News



Notre Dame Fighting Irish quarterback Riley Leonard (13) reacts after losing the CFP National Championship college football game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta Jan. 20, 2025. Ohio State defeated seventh-seeded Notre Dame 34-23. (OSV News/Mark J. Rebilas-Imagn, Images via Reuters)

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The somber mood spoke volumes.

Displaying a despondent countenance before a throng of national media, University of Notre Dame football coach Marcus Freeman and two of his stalwart seniors — quarterback Riley Leonard and linebacker Jack Kiser — fielded numerous questions following a 34-23 loss to Ohio State University in the College Football Playoff national championship Jan. 20 at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

"Obviously tough moment, tough outcome," said Freeman. "There's reasons why we didn't get the outcome we wanted. Credit to Ohio State and their ability to execute on both sides of the ball. … We obviously didn't play the way we needed to get the outcome we wanted, but as I said to the guys in the locker room, there's not many words to say when everybody is hurting."

Aiming for its 12th national title and first since 1988, Notre Dame started strong. Culminating a momentous 18-play, 75-yard drive that ate an unfathomable 9 minutes, 45 seconds off the clock, Leonard powered home from the one-yard line to give the Fighting Irish a 7-0 lead.

As soon as he reached the end zone and noticed a camera directly in front of him, Leonard pointed to his wristband to share his favorite Scripture passage, Matthew 23:12: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

At his first opportunity to speak at the post-game press conference, Leonard said, "Before I answer your question, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for giving me the opportunity to play in this game."

In addition to his wristband, he wrote on his hand Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so should one man sharpen another."

"Us and Ohio State are the two teams that praise Jesus Christ the most, and I think that we strengthen each other in our faith through coming to this game and competing against each other," he said. "I'm happy to see godly men come out on top no matter what the circumstances. I'm happy to praise Jesus in the lowest of the lows, as well."

After the win, several Ohio State Buckeyes publicly praised God, including quarterback Will Howard. "First and foremost, I've got to give the glory and praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I wouldn't be here without him," he said in an on-field interview. Howard has celebrated his team's postseason wins on social media with Bible verses.

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Despite later throwing a pair of touchdown passes and being directly involved in a whopping 49 of Notre Dame's 58 offensive plays, Leonard said he felt he had let his teammates down in the championship game, this despite helping the Fighting Irish climb to within 31-23 with four minutes remaining in regulation, thanks mostly to his heroics.

Reflecting on his decision to transfer from Duke University for his senior season, Leonard credited his coaches and teammates for his brief, but incredibly successful, Notre Dame career.

"It's very easy to be a successful quarterback when, first and foremost, your coaches are setting you up for success," Leonard said. "I've never been so prepared in my life. I've just learned so much within this past year. … The character of this place is kind of hard to describe, and I think I've grown so much because of the people around me."

Kiser, a six-year player who set a record for most games played in Irish navy blue and gold, echoed his fellow team captain.

"When you look at the six years I've been here, what I remember is the people," Kiser said. "Getting to meet amazing guys … and to go on the journey that we went on. To have Coach Freeman — yeah. It's about the people. It's the people that have made this place different. It just shows where this program is heading. The people in this building are the best, absolute best."

Like a father figure making sure his flock understood his gratification for a job well done, Freeman lauded the entire Notre Dame roster. He described a team that "chose to work, we all chose to trust each other, chose to love each other, to be selfless and put the team in front of ourselves."

"I'm just proud of them and proud of what they've done," Freeman said. "I'm proud of who they are, the way they represent themselves, and it's just an honor to be on this journey with them."