this morning with Notre Dame. We have head coach Marcus Freeman, linebacker JD Bertrand, and offensive lineman Jarrett Patterson.

Coach, I'll hand it over to you.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Thank you.

Start off by saying how excited we are to be here in Jacksonville, Florida. This has been a first-class bowl game all week. Our guys have been able to do some great things in the city of Jacksonville. We've had some really good preparation. It's been going really well. We're excited to play an extremely talented opponent here tomorrow at this stadium. This has been a great experience for our guys.

TOM NORTON: We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. Marcus, we know every team wants to win these bowl games as an end to what has been a good season. Are you looking for anything in particular tomorrow that will give you some good signs towards the future, next year and beyond?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, the most important thing is winning. That's going to give us the most momentum as we continue to look forward.

As I told the players yesterday in our team meeting, our focus is right now. Our focus is finishing this season off right now in the right way. If you continue to focus on the future, think about the future, you're going to lose the



opportunity we have in front of us.

The future will be taken care of if we finish the season off the right way. That's 100% where my focus is and I hope this team's is.

**Q. JD, South Carolina is good in the red zone offensively. You guys have struggled in that aspect. What do you have to do? Have you been able to pinpoint what some of the issues have been?**

JD BERTRAND: They're a very talented team. They have the ability to go in and out different personnel groups and also be able to go into the wildcat look.

So just being able to prepare properly, and then also looking at ourselves, making sure we are fundamentally sound going into this game after not playing a month.

**Q. Jarrett, obviously this time of year people are opting out of games. You have a history of some injuries, but you've chosen to play. What went into the decision? Did you give any consideration to joining a couple of your teammates?**

JARRETT PATTERSON: The way I look at it, I have one more opportunity to play with this group. Despite all the injuries, passing on an opportunity... The injuries come and go, but the memories last forever.

I really had no thought of opting out or not practicing, anything like that. I wanted to finish this thing off the right way and play my last game as a Notre Dame football player.

**Q. Coach Freeman, a year ago now your emotions were different than today. Can you compare and contrast? Where was your head last year at this time?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Oh, whew. I'm sure my emotions were all over the place. I remember having a press conference next to Mike Gundy. It was obviously surreal. You're just kind of figuring it out one day at a time.

You know what, I think you're still figuring this thing out. I



don't think the day will come where you say you got it all figured out. That's the reality of this profession, having the opportunity to lead this great group of young men.

I think you have a plan and you have a sense of the, Hey, here is how we want to proceed. Those plans obviously have to continue to enhance and change depending on the situation you're in.

A year later, we have a practice structure, we have a plan that we looked at for this year compared to what we did last year. How can we enhance what we did last year?

We'll get a chance to go out and play an extremely talented football team and be able to reflect, be able to look back and say, Where can we enhance our preparation and making sure the next bowl opportunity we have we're in a better situation?

**Q. When you've been preparing for South Carolina, watching their game tape, how much attention did you pay to just the last two games in particular as opposed to the ten before it?**

JD BERTRAND: I mean, one of the biggest things is you can see they're clicking towards the last two games. Things were working really well, especially against two really good opponents. Obviously they're hot at this moment.

You know they're going to come in confident, they're going to come in with that kind of swagger. At the same time we know that we can look at those kind of clips and those kind of games right there, but know that that kind of is something that they're looking to enhance and kind of go off of. Also know that with the guys that they're potentially having in the transfer portal and stuff, we can look back at ourselves and work on improving ourselves.

JARRETT PATTERSON: I think you pay more attention, the last couple games, really any opponent, schematically from September to the end of November, things are a lot different. Players improve, injuries, opt outs, transfers, things like that happen.

Similar to what JD said, this team played really good football. They beat two top 10 teams, and they play with that swagger. It shows on film. We're going to have to come out ready to play tomorrow.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I'll reiterate what they said. When you prepare to play a team, you want to prepare to play the best, what you've seen them put on film being their best. The last two games they've shown they can beat any team in the country.

That's our challenge. That's the team we're going to face. We'll see what happens tomorrow, but that's what our mental preparation has to be.

**Q. Marcus, Monday you mentioned some guys that might be TBD on status for today. Anybody that you have a sense will be good to go or might miss because of injury?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Jayson Ademilola won't play. He's the one that I don't think was out there. He won't be able to go due to injury.

The rest, Brandon Joseph, he practiced all week, he'll be a game time decision. We'll see how he feels.

