

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 26, 2017



Brian Kelly

BRIAN KELLY: Just to recap, obviously, you know, back-to-back road wins, very proud of our football team and some of the things that they are starting to show as a group. I think we showed great growth Boston College week in terms of our grit, in terms of coming back from some adversity, and then I think the growth that was shown against Michigan State was, you know, a great deal of poise, being on the road for the first time in that kind of environment, and then coming out with a big lead at halftime and really responding to Michigan State's push at us in the third quarter and then responding.

You know, I'm really looking for those areas where your football team grows, and I think in both those instances, really important growth opportunities for our team, and they were able to answer those calls in both instances.

Now we've got another opportunity for growth, and that is to continue to play with the kind of mindset that we've developed since January, and that's one of living up to the standard of excellence that we have here in this football program. The men, the mission is to play for championships and to have championship type performances week in and week out. So we expect nothing less from our football team again this weekend.

Miami University is a Mid-American Conference champion team that went to a bowl game. From here on out, we'll only play teams that have gone to bowl games, so another challenge for our football team in terms of quality opposition, a team that's won, and has an instilled sense of winning football games. Coach Martin has done a great job of doing that in a very short period of time. He's done that obviously at Miami and certainly did that in incredible fashion at Grand Valley. He'll do a great job in preparing his football team. He does a great job of handling these kinds of games, as well. You just need to look at the games where he's played on big stages. They do a great job of controlling the football. I think they average almost 34 and a half minutes time of possession offensively.

So you have to be extremely efficient with the football offensively. They don't give up big plays defensively. So you're playing for a lot of -- for you folks that follow us, this is a lot like playing Navy in the sense that you've got to be extremely efficient on offense against

them, and you've got to obviously keep the points down because they're going to do some really good things.

From our perspective, this is really about living up to our standard that we've established within our program and how we play the game, and then playing a team that is a conference champion that is well-coached and will manage this game in a manner that will force us to be extremely efficient. Another great challenge. We're happy to be back at home and excited about being back in our stadium.

With that, open it up to questions.

Q. Is there anything comparable to going against Chuck Martin in your career, somebody that you've been so connected with during your career and know so well?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, I think in my years maybe at Grand Valley, you get to know coaches so well that there's a familiar face that you know and have been around and have probably either played golf with or have chummed around with in the off-season. But you know, I think it ends there. This isn't -- Chuck and I are not going to be playing the game. I know how he is going to prepare his football team. He knows how I'll prepare my football team. I think that's probably it.

I think I've gone against other coaches that I know very well in terms of how they'll prepare their football team, and I think that's probably the similarity.

Q. In the Michigan State game there was a hit, helmet-to-helmet hit on Brandon. Maybe there was more than one that one that really came to light that wasn't called for targeting. As a head coach after the fact, is that something you turn in to the --

BRIAN KELLY: Yes, we turned it in. We had it evaluated, and obviously felt that they missed that call. You know, it's extremely frustrating as a head coach in this profession that you see -- where I really have a hard time with this whole targeting rule in itself is that young men don't get many opportunities to play this game. I think I was watching a game on the way back on the bus, and there was a young man thrown out of the game trying to make a tackle, just trying to make a tackle, and then we have this instance when this young man was not trying to make a tackle. We can't seem to get that right, and we have a replay official that is

supposed to be looking for that. That is extremely frustrating when somebody has to be thrown out of a game trying to make a tackle, somebody is still in the game, and he's not trying to make a tackle.

It just needs to be fixed. It's right now not in a very good place and needs to get fixed.

Q. And then when you sent it in to the conference office, do they come back to you later and say, yeah, you know what -- is there any consequence for an official and a replay official missing something like that?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, we had the consequence obviously last year against Texas when they missed the clear targeting against Torii Hunter, there were repercussions for that Big 12 replay crew, which was double secret until later in the year, obviously. I don't know what, if any, repercussions would be relative to the on-field crew for the ACC or for the Big Ten replay crew, which was supposed to be monitoring that situation. But it was egregious, and there's no other way to look at that kind of hit. That has no place in the game.

