

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 19, 2017



Brian Kelly

BRIAN KELLY: Afternoon. Coming off really a very good win against a team that is very stingy defensively and has been for quite some time in Boston College. Really proud of the way our guys overcame some adversity.

If you take it from really just before the half where we turned the football over, our defense comes up with a stop right before the half. We turn the ball over again in the third quarter. Hold them to a field goal, then come up with a big fourth down stop. Offensively we find ourselves with three consecutive touchdowns.

That kind of performance is what is expected and needed when you play any Power 5 team. You have to just keep playing. I think that's what we've been trying to develop with our football team since January.

So when you're comparing and contrasting what you're trying to build within your football team, it's that ability to keep playing, overcome adversity, and find a way to win a football game on the road. They're hard to come by.

I point to that, to our football team in particular, about showing some grit in that game. Then winning by 29 points against a Power 5 team on the road shows them that they're capable of winning football games even if it wasn't perfect for a period of time.

We take that. We move forward. We go back on the road against a very physical opponent in Michigan State, a team we're well aware of, what they're capable of. Have a lot of respect for Mark Dantonio, what he's accomplished at Michigan State. A team just a few years ago, like us, that was vying for in our instance a playoff spot, for them being part of the playoffs. A lot of pride. A lot of tradition.

They're very stingy defensively. You can see they're very disciplined. Been impressed with some of their younger players. Their middle linebacker, 35. Bulla has been the name you hear every year. You have a new name in (indiscernible) at Mike. He's very athletic, physical player. Frey has been around for a senior, but a really good inside backer. They have two of the finer inside linebackers that we'll face.

They do what they do. They're stingy against the run.

They're very physical in the back end. They play tight man coverage. They mix it up very good with their pressure package. Again, led by Coach Dantonio's philosophy, they've always been very good defensively.

Offensively, on the offensive line, an athletic offensive line. It's really a makeover of a team that had a lot of veterans. But this is a much more athletic offensive line than Michigan State has presented to us in the past. Really impressed with some of the younger players. You look at the right tackle, a young player, but very athletic. Campbell. The best player is clearly Allen, the center. Experienced, very good football player.

It's a nice-looking offensive line. Athletic, physical, strong. It's what you would expect, but even more from my eye much more athletic.

Certainly everybody knows about the backs. Scott, Holmes, they ran all over us last year. Certainly we'll have to play a lot better to contain those two backs.

I've been very impressed with Lewerke. Very poised, can run. If you fall asleep in zone option, he's going to pull it. He's capable of running out. He had a nice long run against Western Michigan. He's more than just a manager of the offense, he can throw it. Highly accurate. I think he has more than just escape-ability. He's fast. He can run.

Good football team. It will be an electric atmosphere. It will be loud. I think playing at BC was a tune-up, if you will, for us, to enter into a louder, more boisterous atmosphere, if you will.

I think with our guys being on the road for the first time last week, a lot of guys for the first time, it was a great kind of entry into going into an even more hostile environment, if you will, playing at Michigan State.

What does that mean for us? Do what we do. Get back to work today. Really begin Tuesday with picking up our intensity. We can't afford to have some of the lapses that we had in terms of intensity, that mental intensity that's required.

I like our physicality. We just need to keep it tuned up, dialed up for four quarters. If we do that, that's the

most important thing in our preparation right now.

So fire away for you guys in terms of questions.

Q. I noticed in the Boston College game, it seemed like in Georgia, as well, Myron Tagovailoa-Amosa was in there on the fourth down stop that was so big, getting some good penetration. In Georgia, Hinshelwood was on the field when you had to turn the ball over, get Georgia to give you back the ball with a couple minutes left. What did those freshmen do to earn your trust to put them in those kind of situations this early?

BRIAN KELLY: I think from the very beginning, you probably used the word, we trust that they're going to execute the techniques that we've asked them to. They're not jumping out of their fits. There might be times where physically or technically there might be some mistakes, but they're extremely coachable. They're smart. They are always trying to do the right things. I think if you ask Coach Elston, more than anything else, they are trustworthy. If we ask them to do something, they're going to do it. They've got traits. They've got some physical traits that allow them to be effective at the position, as well.

