



NOTRE DAME, Ind. – The degree of difficulty is considerably higher than any other game this season for Notre Dame when the Fighting Irish face Alabama in the BCS Championship Game. Brian Kelly joked on Saturday that he thought the title game should be played in South Bend, where the snow continues to fall, rather than in the warm South Florida climate.

What he did not joke about is Alabama's stature, especially on defense. It is a defense that has been as statistically as impressive as Notre Dame's this season, and it is imposing physically as well.

"Up front they're athletic at 290 pounds," Kelly said of the Crimson Tide defense. "Their athleticism plus their size, the combination of both up front, make them very difficult to go against. And they're well coached, so (they are) a very disciplined group and they're athletic in the back end of the defense."

That size and athleticism up front propelled Alabama to the top spot in the nation against the run, allowing not quite 80 yards a game. The next best run defense Notre Dame faced during the season was Stanford, which has allowed about 92 yards a game on the ground in 2012.

Notre Dame is tested against good run defenses though. Michigan State (9<sup>th</sup>) and Pittsburgh (25<sup>th</sup>) give the Irish three opponents that rank in the top 25 nationally in rush defense this season. Alabama brings a

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dimension those three teams lack though.

“They’re all impact players,” right tackle Christian Lombard said of Alabama’s defensive line. “Usually every game in the regular season there’s a guy that you can key on and say we’re going to attack this guy (but) there’s no one like that on this defense. They’re all solid guys that are probably going to be able to play in the league next year. It’s gonna be a tough match-up, but we’re ready for it.”

Alabama’s main defensive line unit consists of 320 pound nose guard Jesse Williams and defensive ends Ed Stinson (282 pounds) and Damion Square (286 pounds). It is a unit that has the Irish offensive line’s attention.

“Just how physical they are as a team,” left guard Chris Watt said after Saturday’s practice of what has caught his eye. “Some of their players, specifically number 92, Damien Square, he’s really good at getting his hands inside of yours and getting off blocks pretty quickly.”

Square has 33 tackles this season, including 4.0 tackles for loss to go along with 3.5 sacks. Stinson has 29 tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss and 3.0 sacks. The numbers are not eye-popping – just solid.

“It’s just a really good football team,” Kelly reiterated of Alabama’s defense. “I think there are some other teams across the country that you could take one player and go ‘wow that’s a premier player’. There’s not one of the 11 guys that you can go ‘let’s go attack him’, where other weeks during the year we go ‘alright let’s get number four’.”

“They’re just a good football team from one through eleven on the offensive and defensive side of the ball.”

That goes for the offensive side of the ball as well, where the most decorated players the Tide has are on the line. Center Barrett Jones (314 pounds) and left guard Chance Warmack (320 pounds) are both All-Americans who have helped bulldoze the way for a pair of 1,000 yard rushers this season.

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“Whenever I look at them on film I just see how big they are and how fast they are,” Irish linebacker Dan Fox said on Saturday of the Alabama offensive line. “It’s something that I was noticing on film as far as their tackles are - how fast they set and everything. They look really good.”

The tackles are D.J. Fluker (335 pounds) and Cyrus Kouandijo (311 pounds). The latter is the pup of the Crimson Tide line, with just 13 career starts (all this season) to his credit. The other four starters average nearly 35 career starts going into the Jan. 7 game. Whether or not Jones plays next week could be a huge factor in the game. He injured his foot (think Braxton Cave last year) in the SEC Title Game and has not participated in contact drills for nearly a month.

Alabama’s strong running game has helped the line keep quarterback A.J. McCarron on his feet this season as well. They have allowed a total of 23 sacks – or just 1.7 per game.

“They’re an awesome offense,” Danny Spond said of Alabama. “Obviously they’re in the national championship game almost every year for a reason. Coach (Nick) Saban really gets them going and doing the things that they need to be in this game.”

“They’re very big, very fast and the best offensive line we’ll have faced all year,” Spond continued. “We’ll have to execute every play and have to be perfect and have to be right on our assignments. Hopefully that will take care of things.”

What caught everyone’s attention in the SEC Championship Game was the running tandem of Eddie Lacy and T.J. Yeldon. The duo combined to help the Tide rush for 350 yards against Georgia in that Dec. 1 game.

“They’re both really good,” Fox said of the Alabama running backs. “From what I’ve seen they’re hard to bring down. They’re really physical and have great leg drive, so that’s something we’ve gotta be ready for. They’re definitely in the top five I would say with running backs for me. Just from what I’ve seen on film I’m impressed.”

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Lacy, the bigger back at 6-feet and 220 pounds, leads his team with 1,182 net yards and 16 rushing touchdowns this season. Yeldon, the quicker of the two, has exactly 1,000 rushing yards and 11 TDs heading into the title game. They average 6.4 and 6.5 yards per rush, respectively.

“They always have good running backs,” Irish linebacker Prince Shembo said respectfully of Alabama. “Especially from last year it’s just another breed of (current Cleveland Brown and last year’s No. 3 overall NFL Draft pick) Trent Richardson. They’re just big, physical guys that try to push everyone around and we’re not gonna let that happen.”