

# CFP Semifinal at the Capital One Orange Bowl: Penn State vs Notre Dame

Friday, January 10, 2025  
Miami Gardens, Florida, USA  
Hard Rock Stadium

## Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Marcus Freeman Riley Leonard Christian Gray

Postgame Press Conference

Notre Dame 27, Penn State 24.

MARCUS FREEMAN: So proud of this group. What a gritty performance, and they found a way when it matters the most to get their job done. Penn State was a heck of a football team. I had a lot of respect for them coming into the game but have more after the game. It's a really good team, well-coached, and it was a tough match-up. But these guys are resilient, and they found a way to make a play when it mattered the most.

That's what, again, to me is what great teams, great organizations are able to at that moment that they need to do their job or make a play, they do it. The last play doesn't matter. There's unpredictable things that happen all the time, and they find a way to make it work.

I'm really proud of them, excited for this next opportunity. We'll enjoy this thing today and tomorrow before we figure out who our opponent is and then we've got to get healthy and get back to work for one last guaranteed.

**Q. Riley, when you're being evaluated it's not really up to you if you're coming back or not. What was your level of concern for those few minutes, what was the fear factor like, and did you have any doubt that you'd be able to get back out there and do what you did in the second half?**

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I think our medical support team first and foremost did a really good job. Got up a little wobbly, so that's an indicator they've got to bring me to the tent and take me through all the concussion tests.



We went through all the tests and they decided I was good to go back, but we definitely took our time and evaluated my numbers from this summer when I took a brain test to when I performed in the tent.

Passed that, and Steve Angeli, this is a guy who has kind of waited his turn and all year has prepared like he's a starting quarterback every single week; showed a lot of maturity; and he helps me out a lot. He is a guy in the sideline that knows exactly what the defense is doing.

He's a good friend of mine and I appreciate him a lot, so for him to go in and drive them down the field, three points before half, that was big.

**Q. Riley, did you maybe overthink some things a little bit in the first half, making some checks? And by just keeping it simple in the second half, did it allow you to perform at a higher level?**

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, we didn't really have too much of an altering game plan. There were some checks I could have made in the first half, but overall I knew what the defense was giving me. We just knew what to get to in the second half.

But no, I saw it well, and obviously didn't perform on a couple plays, but I can live with that. If I didn't throw that ball to J2, which I over-threw for an interception, I would have regretted it.

So I'm confident in my progression that it was the right throw. Just got to execute it. I can live with that. If I were to not throw it and hesitate, that's one thing, but I let it fly and it got picked, but that's all right.

**Q. Coach Freeman, could you comment on the performance of the offensive line after you had to put two substitutions in the lineup? Number two, how do you manage to loosen things up so much in the second half? You scored 24 points.**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we've got a lot of confidence in the offensive line room. When Knapp goes down, Tosh



Baker has to go in, and when Rocko goes down, Charles Jagusah has to go it.

We've got a lot of confidence in them. I think the situation right before half, you've got a new quarterback in there, is it a two-minute situation, they're trying to rush upfield, and they made some plays.

As I told the offensive staff and the team in the locker room, we have to be able to run the ball and we've got to stop the run. That's not changing. We said that going into the game and we were saying that at halftime.

We had to make some adjustments, which we did. We had to try to calm some things down. The running attack -- the rushing attack truly helped us open some things in the passing game in that second half. You know what? Riley just executed, the wide-outs executed, the O-line did their job, tight ends played well, and you find a way to win it in a game-winning field goal.

It was going to be a battle. We didn't have great production in the first half and it was a seven-point game. I told them, we get the ball the first series of the second half, and we've just to go out and execute on this play. But I want them to understand, we did not play to our standard in the first half. And credit to Penn State for what they did on both sides of the ball.

It was a seven point game. It did not feel like that going into the locker room, but it was a seven point game, and our guys went out there and performed in the second half.