Q. Do you anticipate Cam Smith to be back with you this week? If so, how does he fit into what you're trying to do with the receivers, get Claypool on the field, all that?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I think he'll be back in the rotation. The one thing about Cam is he's extremely physical, a great blocker. He can catch the football. We've got to catch it better at all positions, though, not just one position. But he's definitely a guy that adds to our receiving depth. I think he's a guy that will be at 100% this week.

Q. With Michael Young, is he a guy eventually, maybe not this year, but eventually you feel like is a take the top off the defense kind of guy? Am I overestimating his speed?

BRIAN KELLY: No, I think he's got that kind of speed. I think he presents himself in a manner that he could be a guy that does a little bit more than just a guy that is downfield. We think he can be a screen guy, maybe a jet sweep guy, screens. He's got a little bit of all of those tools.

I think it's too early really to tell other than the fact that we really like his work ethic, his attitude, his football intelligence is really high. It's put him in a good position early in his career. But I see him more as a multi-dimensional player than maybe a perimeter player.

Q. When the ACC commitment came on, I think

with Michigan State there was still a good vibe between the ADs they'd be able to put together some series like this one. I haven't seen any on future schedules. What do you like about the series? What would you miss about it if it went away?

BRIAN KELLY: It's the battle for the megaphone. You guys know that, right? We want the megaphone (smiling). It's all about the megaphone.

I think clearly Michigan and Michigan State, in terms of proximity, Midwest, we recruit a lot of the same players. There's been such great history and tradition going back to the '66 game. I just think that history, tradition, proximity, all those things make for rivalry games.

But more importantly, they're games that attract the attention within the Midwest. I think as games start to kind of lose that local flavor in terms of teams playing each other, this is one that I still think captures a lot of people's interest. I'm all for those kind of traditional matchups.

Q. You talked about the physicality of Michigan State. When you're deciding what aspects of your running game you want to lean on, whether it's read option, giving your offensive line a little bit more time to move, or something more quick hitting and straight ahead, what are some of the variables you're considering as you approach how you want to approach your running game?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, well, we try to look at inside-outside zone, pins and pulls, misdirection, then attacking the perimeter. On our board, if you were going into our offensive staff room, we have a heading for each one of those elements of our offensive running game. Each piece of those is addressed when we're putting together our running game from week-to-week. There may be some weeks where we feel like trap, which is a quick-hitting play, maybe more effective versus two-wide three techniques that are getting up the field.

If you feel you have two guys that are more, you know, locked down, inside guys that are not penetrators or deep backers, play a lot of man, maybe you're not into trap. If you have edge players that are really on the ball, you don't like to get the ball outside as much, you'd rather try to run zone and read.

It really just depends on the defense from week-to-week. I think what we try to do is attack the defense in all those areas on a wide front, and have all of those available to us each and every week out of our running game library.

Q. Of course the skill set of your offensive linemen,

you have guards that move pretty well, that obviously has to come into play.

BRIAN KELLY: There's no question. I think what's important to realize is that we're in game three, I think we're starting to get a better sense and feel for what we're going to be really good at. We have this library, but we're also as a staff starting to now find out that these are the plays that are really going to be our core plays and get good at it.

I think one element of our offense that will continue to be part of it is you have to add the misdirection plays in your offense, whether that's out of a jet series, whether that's out of a counter series. That has to be part of it. You can't just be in pin and pull and zone read. There has to be some more to it, some misdirection, if you will. I think that continues to evolve each and every week.

Q. You kind of hinted after the game that you feel like you have a better idea now which direction you want to go.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I think after three weeks, we've got a better sense of where we need -- I would say this.

We can't appease people in terms of what looks good as much as what we're going to be good at. If running the football is what is going to be the common denominator for wins, then that's what we're doing. Efficiency is the most important thing. Clearly we have to work on our weaknesses, right? So wherever we feel like our weaknesses are within the offense, we have to get better at those weaknesses each and every week.

But we're going to do what we're good at, and that's what you'll see what this offense does moving forward.

Q. Brandon Wimbush gives you a different dimension with his feet, as he proved again on Saturday. Where do you draw the line between taking full advantage of that and increasing the number of hits he's going to take over the course of a season?

