



FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. – The first round of press conferences are in the books in the build-up to Monday's BCS Championship Game. Fighting Irish Defensive Coordinator Bob Diaco and All-American linebacker Manti Te'o took their turns in front of the microphones on Thursday morning in South Florida.

Notre Dame has obviously come a long way in a short period of time. The Fighting Irish were unranked heading into the season, but the find themselves ranked No. 1 in the nation heading into their title game with defending champion Alabama. Diaco, who may be the epitome of Notre Dame's narrow daily focus, said during his 45 minute turn at the microphone that there were no light bulb moments of impending success along the way.

"We set up the business of the day every day so we don't even have time to look at and think about those particular things," Diaco said. "We're just interested in having the very best defense we can possibly have that particular day and when you focus that kind of energy and that kind of intense drilled-down focus on a job – we really don't spend a lot of time thinking about things like that."

Te'o, who sat beside Diaco taking questions during the press conference, had a different take on when he thinks things really started to turn for him and his team. Te'o's own sign showed itself last June when players were on their own to do their summer weight lifting and conditioning.

“Every single one of our players slowly worked their way into the weight room and did their lift,” Te'o said of the dedication the Irish showed in the months before the start of the season. “Nobody asked anybody, nobody forced anyone, but the leaders went and the rest followed.”

“It wasn't a moment where we were like, man we're going to make it to the national championship,” Te'o continued. “It was just one of those moments where we said, okay, we have a chance here.”

Manti The Salesman

Te'o has turned out to be the best recruiting tool any school could possibly hope for. He turned down the chance to head to the NFL last spring, but opted instead to return for his senior season. Te'o parlayed that into leading his team to a 12-0 record and a spot in the title game as well as becoming the Heisman runner-up and the most decorated defensive player in college football history.

With all the accolades in mind, Te'o was asked about his personal sales pitch to potential Irish recruits.

“I think our sales pitch is done on the field and I think when you get to Notre Dame, for those who have been to Notre Dame, it speaks for itself,” he replied. “Two things happen when you go to Notre Dame: Either you fall in love with it or you don't. There's no in between.”

Te'o knows that Notre Dame is much bigger than anything he can say to recruits or even do on the field. “Movies are made about that locker room,” he said. “For me to run out that tunnel for the first time and for me to run out of it for the last time and to be in a brighter spot than I was when I ran out of it the first time was definitely a big accomplishment not only for myself, but for the rest of the seniors and for our team.”

Hard Work

After a record awards haul last month it would have been easy for Te'o to rest on his laurels. That is not his style though Te'o made sure he was able to work out in hotels as he and Brian Kelly crisscrossed the nation as he received award after award. He missed his team's awards banquet and the first few bowl practices while he was in New York and California at the end of his journey, but it did not take him long to put his nose to the grindstone.

"Manti has actually practiced harder the last week since the award circuit, practiced harder than he has all year long," Diacio said of the defensive captain. "He himself has raised his game even just as early as last week and leading up to the travel here to South Florida."

While Diacio was effuse in his praise of Te'o's hard work, Te'o had high praise for his teammates – specifically when asked about safety Zeke Motta.

"I have guys around me that are that example for me, even for myself, that I can always give more," Te'o began. "Zeke Motta is someone who always gives me, not only for himself but because that's how much he cares about this team and that's how important this game is to him."

"He's just that guy out there who's working hard, but also he's helping to just b that kind of traffic control guy out there for the young guys, because I think the youngest group we have out there is our secondary. By the way they play you wouldn't tell, because of No. 17 (Motta) and his maturity and how he just facilitates everything back there."

Motta's 61 tackles this season are second only to Te'o's 103. He has also helped converted offensive players Matthias Farley and KeiVarae Russell learn on the job throughout the season.

"Not one time has he ever complained." Diacio began on Motta. "Not one time has he ever not tried to do what you're asking him to do. He takes his job and work very, very seriously and (has) just sheer toughness."

"This is a tough, tough individual," Diacio continued. "Not only contact tough, (but also) mentally tough. If you were going to any kind of battle to do any kind of competitive anything you'd want

to take Zeke Motta with you.”

Taking a Stand

Notre Dame's defense has been dominant in the red zone this season. The Irish have allowed opponents to score just two rushing touchdowns, while allowing just eight touchdowns in 33 red zone opportunities (24%) in 2012.

A pair of high profile goal line stands is included in that success. The first is the infamous overtime stand against Stanford and the other came at the end of the regular season ending victory over USC. Diacio says there is no specific “art” to making a goal line stand.

“Our unit fundamentally will continue to improve if we make sure that's the identity of the day,” he began. “The goal line stands are a function of players knowing clearly exactly what to do. (By) playing with whole heart, whole body (and) whole mind (and) being physically talented enough to get their job done and win their individual mach-up at that particular moment.”

In Diacio's estimation the goal line stand is less about Xs and Os and more about the “next man in” mentality Brian Kelly has preached since his arrival three years ago. That mentality has “permeated through the defense”.

“We continue that same identity on the defense in that no situation will be too much for us to take on and not place on the field will we get discouraged,” Diacio said of ND's philosophy. “No matter how many times, no matter how many turnovers, no matter how many opportunities, no matter where the ball is placed. That kind of energy and then you create that next level of energy as, hey, what a great challenge. This isn't a negative, this is a great challenge. You have an opportunity to do something really special here and your game rises.”