Tackling where somebody lowers their head as you're trying to make a tackle and there's no intention there to target, that's part of the game, and we just seem to -- can't get that right, and it's extremely frustrating.

Q. Chase Claypool is a guy that's kind of got an elevated role for you now. We've all seen flashes of him both in special teams and offense. What's kind of the next level for Chase as far as you're concerned? What do you think he could turn out to be if he kind of keeps pushing himself?

BRIAN KELLY: Okay, you used a lot of words in there: Elevated, flashes, where could he be. I think all of that. I'm in between flashes and wanting to elevate. It's one game. We think he's capable of being a very nice piece to putting our wide receiver corps together. As you saw, he's big, he's athletic, he can catch the football, we can get some nice match-ups with him. But he's a young player that, quite frankly, the game is still evolving for him. But really like the way he ran and caught the football, made that initial defender miss, and got us the yards after the catch. Excited about Chase, love his work ethic during the week, and hope that it becomes elevated and it continues to grow.

Q. Jordan Genmark-Heath has like eight tackles and I would imagine most if not all of those are on special teams. What do you like about him on special teams, and do you feel like that eventually will translate to him maybe getting in your safety rotation, or is he more of a special teams player this year?

BRIAN KELLY: No, you know, he's attached to Coach Elko at the hip at practice, so he's learning the safety position. As he learns, we want to continue to keep him actively involved in what we're doing, and when I say what we're doing, you know, playing real football, getting him involved in our special teams and tackling and doing the things that can help our football team because he's a physical kid that can help us. You mentioned his tackling. But I'll go back to the game I saw the other night. You know, this one team had one safety thrown out of the game, another one was on the docket to be thrown out. You know, we have to continue to train Jordan to be prepared to play this year, so that training will continue, but as that training is going on, we want to keep playing because we think he's got some nice skill sets.

Q. Quenton Nelson, what is your evaluation of him so far this season, and what's his leadership style like in the locker room?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, my evaluation of him as a football player is that he's extremely powerful, physical, can run. I mean, he checks all the boxes. I don't know that there's anything that I would say here that would surprise you as a football player. Smart, instinctive, can pass protect. He's the real deal. Show me one that's better, and we'll have a good argument.

Leadership, boy, he's evolved and grown as a leader. And he's done it by his choice. You know, we've worked a lot together personally, he and I, on taking his strength as a leader, which as you can imagine, truth is his number one strength. He's very truthful, and you can take that any way you want it.

And really worked hard on how he delivers that truth. It's been much more impactful across the board. He's a very effective leader because of that. And that's something that he's wanted to do.

One of the reasons he came back was that he wanted to work on those skills, as well. Not only did he want to be a better and more complete football player, but he wanted to be a better leader, too, and he's worked really hard on that. I'm proud of him.

Q. How would you assess the performance of the defensive line up to this point, which obviously entails about 12 guys?

BRIAN KELLY: I'd give them an A-. You know, and I think the minus is probably lost a little bit of focus here and there at times, but their technique, their ability to use their hands, play with a much better discipline in terms of how they fit in our front seven is probably an A+, and then just, you know, maintaining that intensity, that endurance, that mental endurance that I talk about. That's the area that they have to continue to

grow at. We're getting some pretty good edge pressure from our front four. We're getting batted balls, and we're getting the kind of integrity that front four needs relative to the run fits. Mike Elston has done a terrific job with that group.

Q. I know you don't concern yourself with expectations. You always set them very high, of course, but is this group ahead of schedule?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, again, I thought that we -- as a group, as coaches, myself, we all underachieved. So I don't know if we really painted the right picture. And so coming into this season, we had maybe higher expectations than everybody else. And then I think that through our preparation, we've been able to really see that this group could continue to grow and be better each and every weekend.