BRIAN KELLY: I think if teams are feeling as though playing man-to-man and turning their back on the quarterback is the way they want to defend us, he's going to run a lot. I know I wouldn't want to be in man-to-man versus option offenses. It's the last thing that you want to do, is turn your back on an option quarterback and give him all the field to run. Teams are figuring out how to defend us, too. We're going to have to obviously adapt as we move forward.

Teams that want to play a lot of man-to-man coverage are going to have to deal with Brandon Wimbush running the ball. That's a fact. Having said that, if we

see more zone coverages, he's going to have to be able to throw the football, too. We've got to continue to grow as an offense in both those phases.

Q. The conversations about getting your tight ends more involved in the passing game, how do you do that?

BRIAN KELLY: We target them quite a bit. I'm not too concerned when the play-caller is also coaching the tight ends. It's never a sense that he doesn't want to get them the football.

If you really look at it and break it down, Alize had a number of touches. Durham Smythe catches probably the biggest pass in the game that Brandon threw down the field. I'm pretty happy with the involvement of our tight ends. Yeah, I think that continues to evolve in terms of Brandon feeling comfortable where they are at all times and getting them the football.

I think that is something that you're going to continue to see week in, week out. The ball is going to be targeted to the tight ends. They're going to be an integral part of what we do.

Q. How have you seen the younger tight ends' progress?

BRIAN KELLY: Again, I think we go back to a question of how do we get five tight ends involved in our offense effectively. Again, I think Cole is developing. Brock is a physical player that we've tried to find a role for as a blocking back. It doesn't mean that we don't think he can play. Nic Weishar is a heck of a ball catcher. Durham Smythe is a stalwart in terms of what he can do. Alize, get him the time we want.

They're all valuable. If need be, they're ready to play because they get the proper preparation during the week.

Q. Josh Adams, is that one of the reasons you took him out in the fourth quarter, to give him a break?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah.

Q. How do you balance that during the game a little bit more to make sure he's healthy throughout the season?

BRIAN KELLY: We try to do that during the week, making sure that we monitor him during the week in terms of his player load. We're very cognizant of how we practice him, making sure that he gets the proper work, that he's sharp when we get to Saturday. We let our best players play.

It's really incumbent upon us to do a great job of preparing him, but understanding that he's got to feel really good when we get to Saturdays, and then

Saturdays let your best players play.

Q. You're 3-2 versus Michigan State. There's been some crazy games, your first one in particular in 2010. What are your memories of how wild that was up there, how crazy the finish was?

BRIAN KELLY: I think what I remember my two times up there is it's loud, it's a raucous atmosphere. They've had a week to prepare for us. They're going to come out with a lot of energy. They probably got the first 10 plays scripted since May. They're going to look like really good plays. We've got to sustain things for the first few minutes and just hang in there. When the game settles in, if you're doing really well, it starts to quiet down in that stadium. If you're not, it's really loud.

Q. I want to take you back to something you brought up in your phone call on Sunday. I think you said that Brandon, when he was struggling in the passing game, was a little slow to see the field open up. Is that what you were getting at?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, it was more about rushing his throws, which if you look at it in the reverse, he didn't anticipate them. Not anticipating, obviously the same kind of way to get to that same kind of answer would be he was slow in seeing them.

He just has to anticipate them a little bit better. That's building a relationship with your receivers, trusting it. He's just got to trust it a little bit better.

Q. My question is, how do you prepare him for that? Is it more film work? Showing him more work against maybe your top defense? Is it something that takes time, you have to let it happen?

BRIAN KELLY: That's a fair question. I think there's a lot of ways to kind of go about doing that. One would say, you know, maybe you go against your defense and give him more speed so he can react in a more intense manner so he can duplicate that better than maybe in a practice. Another way would be, you can do more film study so it becomes more from a picking it up from your brain and seeing it, just that rep.

I think you have to be a little bit more demanding, and when we do it, we're going to do it right in practice and we're going to get it right, we're going to do it till we get it right, then move on to the next play. Let's not just throw it, not get it right, move to the next play.

Maybe that means that we just make sure that we're really good at what we do in the passing game, then expand from there.