Or as Louis Nix would say “You've gotta want the water.”

The Broyles Award

Diaco received the 2012 Broyles Award as the nation's top assistant coach for his work with the Fighting Irish defense this season.

"It's a great honor," Diaco said of the award. "Representing coaches all across the country, I speak probably for most when I say that's an award that we really point to to identify a job well done of service."

"I see it as a staff award – an assistant coaches' staff award," he continued. "An assistant coaches' staff award that was created and had an opportunity not only by the defensive coaches that I work with specifically, but the offensive coaches and the work that they've done in the transition from 2011 to 2012."

Diaco said receiving the award is even more validating, because the voting committee is comprised solely of Hall of Fame caliber coaches. He is the first Notre Dame assistant to ever receive the award.

A.J. McCarron

With a rushing offense that averages 224 yards a game, Alabama quarterback A.J. McCarron is viewed by most to be a "game manager". That is how most Crimson Tide QBs have been regarded in Head Coach Nick Saban's system. Diaco has a little bit different terminology though.

"He's the driver," Diaco said of McCarron. "He's the coach on the field. You can see he puts them in the right spots."

Diaco went on to say that McCarron is an extension of Saban when he is on the field with the Crimson Tide offense.

"The quarterback conducts the game just like if Nick Saban was taking the snap himself," Diaco explained. "He doesn't put the team in bad spots. He doesn't make poor decisions with the ball. He's working the game and managing the game and putting the offense in the appropriate plays, just like you'd think the inside linebacker or the safety would do for their defense. It's an incredible organization to watch offensively led by the quarterback."

McCarron has completed 66.8 percent of his passes in his 26 starts over the last two seasons. He has 26 touchdown passes and just three interceptions this season.

"Watching A.J. and watching film and watching how he conducts his offense and just the confidence he has back there," Te'o began on McCarron. "to first know what play to run, to make the checks for that play and having confidence in his arm – he's very accurate. ..like Coach (Diaco) said, he's Coach Saban out there. He doesn't make silly mistakes. He's their general on offense and he does a really good job at it."

McCarron's 26 touchdown passes this season are a school record. A pretty good distinction for a school that sent the likes of Kenny Stabler and Joe Namath to the NFL.

Bring It On

It's no shock that Te'o and Diaco both sung McCarron's praises, but at the end of the day beating Alabama is still about playing the brand of physical football the Irish defense became accustomed to playing this season. Alabama is going to line-up and try to run at Notre Dame and the Irish are going to line-up and hit right back.

"That's football at its finest," Te'o said of the physical battle that awaits next Monday night. "This is going to be an opportunity that we've been waiting for a long time. As a linebacker, to know that you're going to be run at."

Big back Eddie Lacy leads Alabama with 1,182 rushing yards, while quicker back T.J. Yeldon

has exactly 1,000 yards. They have combined to run for 27 touchdowns.

“We understand obviously what Alabama can do,” Te’o continued. We’ve seen it. Everybody has seen it and it starts with their O-line. We’ve talked about the best collective group of linemen and it’s going to be a great challenge and a challenge that we look forward to. You combine that with their running backs, yeah, we’ve seen what they can do and everybody has seen what they can do and we’re just real excited to get out there and play.”

Alabama’s offensive line, led by All-American center Barrett Jones, is the key to the entire operation. Jones was injured in the SEC Championship Game, but said on Thursday that he will be at full strength when Monday’s game rolls around. He is joined by fellow All-American Chance Warmack at left guard. It is a line that is not about stars though, as Diaco points out.

“Tackle to tackle it’s the best group/collection of offensive linemen we’ve played against,” Diaco praised of Alabama’s offensive big men. “They’re uniquely big and fast. They have quick twitch. They’re not on the ground. They have excellent contact balance and ballast.”

“They play very hard; that’s another unique trait,” Diaco continued. It’s not another happy go lucky group of offensive linemen. This is an angry, aggressive, intense group of players that play hard and finish blocks.”

The Experience Factor

It has been nearly a quarter century since Notre Dame last played for a national championship, while Alabama is playing in its third BCS Title Game in the last four years. Diaco thinks that big game factor could be an initial advantage, but expects things to even out after the initial shock and awe after kickoff.

“Both teams are about the same for the first few minutes of the game and then the game kind of settles into itself,” Diaco explained. “We continue to ring that home with the players. We point towards contests and battles that we’ve had this year, not only individual match-up contests and battles, but (also) overall game moments that were as big as big can be.”

“The fact of the matter is there’s going to be a play and you’re going to stand there and I’m going to be across from you,” Diaco continued. “You’re going to try to block me and I’m going to try to whip you. I’m not thinking about media, press, the sign, who’s there, who’s not. It’s just me and you and that’s it.”

No shock, Te'o is in step with his defensive coach's line of thinking.

“I’ve always been a believer that regardless of the situation the field is still 120 yards long,” Te'o said of any potential title game awe. “The football is still the same shape and everybody straps on their chinstraps the same way. We understand this is a big game, but at the end of the day it’s still football. I think when we start to do things differently than we’ve done all season that’s when we’re going to start getting into trouble.”