

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

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Brian Kelly



COACH KELLY: Well, exciting week. Certainly our players are aware of the game, the rivalry. But it really doesn't change in the sense that our preparation, the standard that we'll have to play still is about what we do. But it's important to be aware of the excitement and the opportunity that awaits our football team.

But again, it comes down to the execution. It comes down to the focus, the attention to detail. All the things that we talked about all year can't change going into this game.

But we want to make sure that our players know that, you know, you get great opportunities like this at Notre Dame to play on a great stage like this against a rival in USC, against a very, very good football team.

I think everybody nationally knows about Sam Darnold and what he can do, Heisman trophy candidate. Great supporting cast: Ronald Jones, Deonte (ph). Very, very capable in many areas; the ability to throw it. They are going to be a challenge as it relates to their passing game, and they are very good at running the football, as well.

Defensively, Clancy Pendergast is an experience the defensive coordinator. He's done a great job. I think if you look at their defensive front, it's probably more than anything else, been one where they have gotten a lot more disruptions; the ability to pressure the quarterback.

Green has done a nice job this year. Fatu is physical at the nose, has been extremely disruptive. I think my favorite player on the defense is Cameron Smith. He's all over the field. He's smart. Great tackler in space. The ability to do a lot of things in coverage, but plays well in the box. Back end of the defense is as good as we've seen.

I think Marvell Tell is going to be a great guy on Sundays. Plays the ball well in the air. Great tackler. I think this is a really good tackling defense in the back end, as good as I've seen in my eight years in terms of their ability to tackle. You know, Jones, very good corner. He's got I think four interceptions.

So this is a very good football team. I think we knew that. This USC football team, after last year, coming

into this year was going to be a Top-10 team, and that's what they are.

So excited about the challenge. Our players know what they need to do. They have to play to a high standard, and again, we are aware of the circumstances but excited about the opportunity.

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

Q. What kind of practise has Brandon Wimbush had since the last time he played a game and what's his health status going into USC week?

COACH KELLY: There are to questions about his health so I think we can put that to rest in terms of how he is. He's 100 percent. There's no health issues at all. I think he continues to grow and develop as a quarterback, in just his, really, his fifth start, right. He'll go into his sixth start.

Again, developing at the quarterback position. You know, we went back, and as know, in these bi-weeks evaluate and self-scout, and he's been really productive in a number of areas for us: Moving the chains, fourth down conversions, third down, big plays.

He's done a lot of really good things to get us to where we are today, and yeah, there has to be some improvement in some other areas, but from a productivity standpoint, he's done some really good things and he's only going to get better.

Q. You reintroduced Kevin into the offense a couple games ago and I know you felt like he was doing some really good things. He, I'm sure, has a little bit of rust. What's your feelings about how he might be able to help this team over the final six regular-season games?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, I think you probably saw what we saw, was somebody that needed to get re-introduced into the game and get back up to game speed, game conditioning, even in a sense it was preseason for him in a lot of ways.

He's had a really good off-week and this week, you'll see more of him. As we progress over the next half of this season, our expectations are to see his role increase.

Q. Here comes No. 3 --

COACH KELLY: It's been quick, though.

Q. With special teams, I'm curious how you would evaluate the coverage teams and the return teams to this point.

COACH KELLY: I think the only area that we need to continue to grow and get better is our coverage teams relative to kick off coverage.

Now, you know, obviously if you're kicking the ball in the back of the end zone and you're not getting returns, that's the ultimate, you know, coverage, but when the ball comes out of the back of the end zone or the end zone itself, we've struggled and it's primarily, we've got to kick the ball better and our coverage has got to be better.

So I think the area of kickoff coverage is an area that we need to continue to get better at -- yeah, right now it is, yes.

Q. We talked about the productivity of your offense in the red zone but your defense is quietly, you're No. 4 in the nation in red zone touchdown percentage. What kind of things have you done on that side of the ball in the red zone to improve that area?

