

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 24, 2017



Brian Kelly

BRIAN KELLY: Quick recap. Obviously pleased with our performance on Saturday. I think what we talked about was the net differential in points from last year to this year, 45-27 loss, then coming back and winning this year in the fashion that we did is indicative of all the work that they put in over the past year. So you get to that point, you certainly don't want to start doing something different.

Within that narrative is really the answers to all the questions that most people have. How do you get your team ready for the next week after a big victory? That is, they know how they got to where they are. They certainly want to continue to be in this position.

From that perspective, our football team knows what they need to do to continue to be successful. Now it's my job and our staff's job to continue to see that that preparation and that mindset, you know, continues to evolve and develop on a day-to-day basis.

It's kind of entwined into being aware of what you did. It's been 50 years since a Notre Dame football team has won in that kind of fashion. At the same time, it happens so rarely, you have to understand how you've prepared so well, you don't want to change anything. From that perspective, that's how we've gone to work, yesterday refocusing our football team. We have to refocus quickly. We have to because we're playing a very good football team in North Carolina State.

First on offense, I think the best way to talk about them is starting with their quarterback. No interceptions on the season, hasn't thrown an interception I think since Miami of last year. Finley is very smart, knows the system, a veteran quarterback. He knows exactly what his offensive coordinator wants from him. Just does a really good job of taking care of the football. Very smart.

They do a great job of holding onto the football, sustaining drives, and scoring. I think they average 3.2 points per possession, which is really, really good. So they've got a number of weapons on offense.

Samuels is a matchup nightmare. He can match up against linebackers, safeties. He's just a really difficult guy to defend.

Hines, here is a guy, elite track speed now, has kind of taken that and translated that to the football field. Big play potential. A very dangerous offensive football team. They've proven that.

Defensively, you know, I think as good of a group that we're going to see. Comparable to Georgia. Physically very imposing. It's led with Chubb and Hill up front. Obviously they're getting the accolades that they deserve. They are very good football players. Chubb obviously has the ability to rush the passer, as well, plays with a great motor. I think what I'm impressed with is that not only they're physical, but they play hard every snap.

Again, this is a defense that's very stingy against the run. They do a great job schematically of putting their guys in a very good position. You have to be worried about special teams with their ability to return kicks and punts, as well. We've got our hands full in all three facets.

A deserving team where they're ranked, no question about it. It's going to be a great challenge, one that our guys know they'll have to play very well to win the football game.

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

Q. I know that you mentioned after the game you thought Te'von's game was the best he's had since he's been at Notre Dame. What is it about him that's got him surging? Looked like he diagnosed plays very quickly. Your leading tackler for the season right now.

BRIAN KELLY: I think it's the trust factor in the coaching. I think it's like anything else, he's trusting the teaching. I think that trust is starting to show itself on the field.

A couple of weeks earlier, there were some clips when we were in a defensive meeting. And, you know, we hear this all the time, right, the defensive line is getting pushed off the ball. Generally if you're getting pushed off the ball, it's because linebackers are allowing double-teams to occur. Our backers are attacking the line of scrimmage and getting those double-teams to disengage. Now it's single blocks because our linebackers are really attacking.

I think Clark Lea has done a great job of teaching how to be part of that front and fit. Quite frankly, Te'von has done a great job of trusting his teaching.

Q. The safety position, you got asked about that. You said, We're not going to cover up for them in the Southern Cal game. I wonder how they graded out in the Southern Cal game. Do you feel like they accomplished what you wanted them to?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I mean, I thought we tackled fairly well. I mean, I think there's always areas of improvement. We have to communicate better on the back end of the defense. I think that's an area that's got to get better for us defensively. There were some times there that communication was an issue.

Those guys are giving us all that they have every single snap. I think if you would ask our safeties if they were in here right now, they would want to communicate better. That's what we'll have to continue to work on.

Q. Quenton Nelson, when you were recruiting him, I would think he probably had his heart set on playing tackle. How did the transition to guard go? Was that a hard sell? Also, his leadership. We see him picking up people sometimes. How does he lead other than just being bigger and stronger than everybody?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, sure. You know, I don't know that there was really that much of a fight in terms of moving him inside. He really was a player that we felt like needed to redshirt, needed the time to develop in all facets of his game. He was very physical as a player. We needed to work on his pass set skills. That has evolved in time.

