

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

Saturday, September 2, 2017

Brian Kelly

Postgame



COACH KELLY: The traits that we've been working on and developing showed themselves, in particular -- to really come up with a stop and really change the flow of the game, and those are -- those are really critical pieces to a good football team.

And so, you know, when you look back and take a step back at a first game, you go, oh, you can make great progress from one week to the next. True. You know, we'll break down the film and we'll clean up the mistakes.

But when you can exhibit some of the perseverance and the grit that we showed that is needed to have a successful season, that's a good day for me.

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

Q. Just talk about the series in the fourth quarter, when you have stops on fourth down, and your offense came out and scored, can you talk about what you saw from your team today?

COACH KELLY: Well, we've talked since January. We've had some early morning conditioning that has addressed perseverance over a long period of time where you're going to have some setbacks, but you keep pushing forward.

And that was, clearly, the scenario that we saw today. We were going to keep pushing, regardless if we got stopped. We were going to come right back at our opponent, and we did. We had the success that we needed.

Q. With 22 yards on the ground, can you assess the ground game?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, I think having a good run game, you have to have big plays. They crowded the line of scrimmage. Look, when you drop your safeties down and decide that you're going to play eight, you know, nine guys on the line of scrimmage, if you break through, those are the things that come with it.

Now if you play two safeties back and play second level and third level defense, you can probably get five yards, six yards, seven yards. But when you play that kind of defense, you're going to get some big runs. You know, we were able to do that.

Q. When you assessed this team in the off-season, what was the main thing you saw that was holding it back from being the team that you wanted it to be and how have you addressed that since last season?

COACH KELLY: Well, you know, there are a lot of things that had to change. But it started with me and we made some changes within.

I think more than anything else, the traits. Developing the traits of our football team that I've just been talking about; that grit; that attention to detail; that focus that you need.

Look, we're not -- this is one game. I can tell you that they have been great at doing everything that I've asked them to do about sticking with this process, and they got some production from that process today.

But it's a long season and there's going to be some setbacks. We're not out for perfection. We're out for, you know, excellence, and we're going to have some setbacks but if they stick with it, we'll have some success.

Q. With the offensive line having to go against eight, nine guys in the box, what's your assessment of their play today?

COACH KELLY: I told McGlinchey and Quenton, thank God for the right side. Because if you look at how everything was run, it was the right side. They didn't like that, by the way, very much. (Laughter).

It just happened that, you know, even late in the game, we kept -- just where the ball was, you know, we had to call on the right side of the offensive line.

So I love the fact that we -- when we needed to run the ball, we could go behind Bars and Kraemer and Hainsey and not have to just rely on Quenton Nelson and Mike McGlinchey. You know, when you step back, that's pretty good; that you've got the confidence that you can go on either side of the ball.

Q. And then could you assess your run defense overall, and do you feel like that heavy investment or rotating the defensive linemen in the first half paid off for you in the second half?

COACH KELLY: It's going to have to, more so than a tactical advantage. It's really a matter of to keep these guys fresh and playing at the level that they need to, they are going to have to play.

And so we had a fixed rotation of how they were going to play early and throughout. We trust them. We're going to stick with that. They believe in us and the system that we have put together for them and we are in the going to waiver from it.

Q. How do you feel like they did --

COACH KELLY: I couldn't tell you exactly. You know, look, there are times where I thought -- there was probably one series in the second quarter where we didn't tackle as well as we needed to. We made some, you know, some mistakes that we've got to clean up relative to attention to detail. We had the one off-side penalty where we gave them a first down.

There's areas of improvement, but I love their mental state. I love where they are in terms of what they are going to do for us every week. We'll be excited to go coach them again.

Q. How would you assess the way Brandon played today?

COACH KELLY: I thought that for a guy starting for the first time, he provided some excitement and energy to the offense. You know, he's got -- I think everybody that watched him can see the tools that he has; the ability to run, throw the football. He's tough. He got hit today; got back up.

Again, I think when you assess the quarterback position at the end of the day, they are going to assess him on wins and losses and today was a good day for the quarterback at Notre Dame because we are 1-0.

Yeah, we've got -- I mean, there will be things that we've got to clean up there, certainly. The interception, he's got to key the corner. The corner came off, lagged. But he's telling me on the way back, "I've got to keep my eyes on the corner." Ends the conversation pretty quickly with me. I love that about him. Very coachable and we'll get better and he'll be better next week.