**Q. Marcus, your age was brought up at yesterday's press conference. Happy birthday to you. Where does this rank in terms of how you've started one of your birthdays?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: 13 years ago I had a daughter born on the same day as me. For the past 13 years she gets all the birthday credit. But this is special. Again, this is a special moment that a lot of hard work has been put into it. It's not about a birthday, this is just about a moment and enjoying this moment together.

**Q. On the final drive where you kicked the field goal, how hard was it to strike a balance of being aggressive but also being careful knowing you didn't want to give Penn State the ball back there, as well?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we had great communication in terms of what we were going to do. I wanted to see are they going to call a time-out. If they're not going to call a time-out, then I had to have a plan, hey, when do we want to use our time-outs.

Once we figured out what they were going to do we said we want to center this ball on 3rd down, center the ball on 3rd down, and on 3rd down -- I'm sorry, center the ball on 2nd; on 3rd down is when we decided to do a QB sneak because they called a time-out.

They executed flawlessly. Nobody panicked. It was great communication. Riley kept everybody under control, and we knew we were in range where Mitch could make that field goal.

He is a confident guy, man. There is no moment too big for Mitch Jeter. I had a lot of confidence in him in that moment that he was going to do exactly what he did, and he did a great job at doing that.

**Q. I am curious about the beginning of the drive, how you decide what the plan of attack is in that situation.**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I don't know exactly where the ball was -- at the plus 42. We wanted to get the ball as close to the 30-yard line as we could. Listen, if we could have went down and scored we would have, but we get at this moment, let's get the ball at least to the 30, and if we're not going to score a touchdown, let's run as much time off the clock as we can.

But we didn't want to leave us with zero time, so we had to be smart with how we utilized those three time-outs, and we did a good job.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, he was banged up, and he is a tough individual. He didn't get a lot of practice reps. We were very calculated on what we asked him to do in practice.

There was maybe a little doubt on my end, but the closer we got to the game I said, okay, he's going to give it a go.

The statistics maybe weren't there in the first half, but him being out there means something to everybody on that offense and everybody on our team. In the second half he made some Jeremiyah Love plays.

It speaks volumes to the heart he has. He gave everything he had to this place. He did not have to play today. Nobody would have batted an eye. But he put team in front of himself and how he felt, and we've got a whole bunch of guys like that in that locker room, and that's why we're in this position.

**Q. (Indiscernible)...wide receivers against the**



**cornerbacks. At some point during the game did you realize we could adjust a little more and help out on the run when you have Christian and Leonard more on the outside?**

CHRISTIAN GRAY: Coach Mick has always told us challenge, challenge, challenge every time and we just did our job and we just kept them to zero matches, so yeah.

MARCUS FREEMAN: That's him, man. Keep it simple. You know, as a defensive mindset, when you have a lot of confidence in your corners to be able to play man-to-man coverage, it allows you to do a lot of different things with those nine other people.

But we can't always just play man, too, because that's how some of those big plays happen. You can scheme us up.

But just those guys -- one of my favorite plays Christian made today wasn't a play on the pass, it was when his guy cracked blocking the field and made a huge tackle. I think that was on 3rd down.

He put all 175 pounds into that tackle, man. But you know what? That hurts. That hurts. He's made to play man coverage, but I don't know how much he signed up to throw his body in there against a 200 pound running back that runs physical.

But that's the way we choose to play this game. That's what I told them in the locker room. That's what I told them before this game. We choose to play this game in a physical, very physical manner.

You know what? You're going to have to play through some pain, but that moment in that locker room when we're singing that fight song and we're celebrating together, it numbs the pain. I'm just proud of them. Proud of them and grateful that we have these guys in our locker room.

**Q. Marcus, it feels like this game was a microcosm of the journey you've been on this season to get to this point. Can you just talk about the resilience and response of this team, to give this program a chance to win its first national title since 1988?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I often tell them, in your lowest moments you find out the most about yourself. We've had low moments, but we had a really low moment week 2, and these guys battled. We've got great leaders. We've got great players that chose to put this university and this football program in front of themselves.

That to me is probably the single most -- the single thing that I'm probably most proud of, is how we have a group of

individuals that truly put Notre Dame football in front of themselves.