I think, again, what we ask them to do and what Mike is coaching them to do has really fit very well with the position group, and look, we've gotten some really good play from some freshmen, emerging players like Julian Okwara have done a nice job, and then some veterans are having their best year in terms of an Andrew Trumbetti. It's been a little bit of all of that coming together.

Q. We ask you about a lot of players every week. We focus on the left side of the offensive line. Talk about the changes on the right side of the offensive line. We don't ask you about Sam Mustipher very often, but your comments on where he is, seeing him in the fourth quarter of an 85-degree night, still pulling and leading the way for you.

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I think it's a really keen observation. I will tell you some inside information that I usually don't share, but we do a highlight video of our offensive linemen, and he was not in the clips last week, and that -- not that he didn't play great, because he played pretty good. But there were some hellacious hits from some other players, and he took that personal. He is all over this week's highlight clips, and that's the kind of pride he has in his performance. And they were late. I mean, it was late in the game, and he was all over the place. Somebody that -- and you mentioned his physical endurance, his ability to pull the his ability to snap the ball effectively. He's made great strides in that area. He takes great pride in it. He was really impressive on Saturday.

Q. We talk to you a lot about that physical endurance and strength and conditioning and improvement, but when you see that in the fourth quarter of a Michigan State game, does it even surprise you a little bit that not necessarily across the board, but pretty close across the board that is

what your team has become?

BRIAN KELLY: It's pleasing. It's certainly pleasing. In terms of -- you know, laying out the plan of what our total preparation needed to be, right, and I keep bringing this up, about our physical preparation, technical, tactical, and then the mental preparation, all of them have to come together in some fashion, all of them I've talked about in terms of how we needed to come out in this football game mentally. And now you're just having this conversation about the physical, right? We have to have a really good game plan, and then they have to execute the technique. So all of these things coming together is intentional. We've got to keep doing that each and every week.

Q. Is Nic Weishar as good a blocker as he was this past week?

BRIAN KELLY: Nic has been amazing. Nic is in an incredibly gifted group of tight ends, and Nic will be the first one to tell you that he looks like the dad with the guys, you know, from a body standpoint. But man, he will stick his nose in there. He's a South Side Chicago now; he's got some grit and toughness to him. We all know he can catch the football, but it's hard to take him off the field because he'll throw his body in there and he'll do whatever is necessary to get the job done. We just love what he's doing right now.

Q. Obviously the guys took a lot of heat after the Georgia game, and it seems like it turned around fast. Did they use the criticism out there as motivation? Is that some buttons you pushed?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, we're our harshest critic, and we don't really listen to a lot of the noise, whether it's good or bad. We know what we did against Georgia and what we needed to improve on quite frankly, and it wasn't -- it really wasn't an impetus for what we did against Boston College. We knew what we needed to clean up. We knew we needed to do things better as a coaching staff and put our kids in better positions. But it's just a group that was still evolving and still coming together, and so I think each week is a new week, Georgia is a good football team, and you know, they beat us that week, and we were ready to move on and tackle the next challenge.

Q. When you go from the start of the season now through four games, are you seeing the steady improvement from that unit that you want to?

BRIAN KELLY: I'm seeing comprehensively each player do some things that is a carryover from what we're seen in practice. Kramer and Hainsey, for example, that tandem, is really now almost seamless in terms of how they're working together. Tommy -- look, extremely physical, and that showed itself on film. He's throwing guys around, literally. Hainsey is a beautiful pass setter. He's about as flawless as a pass setter as

there is in college football at his age. I mean, he's a young player. So that's showing itself in practice, and it's translating into games. Alex Bars stays on his feet and plays with great balance and leverage. That wasn't necessarily the case last year. We've already talked about Sam in terms of his endurance. And then those other two guys on the left side, stay away from those two. I mean, they just -- each and every week they have a mindset of wanting to dominate, and that's a pretty good thing.