Jayson is the one we know for sure is out.

**Q. Brandon, is that the ankle that gave him trouble before?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yes.

**Q. JD, for you, Marist and Jack, how have you grown this year now that it's been the three of you all together out there as the middle of the linebacker unit? What have you seen as the biggest improvements?**

JD BERTRAND: I mean, I think one of the biggest things is as the year goes on, you continue to grow and you continue to see where we were at the beginning of the year and going forward.

I think one of the biggest things was the communication piece. Especially going into a new defense and being able to start in the beginning of the year, come to this point, it's that communication piece, not just among the three of us but also to the guys up front, the guys behind us, be able to make sure we're all working and flowing as one.

**Q. Jarrett, what would it mean to you to win your last game at Notre Dame?**

JARRETT PATTERSON: That one last great memory I could have. I have so many of these last four and a half years, five seasons with these guys. Especially for the other guys in the locker room who are going to move on later in life, not even try to go to the NFL, playing their last football game. Going to be special for those guys as well. It's not just for me, it's for the other guys, too.

**Q. What do you think it would mean for your program to win tomorrow?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: I want this group to be the example for our future groups. We talked about this all season, this road to where we want to go isn't always as we see it on the front end.

I want this group to be the example, this is why you trust your coaches, continue to work no matter what the outcome is each week. To finish this thing off the right way with a victory here at this Gator Bowl would be a tremendous example for not only a congratulations to this senior group and this group of players that have been so resilient, but I think it's going to be the example, no matter what, they're going to be the example of what we use to propel this program forward.

**Q. How would you assess where Tyler is right now? How prepared is he for tomorrow?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think he's ready to roll. You talk about a guy that hasn't played football for probably week 2 to week 12. He had some time where he wasn't on the practice field.

After I think today's practice is 14, after 14 practices, I think he's ready to roll. He's been magnificent in practice. He's done a great job of leading the offense, which to me it's not just throwing the ball, right? When you're the quarterback at Notre Dame, it's gaining the confidence of those guys around you. You're the leader of that group. I think he's done a good job of continue to earning the trust of these guys that are surrounding him in that offensive huddle.

**Q. JD, Spencer Rattler, his particular skill set, what jumps out at you? Have you faced a quarterback this year similar to what he does?**

JD BERTRAND: I mean, the biggest thing is he's an athlete, he's able to make plays with both his feet and in the air. His ability to extend plays beyond just the usual of being able to stay in the pocket, three on the run, just be able to make those third-and-shorts, that low area red zone, being able to scramble or get those extra yards, convert the first downs, get into the end zone. That obviously has been a big point of emphasis for us.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

JD BERTRAND: Most definitely. There are some. Just being an athletic quarterback that can extend plays.

**Q. Marcus, what have you seen from the receivers, building that chemistry with Tyler Buchner again, taking advantage of this opportunity without Michael Mayer in the pass game?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, you lose that crutch, right? At some points, when in doubt, you throw the ball to 87. Well, he's not out there.

It's been excellent to see what Coach Stuckey has done with that wide receiver room, see those guys elevate, take advantage of those opportunities.

You never know on a pass concept or pass call if your number is going to be called. You have to make sure you're running or routes, precise, expect to get the ball.

It's been good to see those guys in practice. Listen, we've had a lot of competitive situations. That's kind of been the focus for me for this bowl prep is saying, Let's go good on good. Nowadays, with opt-outs, guys not playing, you don't know what you're going to see. You don't. This game is going to be about our preparation, what we do.

You've been able to see our wideouts compete against our DBs, ones versus ones in competitive situations. They're doing a really good job, and I'm excited to see them play tomorrow.

**Q. Chance Tucker was highlighted the other day. What has he done in bowl prep to give him a chance to contribute tomorrow?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's gotten more reps. With Cam Hart being down, it's giving some other guys an opportunity to get more reps. Chance Tucker was a guy that he was getting reps with the twos but also getting reps during that developmental time we talked about before we came down here.

That's why bowl practice is so important. You get a chance to prepare for a great opponent but also early in the bowl practice really get a chance to develop some of those guys that haven't got the opportunities throughout the season. He's done a great job.

**Q. Jarrett, Coach Freeman talks about the uncertainty about going against a team that may have opt-outs. You have extra time to help prepare for the game. Does that help the offensive line prepare for anything that can be thrown at it?**

JARRETT PATTERSON: With certain opt-outs, especially on their defensive line, you expect wrinkles, guys moving positions.

