

CFP National Championship: Ohio State vs Notre Dame

Monday, January 20, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Marcus Freeman

Jack Kiser

Riley Leonard

Postgame Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
ATLANTA 2025

Ohio State 34, Notre Dame 23

MARCUS FREEMAN: Obviously tough moment, tough outcome. There's reasons why we didn't get the outcome we wanted. Credit to Ohio State and their ability to execute on both sides of the ball. Obviously in the special teams they made a field goal that mattered at the end of the game.

We obviously didn't play the way we needed to to get the outcome we want, but as I said to the guys in the locker room, there's not many words to say when everybody is hurting.

I'm just proud of them and proud of what they've done. I'm proud of who they are, the way they represent themselves, and it's just an honor to be on this journey with them.

There's going to be a lot of guys, seniors, that this was their final game with Notre Dame football, but they've left this place a better place, and very grateful to be on the journey with them.

Q. Their ability to slow the Riley Leonard-led running game after that first drive, were there adjustments they made? Was there something you could do to counter that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: No, we couldn't run Riley every play. It's not right for Riley, and it's not going to sustain the success we needed offensively.

We ran him a whole bunch that first series, and you look at the second series, we had two penalties which ended up forcing us to punt, and in the third series we had the miscommunication with the muffed snap, and that's the end

of the half.

I think more than anything, it was two series after the first one we didn't execute and we had some self-inflicted wounds that we had to clean up. Second half we drove the ball. I thought we did a good job with some tough situations.

But we can't run Riley every single play. That's not what the formula for success is.

Q. Jaden Greathouse's last two games, he's shown great growth. What did Riley find in him in the second half?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I think there was a confidence and a connection between Riley and him, but as I said this before, production doesn't always reflect performance. It doesn't. Production is something that is a result of doing your job and the quarterback making the decision to throw you the ball and the offensive play that calls for it.

But JG has been playing great all season long, it's just now he's had some production to go along with the way he's been playing.

Q. You have an opportunity at the end in 3rd down to maybe get the ball back and try to go score. What was the look there? I know you guys brought some pressure. Obviously it was a difficult assignment there for Christian to cover Jeremiah. What did you see there?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, it was do or die. It was that type of down. If they run it and they get a 1st down -- we've got to get them stopped, and we thought at that moment the best way to get them stopped is to run zero pressure. We have to have faith at some point that we can make a play.

There was times in the second half that we did in man coverage, but he's a heck of a player. He's difficult to cover. You want to play zone, and they'll find ways to pick you apart. You want to play man, they'll find ways to get him the ball. It's a talented offense, with that situation right there.



Q. On 4th and goal, how tough was the decision to go for it there or kick the field goal, and what was the thought process?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think it was 4th and 9 or 10, and I just thought instead of being down 16, let's try to go down 13. I know it's still a two-score game, but you have a better probability of getting 14 points than you do 16 points.

If it was a shorter 4th and goal situation, I probably would have gone for it, but I just felt fourth and nine was not a great chance for us to make that and decided to kick it, and we didn't make it.

Q. Marcus and Riley, what did you both learn about the program this season, both looking back from where you came to get here and also looking forward about what you might be in position to do?

RILEY LEONARD: Before I answer your question, I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving me the opportunity to play in this game. I wrote on my hand Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so shall one man sharpen another."

I think, as I said throughout the week, us and Ohio State were the two teams who praised Jesus Christ the most, and I think that we strengthened each other in our faiths through coming to this game and competing against each other.

I'm happy to see godly men come out on top no matter what the circumstance is. I'm very happy to praise Jesus in the lowest of lows, as well.

I think as far as this program goes, we've learned a lot. We've been through ups and downs. I've been through ups and downs. I don't even recognize the person I was before I got to Notre Dame, and it's all credit to these guys beside me and everybody else in the locker room.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I'm tremendously grateful for what Riley and these guys have done for our program. Week 2, it was a rough outlook. You go from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. The reality is we all had a little bit of doubt, but we all chose to work, and we all chose to trust each other and choose to love each other and be selfless and put the team in front of ourselves.

And we did it every week, and every week, and you still had to trust beyond knowing if your work was going to get you the result that you wanted, and they continued to do it. They put this program in a position to play for a National Championship.

We didn't get it done, and it hurts. My job is to figure out why, and I will, but I told these guys, they've left this program better -- I don't care if you were here for one year or you've been here for six years; our program is in a better place because of the examples these two have set, and many other leaders in that locker room.

The outlook of Notre Dame football is extremely high. As long as the people in that locker room that come back understand what it takes, the work these guys have put in, there's a lot of success in our future.

