

University of Notre Dame Football Media Conference

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South Bend, Indiana, USA

Head Coach Marcus Freeman

Press Conference



Notre Dame - 41, Central Michigan - 17.

MARCUS FREEMAN: Man, it was -- you know, I tried to tell the team, these wins are hard to come by. And we are so greedy and selfish and we wanted to be perfect. And that's just who we are as coaches. And I was proud of the way they battled. It wasn't perfect, man. But they battled and they battled and they responded.

And, you know, if we -- as I challenged them, if we don't beat Notre Dame, we're a good football team, man. There was times in the first half and second half, penalties cost us. And if you look at the drives that didn't end well, there was a lot of self-inflicted wounds. Now, that doesn't take anything away from Central Michigan. I told Coach McElwain after the game, he's got a really good football team that's going to win a lot of games in the MAC.

And so, I'm proud of the way our guys battled for four quarters. I'm proud of the way they really tuned out the distractions and focused on this week and this game and took care of business. With that, I'll open up with questions.

Q. Hey, Marcus, you played linebacker. So I'm wondering what's the accumulative effect trying to tackle a guy like Audric Estimé, especially for the full course of the game? And what does that do to energize your team and what do you think it does to dispirit the other team?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Well, I mean, trust me, it's not a lot of fun tackling a guy like that. Those hits take a toll on you as a player, I'm sure, as a defender. But the success we can have running the ball without Audric and with any of those running backs, again, when you can run the ball and have success running the ball, you truly open up your pass game.

And so, that's always been a strong belief of mine, is the ability to run the ball will help us in the pass game. And

that's what you saw today.

Q. You referenced the penalties. You encountered a little more adversity today with no Mitchell Evans, no JD Bertrand, DJ Brown, Rubio's still out. What did you maybe learn more about your team today as it encountered that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, we got to continue to develop. This is the greatest team sport in the world. And you don't know what's going to happen. You don't control what circumstances come your way. And we had some guys out, some key leaders that we have to continue to develop those guys that are the second -- the twos and the threes.

And so, I thought they stepped up and did a good job. We have to continuously improve, right? And that's going to be something I always say. We have to continuously improve. You know, go back and watch the film, we'll see. We'll see where those areas of improvements truly are at.

But those penalties, man, we can't have them. That's not to our standard. Especially the -- you know, the uncharacteristic -- the two roughing the passers, a couple holding penalties on offense, defensive PI. I think about those penalties and great football teams don't beat themselves. And we're fortunate we can learn from that and still have a good victory.

Q. Marcus, I'll ask an injury question today. What's going on with Mitchell Evans? I don't think we saw DJ Brown today. Is everything okay with him?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah. Mitch ended up having a concussion. He was in concussion protocol. That's why he was out. And DJ, you know, he got a -- he had a tight hamstring two days ago and we just think -- we didn't think he would be able to be 100 percent, so we decided to hold him.

Q. And then, you know, two touchdowns, 75 yards or more. You know, you talked about the run game opening up the pass game. What does that deep ball success do to open up the rest of the offense?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, the ability to execute on those deep balls and those open passes are huge. They're

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huge to have success. I think we -- 578 yards on offense, man, that's a credit to success in the pass game and the run game. And so, it's a great job by the entire offensive staff and the players.

Q. Hey, Coach. You got asked about a lot of offensive line and pass rush questions this week. I'm wondering how you thought those two phases of the game played for you today.

MARCUS FREEMAN: You know, I'm trying to look. 578 yards on offense. We ended up having, you know, 342 passing and 236 rushing. So in order to have those type of numbers, your offensive line has to play well. If they don't play well in the pass game and run game, your stats aren't going to look like that. You know, obviously, I don't love the two holding calls. We got to be better there.

I didn't get a chance to see the replay but the guys in the replay said, yeah, they're holding. We can't hurt -- given we can't hurt Notre Dame. And holding penalties hurt us. But for those to have the success as an offense, the O-line played really well.

Defensively, D-line, we were holding a lot of guys. I thought they did a good job getting some pressure on the quarterback and getting to him early. And we'll go back and see the film. That's what sticks out in my mind.

Q. And then you've learned a lot about your team in the first four games. What's still out there maybe that you haven't learned about your team?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Shoot, it's to be determined. You put a lot of work in to win these games, to give your team a chance, right? I still don't know if we've seen the full potential of this team, right? And that's my challenge. My challenge is we got to get better each week.

And the same thing as we thought next week. We'll see, man. We got a great opponent coming in here. And, you know, the challenge will be to not worry about Saturday. That's going to be the challenge. I can already tell them right now, Don't worry about Saturday. Saturday will be here.

But worrying about Saturday does not help you really prepare for Saturday. Right? Continue to win the moments. Stay in the moment. You study your opponent but you got to win these moments. That's going to help you on Saturday.

So I don't know that perp against what is there still to learn about our team? I don't know. We'll see. We're going to play a heck of an opponent next Saturday. So we'll see

how good this football team really is.

Q. Marcus, kind of going off of that. Three plays of 20 plus yards for Central Michigan. Curious how you would assess where the defense is at, especially going into a game like Ohio State, who's got all those playmakers?

