

Tide Talks Irish

Written by Sean Stires

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FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. – Alabama has faced some good defenses in 2012, but statistically none are better than the one the Crimson Tide will play in four days. Notre Dame sports the No. 1 scoring defense in the nation.

“To me the biggest thing is they lead the nation in scoring defense,” Alabama Offensive Coordinator Doug Nussmeier said on Thursday when asked what stands out to him about the Irish defense he will face in Monday’s BCS Championship Game. “They’ve given up 10.3 points a game. They do a great job of keeping you out of the red zone. The goal of the game is to score points. I think that right there. Their red area defense is really, really good.”

What has helped the Fighting Irish hold points down this season has been their proverbial “bend but don’t break” philosophy. Notre Dame opponents reached the red zone 33 times this season, but only walked away with touchdowns eight times. That equals a 76% success rate.

“They’ve created a lot of lost yardage plays in the red zone and when you get behind the sticks and you get out of rhythm down there it’s very difficult, because obviously the field shrinks,” Nussmeier continued. “They’ve done a tremendous job of creating their lost yardage plays for their opponents.”

Alabama quarterback A.J. McCarron has had a lot of success of his own in the red zone this season. He has had the Crimson Tide score touchdowns on 41 of 57 (89%) trips into the red zone this season and he knows he will face a stiff challenge when he sees the Irish defense next Monday night in Miami.

“They do a really good job in the red area,” McCarron said of the Irish defense. “I mean, they’re first in the nation in almost every category on defense, so they’re really good. We’re just going to have to bring our A-game.”

Bob Diaco’s 2012 defense has drawn comparisons to SEC defenses this season, but that is a bit of a misnomer considering the Irish have been better than pretty much every SEC defense than Alabama.

“I think it’s very, very comparable,” Nussmeier said of the ND-SEC comparisons. “This is as good a front seven as we’ve seen. They do a good job jumping in and out of their odd defense and going from an odd (three-man) to a four-down front and they’ve got big, physical, fast players.”

The player that McCarron and Alabama will have on their mind as they prepare to face the Irish is Manti Te’o. The Heisman Trophy runner-up leads the Irish with 103 tackles and will be playing in his final collegiate game next week.

“He’s always around the ball,” McCarron said of Te’o. “He’s a great payer (who) makes a lot of plays for his defense and is the heart and soul for them. He’s going to be a big key to the game, like always.”

“The thing that stands out to me about Manti is he always seems to find the ball as do all great players on defense,” Nussmeier complimented. “You look at the interceptions (7), the tackles – he always seems to be around the ball. He has great natural instincts. Obviously he’s a phenomenal athlete. It’s going to be very important that we know where he is at all times.”

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The other player that gets high praise for his work is Louis Nix. The nose guard has 45 tackles this season – the most for an Irish lineman. His work has allowed Te'o to run free and do his thing though and he has Alabama's attention.

"He's a big, physical player (who is) very athletic," Nussmeier said of Nix. "One of the things you can say about their defensive unit as a whole is they do an excellent job of getting off blocks. They set blocks and get to the football. There's a lot of key match-ups in this game and obviously he's a very, very good player."

The front seven gets the bulk of the credit for Notre Dame's success this season and for good reason. The Irish rank 4th nationally (92.4 yds/game) against the run, 2nd in red zone defense, and 6th in total defense. Meanwhile, the Irish secondary plays second fiddle to the guys up front despite a passing defense that ranks 21st at 194 yards a game.

"I think they do a really good job of disguising certain coverages and try to confuse you in the later part of the play before the snap," McCarron said of the back end of the Irish defense. "They deserve a lot of credit too. I know their guys up front get talked about a lot, but trust me, they make plays back there. It's not just the guys up front that have them labeled as the number one defense in the nation."

"They run very well at the corner position and they tackle very well at the safety position," Nussmeier added. "(Zeke) Motta does a great job (and) it shows in the statistics that he gets to the football and makes plays. The focus, like AJ said, has been up front, but that's a very, very good defensive unit top to bottom. "