Q. You've had a unique look at some of Mark Dantonio's other teams, having followed him

throughout the course of your career. Does that give you an idea, can you speak to the kind of characteristics that are benchmarks to his program that you've noticed?

BRIAN KELLY: This team looks a lot more similar to some of his earlier teams. Extremely disciplined, hard-nosed, play to the echo of the whistle. Just resembles a lot more of the teams that I had seen '10, '11, '12, '13. Those were supremely talented teams the last few years. This team reminds me of some of his earlier teams.

Q. Since you know how those teams play, how do you beat those teams?

BRIAN KELLY: Score more points (smiling).

One of them went to overtime. The other one was a defensive battle. You're fighting for every inch when you're playing Michigan State because they're going to take care of the football on offense, they're going to play really good defense. That will have to be the case on Saturday. We can't turn the football over like we did against BC. We're going to have to play really good run defense, which we didn't last year. We're going to have to put some points on the board.

Q. They are number one in the nation in stopping opponents on third down. What makes them so effective in that?

BRIAN KELLY: I mean, look, they've played two games. I think Western Michigan is a really good opponent. It's harder to judge Bowling Green. But I think they were challenged a little bit better against Western Michigan.

I thought they did a really good job on third down. They've got a nice third down package that's difficult sometimes to know where pressures are coming from. They've got some guys that can come in in third down, that can bring some pressures.

They really did a nice job against Western on first and second down, put them in some third-and-long situations. I think stats right now, as it relates to Michigan State, are a little early. It's a stout defense, a good defense. I think if you ask them at 11%, they're not into the Big Ten Conference yet, but it's a really good defense.

Q. With Josh, he was not somebody who was necessarily highly recruited coming out of high school. He was considered a three star. I realize his injuries played a role in that. What did you see from him in high school? Did you see the explosiveness that he's shown throughout his Notre Dame career?

BRIAN KELLY: I think Sampson and Prister had him at a five star, didn't you? Not quite (smiling).

There's a little bit more to it. I mean, he was injured. I don't think he was evaluated in the manner. Those guys sometimes, you know, fall through the cracks. We saw a guy that had a great size potential. We loved his character. We saw a guy that had a chance to be an all-purpose guy, that could catch the football coming out of the backfield, block, run the football.

I think, you know, again from a star perspective, we didn't get too caught up in that as much as what we saw and what his potential could be.

Q. Have you ever had any other player break George Gipp's records?

BRIAN KELLY: No. Mike obviously does an incredible job of keeping me up to date on all George Gipp's records, which he didn't, so I'm winging it here.

Our kids, you know, when you talk about some of the records, we brought up a couple of them in terms of rushing, they like to hear it, but they move through it real quickly.

Q. When he was a senior in high school, Brandon Wimbush was actually challenging the national record for accuracy completion percentage, finished about 73% or so. Right now there are questions about does he have an accuracy issue. Do you think that's overblown or have you seen things in practice that make you continue to be confident he is as accurate, being mindful high school is a lot different than college?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I mean, I have absolutely no questions about his ability to play at the highest level at Notre Dame and help us win a championship.

Accuracy I think is a product of being comfortable within an offense, an offense that has changed a little bit from what he was used to running. It also has to do with really only having one receiver that has established himself in the program for a period of time. He's working with some new receivers.

So I think just some patience and you'll see him throw the ball with a higher accuracy rate.

Q. Have you seen it consistently since the spring? Anything that had to be worked on with motion or technique?

BRIAN KELLY: No. If you look at all of his balls on Saturday, they were overthrows. Typically what happens when somebody overthrows, maybe it's not the greatest analogy, but if you're overthrowing in baseball, we ask Tim Prister this because I know he's a baseball expert, but generally it's just you're rushing. He needs to just settle down a little bit. It has nothing

to do with mechanics as much as he needs to settle. When he was settled, had his feet set, he threw a beautiful ball to Durham Smythe.

I think the question that probably hit it the most was recognition, being comfortable with the route, where the receiver is, and just trusting it. Once he gets to that level and trusts it, he trusts that corner route, that six route, he loves to throw that route. You can see that he loved throwing it. Once he gets to that level with all of his passing game, he'll throw it with the same kind of accuracy.

