



FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. – Brian Kelly’s last pre-game media gathering of the season is in the books. Kelly met with his largest media contingency, some 200 strong, on Sunday morning in preparation for Monday night’s BCS Championship Game against Alabama.

Kelly has coached in college football championship games before, but it goes without saying that the game he will coach on Monday will be the biggest of his career. A decade has passed since Kelly won his first Division II national championship at Grand Valley State, and the Irish head coach says the anticipation for this game is just a little different.

“We were staying at the Best Western,” Kelly said of his team’s resting place on the eve of his first championship game. “I don’t know that anybody knew where we were. It was just another game. It was the championship game, but it certainly doesn’t have the same kind of feel.”

The biggest difference in the buildup to that 2002 season’s championship at GVSU and this one is the structure of the system. Kelly’s Grand Valley team was just playing its “next game”, because they had advanced through a playoff structure, while this team has gone a month and a half since its last game on Thanksgiving weekend at Southern Cal.

“This one you’re a little bit more anxious because you want to see your team play again,” Kelly explained. “It’s been such a long time. Whereas when you’re in a playoff structure you know what you’re going to get from your team, because you’ve been playing week after week.”

The Irish completed their last official pregame practice on Saturday at Nova Southeastern University. Kelly now has one last pregame speech to give his 12-0 team before they face the defending national champions at Sun Life Stadium. Kelly says about 80 percent of his message to his team will come from his feelings at that moment.

“But I always have something that’s going to be applicable to that week,” Kelly said of his pregame theme. “Certainly there will be a little bit of a decision that’s already been made as to what theme I want to get out there, but a lot of it has always been about the moment and getting to look at them and getting a sense and feel for where they are at that moment.”

Regardless of what the message is, Kelly believes the key to the game is simple – win the battle in the trenches.

“I really think it’s about who controls the line of scrimmage again,” Kelly said. “People were talking about how do you bring down (running back Eddie) Lacy. How do you bring down those backs? You don’t. If there (are) big holes we ain’t tackling them. We’re not going to get them on the ground. We’ve got to make sure that we don’t have big creases so we can get them moving east and west and get them on the ground.”

Controlling the line of scrimmage is what the Irish have done all year long. They have been able to do it on both sides of the ball, but Alabama’s lines are the best Notre Dame has faced this season. Regardless, Kelly hopes to ride his recipe for success that he has used throughout this magical season.

“I think going into the game people can surmise the way this thing is going to play out,” he commented. “We want to make sure that we get this thing in the fourth quarter and find a way to win the game. That’s how the game will be managed, just like the other 12 games that we played.”

What the Irish cannot do is play on their heels hoping something happens. Nerves could affect his team in a setting in which none of his players are accustomed to, but Kelly says his team cannot be afraid to make mistakes.

“This is one of those games where you have to be aggressive and you’re going to make a mistake,” he explained. “I’m not talking about catastrophic mistakes (such as) throwing picks for touchdowns, but you may make a mistake here. As long as you know that you’re playing hard and aggressive.”

Good For Golson

Just how much Notre Dame’s long layoff will affect the team when it lines-up on Monday night is yet to be determined. The layoff has been one of the hotter subjects for its potential negative impact on the Fighting Irish. However, Kelly says it was great for his most high-profile young player.

“This long layoff is talked about relative to the process for your football team and preparing them,” Kelly began. “But I will tell you there probably is only one player that has benefitted as much with this time off and that’s Everett Golson. He’s gotten an opportunity for three and a half weeks to continue to grow.”

Building A Dynasty

Notre Dame is finally back in the place where its fans and alumni have always thought it should be in the college football strata. After ruling the college football world with 11 national championships in the 20th century nearly 25 years have passed since the Fighting Irish claimed their last national championship. Kelly says a “clear goal” had to be set for the program before it could get to where it is now.

“It’s morale, it’s the right people,” Kelly began of where his process began when he arrived at Notre Dame three short years ago. “It’s creating an atmosphere where when your players come to the football building they enjoy being there. I think if I would probably say one thing, it’s about setting the bar and what that expectation is – win a national championship – and then create a winning atmosphere on a day-to-day basis.”

Alabama is shooting to become the first repeat BCS Champion and is also looking for its third title in the last four years. Without even having played in Monday's game, let alone win it, Kelly was asked on Sunday what it will take for Notre Dame to be in a similar situation next year and beyond.

"Playing in this game is an incredible springboard into the next season," Kelly answered. "As I just mentioned, you set a goal; you set a bar. They've already been here. You come back next year (and) it's unacceptable for a standard to be any less than being back here again."

Alabama's Blueprint

Alabama was nowhere near where the program currently stands before Nick Saban arrived after a stint in the NFL with the Miami Dolphins. The Crimson Tide averaged a little better than six wins a season (not including wins later vacated by an NCAA ruling) under Mike Shula in the four years prior to Saban's arrival, but they have averaged double digit wins since Saban took over in 2007.

Kelly has talked all season about "the process" that he has made his focus at Notre Dame and there is a parallel to the consistency he sees in Saban's tenure in Tuscaloosa.

"You know what you're going to get from him every single day," Kelly said of his Alabama counterpart. "You're going to get a disciplined program both on and off the field. You're going to get great coaching; great teaching and you're going to get a football team that knows how to play the game. It starts with coach Saban and his consistency of approach and the way he goes about doing his job on a day-to-day basis."