

Marcus Freeman Looking To Build On Last Year's Loss Heading Into Saturday's Matchup



Marcus Freeman's debut as the head coach at Notre Dame was about as challenging as a new coach can experience, considering his first game was a road contest at Ohio State.

All things considered, Freeman - the former All-Big Ten linebacker and graduate assistant at Ohio State - showed up ready, with the Fighting Irish leading the Buckeyes deep into the third quarter before Ohio State's talent advantage was ultimately able to win out in a 21-10 victory. But more than a year removed from that contest, Freeman said Notre Dame is in a different place than it was heading into that game.

"I think there's a lot of different factors that go into the differences, but experience," he said Monday. "You have a year under your belt. It's not the first game of the year. You've been able to develop an identity as a program with these first four games, and so it's a lot different than what it was last year, being the first game of that season for me and the first week of the year.

"I think going into last season, you had questions on really what was our identity. This was game one. What was our identity on offense? Similar to this year, game one, you don't know until you face an opponent. But we know what we can do offensively after four games. We're not going to go rapid speed now. I don't want to go up-tempo and go as fast as we can. It's complimentary football. And so, the ability for our defense, what we want to do is make sure that we limit the big plays. We want them to have to truly drive down the field and we limit those big plays."

Limiting those big plays will begin with stopping Ohio State's group of talented wide receivers. Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka got their usual due last season against Notre Dame, combining for 14 receptions, 146 yards and a touchdown, while Xavier Johnson had his coming out party as a Buckeye with two receptions for 34 yards and a score.

With most of Notre Dame's starting secondary from last season returning it's an important matchup for Freeman - who said Ryan Day has done an "unbelievable job" of leading Ohio State - heading into Saturday's primetime matchup.

"You look back to that game and the playmakers Ohio State has at wideout, a lot of them are back," he said. "And so that was a way for our guys in the first game of the year to measure themselves versus

some of the best in the country. And so to where they are now, they've continued to grow and get better and better because of experience, because of the opportunity to continue to practice, to continue to build skill. And that's something that we have to continue to do and it will never stop."

Another area Notre Dame is hoping to see improvement from last season is at quarterback, where the Fighting Irish made a significant addition in former Wake Forest quarterback Sam Hartman. He's the ACC's all-time touchdown leader and has already thrown for over 1,000 yards this season with 13 touchdowns to no interceptions. And Hartman - who has played in bowl games and conference championship games - is no stranger to big-game experience.

"It's a huge opportunity for us as a program and as a team to go out there and show what we've got," he said. "Obviously a very challenging opponent, historically. Great opponent, great football program, and like ourselves, it's a great football university, so I think it's a clash of two football greats."