

## Monday's Hidden Matchup

Written by Sean Stires

Saturday, 05 January 2013 17:04

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MIAMI, Fla. – When the conversation begins about Monday's Notre Dame – Alabama matchup in the BCS Championship Game talk quickly, if not immediately, centers on the battle that will take place in the trenches. How will Notre Dame's front seven contend with the Alabama offensive line and a pair of backs that each ran for at least 1,000 yards?

The matchup that gets next to no attention, but will likely prove to be every bit as important is the one that will be waged between the Fighting Irish secondary and Alabama's receivers.

"They're a team that wants to establish the run," Cooks said of Alabama's defense. "But if you study tape and you see what they've done over the course of the season and how they've produced their points it's through the passing game. They get those DBs eyes in the backfield and get them sucked-up and throw a play-action pass over your head. "

Alabama's rushing attack has averaged 224 yards a game, and the majority of it has come from Eddie Lacy and T.J. Yeldon. They average 90.9 and 76.9 yards a week, respectively. They have allowed Tide quarterback A.J. McCarron a safety net that has turned into a 66.8 completion percentage. The run-heavy attack makes it easy for cornerbacks Bennett Jackson and KeiVarae Russell to have their eyes in the Tide backfield if they are not careful.

"Just trying my best not to get lulled to sleep," Russell said of his biggest concern when facing Alabama on Monday. "You've gotta stay disciplined and focused on your receiver. My job is to

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stop the receiver from catching the ball. That's my job. I'll get in the run game when it's needed, but I've just gotta make sure I stay under the cut and make sure no deep balls get over my head."

The main receivers in question are freshman Amari Cooper and junior Kevin Norwood. Neither has eye-popping numbers, but both have shown they can make big plays when opposing DBs have fallen asleep at the play-action wheel. A pair of Notre Dame scout team players wore the receivers' jerseys, No. 9 and No. 83, respectively, along with red skull caps during practice this week.

"Cooper for a freshman – he doesn't play like a freshman," Cooks said of the young receiver. "He plays with a lot of confidence. He played against veteran defensive backs in the SEC Championship game. He's very competitive. He goes up and attacks the football, which is always a challenge for a defensive back."

Cooper's most famous play of the season came late in the SEC Championship game against Georgia. The speedster hauled-in a 45-yard touchdown strike from McCarron to seal the Tide's 32-28 win with 3:15 to play.

"That cornerback just didn't stick to his fundamentals," Jackson said of the big play against Georgia. "He fell asleep a little bit and he probably didn't expect the ball to be coming his way, because it hadn't that much the whole game. You've just gotta keep the guy in front of you. If you keep the guy in front of you and if you keep the ball in front of you, you limit those plays."

That SEC Championship Game was not the only time Alabama has taken such shots down the field though.

"You see it almost every game," Cooks said of plays similar to the one Cooper broke against the Bulldogs. "Somewhere throughout the course of the game Cooper or one of the other wide outs is going to make a game-changing play."

Alabama's longest offensive play of the season was an 85-yard connection between McCarron

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and receiver Kenny Bell. Cooper, Norwood and White have respective long plays this season of 54, 47 and 51 yards.

Limiting big plays is what Jackson, who calls his unit the "air traffic control" of the defense, and the back end of the Irish defense has done well all season. Cooper said on Saturday in Miami that Notre Dame's penchant for playing in zone coverage allows them to keep those big plays to a minimum.

"Most catches are underneath," Cooper began. "They don't allow big plays as a defense or as a secondary. Those guys are good, they're quick and solid DBs and they break on the ball."

While the Irish obviously need to limit Alabama's "big chunk plays" as Brian Kelly would call them, Cooper knows his team needs to make them Monday night, especially since the Irish do not give-up many big plays in 2012. The average yards per reception for opponents this season is a meager 9.7.

"They do a good job of jamming off the line and stuff like that," Norwood said of how Russell and Jackson play. "When the ball's in the air they do a good job of attacking the ball and going up to get it and making sure the receiver doesn't come down with it."

Norwood, who is Alabama's second-leading receiver this season with 395 yards and four touchdowns, has a slightly different view of how Jackson and Russell play than Cooper, who leads Alabama with 53 receptions for 895 yards and nine touchdowns.

"They don't jam a lot," Cooper said when asked about the ND cornerbacks' physicality. "They play a lot of zone. They just try to make people catch it underneath and make it a long drive (to the end zone)."

"They're two solid cornerbacks," Cooper continued. "They're both quick and they both like to break on the ball. They don't give up a lot of big plays. They get a lot of help from their D-line and their safeties."

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Cooks says his cornerbacks' eye progression, foot work, mind, and mentality have been the things he has hammered home in preparing his corners for their tasks on Monday night. Cooks mentioned USC's receivers as the best the Irish have seen so far this season, but says Alabama's wide outs are right up there with them in athleticism and ability.

"They're not as flashy," Cooks explained as part of the reason why the Tide receivers don't get the same acclaim. "Because Alabama's not a flashy team. They're going to run, smash you in the mouth, smash you in the mouth, go play-action pass and go over the top. I don't think they get the recognition that they deserve, but I think they're as good as the USCs and Miamis we faced."

While the longest pass play the Irish defense allowed this season was 53 yards, they nearly gave-up two bombs on the opening possession of their eventual 41-3 win over Miami. Maybe Norwood had those in mind when discussing what he has seen on tape from the Irish secondary.

"They have let some passes go in the past," Norwood commented. "But with this game, the last game of the season and the most important game of the season they're gonna have their mind right."

The early drop by Hurricane wide out Phillip Dorsett, a sophomore from Ft. Lauderdale, was the closest thing Miami came to scoring a touchdown against the Irish. They momentarily stopped the hearts of the Irish and their fans, but they also proved to be an invaluable learning tool in what turned out to be a 12-0 regular season.

"It was the best thing that could have happened for our secondary," Cooks said of those near misses in the opening minutes of the game in Chicago that changed the entire complexion of the night. "We hadn't seen speed like that prior to Miami, but it also taught those guys that we made the adjustments throughout the course of that game."

"I think it built some confidence in those guys," Cooks continued. "Moving forward, we were able to emphasize what could potentially happen and why it's important to pay attention and do your

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job and never assume. It was good to teach off of a win.”

One more win for the Irish this season is dependent on not only a great effort by the Notre Dame front seven, but also the less heralded back end that has had their backs all season.