Q. You don't have him in the takes of Tony Rice throwing darts to improve his touch?

BRIAN KELLY: No, we haven't gotten to tin cup where he's wearing some kind of device. No, we're pretty good there.

Q. Jerry Tillery, it seems his performances have been a little bit under the radar. Getting the large snap counts, what has his threshold been?

BRIAN KELLY: His conditioning level is really good. He's worked at it. Jerry is a different committed player in a sense from last year to this year. He's worked extremely hard in the weight room. Dedicated himself in a manner that he was campaign manager last year. He was doing a lot of things. He's really focused on football. It's important to him. It's showing on Saturdays.

Q. What has Brendon been like before games? Do you think nerves or pressure of being the first-year guy, being the quarterback at Notre Dame has played any role in his performances?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I think it's typical of any first-year starter. First one on the road, there's a little bit of that. But I think as we move forward, I think I said at the outset, this was a first road game, first road start. There's a little bit of the nerves that go along with that. It was a great tune-up, if you will, for Michigan State.

But he found a way to win. He wasn't throwing the ball very well, so he ran it really well. That's pretty good. He willed himself into finding a way to be successful on Saturday. He's got that kind of will and want and desire to win. I love coaching a guy like that.

As he grows into the position, remember, we're three games into this, he's only going to feel more comfortable each and every week. These conversations that we're having right now are totally natural for a first-year starter. He's had a clipboard and a headset, and that's it. Now he's in the middle of it.

Yeah, I think you'll continue to see progress for him from week-to-week.

Q. Three games in, is it an ongoing process of learning what plays he's comfortable with, concepts in the passing game? Is that a continually evolving thing throughout the year for a quarterback?

BRIAN KELLY: I think there are some things that have to be part of what we do because there are complements to what we're doing. As we really settle in on who we are, there are going to be natural complements that get repped each and every week. He's going to get really comfortable with those things.

Now that we've seen for the last couple of weeks, first week it was all three down, second week it's three down, now it's four down. We go back and forth. Now we start to get into a rhythm of knowing our opponent. We know our opponent a little bit better this week. I think we'll be able to get into more of a comfort level with him.

Q. Michigan State is younger on defense this year. For a long time they had the same sort of blueprint. With so many new faces playing key roles for them, do they bring anything different to the table stylistically, new twists from what you expect from the last five, six years?

BRIAN KELLY: Structurally they're very similar to what they've done in the past. They're built certainly inside-out, two inside linebackers, really strong defensive tackles. They've had some outstanding edge players in the past. Now they are really solid players on the defensive end position.

But they just look structurally all together. It looks like 11 guys working together play after play.

Q. Your nickel package, obviously the field is slanted in your favor if you can get somebody in long, but has that been more effective than you thought entering the season?

BRIAN KELLY: Pass-rush. We've been able to get a pretty good push. The ball has come out in a fashion that has been predictable for us. We've gotten the kind of matchups that we've wanted.

I think we've been assignment correct. We put the right guys in the right place. Shaun is a guy that we trust in terms of playing the nickel position. When you can play on body, get an extra guy into the rush, the ball's got to come out a lot sooner. We don't have guys sitting back there picking us apart.

I think the pass-rush, being effective more on body has been effective to us.

Q. How much time are you able to target that in

recruiting? What do you look for to find a guy that has football intellect?

BRIAN KELLY: Conversations with them when you're recruiting them. Talk football. I actually like to talk about other sports. If they don't know anything about Kyrie Irving and the trade with the Celtics, I get a little nervous.

If they are so focused that they don't know anything about sports, that gets me nervous. Kids should know, that play the game, understand sports, they should know the sports arenas that they're in.

I like to have conversations with kids that understand sports. Those that understand sports, whether it be basketball, football, whatever they follow, other sports other than football itself, they generally have an understanding of the games.

There are so many carryovers with other sports. I get a little nervous when somebody doesn't know anything about any other sport. We try to ask those questions that may at the time seem mundane or, Why would you ask that question? It's really just to find out a little bit more about how tuned are they into the sport and how they play it.

Thanks.