MARCUS FREEMAN: I know two of the plays were missed tackles. We did not tackle well in those first couple series. And then, you know, it was a little bit -- the first series were three and out. And then the next series they scored a touchdown, we got to -- first of all, kicked the ball out of bounds, roughing the passer and just missed tackles.

And so, we can't miss tackles. The one long pass in the second half, we're blitzing six guys and we didn't get pressure, right? And so, I can't get mad at the DBs. If we're bringing six guys, man, we have to get pressure.

And so, we challenge those guys. If we're going to blitz you, let's get pressure so the DBs don't have to cover longer than the amount of time we need them to.

Q. Obviously, can't be a press conference without asking about Sam Hartman. He just continues to light it up. I mean, going into that Ohio State game, you got to think he's playing as well as he possibly can. And what does that do for a team when you've got a quarterback playing like that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, the beautiful thing about this, I don't know if Sam is coming in here, but he'll tell you he's got to be better, right? He made some mistakes today that he can improve on.

And, you know, the thing that I think about this game for Sam is that the moment won't be too big. He's played a lot of football games. I don't know how many, but he's been in a lot of football games. So I think his mind will be in a great spot. He knows he's got to go out there and execute and do his job. He won't let the things that don't matter to have success affect him.

Some young guys that haven't been in this situation, sometimes you can let that stuff that has nothing to do with winning the game, you can let it affect your execution and game out there. I don't think that will be something that Sam will let bother him.

Q. Coach, how would you describe the explosiveness by the defensive line on the first contact? And is there anything in particular you would like to watch on this film?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think they're an explosive D-line, you know? We got some really good players upfront. I think we got, really, a good, difference of talent. Right? Some guys are big bulrush guys, some guys are more athletic. The mix of talent that we have on that D-line, I think, is a really good mix. What was your second part?

Q. Just is there anything in particular you would like to watch on this week's film? Everything?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Everything and every play. There's something to fix on every single play. I can promise you that.

Q. Marcus, the moment where Sam took that shot as he was releasing the ball, he looked a little gimpy, initially. And then he got over to you. What was that conversation like on the sideline? What goes through your mind when you see that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, you protect your player and you care about the player. I said, Hey, are you okay? First, Are you okay? He said, Yeah, man, they kind of turned my knee or, you know, kind of rolled my leg. And I just kind of mentioned to the refs, Hey, protect our quarterback a little bit.

And, you know, I care about Sam. But I also want to make sure we protect him, too. And he's a trooper. I asked them over the headset, I said, How's Sam? They said, He's fine. And so, you want to protect every member of your team. And you don't want to see any member limping off the field.

Q. And then you mentioned the penalties several times. But can you call this team a disciplined team at this point if the penalties have been piling up like that?

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I think we're a disciplined team. We have to continue to get better, continue to make sure that -- you know, they're an aggressive team, right? Are they disciplined? Absolutely. But they're aggressive. And sometimes you have aggressive penalties, right?

And so, I want to look at those two roughing the passers and say, Okay. Was this an aggressive penalty or selfish penalty? Right? And I don't know until I go back and watch the film.

But what I won't do is keep them on a leash. Like, you got to let these guys be aggressive. When I tell them to come out of the locker room, it's not, Don't make a mistake, don't get a penalty. It's, You go attack. We're trying to win the interval in five seconds. And you go as hard as you can.

Do I like to see penalties? Absolutely not. But it's not a disciplined issue, it's an execution, fundamental issue that we have to continue to improve. So I look to coaching. If it's a fundamental issue, you got to coach better. Holding is coaching. We got to coach it better. So I take accountability for that, not our players.

Q. Yeah, Coach, I know we talked earlier this week about Emmanuel and his athleticism that he brings to the team, but he didn't play today. Did that change the game plan? Did you guys know about it early?

MARCUS FREEMAN: We knew about it right before the game. I talked to coach about it right before the game. And he said he was out. He didn't make the trip. I think he was ill. Did it truly change our game plan? No. But, you know, we had to go back and kind of watch a little bit of what the backup did.

And, you know, the game plan stays too late to truly change the game plan. But, you know, it -- I thought they did a good job. That -- that quarterback did a good job of staying in there and throwing the ball well. And so, you know, as I told our guys, defensively, our keys to victory in that game was attack the quarterback, no matter who's at corner.

It's not attack Emmanuel, it's attack whoever's at quarterback. Keep him contained and be really good on our presnap communication. Because we didn't have some of our seniors and our captains and our local leaders out there. And I thought they did a pretty good job for the most part.

Q. And just halftime, leading seven points: What changed into that second half? What did you guys do to change that up? I mean --

MARCUS FREEMAN: Yeah, I told them at halftime, If you need me to give you a rah-rah speech, that's not what this team needed. This team needed to settle down and really look at the mistakes that happened the first half and why was it a seven-point game. And so, our mind has to continue to execute one play, one life. Right? And what do I need to do to make sure we're executing?

I said, Go out there, don't beat Notre Dame. Don't beat Notre Dame and we're going to be just fine. And for the most part. That's what we did.