Q. With Brandon, I know he's trying to make plays, do you talk to him at all, thinking about sliding and protecting himself at the end of some of those runs?

COACH KELLY: I think he's pretty smart. He did slide one time, and he has slid in practice. He's a pretty good baseball player, so he knows how to slide.

But I think he's a pretty smart guy. He's going to know

when to get out of bounds, when to slide, when to protect himself. He got hit one time, and I think he'll be smart enough to know when to get down.

Q. Could you talk about how important it was for the team to get off to a fast start in the game, and for the season, just for the confidence factor?

COACH KELLY: Well, you know, each year, I've felt like certain years, confidence is really huge with a football team. That wasn't a word that I used much this year.

I wasn't really worried much about confidence in this group as much as they just needed to go play and exhibit the things that they had been exhibiting through the 26 practices.

So I don't think I ever felt confidence -- last year, I felt we needed confidence. We needed some good things to happen. Even when we fumbled the ball and turned it over, I really didn't feel like we weren't going to respond in any way. It's just a different group, a different year and a different team.

They just needed to go play game and get some production, and they got a win, and now we can build off of that.

Q. And what was the key to Josh's game today? What do you think the key was?

COACH KELLY: He runs really fast (Laughter).

Q. Well, he got caught on that long run.

COACH KELLY: Yeah, but he had to run so far, he got tired (Laughter).

Q. Special teams overall today, coverage, punt game, how did you assess that?

COACH KELLY: We thought our punt coverage was really good today. We thought our kickoff coverage, other than we missed a tackle the one time that they ran and bounced it back outside, we were supposed to trim that fat and we missed the tackle. One of our better tacklers missed a tackle there. I think they bounced it out to about the 32 but their average field position was within our margin.

So from a kickoff coverage, we almost hit the first one out of the gates for kickoff return. So I think coverage teams, punt return, kickoff return, really good. We missed two field goals, but I'm not really concerned. He's hitting the ball really well. It leaked twice on him to the right and he was trying to make the adjustment. It just -- it got away from him and leaked a little bit.

Those are not things that I'm really concerned. We'll have to tighten that up in close games. Obviously we have to make them but my hair's not on fire about that

stuff. He's hitting the ball pretty good. As you saw on kickoffs, he's driving the ball pretty good.

Q. Do you feel confident in that phase of the game in a way that you haven't in a while?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, that's not even -- well, as you can tell, it wasn't even in the top four or five things that I discussed. He's really hitting the ball well.

Q. Did Durham take a concussion?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, he went through our concussion protocol. He came out pretty good after the game. But we bring him in and he goes through that protocol. But he was correcting me on my talk to the team; so he was pretty good.

Q. Correctly correct?

COACH KELLY: He's always correct. (Laughter).

Q. Red zone, six-for-six, all touchdowns. When you went into the off-season and evaluated the red zone from the previous year, what did you feel you needed to address?

COACH KELLY: Run the football a lot more. Take a lot of the coverage variations that we get down there out of the quarterback's hands effectively. Get into some more tight end sets that causes you to get out of bracket coverages and into more man coverages and really effectively create more of a run game opportunity down there.

Q. When you get in the red zone or like inside the ten or five, does your conversation increase with Chip Long or do you still want to leave him alone?

COACH KELLY: My conversation with him is pretty constant during the drive. I'm just trying to keep -- I don't want it to be, you know, over-chatter. He's got to get in the flow and he's got to be calling the game.

I'm just keeping him on track relative to fourth down calls, whether we're on this particular area of the field, he's got a fourth down in his pocket; so calling accordingly on second and third down. You don't have to worry about it; you have a fourth down to work with.

And then when we get into those short fields that you've got a couple of downs here to run it, so be stubborn.

Q. You've got a bunch of good tight ends. We've talked to you about them a lot ask we don't talk to you about Nic Weishar very often. What has kept him in the mix?

COACH KELLY: He's had the best year that anybody can have in terms of his physical commitment to the position itself. In other words, look, he does not have the DNA of LSA and he will tell you that; that he looks

like a dad, compared to those three, four stallions.

But he can catch the damn football. Doesn't matter where you throw it. I mean, we had one scrimmage where we went -- we had a fourth down scrimmage where we just called fourth down plays and he made four tremendous plays on fourth down. So he created that on his own, and he's just had so much confidence in the way he's been playing and it's carried over.

