

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Marcus Freeman

Press Conference

Notre Dame 44, Boston College 0

MARCUS FREEMAN: All right. Warmed up a little bit. Huh? You guys were inside the whole time anyway, so I don't want to hear it.

What a win. What a way to go out for this season at Notre Dame stadium. And, you know, we spent a lot of time last night as a team talking about what an opportunity we get to perform one more time as this team at Notre Dame stadium. It's a special place. And our performance hasn't always reflected that way. And I wanted to make sure we finished this season in this last opportunity that way.

I should start by saying thank you for the people that helped make this opportunity happen. The snow, the guys that were working to clean it up, the students that were there that stayed in this weather condition. This was my toughest game in terms of weather conditions playing or coaching. So the people that stayed, the fans, man, the students and the people that work here have been unbelievable.

As far as the game, obviously, it went really well with the ability to run the ball offensively early in the game. And, really, Drew I thought started off the game really pretty good and taking advantage of the opportunities that he had. Isaiah Foskey breaks the sack record, which is huge when you think about the elite pass rushers we've had in the history of Notre Dame football. Michael Mayer breaking another record today at home was huge. And then, you know, Ben Morrison, three interceptions, finds a way, keeps finding a way. He's a talented young man. And I thought Logan Diggs had a really good day on offense. I think he had 100 and some plus yards rushing the ball. So overall performance-wise was really, really pleasing. And as I told them, let's enjoy this tonight, but we know what we have coming up next week. We've got a great opportunity and a great challenge. So enjoy tonight and let's get ready to go back to work tomorrow.



So with that, I'll open up for questions.

Q. Could you put into words just how much your team has grown since the start of the year?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, are we playing better? Yes. I think at some point after the season we'll go back and reflect and say, okay, where did we start to here. Right now, we're just in the moment. But they are performing and playing at such a higher level I'm sure than we did at the start of the year. But it goes back to the leadership. Those seniors. Those guys that are our captains. And they could easily started blaming and complaining and pointing fingers. Those guys looked at themselves and said we're going to work. And they drug everybody with them. That's the sign of a team that's led by -- it's seniors and it's leaders. There was no other option in our program. There was no other option. I can get up there as a head coach and say this is what we're doing. But until it's implemented by the leaders on your team -- you know, that's such a strong statement in terms of their type of leadership. And so I'm proud of the way they've led our program.

Q. Early in the year, you guys struggled to create turn overs. Now it seems like you're doing it quite a lot. You had five I think today. What's going into that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Gosh, I've been the defensive coordinator plenty of times where you stress turn overs and take aways and it never happens. But you keep going. You keep going. You don't get flustered. You challenge everything. Right? You find a better way. And I think you're seeing it happen in bunches now. Right? And it's starting to happen and go.

And so our guys are taking advantage of their opportunities. And maybe those opportunities that Ben had today might have been dropped passes early in the year. We're taking advantage of our opportunities. And, again, it's still a point of emphasis in practice. It has never changed.

And that's probably -- it's going to lead to my next comment of it's a great lesson in terms of you can work at something tirelessly and not get the result you want. If you quit, you're never going to get the result. But the defensive staff has continued to work at take aways, take aways. And then all



of a sudden, here it comes in bunches.

So I think it's a great lesson for our entire program that because you work hard doesn't mean you're going to get your reward tomorrow. Continue to do it, continue to do it. And at some point, it will come. At some point, it will.

Q. You've referenced the bumpy road. Some of the players, Blake Fisher, have referenced the bumpy road. Where does that come from? What is that? And how especially the early season bumpy road lead to today?

MARCUS FREEMAN: For me, it was a sermon somebody sent me. It was after a loss. And it kind of just hit me and said, okay, the pastor was talking about the bumpy road to better. And, really, what it was was for us to look at ourselves as a program. I say, okay, we're on this bumpy road, but this bumpy road is life. The bumpy road to better is life.

And it's also a reflection of this season. And it's also a reflection of a game. You know, the ability to handle the ups and downs is, to me, what makes a person, what makes a team, what makes a life. And so I use it over and over. Just in academics you can be on a bumpy road. In the course of a game, you can be on a bumpy road. But it's how you respond, to me, that really dictates the future.

And that's the challenge I always have for these guys is, you know what, it's never as you foresee it on the front end. And that's what I said last week. But it's how you respond to the different events that happen to you, no matter how hard you try. You can try as hard as you want, and sometimes you can't control what happens, the events.