I know Riley and Christian truly would rather be in that locker room celebrating than being up here, but that's what it takes. It takes 120 guys saying, you know what, who cares how many plays I get? Who cares what type of individual praise I get?

It's all for Notre Dame and to make sure we achieve team glory and we have a locker room full of guys made up of that, and that to me is a reflection of what you saw today, guys that did whatever it took to make sure we achieved the outcome we want.

**Q. Coach, having a win down here in South Florida is huge impacting just visibility to students and high school recruiting. What do you think a win like this locally here will do for you guys in recruiting in that aspect?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Winning helps everything. There's a lot of coaches that are on the road right now recruiting, and fortunately for us, the best recruiting we can do is winning. But also hopefully the culture that is built here attracts recruits.

This is a place -- we know South Florida is a hotbed. South Florida has a lot of great football players. Hopefully we find the right ones that choose Notre Dame.

**Q. Riley, walk us through the 3rd down play right before the field goal and having to sit on the sidelines when it feels like forever when Mitch finally hits that field goal?**

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, it's a really weird feeling. It's hard to describe the emotion that goes on during that time. It's hard to describe the emotion that going on right now even.

But I think it's kind of funny to me, because I kind of knew the kick was going to go in. We all knew the kick was going to go in. The kid has got ice in his veins. Any time his number is called and he's got to make it, it's a lock.

Shout out to Mitch Jeter there and to the defense, as well. Our job was to get 15 yards or so, get us in field goal range, and the rest is history.

**Q. Marcus, I know you said you had all the confidence in Mitch, but how much was it between when Penn State called a time-out and when the kick went through, what are you feeling on the sidelines?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Let's go. I was more concerned with the protection than I am with Mitch Jeter. Our field goal protection has been a big point of emphasis the last few weeks, and that was what I kept thinking about, and when we had that time-out was reminding them of the fundamentals to execute the protection protecting the field goal.

I leave Mitch alone. When he's in his lane, let him do what he does. But I had to make sure those big guys didn't get lost in the moment. It was about execution in that moment, and they did a great job in protection.

**Q. Christian, what did you see on the interception, and when did it start to sink in that you just made probably the biggest play of your career and were going to help send your team to the national title game?**

CHRISTIAN GRAY: To be honest with you I really didn't think about anything after I caught the ball. I just knew I was just blessed and I just felt God over me after I caught the ball.

So pretty much it.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Special, I mean, all these guys are special, man. He won't take credit for it, but in the biggest moments, both of these two and many guys in that locker room find ways to make plays when it matters the most.

We're playing USC here a couple weeks ago and they're going in to try to make this a one-score game and he had some plays earlier that didn't go his way, but on that play versus USC, when they went at him, he picked the ball off and ran it back for a touchdown.

That's what Christian Gray does. He makes plays when it matters the most. I think he got a DPI or a holding or something like that, but in that moment Christian had to make a play and he did, and was a huge reason why we won that game.

**Q. For all three of you, players come to Notre Dame, coaches coach at Notre Dame for the hope of winning a National Championship and the belief that that's possible. I'm curious for each of you, now that you're 60 minutes away, what does that mean?**

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, throughout this whole off-season everybody would ask me why I came to Notre Dame and I would give a lot of different answers, but the truth is I came here to win a National Championship and to go to the best team that would give me the best chance to do that.

Obviously this is the right place and I made the right

decision. That's why I came here, at the end of the day.

CHRISTIAN GRAY: Really, I just trusted God and I trust the coaches here. They saw potential in me. They saw greatness in me, and I believed them on that. I just came there because of the trust and the community and everything here. So yeah.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think any competitor wants to be a part of a place that the expectations are to win championships. We all had a decision to make when we chose Notre Dame as the place we want to either coach or play at.

But there's more to this place than that, too. We know every year we compete. The expectation is to win championships. But there's more to this university and what it provides for young people. It's a special place that young people get to grow in their faith, they get to grow in community, they get to make connections that are going to help them for the rest of their lives.