Q. How do you anticipate reintegrating Josh Adams, and will Tony Jones, Jr., be in your plans this week after having to sit out against Michigan State?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, we clearly see the benefits of all of those backs being involved in what we do. It's getting to Saturday, too. So my job this week will be really to monitor the health of the group and making sure that we get them back so they're 100 percent on Saturday. I don't want to tax one over the other. I want to make sure that they're all peaking on Saturday. So it'll be my job this week to make sure that we get all of those guys at 100 percent on Saturday. I think we can, but we've got some work to do over the next few days.

Q. I assume with Jones missing the game that McIntosh did get increased practice reps last week in preparation?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, he sure did. Deon took probably virtually all of them. We did some light what we call run tracks with Tony, but he just didn't have the explosiveness, and Deon does. Deon is fearless. I mean, he'll go anywhere. He doesn't have a problem running it up inside. We felt like that was the smart move. This week now, we'll have to balance that out and find what the best rotation is.

Q. Switching sides, your corners have made a lot of plays on the ball, especially Shaun Crawford but not only Shaun Crawford. What has Todd Lyght's influence been this year being able to focus on that one position?

BRIAN KELLY: Extremely helpful, extremely helpful. I mean, when you're just focusing on the corners, it allows you to have a level, in my opinion, an attention to detail that's unlike trying to pay attention to both. You know, we're very fortunate that we've got Mike Elko, who's got a great training in the back end of the defense, too, and Mike is there to oversee that whole operation, but Todd has done a fine job there.

Q. We haven't seen a whole lot of Shaun Crawford with him being injured the past two years, but he's had two phenomenal games the last two weeks. Is this kind of the Shaun Crawford that you've always expected to see?

BRIAN KELLY: I knew what we had. I mean, I think I've said this a couple of times; I recruited him personally because of what I felt were his traits. We weren't unanimous on the recruiting of Shaun Crawford. That was a head coach take. And I'll take credit for it 100 percent. And I'm not here -- and I don't mean that in any other way -- I'm not trying to pat myself on the back. I'll take credit for it because there's more to this game than just, you know, looking at the size of one's stature. I mean, the kid plays the game in a manner that is so smart and savvy that I hadn't seen before. He had those traits that overcame two or three inches.

You know, again, I'm just saying that when I was at Grand Valley State, we had to find Shaun Crawfords, because they weren't getting offered scholarships. He just proved that the other night with the punch-out and then staying with it right through the end. I love Shaun Crawford.

Q. And you're obviously not the only one. After a lot of these games he's getting a lot of love on Twitter from guys like Jaylon Smith, KeiVarae, Matthias, Joe Schmidt. When those guys were around, Shaun Crawford was just a freshman and was injured. What is it about him that allows him to get respect and praise from guys like that?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, when you're out there playing the game, the players know the guys that know the game, and he's got a huge football IQ. He's always got a great attitude, a spiritual center on him that attracts many people, just a great attitude, and people are attracted to people like that, that are always -- it's always half full, not half empty. And when he had to deal with back-to-back years of injury, and you talk about a kid with grit, that's why he deserves everything that's coming to him right now.

Q. Just in terms of the ability of your defense to keep the big plays down, particularly in the passing game, what do you think the biggest tenets of that have been?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, we've laid down that programming. That started in the spring. I could tell you the first meeting that we came in here with our defense, Mike Elko puts up a Power Point that talks about situational awareness, talks about eliminating big plays. This is not by coincidence. This is about crafting the tenets of playing the kind of defense necessary to be a championship football team. He laid down the programming from day one as to what we needed to do here, and that was, we're at Notre Dame, we've got smart players, we need to play smart. And part of it is not giving up big plays and taking the football away. We can do that. So laying that down and getting our kids to believe in that, and we're not certainly a finished product by any means. We're going

to continue to work on that. We've got to continue to recruit there in that fashion, too. But Mike has laid down that programming.