COACH KELLY: I think, you know, a lot of that is matching your ability to play coverage when coverage is needed, and don't short yourself in the box in run game.

I think it's really important to do a great job of matching personnel. I think we've done that. I think our ability to get personnel in and out of the game to match personnel groupings has really helped us in that area and not get shored in -- for example, being in nickel when an extra tight end is in the game or two backs are in the game.

So I think we've done a really good job of matching personnel there, and first down. We've been really good good at first down, which then you become a little bit more predictable. The leverage has been with us in red zone. Leverage has been with us in down and distance in red zone and leverage has been with us in personnel matching, and that's gone a long way.

Q. We talked about philosophical changes in the red zone offense. Is that matching of personnel, is that a change from what you had done?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, we weren't matching quite as regularly. We were keeping regular personnel on the field.

Q. How would you evaluate the linebacker play up

to this point, including the rover position?

COACH KELLY: Well, I think Drue and Nyles have been outstanding players for us. I mean, at a high level. You know, I think our will linebacker has been productive. I think, you know, both Greer and Te'von have played well, and what we have expected.

But the higher level of play has been certainly the Mike and the rover position. And quite frankly, they were in a position to be there, as well. The Will gets -- he gets expanded a lot more out of the box, you know, he's a lot more in coverage, so your productive players are going to be that rover position in Mike, and they have proven to be so.

Q. Specifically what would the buck and the Mike need to improve on?

COACH KELLY: Well, I don't know that I said they need to improve on -- yeah, yeah, but I would say that, you know, both of those have done well.

Look, they are stressed in coverage. RPOs are difficult. It's run/pass recognition. It's been really good, look, we are going to get challenged in the passing game. We're going to have to play really well at that position in the passing game.

Q. I want to expand on drew tranquil a little bit. Obviously when guys have to go through one rehab, that's hard enough. I think it would be almost demoralizing when you have to go through two, but Drue, it didn't seem to bother him. Can you talk about his attitude during his recoveries?

COACH KELLY: Well, you start with the person. His spirit is unbreakable. He just has such an incredible mind-set and a positive mind-set. Everything that he does is, you know, with a purpose. It always has a positive spin to everything he does. So he saw it as another opportunity to grow and get better.

Look, we just -- yesterday we were in the weight room, you know, speed squatting and he hit a personal best in speed squatting, you know, and that's a guy with two ACLs. Here is a guy that has just taken what could have been catastrophic and turned it into positives and that's just his mindset and spirit. That's kind of the kid he is, and that's why he's a captain.

Q. What was his best --

COACH KELLY: Well, I can tell you his personal best and what it was, and it's all relative on how they fire neuromuscularly, it's not pounds. But it was a 16 percent increase yesterday, which is crazy after six games.

Q. This is the first time since 2009 both teams have been ranked when you guys have been going head-

to-head. How much does that amp things up perhaps even more in a game that's already so intense?

COACH KELLY: Like I said, I think it's important that our players are aware of the game and the circumstances because that's why they come here. It's important not to just bury your head in the sand; be aware of it.

Having said that, that has no bearing on our preparation. It has no bearing on what we need to do relative to our habits and our traits.

But I think that that's why they come to Notre Dame. They want to play in these kind of games. You know, I didn't even know that; that that was the case. So you're telling me something for the first time, so if I'm hearing something for the first time, I'm sure our players did, as well.

Q. Fans are coming around to starting to believe in this team after what happened last year. How critical is this a game in terms of living up to expectations now of where you have built your program back up to?

COACH KELLY: Well, I think it's critical to continue to play to the standard of Notre Dame. I mean, that's what we have to play to. There's a standard of play that Notre Dame needs to play to.

Look, at the end of the day, we're all going to be judged by wins and losses and I understand that and I said that from day one. But there's a standard of play that we have to live up to. Our players understand that, and that's the most important thing is a standard of play that we're interested in.