Every football season this is the expectation. Although we haven't achieved it. But there's also a lot of things that this university does for these young people that will carry them throughout the rest of their lives.

**Q. Marcus, you've not only had to put Steve Angeli in the game in a critical moment but you let him let it rip. What's the confidence level and where does that come from in him and all the other backup guys that you ended up having to play?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, it's earned. We've got a lot of confidence in Steve and all those other guys that had to step up when their numbers are called. They earn that confidence in practice. Steve has earned it in some game opportunities coaching, but you earn it from your teammates and your coaches in practice.

And so if you're thrust into this opportunity out in a game where everybody else can see you, that's when they get to learn about you. But we had a lot of confidence in Steve and what he can do, and we weren't just going to put him in there to hand the ball off. We were going to go to try to score, and we ended up scoring three points.

**Q. Marcus and Riley, making this run, the whole country is watching. What do you hope the country is learning about your program?**

RILEY LEONARD: What I think the country is learning about our program, I think the biggest thing is just culture wins. You see a bunch of talented guys across our locker room but you can see that anywhere in the country.



I think at the end of the day it's which guys are putting their bodies on the line and doing everything they can for the man next to them. Nobody is thinking about draft stocks or next year or anything like that, any type of individual glory. We're all thinking about the man beside us.

I think we kind of proved throughout the season that culture wins, and it's a special place for a reason.

MARCUS FREEMAN: I'll follow up what Riley says. I hope people that see this football team that aren't with us every day sees a bunch of individuals that put team in front of themselves, and that's a lesson that is going to help you achieve great things in football but great things in life. You have to be selfless to achieve anything great. We've got a locker room full of selfless players and selfless coaches.

The time you're tested the most is when you're at your lowest point. We lose to Northern Illinois and you've got a decision, do I want to be selfless or am I going to put individual glory ahead of myself. I hope the nation sees no matter what the situation was, this team continues to put Notre Dame in front of myself.

**Q. Riley, either when you were down right after you got hit in the first half or in the tent, was there a worry or concern that your night might be done?**

RILEY LEONARD: No, I was very aware of how I felt. I just had to prove that through our brain cognition tests.

But yeah, I knew -- I got a little wobbly there for a second, but I knew whenever I was in the tent I was all good, so there wasn't no worry at all, no.

**Q. Can you guys just speak, he's not up here, Jeremiyah Love, can you speak to the grittiness that he portrayed tonight, especially on that touchdown run? What is it like for him to battle through that injury? Obviously he wasn't 100 percent, but what was it like for him to be out there and grit through this game?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: I've already answered that on my end but I want you guys to answer that.

RILEY LEONARD: I'll speak on J Love real quick. J Love is a guy that doesn't show too much emotion until he gets the opportunity to be the leading blocker for me.

It's kind of funny out there. He's a real quiet kid, but whenever he has the chance to go knock a D-end and block for me, that's when he starts to chirp. I think it's the best feeling in the world when he's only talking trash

whenever the ball is not even going to be in his hands.

He's a special, special person and one that I love sharing the backfield with.

CHRISTIAN GRAY: Man, I've been going against J Love since like freshman year of high school. He's just that guy. He's just that guy, ever since freshman year. He's been scoring touchdowns like crazy. Knowing J Love and his personality, man, the future is bright for him, not gonna lie.

**Q. How do you feel about extra day off that the winner of the Cotton Bowl is not going to have?**

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know what? The greatest thing is there is one day guaranteed you don't have to stress. We don't know who we're going to play. So let's enjoy the night and let's enjoy tomorrow. Hopefully we can watch the game or try to as a fan. I don't know if we will.

But the minute that we find out who wins that game, you go into competition mode. You're starting to prepare, coaches and players. But the best thing is yeah, we have one day extra physically to get healthy, but the mental strain that it has on you preparing for an opponent, it's tough. I hope these guys for one day can enjoy this moment, enjoy not having an opponent. We'll have a happy flight home and then Saturday we've got to get to work.

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, it'll be great to have that extra day for my body for sure.

CHRISTIAN GRAY: Yeah, same thing.

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