I think he was more suited for the inside position. Sometimes that becomes more of a two-way conversation with the player in terms of, Hey, we think you'd fit inside. How do you feel about it? I think that's how that kind of ended up.

As a leader, I think I've said this before. When we did our strength surveys, his strength was truth, truthfulness. He's very truthful to a point where sometimes maybe a little bit too truthful. We've kind of smoothed the rough edges of that truthful kind of demeanor.

What it's done really is it's created an accountability. He holds everybody accountable. So if somebody is not doing it the right way, he's not afraid to get up there and tell them, That's not how we do it here at Notre Dame. That's a real good leader to have on your team.

Q. When you say 'truthful,' you mean brutally

honest, is that what you're saying?

BRIAN KELLY: That would be another way to characterize it.

Q. You made a comment after the game, you had a card that you filled out and put in your locker that you would have been disappointed if your team didn't play really well.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah.

Q. Do you do that every game?

BRIAN KELLY: No. We did some things, because it was a little bit different in terms of having -- we gave them six days off from practice because I wanted to physically kind of reset our football team. Then we had this mental break. We did some things a little bit differently over the last two weeks. I was curious to see. I thought it was a good plan. I wrote those notes down to remind myself that I thought it was a great plan, that we should be ready to play at a high level, I would have been very disappointed if we didn't because I thought the plan was really good.

It turned out that the plan was good, but more importantly, that our players played with great energy and played with that physicality.

Q. Much like your team, NC State's personnel this year is pretty much the same as last year. They were a talented football team last year, obviously.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah.

Q. What areas do you see them improved, or is just a maturation process kind of similar to your team?

BRIAN KELLY: I think, you know, first of all, with Finley and with Drinkwitz, those guys have been together, right? They came from Boise. You can see they're attached together there, there is a direct correlation to the play calling and the execution of that by the quarterback. So the efficiency on offense is there because they've been together and you can see that play out.

But I think more than anything else is the maturity of the football team, a veteran team, seniors, and they play really hard for a long time. This is a team that will fight you for four quarters.

Q. How do you reflect, if at all, from the NC State game last year and how it played out?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, we didn't even look at the film. It wasn't even part of our breakdown because it really didn't give us anything. It was a poorly designed game plan by me. There was nothing there that we really wanted to go back and look at.

We've changed our punt protection since that time,

which obviously the punt was a huge play in the game. There's really nothing that we could garner from that game. It really didn't show truly who they were or who we were in that game because you just didn't have the ability to exert force against the ground and be explosive and powerful.

Q. When you're playing a team two years in a row, do you usually look back from the previous year?

BRIAN KELLY: Oh, sure. It gives you a great evaluation of players. Are they ascending, descending? How are they playing? What do they look like in terms of physicality versus one year over the next? Are they playing injured? There's a lot of evaluation in the individual personnel.

Q. When you go into a game, obviously you put together a game plan. You've heard coaches in the past, not necessarily here, but coaches talk about how we script 20 or 25 plays. Saturday night, first series, two-yard loss, they come out, the next time you get the ball, went wide twice, they bring the safeties up. Terrific adjustments. It was like you adjusted early, not wait and see what happens.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, we got a pretty quick glimpse at what their plan was. We weren't certain. They had to make a decision with some players out on the defensive front as to how they were going to play us. We weren't sure exactly how they were going to play us, whether they were going to be in three down or four down because of the personnel situation.

There was definitely some adjustments. We were prepared to attack the perimeter if we felt like there was the need to go there. So I think the plan, when you have the versatility in the offense that we did, we were able to call from that chapter of our offense.

Q. Seemed like during the course of the game, there were a couple occasions when you saw a tight end get a good block, help create a big play. Almost like you see a runningback going into the end zone, but the tight ends were, Got him. 84-yard run, a good block, I could have maybe gone through there.

BRIAN KELLY: I've said that to myself. I think right now the mentality of our football team has been crafted over the year of this physicality and running the football, right, where last year it was about throwing the football. These guys really take so much pride.

I'll take you back to a great block by Josh Adams on Brandon Wimbush's score. He cuts the end where he's able to walk in the end zone. Tony Jones, where he's really physical in our two-back set coming out on the perimeter, making a great block. So there's a commitment amongst the group to have that kind of

mentality because they know who we are now. Once you know who you are, you take great pride in that.