At the end of the day, we still have 12 games of film to watch to understand their running schemes, pass rush moves, third down schematically. At the end of the day, it's go out the first couple series, figure out their game plan is

going to be, and just making the adjustments on the sideline.

**Q. Jarrett, in terms of working with Coach Hiestand over the course of 12 games, when did you feel like the offensive line figured it out? How has Hiestand been in the last month and a half of the season when you guys were clicking, figuring out ways to push you further?**

JARRETT PATTERSON: I remember after the North Carolina game talking to Coach before we got on the plane that you kind of see the cohesiveness, togetherness of the unit. He understands a new group of guys out there, Blake Fisher only played a couple games, it's going to take time.

I think throughout the season, as the moments are more crucial, got to have situations where it's two minute, four minute, short yardage, that we improve in that area.

The last month he's been great focusing on development of us. He's still the same guy every day, attack, get after you, but it's been an awesome experience to have him as the offensive line coach this year.

**Q. Marcus, in terms of taking a quarterback in the transfer portal, what is your process for that timeline? As you're evaluating guys that you may like, how important is game experience where you have a lot of college tape to look at?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: It's something we do every day, we look at the portal, look at high school recruits. We're always looking to enhance our roster. There is no timeline. It's all about fit. It's about making sure you find the right guy at any position, quarterback being one. We're looking at all positions.

Again, it has to be the right fit. They have to not just enhance our roster athletically but they have to fit into the Notre Dame locker room. That's something we'll continue to investigate.

Recruiting is an everyday thing. It's an everyday thing that we have to do and we must do. I can't give you an answer for when that will happen. We're constantly looking and evaluating at all positions. Whenever we find the right guy.

**Q. The experience of that player, Kaleb Smith coming from Virginia Tech, you have a lot of college tape, you're not taking a flyer on somebody. How valuable is that?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Extremely important. Again, if you're looking for a guy to come in, we have a young group

of quarterbacks, from Tyler being a freshman, actually a sophomore, Tyler being a sophomore. You have Steve, Ronnie, another freshman coming in. We have a young locker room.

Yeah, we're looking probably for a little bit more experience.

**Q. Jarrett and JD, you are missing a couple guys in Michael and Isaiah, how is it stepping in that leadership? Any younger guys you feel are stepping up?**

JARRETT PATTERSON: Like Isaiah and Mike, those two guys were great leaders, but also tone setters for this team. Just because there's a couple guys named captain, they're not the only leaders on this team.

One of the strengths I've seen especially throughout the summer working with Coach Balis, there are plenty of other guys that are vocal as well that are not seen as captains or leaders of this team.

I think those guys in those position groups understand that, they're going to have to step up and try to be as great of leaders as they possibly can. They've done a great job for us.

JD BERTRAND: It's an exciting time for a lot of young guys to, one, be able to get these opportunities in this bowl prep time, and then also be able to display their talents, be able to have an opportunity to play their best out here tomorrow.

**Q. JD, one of the young guys who has played a little bit more late in the year, Jaylen Sneed, what have you seen from him since the start of the season that's helped him come on a little bit?**

JD BERTRAND: I mean, the biggest thing is he is very raw athletically. He has so much athletic talent and potential, you can see such flashes and stuff that, I mean, kind of remind you of 'woo' like.

Those instances where you see that is super exciting. He has so much to build off of. It's exciting to be able to see him be able to step into a little bit bigger role one step at a time.

**Q. Coach, I think you said after the Tennessee-South Carolina game that the Gamecocks looked explosive and you were impressed. What has been the most impressive thing about Shane Beamer, what he's been able to do heading into this game?**



MARCUS FREEMAN: You talk about a guy, I think his second year of being head coach at South Carolina, first head coaching job, I think he's done an excellent job of recruiting, developing and improving. That's the challenge, is to continue to enhance your roster but develop your roster that you have.

What you're seeing is a team throughout the season get better and better and better. At one point you could have saw his season, the South Carolina season, going one way or the other. They went one way, and that was they went vertical, got better. That's to me a reflection of the way he's led.

He's done a great job with this football program.