Q. And what do you think the atmosphere will be like Saturday?

COACH KELLY: Well, I would think it's going to be a great atmosphere in the stadium. You know, I'm sure our students will be back for it. I saw something that Father Sorin put out on Twitter, so I'm sure that that is going to get all of our students back -- that's a joke, right. Okay. You guys are really tight today. You guys nervous about the big game? (Laughter).

I'm sure it will be a great atmosphere.

Q. With no classes this week, does that in any way alter your preparation for this game? Sometimes there might be a temptation to maybe do a little more or do you go back to reinforcing the fundamentals?

COACH KELLY: No, it helps us. You know, any time that -- look, the back-to-back weeks is a positive thing. We have six days of not being in contact situation after

the North Carolina game. So you get the physical rest and then you get the mental rest this week, without having to be in the classroom. So it's clearly a benefit, not only for this game but the next five games after this.

Yeah it gives us an opportunity to do a little bit more film study. It gives us a little more opportunity to do some walk-throughs.

The schedule is altered a little bit in the sense that we can do a little bit more football with them. We don't over tax them in any way. It's a great opportunity for them to catch up on some sleep and some rest, and the practices are virtually the same as any other week. So that doesn't change much at all.

Q. I think after the spring game, there may have been some unrealistic expectations on Daelin Hayes -- 15 sacks this year, he has not necessarily put up those numbers but he's been very effective at impacting the rush. How about as just an every-down player, it seems he's behind only Jerry Tillery on the defensive line as far as being out there as a three-down player?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, so we measure productive players a little bit differently than you guys.

You know, he's graded out every single play by run/pass, by effort, by gap integrity and responsibility and doing his job as 111, and he's been really good.

Certainly, you know, the more glamorous stats are what you had mentioned in terms of sacks, but his ability to play fast has impacted the entire defense. Because you've got to pay attention to him. If you're paying attention to him, and you're sliding a back over there, there's some other one-on-one match-ups.

So his impact in our defense has created a trickle-down for our entire defensive structure.

Q. And you updated Brandon Wimbush's status. Can you also give an update on Myron -- the three running backs, and just if Elijah Taylor is able to play at all the rest of the season?

COACH KELLY: Yeah, Elijah will not play, from that foot that has not healed to the level that it needs to. But all the ankle guys are good to go.

And Myron, no ill effects. He would have been cleared probably last week to play. So rested, and healthy going into this game.

Q. Ronald Jones is averaging over a hundred yards a game. What makes him such an effective Ryder Cup and so difficult for defenses?

COACH KELLY: Well, he's got speed, explosiveness,

great vision. I love Ronald. We recruited him out of high school. He's just a terrific back.

You know, he's a featured back. I think he's as good as anybody in the country and you know, he runs behind an offense that can throw the football. So creates great opportunities and great space. He's a weapon. Dangerous, dangerous player.

Q. You mentioned Clancy as defensive coordinator.

What are some of the hallmarks of his defenses?

COACH KELLY: Multiplicity. He's seen it, done it all. Been in the NFL. Operates out of a three-down package. Makes it difficult. Each week there's a different flavor, blitz and pressure, so you've got to prepare for a lot of different things, and make some adjustments on the sideline.

Tries to get the quarterback on the ground and rattle the quarterback. Does a really good job. You know, three-down is difficult because you don't see it each and every week. So you've got to make some adjustments with some protections, and any time -- Rector has been matched up on a back a couple of times, and he's got some sacks just because he's one-on-one with a back and in that three-down package, sometimes you fan the wrong way and you've got him matched up on a back. There's some nuances within his structure that make it difficult.

Q. Such great and historic rivalry. What are some of the things that stand out to you about this rivalry?

COACH KELLY: Well, I just think that, you know, the history, and, you know, the history and tradition of it. The great players that have played in this game across, you know, the decades. I think that's what stands out when people talk about Notre Dame, USC; it resonates. It's got brand power. It sits up there with the great rivalries of college football.

And so there's a great sense of anticipation and excitement in playing in a game of this calibre -- football terminology, I like it.

Q. You mentioned, Brandon still a young quarterback. How much do you think just the experiences of being under the lights against Georgia and Michigan State will help him kind of just understand the atmosphere on Saturday.