So how do you respond to those things is really what defines this football team of this season. And so as I tell them -- I told the seniors last night, this will be lessons that you use when you leave here, you'll use at the next level in the NFL or you'll use as a husband, you'll use as a father. It's never going to be perfect. But the ability to respond and to sustain and keep going after you have those ups and downs is truly what will change the future outcomes.

Q. So with that in mind, what have you learned about your team on the course of this bumpy road? How is it serving you now? And how does it serve the program moving forward?

MARCUS FREEMAN: They're resilient. We've got a resilient group of leaders. And I think I said this to Zara postgame is that this university attracts resilient people. If you're not a resilient person, you're not going to make it here. And that's something that I've learned in my short

time here. This place weeds nonresilient people out, you know, this university. And it even happens in the football program. If you're not a resilient, tough-minded person, this probably won't -- at some point, won't be the place for you. And you'll say, hey, I'm going to go somewhere else.

But that's what this place, this university attracts, resilient people. And we're fortunate we get to coach great football players that are resilient people. So I think that's a reflection of this university.

Q. I know you guys have had some of these games, last week in particular where you win, maybe feel like you should have won by more. So what's the significance both for you and the team to get out to the lead you did and leave no doubt in the second half?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I was thinking about you when I addressed them halftime. I said, listen, I'm tired of getting up there postgame and they saying you're not a -- you play to your competition, you came out to a 30 point lead, whatever. I said, listen, you help me answer these questions after the game. It's going to be about the decisions that we make and how we go perform.

And as a head coach, you sit there and you say what didn't I say or what didn't I do last week. You always look at yourself as a leader and say, okay, what didn't I do to prepare them for the second half? I said Navy was a second half team. I said they're never going to quit. But we didn't perform to the level.

So we tried different things this week. We tried to show them the film. We tried to truly get them to see. I thought last week was the first time we truly took our foot off the pedal a little bit. And what, in turn, happened is you don't -- you physically box somebody, and they beat you on a block and they make a play. That's what I mean when you take your foot off the pedal, like you're not as physical as you want. We didn't tackle well in the second half because I think we took our foot off the pedal.

This was a challenge today to say, listen, let's go out in the second half and truly continue to pull as hard as we can and go as hard as we can. I think they really did. In the fourth quarter, we got some guys that haven't played a lot of football in the game. But the ability to hold that team to 0 points was huge.

Q. And then run game, how much of an emphasis was it to get that part of something that's been such a big part of your identify back in the groove?

MARCUS FREEMAN: It's funny, I kind of do my Friday Keys to Victory before Friday. And one of my keys, it said

run the ball or make them pay. What happens with a team that doesn't let you run the ball? They bring nine guys in the box. You've got to make them pay. They're playing zero and they're pressuring and we've got to throw the ball. And then I go into the offense unit meeting. And Coach Rees said something about we're going to run the ball. There's no other option. And I said, you know what, that's right.

So we went to the Friday night meeting. I said, listen, we're going to run the ball and make them pay. Right? We had to run the ball. I don't care what they were playing defensively. I don't care if they brought everybody they had, similar to Navy. I said we're going to have to find a way to run the ball.

I think it's a mental challenge to our guys that, you know, what, somebody's going to have to beat a block, somebody's going to have to beat a tackle. They might have one more hat in the box, but we've got to beat them. Everybody's got to do their job. It's a mentality. And the ability to run for 100 and -- I don't know how many total yards we had today rushing. How much?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: 281.

MARCUS FREEMAN: That's pretty good. The ability to rush to 281, that's pretty good. And they stepped up to the challenge.

Q. You mentioned you touched on Isaiah Foskey breaking a record. Obviously, he came back to try to win a national championship but for him to still accomplish that before he leaves, just how big is that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, it's a reflection of so many things. He didn't come back just to break the record. He came back to win a national championship, just like you said. And you know what, he didn't win a championship this year. But what he did for this program and what those seniors did for this program to me will be the reason why we do win a national championship in an upcoming future.

So I told those guys last night in our last meeting, senior meeting, thank you because they built the foundation. They really have built the foundation of what is to come. I'm glad he got a personal achievement, but what he did for this program in terms of those seniors, it's going to be really impactful.

Q. Marcus, obviously, you've mentioned the senior leadership a lot and kind of crediting that for the turnaround of the season. But I'm curious what a guy like Michael Mayer has meant to the locker room and

just being here. Seems like every time we're here, we see a record go up on the screen. But the guy in the locker room and what he means to have a guy of that stature at this program, what does it mean to you?

