

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Notre Dame vs South Carolina

Friday, December 30, 2022

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Marcus Freeman Press Conference

Notre Dame 45, South Carolina 38.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Man, what a great feeling. As I told these guys in the locker room, the opportunity to finish as a champion, there's no greater feeling, and I'm so proud of the way they continued to battle today, which is a great representation of what they've done all season long.

I know I've said this before, but we're on that bumpy road, and they continued to trust their coaches, to trust their leaders, and this is a great way to finish off this 2022 season.

I told them they'll be the example we use for a long time because this is what real life is about, the ability to respond to some of those situations that happened to you.

I'm extremely proud of this team, the leaders, the seniors, and to send that group off the right way, it's very pleasing.

With that, we'll open it up for questions.

Q. Coach, being that this is such a hotbed of recruiting in this area, how do you think this game affected your recruiting efforts going forward with a bunch of kids that grow up looking at and wanting to play in the SEC?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, for us, listen, the best recruiting we can do is to go out there and play well and win. We'll find the right guys no matter where they're at, because this university attracts the right people. That can be in Florida, that can be East Coast, West Coast. We've got a kid from Germany.

Really, we recruit obviously nationally, but for those guys to go out there and play the game the right way and to beat a really good South Carolina team, that's the best recruiting



you can do.

Q. Regarding the game, that pick six, what was the reason behind the call there? It looked like you had broken South Carolina's will on the ground at that point, you called the pass, it goes the other way, 100 yards, Gator Bowl record.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we were looking for a specific look, and we thought we had it. Didn't have the exact look we were looking for, and the guy made a great play.

Obviously at that moment we were running the ball really well, and again, ultimately we obviously shouldn't have threw it, shouldn't have called it. But the greatest thing about it was to be able to, again, use that situation as another example in the future, and the ability for that offense to have that happen, look at them on the sidelines say in about five minutes, two minutes you're going to go right back out there, and for them to march down the field and score, that's what it's all about.

Q. Can you just talk about how satisfying it has to be to win a game coming from behind, almost kind of in opposite fashion to the way you guys weren't able to put away the bowl game a year ago? I've got to imagine it's gratifying.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I remember saying this after the Clemson game. It's never how you foresee it on the front end. In all the days you can sit here before this game and daydream about how you think this game will go, it wasn't like that. But the ending was, and that's what we'll remember.

Again, to send these guys off the right way, no matter how we could achieve it, that's what matters. So I'm happy we got it done.

Q. How do you feel No. 12 played tonight?

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's special, man. I told him on the sideline, I told him after the game that there's many different examples we use, but Tyler Buchner is an

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example of a guy that had a bumpy road. The way he finished off this season, his first year, having a chance to start, and the ability to just really tune out all the noise and focus on, you know what, his job. That's within a practice, within a season, within a game. That's why I'm proud of him.

Q. You've only had a few minutes to take this in, but has it occurred to you how great of a game that was?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Now it does because we won. But yeah, listen, it was a -- you expect it, to play a tough game, because you knew that opponent was really good, and that quarterback is special. We knew that coming in.

Take your hats off to them; that's a well-coached program. First time I got a chance to meet Shane Beamer. He's first class, and he runs a really good program.

Q. We talked to Brian Mason in December and he had mentioned that you're kind of waiting for the right time and a lot of things have to go right to call a fake. Talking to him over the headset there, what did he like about that moment for the fake punt?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we ran a punt earlier in the game. We wanted to see the look we would get, and after we ran the punt, he said it's there if we want it. Right before we went out there, he said it's there. I said let's do it. We've been practicing that fake all year long.

Listen, there's no more games left, and I wanted to run it. I knew going into the game if the opportunity presented itself, I wanted to run it. Mace said let's do it here, and said let's go. We executed; it was beautifully executed.

Q. On defense they go down the field pretty quickly on the opening drive and scored on three of the first four. You guys had 4-3 and outs during the second half. Was there anything schematically you wanted to do or doing what you wanted to do initially better?