COACH KELLY: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Each step is a building block or him and being more comfortable and calm in moment.

We've seen that he settles in nicely as the game kind of unfolds. But I think as we kind of, you know, got a chance to kind of sit back a little bit and do a little bit

more of the analytics and dive deeper in what he's done, it doesn't jump out at you on film. But his production numbers are really, really interesting in terms of big plays with his feet and big chunk throws, conversions in third and fourth down situations.

So we just want to keep that confidence level in him and his ability to continue to make those plays, and this will be another step in that maturation process.

Q. How helpful was he, not playing against North Carolina for Ian, how helpful was he in understanding and explaining things?

COACH KELLY: He wasn't very helpful. He wasn't very helpful. He's young. He lost his helmet and couldn't find it; it was in the locker room. He's not there yet where he could be that mentor. Montgomerie VanGorder was awesome. Montgomery VanGorder was there for him.

He's just trying to figure it out and learn, and he was on the head set and he was trying to communicate but he's a starter. You know, he just was, like I said, just trying to figure it out.

Q. When you were growing up and you watched these series, what are some of the memories that you have of Notre Dame and USC?

COACH KELLY: Great come backs. You know, turning the game off at half time and coming back and somebody coming back to win the game. Just seemed to always be tightly-contested.

I think, also, that it caught my attention because there was such a buildup to the game, and growing up in Massachusetts, you know, there wasn't really a local team that you followed, right, and so it just had such a grasp on you and it was built up even on the East Coast as the college football game, and that's what I remember about it.

Q. Going back to Brandon, watching a game from the sidelines and having a couple weeks, including this one where he doesn't have class, is this sort of, I don't know, sort of a training camp reboot for him where he can sort of see the game in a different way and prepare in a little bit different way?

COACH KELLY: I think you'd have to ask him to get the kind of response or information.

I know he wanted to try to play the game. His focus was much more about trying to play the game than learning from what transpired in the game. I think if maybe he's a little further along in his process, that maybe he picks up more from the game.

I think there was too much angst and anxiety of wanting to play and trying to get in the game and him feeling like he was out of place on the sideline. I don't know that he was totally in the right place in terms of mentally trying to learn things and see things as they unfold.

Now maybe I'm missing the boat on it. I didn't sit down and have this conversation with him, but I'm sure he'll be available to you guy this is week; you can have that conversation with him. But it just didn't seem to me like he was in the right place to kind of grasp what was going on.

Q. I don't know if protect is the right word with your safeties and how you run your defense, but could you speak a little bit to how Mike has used them -- maybe not asked him to do things that they are not good at and then also spin that forward to what test Saturday is going to be for that position?

COACH KELLY: They are going to have to play well on Saturday. There's no protecting anybody in the back end of our defense on Saturday. This is a dynamic group. Runs well. Runs great routes. Runs after the catch.

You know, I don't know that protect would be the right word but we are definitely utilizing what we consider their strengths and trying to play to their strengths.

You know, at this level, if there is a big weakness, somebody is going to go after it. We are trying to really stay towards what we feel their strengths are.

Saturday night, they are going to have to play the ball in the air. They are going to have to tackle in space against a dynamic group. So we'll all be on display.

Q. You spoke a little bit about injuries earlier, but just coming out of practices that you had last week, curious about Greer Martini, if he's healthy moving forward?

COACH KELLY: Greer injured his knee in practise and he's really a day-to-day kind of situation right now.

Q. You mentioned Darnold up at the top, as well. Just what makes him such an effective quarterback?

COACH KELLY: You know, I don't know where to start. Let's see: Accuracy, quick release, competitiveness. He can make plays after things break down. You know, he just has that knack of making plays when it looks like you've got everything covered. Just a great arm. Great arm strength.

But I think what probably separates him from the other quarterbacks is just his ability to find that open window

in tight spaces with a quick, quick release. I mean, that ball comes out of his hand as well as anybody that I've seen.