Q. In Quenton and Mike, you've got two guys -- first rounders. What's the difference between a good offensive lineman and an elite offensive lineman like those two?

COACH KELLY: I would say, first of all, it starts with -- from an offensive line standpoint, the ability to control your opponent and create a new line of scrimmage. Both of those guys can control their opponent and create a new line of scrimmage. They can dent the defensive line. They can pass block. They can get out, move in space.

So I think it starts with winning at the line of scrimmage, and then the versatility that those two guys have is pretty unusual.

Q. Speaking of the offensive line, earlier you mentioned running behind the right side with both Kraemer, Hainsey. Were you expecting to split that time so much today?

COACH KELLY: No -- oh, yes, I'm sorry. In terms of -- I thought you meant in terms of going right and left. We expected to go left the whole time and we didn't care if anybody knew about it.

Yes, we had it in that it was going to be pretty much -- it ended up being, I believe, almost 40 reps apiece. It was darn close. Last time I checked with hairy he's fast it was like 40-38, 40-39. So we were expecting that to be a 50-50 battle.

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Geoff Collins

Postgame

GEOFF COLLINS: This moment right now what just happened is not one of them. I thought we came out slower. I told the kids at halftime, I said I thought I did a poor job. We had a bunch of rookies playing, especially on defense. They kind of acted like rookies at times. And I told them the truth, I thought I acted like a rookie early.

So we got that fixed, we got settled in, started playing some really good football. Continued for most of the second half playing some really good football, and then kept trying to compete. We didn't come here to win a participation medal, we came to try to push it and try to go for it. A bunch of times in the fourth quarter, we gave them some big plays to close the game out.

But I thought that the offense did a really good job at times, special teams did a really good job at times. Defensively we missed a bunch of things. Led to some big plays which you can't do against really good running backs, really good quarterback that's shifty and can make plays in space. Those things have to be eliminated.

I love them, I'm proud of the way they competed, the way they fought, they never quit. But some of the misfits on some of those big plays were killers.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: I thought he did well, I thought he threw the ball, I thought he had rhythm, I thought he had timing, I thought he had control of the offense. I know that's been a big point of discussion the entire off season, throughout the entire pre-season, and I thought Logan performed admirably. Probably was a little too much gamesmanship on my part. I probably carried it a little too far with the quarterback battle, the quarterback situation. But Logan knew he was going to be the guy, Russo knew that Logan was going to get the nod. And then Logan came in and played admirably and moved the offense really well at times, threw some really nice balls and threw some balls that not a lot of kids in the country can make. And I thought the rest of the offense kind of rallied around him. We had some uncharacteristic penalties in the first quarter, and then we settled down and eliminated those.

There were two defensive penalties that led to two



touchdowns that were third down stops that we gave up, so that added 14 points that we don't want to ever have happen.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, just the -- I knew going into it we were replacing three starting linebackers, and I thought we had some very talented kids in the game. I think we played. I think we had seven linebackers play today. So trying to replace three starters, I thought just a little bit the fit, the thing -- the unique things that they were doing, they were tempoing, some of the run game that they were doing, just in a sterile environment, is tough if you're a young linebacker. And then you add the tempo piece to it and two really good players, that adds to it as well.

But just me finding my rhythm as well. And I told them that at halftime, there was a lot of rookies out there getting a lot of shots for the first time, and I put the onus straight on myself as well. I thought once we settled into a rhythm, the entire team, me included, I thought there was some really good ball being played, especially in the second and third quarter.

The beginning was bad, the wheels fell off at the end, which is inexcusable to, the same with the misfits, but we'll get it corrected. I've got complete faith in them, the players, complete faith in our coaching staff. I'm on the headsets with them saying all the right things, teaching all the right things, the kids are dialed in. But it's still, in a unique environment, it's still tough at times.

Q. When did you know you weren't going to have Ventell Bryant and how did you adjust the game plan?

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, we have been trying to get him ready and it just wasn't happening, so probably Friday.

Q. What adjustments were made?

GEOFF COLLINS: Well, I think you saw it. Wright got a ton of balls today. I thought he had an impact in the game. Kirkwood had some nice catches. Adonis did some really nice things. There were times this week we were worried about Marshall Ellick and then in the fourth quarter you see Marshall doing some really good things for us. So I'm excited about our receiving corp. Tight ends as well. So I think we have a complete

offense, we just got to give them some better field position, some better situations.