Q. Just from an Xs and Os standpoint, is there anything you're doing differently with the safeties that's not too in-depth?

BRIAN KELLY: It starts up front. It really does. Look, a lot of the big runs emanate from the line of scrimmage, and we don't put our safeties in a position where they have to be making one-on-one tackles at seven, eight yards down the field. So it's really comprehensive and layered starting at the line of scrimmage.

Q. Obviously Josh Adams has a ton of positives in his run game. How does the run game change a little bit with Dexter? How are his strengths different or how does the run game change when he's in as opposed to Josh?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, he's a bit raw in the sense that we like to -- we don't like to cage him up a little bit. We like to let him go, let him run a little bit. I think Josh is a guy that can press the heels of a guard, be patient, three-way spoke it, front door, stay on it, cut it back. Sometimes you're just like, give the ball to Dexter and let him go. Maybe that's not fair to Dexter, but we don't want to hold him back. He's got great acceleration. We want to try to get him in open spaces as much as we can.

Q. Lastly, you used the term championship level performance earlier. Was that as close as you've had to one in a while, and how often do you feel like you come out of a game and think like, wow, that was really close to exactly what I want?

BRIAN KELLY: '15 we had some, we just couldn't sustain it for a long period of time. The mindset is closer here with this group. We're closing in on that mindset in terms to start of finish, and we'll need to continue to have that and grow with that.

Q. Building off of that, obviously you guys had two great road wins, a lot of positives about your program. Now you're facing a MAC team. Yes, they've been to the bowl, but how do you avoid your kids allowing for a trap game or a letdown?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, so it's kind of what I talked about. We've only built one mindset. It's to dominate our opponent. I don't know that there's any way for us to turn back from where -- we've been building this since January. There's only one kind of performance that is acceptable, and only one kind of form of preparation that we're going to begin with this team each and every week. We reset on Monday, and we go back to work on how we want to approach this week. This is really about inner focus on how we prepare for our next opponent, whether it's Miami University or the

University of Miami.

Q. We're not too far removed from Ara Parseghian's passing. What do you think this weekend means to his family considering the connections between Miami and Notre Dame?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I'm sure that there's a great deal of pride in both institutions, where he started and where he finished, cradle of coaches, and then arguably the greatest college football tradition, and to be on both ends of that spectrum, I'm sure it's satisfying, fulfilling in so many ways that Ara is at the center of that this Saturday.

Q. Ever have an assistant that loved Notre Dame as much as Chuck Martin, maybe taking away the guys that played here?

BRIAN KELLY: If you take away those that played here, the Powluses and the Autry Densons and the Todd Lyghts, who absolutely bleed -- for somebody that never went to Notre Dame, Chuck Martin has got to be at the top of the list.

Q. You mentioned last week that one of the things you like when you're recruiting a player is that he knows something other than football; what does Shaun Crawford have that you like?

BRIAN KELLY: I just love the ability to have a conversation with him outside of football. We talked on the phone about other things outside of football, and you could carry on a conversation with Shaun Crawford virtually about anything. He is tuned into daily events. He's tuned into what's going on today in the NFL. He's a young man that is just interesting to have a conversation with. And then when it's time for football, he is 100 percent locked in and focused on the game of football. I just love being around guys like that.

Q. Was there a breakthrough moment for him during training camp or something where you just knew that those injuries were completely past him and he would be able to make the kind of plays he's made the last few games?

BRIAN KELLY: No, I don't think there was ever a breakthrough. I think there was a physical breakthrough in terms of not playing for really two years. His speed was down a little bit. An analogy maybe coming off Tommy John, you really don't get your fastball back for a little bit. He hadn't got up to 20 miles an hour, which is kind of our number that we want to see our guys run at when they're at full, and he was hovering around 18, 18.5, and then he hit that threshold of 20 after week one, and we knew, Crawford is back at 100 percent.