Q. Riley, there was a point you were puking after the first drive. What were you feeling after that first drive? Was that just exhaustion, or have you been sick?

RILEY LEONARD: No, I just landed on the ball funny a couple of times. I wasn't feeling sick. I felt fine. Just landed on the ball, felt a little awkward. No problem at all for me.

Q. Jack, after 70 games at Notre Dame, could you speak to how you feel like you're leaving the program better than how you found it and what this place has meant to you over the six seasons?

JACK KISER: I think when you look at the six years I've been here, what I remember is the people. From when I was a small underclassman just trying to learn the ways, looking at a Drew White, Bo Bauer, to being a guy running with my boys in JD and Marist, and then this year coming back and feeling like I had a chip on my shoulder and getting to meet amazing guys like Riley coming in and just kind of going on the journey we went on.

To have Coach Freeman -- yeah, it's about the people. It's the people that's made this place different.

It just shows where this program is heading. The people in this building are the best, absolute best.

Q. Riley, in addition to falling on the ball that first drive, could you take us through from your perspective starting out to getting into the end zone?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I think the best thing we did on that drive was just play by the -- or stay by the chains. You see the next three drives after that, penalties and miscommunications. And all that stuff is on me.

That first drive we just came out and played Notre Dame football, took advantage of our match-ups when we had to. We just drove the ball down the field. We had to run the ball a little bit. Everything was just clicking.

Then the next couple drives maybe I got relaxed a little bit, and I can't let that happen. And I apologize to everybody for the way that I played after that drive in the second quarter because it's unacceptable.

These are things that aren't necessarily physical but just like the mental side of things that I can't make certain mistakes. I've just got to live with that and respond.

And that's kind of what the message was at halftime: We've got nothing else to lose. It's the last game no matter what. Might as well go out there and sling the rock and trust your guys.

Q. Riley, you've grown so much since you were a dark horse at Duke. How do you feel like you flipped your narrative and improved as an overall passer?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, I'll start with just the guys around me. It's very easy to be a successful quarterback when, first and foremost, your coaches are just setting you up for success. I've never been so prepared in my life. I've just learned so much within this past year.

Then the guys up front, I'll start with the offensive line. These guys, the day I got here I understood how special they were. Yeah, the O-line, and then the wideouts, as well, every single one of those guys, you look at our offense, and a lot of people want to describe us as a rushing offense, and I'm probably labeled as a rushing quarterback sometimes, but these guys don't budge. They do their job. They smile.

They're all about team glory, and when their time comes, they always make plays for me, in the backfield with J-Love and all those guys. How could I not become a better player on the field?

Then off the field, you can walk into that locker room and every single one of those people, you're going to leave impressed by, if you just had a simple conversation with them. The character of this place, it's kind of hard to describe. I think I've grown so much just because of the people around me.

Q. Marcus, I was curious from the end of the first touchdown drive to maybe the strip of Egbuka, do you feel like you guys got out of character in any way? Or is it something Ohio State did to put you on your heels or make you play outside your comfort zone?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I mean, there was some things on both sides of the ball that we don't normally do and some communication mistakes, self-inflicted wounds

that we haven't been doing the past few weeks. You're always making mistakes, but those type of detrimental mistakes when you play a really, really good football team cost you points.

I think that's probably the biggest thing that has stuck out to me even in between series, the communication. Hey, we're good, we got it. Well, we can't make mistakes.

It falls on my shoulders. And as the head coach, we have to prepare and be better prepared for this moment. These guys gave everything they got.

You sit up here and you listen to these two guys speak and the passion they have for Notre Dame and each other in that locker room, I'm just sitting here listening like this is one of the greatest gifts in life is to be able to be the leader of this program because you have great young people like this that share the blame -- share the success when you win and own the blame when you lose.

But I'm better because of them. But we just have to be better. I've got to make sure we prepare better for this next opportunity that we have in the future.

Q. Riley, one more about that opening drive if I could. You just referenced you ran the ball a little bit, but you had nine carries on that drive, and that's half of your top total for a full game this season. Did that take something out of you, or did a long drive by Ohio State give you a chance to recoup and recover?

RILEY LEONARD: Yeah, Coach Free is always about reload and worry about the next play. So I didn't know it was nine. If you would have asked me, I would have said it was three or four.

If Coach wants to call my number and have me run the ball every singling play, I've got no problem with it. You've seen me put my body on the line for this team over and over again. Whether I'm running the ball or passing the ball, it doesn't matter. I'm going to do everything I can to help the team win. Hit a little lull there in the first half, but like I say, I've got to live with it.

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