Q. Your feeling about Wimbush, his start and what made him so difficult to defend and the running backs?

GEOFF COLLINS: Sure, the things they were doing, which were unique from what they have done in the past, they were doing a lot of things out of the pistol and he was doing some of his own stuff and keeping it. We had him hemmed up about three times. One of the touchdown passes down the red zone, we had him hemmed up, he stepped in, moved outside. Just a tremendous athlete. We knew he had a strong arm, we knew he was athletic, but then that pace of the offense and then his athletic ability, I was impressed with.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: It was just some of the fits. There's certain things that we do that, some of the young linebackers have to put some stunts, so we're playing tight you got to put a gain on it. A lot of time the gain weren't being put on or they were taking a yo and then rocking back and just the fits change a little bit. And then the tempo, in the first half especially, we were just, they were just almost too fast. So they were getting the read, they were getting the key, but they would go one back or one gap too far. And that running back's a really good player and he did awesome. Once you misfit something like that they're going to make you pay.

Q. When we see missed tackles is that what you're talking about?

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, it was a lot of misfits. Just on the rock backs not fitting exactly the way we wanted to. And then against good players, it bounces out and they're able to hit the home run with it. I didn't think we tackled the way that we have all pre-season, grabbing cloth, all the things that we preach. There's some times that once the game starts slipping away, or once a big play starts happening, you start trying to make up for it by being too over aggressive and not relying on your fundamentals and techniques and I thought that happened at times today as well.

Q. Can you talk about the strengths of the Notre Dame running backs versus your defense?

GEOFF COLLINS: They're good players. They're really good players. I think the running back will probably go down as one of the great running backs of this school and that's probably saying a lot. The quarterback can run as well. And then that catch the tall No. 6 made down in the red zone, I mean that was a heck of a play against tight coverage. Got one foot in bounds, a really good play, a really good ball. So at

times you got to make sure that you're in position to make those plays against really good players.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: Logan was playing good and we kept getting in that rhythm, so we didn't talk about it. We were letting it be Logan's show today. I told Russo and Frank they were doing a great job supporting him and I think they have a special relationship, they're all pulling for each other, and I think they know that if their time comes, they will step in admirably if they need to.

Q. Is it going to be Logan next week?

GEOFF COLLINS: We'll do the same thing every single week, you guys are going to get tired of me saying it, but every single thing that we do we evaluate on a day-to-day week-to-week basis. With how you practice, how you prepare, how you perform, all your reps are determined throughout the week and there's for every single position.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: A lot of times there were some really good -- I thought Coach Johnson at times caught some really good blitzes, exactly where it should be. The last touchdown I thought was a great call, the pressure was coming and we just misfit it. And you cannot do that against an elite running back and that's what happened.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, a hundred percent. Yes.

Q. Did Logan throw too early? Seemed like on the third down plays they were sailing behind.

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, the one to the field maybe once, but I thought that he was under control, he was composed, I thought he was changing the rhythm and the cadence of the offense, trying to keep them off balance, so I was happy with his performance.

Q. How much credit do you give to that Notre Dame offensive line as opposed to your linebackers?

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, they're really good. There's two of them that were projected to be second round picks and they're really good players. They have got five players that can move people. But I think I want to say it's more about us. We got to fix what we can fix. We got we got to control what we can control. But they're really good players, I'm not going to take that away from them. It's a really good offensive line, two really good receivers, a dynamic tailback. I thought the tight ends were good. I don't think they got the ball very much, but they were good blockers, they were physical. And then Wimbush adds another dynamic as a running quarterback -- and I thought he made some nice throws too.

Q. (No microphone.)

GEOFF COLLINS: Yeah, that was tough and I hate it. I know Kenny, I mean, he's made those catches all pre-season, he's a really good player, he's going to have a huge, huge year for us. He's a huge presence for us. So I know he was tough and I credit Coach Foley and Coach Patenaude, we went for two, just two plays later, and he was the target. I think that's really good coaching. Because you got a really good player who is a freshman, that drops a pass, but we let him know right there we believe in you, we love you, we trust you, we're going to get you the ball the next time we can. And then just the little pressure and the ball sailed a little bit. But I thought it was good to show faith in Kenny.