Q. You mentioned right at the beginning that your message to your guys is to not do anything different, stick with what got you here. You can take them through the same routines, but you can't stop them from hearing how great they are during the week, seeing where they are in the polls. With the exception of Mike and a few other guys, they're getting attention they haven't gotten.

BRIAN KELLY: Right.

Q. How do you combat that or keep that from creating a sense of complacency other than what you said?

BRIAN KELLY: Because our mission from day one is to win a national championship. You guys are just catching up to us. Whatever's being said and has been said has been what our mission has been from day one.

Look, you know, USC lost the game. They go home and get to play for the Pac-12 championship. That's great. We don't have anything else to play for. We've been in the Playoffs since we lost to Georgia. Every game is a Playoff for us. Everybody is talking about, you know, getting to the Playoffs, getting to the Playoffs. Every game we play is a Playoff game. Our guys don't know it any other way.

Everybody else seems to have caught on with this idea that Notre Dame is playing for a Playoff spot. We don't have anything else to play for. That's what we play for. We're an independent football team, and our mission is to graduate all of our players and play for a national championship. That's all we have. It's not really any different than it was yesterday or the day before or last week.

Q. We'll speak to Te'von tomorrow for the first time since his arrest last year. Can you explain to us maybe how far he's come from that moment, what maybe changed with him.

BRIAN KELLY: Well, you know, this is my 27th year of being a head coach, 34th year in coaching. I've given my life to developing 18- to 21-year-olds. He is one in a long line of young men that have made mistakes, and have been held accountable, have from that point on grown from the mistake that he made. He's grown off the field, the decisions that he makes on a day-to-day basis, and now he's growing as a football player.

We were more interested in the growth of Te'von Coney off the field, and the football's starting to catch up, so we're good with that.

Q. With Josh, you've been preaching that you believe he's the best back in the country for a while. It starts to seem that others are catching up on that, but he's still not totally at that level in terms of the national recognition. Why do you think that is?

BRIAN KELLY: You know, we could assume a lot of reasons. Coming out of last year, we were a 4-8 football team. Even though he had two really good games, a great game at the end of the year, the Heisman is meant for, and this is how our team understands it, individual awards go to really good teams, too. Penn State was a really good team last year. Those that were in running for the Heisman all had good years last year. Notre Dame did not have a very good year. We have to earn everything this year.

Again, we still have a lot of football left. We're making up for lost ground. He's got to continue to play well. Notre Dame's got to continue to play well. I think if you just hold your ballots till the end of the year, we'll see where it falls from there.

Q. You mention NC State and that game last year. Do you feel that was a microcosm of last year as a whole?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, when it rains it pours.

Q. You were able to utilize eight different defensive linemen, played at least 22 snaps against USC. You've always talked about wanting to get that rotation going. It's really manifested itself this year. Is that a result of necessity, or has it just been a commitment aspect?

BRIAN KELLY: Philosophical plan in the hiring of Mike Elko in terms of what he's always been about, what we've really wanted to accomplish. We felt like last year when we started to get into a deeper rotation with players, we saw how the culture began to change within our defense in terms of camaraderie, in terms of closeness, in terms of guys being into what we're doing on a day to day basis.

Part of the decision to hire Mike was part of, How do you feel about getting guys involved in rotations? That was part of who he was coming up through the ranks. So this was just connecting with another philosophical alignment that we had.

Mike Elston has done a great job of developing those guys, so now they're at a point where they can really come in and impact the football game.

Q. It's been a long, long time since Notre Dame ranked in the top 10 in rushing offense, also at the same time scoring defense. Usually it's been one or the other.

BRIAN KELLY: Sure.

Q. If you had to rate it, what has been a bigger surprise to you? You surprised people in August when you said the defensive line is ahead of the offense. Is it the rushing yards?

BRIAN KELLY: No, you guys looked at me like I was crazy, that's what you did.

Q. Is it the rushing yards per game or has it been just how effective the defense has been?

BRIAN KELLY: I think a little bit of both. We expected to be more physical and running the football, but I don't think you set your margins at 300 and above. You try to set it at about 250. I think we've exceeded that. I think a lot of that has to do with collectively nine of the 11 guys blocking at the highest level, and a commitment from everybody, receivers, tight ends, offensive linemen, and then the talent of Josh in terms of his ability to turn pedestrian plays into big-chunk plays.

