

Ohio State Prepared For Slugfest With Notre Dame



Although Texas and Ohio State possessed two of the better offenses in the country heading into the Semifinals of the College Football Playoff at the Cotton Bowl, the score to start the fourth quarter of Ohio State's 28-14 win on Jan. 10 was only 14-14. The hard-nosed, low-scoring nature of the game may have come as a surprise to fans outside of the program, but it wasn't to defensive coordinator Jim Knowles.

"We knew (the Texas game) was going to be a slugfest, and that's what we expect this week," Knowles said in a press conference on Tuesday ahead of Ohio State's national championship matchup with Notre Dame on Jan. 20.

Ohio State got out to huge leads immediately in its first two playoff games over Tennessee and Oregon but loaded with arguably the best defensive back in the country in Jahdae Barron and an elite defensive line, the Texas defense was a step up in class. Notre Dame's defense will likely be no different.

"That's the one thing in our week of preparation and going into it is just how much respect we have for Notre Dame's defense and what they can do, and what they've done against everyone they've played," offensive coordinator Chip Kelly said.

The Fighting Irish defense has already fueled playoff wins over talented foes like Penn State and Georgia, and for the season as a whole ranks second only to the Buckeyes nationally in scoring defense, and ninth in the country in total defense. The unit's success of course has to do with the talent driven into the program by head coach and former Ohio State linebacker Marcus Freeman, but also the togetherness they play with on the field.

"You watch those guys play, as a fan of football you just kind of admire how cohesive that entire group is and how hard that group plays, so credit to Marcus and (Notre Dame defensive coordinator Al Golden) for how those guys have those guys playing right now," Kelly said.

Outside of an exception or two, Notre Dame has been pretty reliable all year stopping the run, but what separates their defense from some of the other great units in the country is its pass defense. Despite playing with the lead for much of their three games, the Fighting Irish have only allowed 194.7 passing yards per game in the playoffs. The Fighting Irish defense is marked by a high usage of man coverage, which according to Kelly is used by Golden because his secondary is so good at it.

"You look at how much man (coverage) they play, the reason they do it is because they can," Kelly said. "No one has really exploited that with them, so I think they all can cover. It's not just stay away from him and throw against this guy, I think all of them are really, really skilled."

The good news for Ohio State's offense is that Jeremiah Smith, who was held to just one catch for three yards in the Cotton Bowl after the Longhorns used bracket coverages against him according to Kelly, could have a bigger impact against the man-to-man approach. Still, Kelly isn't counting his chickens.

"I don't think there's any coach six days before the national championship that thinks I got this," Kelly said. "We're really happy that we have (receivers Emeka Ebufa, Smith and Carnell Tate), but we also have great respect for who we're going against and it's going to be a battle. I think that's the great part of it, you have the two best teams in football playing against each other and it wasn't voted on, it was earned by both teams."