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, I said this before, when your best player is one of or the hardest worker, that's the ultimate example. Right? Is when you can point and say this is our best -- everybody knows it, probably the most dominant player we have is Michael Mayer. But they also can watch him in practice and say, okay, he works as hard as anybody in this program. To me, that's the ultimate example. That's who he is. He's a captain as a junior. He's a great leader, leader by example, leader by his words. And he is an unbelievable football player. So it's been unbelievable to have him here. And we'll see what the future holds.

Q. To see a guy like Matt Salerno get into the end zone for the first time in his career. He's paid his dues.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Was that his first time?

Q. Earned his scholarship. What does that mean to you? And who is Matt Salerno. Seems like he's the ultimate team guy too.

MARCUS FREEMAN: He is. He is. What a resilient guy. A guy that came here as a walk on. It's funny, we showed a video to the team last night. His parents had said -- they told Matt Salerno -- because he was deciding to walk on. They said pick a school because of your academics not because of football if you're going to walk on. And that's why he chose Notre Dame.

And what a great example for our team, a guy who said I'm choosing Notre Dame because of what this academic institution will do for my future. But I'm going to bust my tail and pay for school. And he busted his tail, and now he's on scholarship.

And to get his first touchdown, I'm glad to hear that. He deserves it. But he's been a huge addition, just a huge part of the success we've had. A guy that goes in to block sometimes, you know. We put him in to block. And he doesn't bat an eye. He goes in there and he does his job. Selfless. Selfless individual.

Q. You touched on this a little bit, but the ability to sort of play up not because of the opponent but play up because that's the standard you tried to practice at. How significant can that be moving forward, like beyond next week and beyond whatever the bowl game is?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Play up to your standard you mean?

Q. Yeah. Come out and have the performance have nothing to do with the opponent?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah. That's what great teams do. Great teams are able to play to a standard. Right? Great individuals are able to perform to a standard, not to an opponent. Right? Competitors really face -- they rise to the level of their opponent. But to me, great teams, championship teams, they set a standard and say this is the way we're going to work. There's no other option. This is the way we're going to perform.

We all can sit here and say we're going to perform to this standard and maybe something doesn't go your way, but every day to come into work and say we're going to practice and work to this standard is something only great teams do. And it's something we'll continue to strive to be.

Q. You had referenced sort of when you put in work you don't know when you're going to get rewarded. I'm interested for you this season, you put in work to get a performance like that not really sure when you're going to get it. So how do you process today in terms of kind of an example of that lesson you're trying to get across to your players?

MARCUS FREEMAN: For me it's always trying to find a better way to lead. For me it's how do I find a better way to lead to get these guys to prepare better and to perform on Saturdays at a higher level. And we'll look back today and look at this past week of our preparation.

Next week's not going to be in a snow game, but two of the three days, we're going outside. It's a mentality. We're going to be tough. We're not going to let the weather affect us. And we're just continue to find better ways.

That's, to me -- what I'm learning is that you don't have a book that says this is the way you lead. Because if you did, everybody would. This is the way you lead and -- no. It's having the ability to maybe have an idea but also be able to adjust and find better ways based off your players, because each player is different. Each team is different. That's what I'm learning is every day there's got to be a better way to do it. There's got to be a better way to coach and there's got to be a better way to lead these young people.

Q. Coach, you mentioned earlier in the season that Drew Pyne's performance wasn't just about him but the offensive line blocking, running backs blocking and also the wide receivers running like precise

routes. So how important was to you seeing the wide receivers being at the spot where they had to be, especially with these conditions?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah. Everybody has a role in protecting our quarterback. That's the message that I always have for our team. Every coach in our program has a role in protecting that quarterback. That quarterback has a role to making sure he protects his self. The way he throws the ball, the accuracy, the decision making. But we all have a piece. The offensive line has a role in protecting the quarterback. The running backs have a role. The wide outs being exact, not close, exact in their routes. All that stuff has a role in protecting our quarterback. And that's our job is to protect him. And then he's got to perform. He's got to protect himself. He's got to perform, but we all have to make sure we help that guy have success.

Q. How would you describe Gabriel Rubio's growth this year?

MARCUS FREEMAN: He's a tough individual. He is a tough guy. He is high motor, high energy. He's exceeded my expectations from last year. Did I think Gabe was going to be a good player? Absolutely. I didn't know how soon it was going to be. And he's exceeded my expectations. He's been a great addition for this team this year.

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