MARCUS FREEMAN: As I told the guys at halftime, I don't know what the score was, but it should have been 17-10. Our defense had given up 10 points, and the field goal fake is the field goal fake. That's not the defensive coordinator's job. As I told them, they played really well. They gave up 10 points the first half on defense.

All I told them, stop beating Notre Dame, and they were able to go out and put it all together that second half, and I think they only gave up seven points in the second half.

Q. Marcus, for how unpredictable the game was in the flow, your offensive line was predictable by the end of

the game. What did they deliver tonight? I don't think they probably showed you anything new, but just in terms of like okay, the game ended with that unit being the best group on the field.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I've always said this, when you have the ability to run the ball, when the other team knows you're going to run it, that's when you know things are rolling. They knew we were going to run the ball. Except for the last touchdown, they thought we were going to run the ball, and we didn't.

That's why we do those inside run drills. That's why you challenge those guys up front. I say this all the time, we're an O-line D-line driven program. I said that at halftime. This game is going to come down to our offensive line and defensive line, and they want that. They want the pressure on. They want to run the ball in those critical moments, and hats off to them. They're an excellent group. They've done an excellent job all season.

Q. Bowl games can be a little bit of a one-off, Mayer is not playing, Foskey is not playing. What do you take out of tonight that matters for the next nine months? What carries from this?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Well, I don't want to take away from how we finished for the seniors. That's the most important thing is now, is right now, because if you continue to just think about the future, you lose this opportunity to send these guys out the right way.

But once you get through that, then you say, okay, let's look at the young guys that have a chance to play, let's look at the ability to -- for about 10 practices, really develop that middle part of your roster.

We didn't get into South Carolina until really two practices before we came down here. So the ability to really improve your roster, those guys that are coming back next year, and the ability to send these guys off the right way, that's what's the beauty of a bowl game.

Q. Braden Lenzy had a couple chances this season, some missed connections and a big game, not only the fourth-down fake punt but also the deep ball from Tyler and a key third down. Can you discuss his journey sticking with it?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I remember saying it after the Navy game when he had that big catch for a touchdown. You know what, you don't know when your number is going to be called. For a guy like Braden, just continuing to do his job and run as hard as he can and run his roster protection, and that's an unselfish position. It's just great to



see him get the opportunities to go make a play and make them today.

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Q. Mitchell Evans today, the throw back, it looked as if Jayden Thomas might have been open on that play, but the patience of Tyler to wait. Was that something you knew was going to break open because it looked like he actually had a shot for the first one, but the second one Evans was wide open for the score.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, that was meant for Mitch, and it unfolded beautifully. Again, I think it's a credit to how we were running the ball. Run the ball, run the ball, run the ball in that short yardage situation, be able to leak Mitch out, that's a tough play versus a defense, especially when you're able to run the ball. But it was great execution by these guys.

Q. Your offensive line obviously took over and you like to milk the clock. You've done that this year. Did you feel -- I wonder what some of your conversations with Coach Rees were in the second half about remaining aggressive and having to be aggressive because you knew Spencer Rattler was on the other side.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, that played into a lot of my thoughts. I think early in the game, I was probably a little bit more vocal on running the ball. But in the second half, I wanted to be aggressive. Let's not be cautious, let's be smart, but be aggressive.

Again, the interception, that was a chance -- the ability for us to be aggressive, but it also wasn't smart.

We can't play keep-away. I sit there and I challenge these guys every day to be relentless and aggressive and go after them and let loose. With eight minutes on the clock, I can't say there and say, okay, let's play keep-away. I wanted them to be aggressive, and other than the one interception, they did a really good job.

Q. Obviously you knew about their punter's ability to throw the football, but I'm sure you didn't see the look you got there. Did you think about calling a time-out or did you try to?

MARCUS FREEMAN: No, because the communication was do we have everybody covered. Yep. Because we've repped so many different fakes on field goal and punt, it was just a miscommunication. Are we good, do we need to call a time-out, no, we're good, we've got everybody covered. It's was a miscommunications between two guys. Anytime you've got two guys covering one guy, maybe somebody is open. That's what happened.