**Q. When you're assessing a transfer possibility through the portal, how important is it to look 'em face to face, to be in their space, the time spent in person? I believe in the early stages of this portal some offers were extended to receivers, et cetera, from Western Michigan where maybe you haven't been face to face yet. How important is it to assess, have a one-on-one? What kind of questions do you ask to assess the character and the fit?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: That's so important. The recruiting game, if you want to call it, has changed in terms of at times you have to offer guys to even be able to recruit 'em. That's the reality of it. Some guys don't want to talk to you unless you've offered them.

In order to take a guy into our program, I'm going to have to meet with you face to face, have to make sure Zoom, whatever, we have a connection. There's so much that goes into a football player beyond what you just see on film. There's a lot of guys you can turn on film and say he's a good football player, or you can say he's not so good.

When you meet somebody face to face, you get a chance to know them, ask them difficult questions, see how they respond, you get to say, Let's figure out who this person is as a man.

It's different in the transfer portal because everything happens so fast. When you're recruiting high school kids, you build relationships over time, right? You really get to know the kid, the coach, the families. In the transfer portal, you have to be able to look kids in the face, have those conversations, but also make phone calls, try to see, hey, do you know somebody at the previous school, do you know somebody that can give you a little bit of character makeup of this person.

Because it's careful, man. You got to be careful the people

you bring into your locker room. We're fortunate, we have a great group of captains, a great group of leadership that you really don't have an option when you come into our locker room. You're going to convert to the way these guys lead or say, This isn't the place for me. That's really important.

You have to be cautious on the type of personalities you bring into your locker room because I've seen it go both ways, one really good and one really bad.

**Q. The health aspect, the medical, on a transfer portal guy, do you need to have your own doctors look at someone physically, poke and prod, or can you accept what you see from a reputable doctor out there, especially about complicated medical issues?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I'll always lean on our doctors to give us a thumbs up or thumbs down. Maybe they didn't medically evaluate 'em, but they can make phone calls, they can look at the medical history to be able to say, We feel good about this or, no, this isn't going to be something good for our program. I always lean on our doctors.

**Q. You don't need your doctors to physically have hands on or do their own deals?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: I need the doctor's blessing. Does that mean they physically put their hands on them? Not all the time. I need them to look at me and say, We feel good about this. That's part of it.

**Q. Marcus, the captains talked about their leadership. Evaluating the season, what did you learn about leadership from the two individuals sitting next to you?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: That your culture, your leadership is really revealed when things aren't going so well. I learned more about these two guys and our captains in the difficult times than I did during the times that things were going really well.

These guys continue to take control of this team. Sometimes as the head coach you feel like it's everything you say to the team that's going to get the culture, get this program where it needs to go. These guys do it. They take care of the messaging that needs to be said.

I'm fortunate that I have a great group of leaders, that when things weren't going so well, they really took care of the locker room.

**Q. What is the one thing that you learned from Marcus**

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## Freeman this year?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Not in front of me (smiling).

JD BERTRAND: I think the biggest thing for me was him being able to have the steady voice, no matter how the season was going, we could always look to someone that was pushing us to get better throughout every single day, every single week.

JARRETT PATTERSON: I'll just say authenticity. Everything he says has a purpose. He's not saying stuff just to say it. He believes what he says and he practices what he preaches every single day.

**Q. Coach, South Carolina, you have a lot of players that are stepping up out of the transfer portal. Talk about facing guys you don't have a lot of tape on, how hungry these guys are.**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think that's why I said earlier, we do a lot of good on good in practice because when you have almost a month to prepare for an opponent, sometimes that's too much time.

The beauty of playing a team in seven days is that you can only watch so much film. Right now we have 12 games. Really you can talk about two years' worth of film. These guys are junkies. All they do is watch film. Sometimes you can watch too much and assume you know exactly what the other team is going to do. You don't know.

Just like we're preparing to make sure we self-evaluate, that we're not just doing the same things over and over, we're sure South Carolina is doing the same thing.

We spend a lot of time going good on good, meaning our offense has to go against our defense, which isn't South Carolina's defense, and our defense has to go to against our offense, which isn't South Carolina's offense.

That forces you really to be able to execute off of your fundamentals, off of your basic schemes, basic concepts, and not just always try to attack a different opponent's tendencies.

That's a long answer to your question of with opt-outs, you don't know. You don't know what you're going to see. We don't know what we'll see tomorrow. We'll have an idea, we'll have the base concepts that they do on offense and defense and special teams, but we obviously have to prepare for some different wrinkles and things we haven't seen.

TOM NORTON: Thank you to Coach and to JD and Jarrett

for coming.

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