Then the defense. I knew we were going to be better defensively, and I knew it was going to be fundamentally better, but it's been about taking the football away at a higher level. It's probably a little bit of both of those things that are showing themselves right now.

Q. 250 yards rushing per game, is that your threshold?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, we felt like 250, somewhere in that range. If we could average 250, we were going to be really effective running the football.

Q. You were asked a little bit about tape of last year. How relevant or not is NC State's success against Wake Forest in terms of systems against systems?

BRIAN KELLY: It's not as relevant as you might think. I think there's circumstances. There's other factors you're taking into account because it's a team game, it's not just one-sided. You're looking at the whole game in itself.

I know that we haven't spent a whole lot of time wringing our hands about Wake Forest-North Carolina State last year.

Q. You mentioned on Thursday about the two-minute drill, Brandon. Last Thursday may have been the first time he won.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, moved the ball.

Q. Can you expand a little bit on maybe what happened last Thursday. Hasn't been asked to do it on a Saturday yet, but how you want to see that

progress Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday of this week.

BRIAN KELLY: You know, Brandon, as you know, is an emotionally stable young man. At an early time in his development, he has that emotional stability, which is hard to get for quarterbacks at the level that he's at. Then you have to physically play fast. If you watch quarterbacks, you watch Brandon early on, he wasn't physically fast. Your drop slows down. You visually try to hook up. The ball comes out late.

Third, you're not decisive. You emotionally have to be in that balance, which he was. Physically, he was so much faster, and then he became decisive. What he saw, he believed in. That just takes repetition over time and time again.

Those three things started to come into vision on Thursday where you saw him playing faster and more decisive. Now, he is still not at that point where all that occurs. For example, he throws the touchdown to EQ, he's late on that. He's late on that. He needs to take that off his third step. He slides, then throws it, but his arm is so strong, he can still get that out.

So the process is still unfolding for him. But those are the three things that have to happen.

Q. If you were to reduce that all the way down to a sentence, is that the difference between throwing to a man when he's open and throwing to the spot where the man is going to be?

BRIAN KELLY: Yes, that's a great way to put it.

Q. Curious about EQ and expectations. You think he's going to come back, have 1400 yards, 77 catches. How has he sort of handled the fact that this offense is a lot different than it was last year and he's not going to put up those kind of numbers?

BRIAN KELLY: I think he's great with it I think he's more concerned with how he can help his football team win. He's never been an 'I' guy, never been about his stats, never been about get me the football. He's always been about how he can contribute. It's always been his style and personality. Sometimes maybe to a fault. You want him to be a little bit more selfish at times. But that's the kind of kid he is. He's always been about team first.

Q. To Nelson's left, there's Mike McGlinchey. What did his personality test show? How would you describe his leadership style?

BRIAN KELLY: Mike, let's see. Mike was social. I can't remember the exact character trait, but it was outward going, social. That really fits who he is, right? He's great in front of the media. He's great in front of our

guys. Very engaging. If somebody's going to speak, Mike is going to get up and talk to the team, it's easy for him to do it.

On the other hand, he's a guy that can be short with you, as well. Look, he came back for his last year here for a reason, as well. I think the similarity between those two guys is their 'why' is to bring Notre Dame back to a championship. They were in pretty good shape last year if they wanted to go to the NFL. They both have similar leadership styles in that sense. That's why those guys working together, it's a pretty no-nonsense kind of situation.

Q. I'm going to take you back a few years to the inspirational story of Sam Grewe, the football team adopted, became a part of the fabric of the football team. How did you become familiar with his story?

BRIAN KELLY: Ernest Jones, who was working with us at the time, was part of our Athletes Around the Bend. Exactly the circumstances, how we came in touch with him, I can't remember if it was Make a Wish, I can't remember what the organization was. That's how we found Sam.

Obviously we all know Olympian, he's here at Notre Dame as a student, just incredibly proud of what he's been able to accomplish.

Q. What did his presence mean to the guys?

BRIAN KELLY: I mean, his impact I think more than anything else, collectively our team in adopting him, I think he did more good for our players in the sense that, you know, it wasn't hard to go out there and practice and show grit, show determination and toughness after what this young man had gone through.

Beautiful, thank you.