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NOTRE DAME

Defensive Coordinator Bob Diaco & LB Manti Te'o

JOHN HUMENIK: We're joined today by Notre Dame defensive coordinator Bob Diaco and CoSIDA Academic All-American and National Football Foundation Scholar Athlete linebacker Manti Te'o. Questions, please.

Q. You represent a lot of different constituencies, defensive players, the resurgence of Notre Dame, the underdog in general because of you guys being an underdog for this game, but can you speak a little bit about representing the people of Polynesia and the state of Hawai'i.

MANTI TE'O: I think for me that's one of the biggest pleasures and honors that I get, to not only represent my wonderful school and my teammates and this man beside me, but to represent my people back home, the state of Hawai'i, and to just be an example to them of somebody who made that leap of faith to leave the rock just for a few years and to find comfort in knowing that Hawai'i will always be there, and that you can do a good amount of service to the State by sacrificing a few years away from home to help live your dream, and by you helping to live your dream, you help other people's dreams seem that much more real.

Q. I was just curious, when you came to Notre Dame you chose the No. 5. Was there a reason behind it or a story behind it?

MANTI TE'O: No, ever since I was five years old -- it's kind of a simple story. My dad and I were driving around Laie where I grew up, he asked me, "son, when you play football, what number do you want to be?" And since I was five years old, I said "five" (laughter). I've managed to be lucky enough to carry on that little tradition that I started when I was five years old.

Q. How have you kind of wound down the last couple weeks just from the award circuit and the sleepless nights a couple weeks ago?

MANTI TE'O: It's been easy. When you're in the middle of football, nothing else matters. Football is my sanctuary where I feel most at home, and when I'm with my guys, when I'm with my coach, that's my comfort zone, and that's where I want to be. I was just glad to finally get back from that week of just traveling and just to spend the rest of my time with my guys.

Q. Bob, just how impressed were you by the way he was able to handle being pulled in 12 different directions that week?

BOB DIACO: You know, that's a great question, and I was just speaking with the other defensive staffers talking about a few guys, not just Manti in particular, but you asked about Manti. Manti has actually practiced harder the last week since the award circuit, practiced harder than he has all year long. So he himself has raised his game even just as early as last week and leading up to the travel here to South Florida.

Q. Could you just talk a little bit about Zeke Motta and what he has brought as a teammate and his contributions on and off the field.

MANTI TE'O: I think when you're talking about Zeke Motta, you're talking about a guy who does not quit, a guy whose work ethic you cannot measure, because that guy will outwork anybody, every day, every single rep. He and Prince Shembo are the two guys who really inspire me. Coach talked about how I practiced the hardest I've practiced all year. One, that's because I realized that my time here is running out; and two, because I have guys around me that are that example for me, even for myself, that I can always give more, and 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.

So he's just that guy out there who's working hard, but also he's helping to just be 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, but by the way they play you wouldn't tell because of No. 17 and his maturity and how he just facilitates everything back there.

BOB DIACO: Zeke from a coaching perspective is such a pleasure to coach. Since the first day that we started to work with Zeke, not one time has he ever complained, 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 just sheer toughness. Manti was talking about work, and that's all true, but this is a tough, tough individual. I mean, not only contact tough, 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.

Q. Manti, talk about how much pride you take in having the "C" on your chest, knowing that you're going to be entering your final game as a collegiate football player, as a captain of Notre Dame.

MANTI TE'O: I think that myself and the other three captains, Cap, Zack and Tyler, we all take that very seriously, and when we found out that that was actually going to happen, we didn't know. But for us to have the opportunity to represent our team and to represent them every Saturday, for people to recognize us, we're the first to come out of the tunnel. And so with that comes a lot of responsibility.

I'm just very, very blessed to be able to represent this team and to be part of this team and this journey that we've taken.

Q. Can you talk about I guess you've gotten to meet a few of the Alabama guys on the awards circuit, maybe what some of the interchanges between you have been like.

MANTI TE'O: Oh, it's been great. I think what a lot of people don't realize is that outside, off the football field, everybody is pretty much a good person. I met D and I met Barrett, and those guys are just real good guys, guys that if they were on our team, we would enjoy having them on our team, as well. They're competitive, and it's just great to know them.

Q. For both of you guys: Were there one or two instances that told you in the off-season why Notre Dame was ready to win? Because you did come from unranked to No. 1.

BOB DIACO: I would say that we really don't operate in a big-picture manner, so we never really had this moment, crescendo moment, where we sit down and think like that, and we really don't talk like that. None of our business of the day is set up like that. 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. 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.

So I would say that for me there wasn't this moment that said we were going to have a great team.

MANTI TE'O: I think for me, this summer, it wasn't a moment but it was a sign that this team was different. Obviously that moment wasn't a sign that said, man, we're going to make it to the National Championship, it was just a sign, hey, this team is different, this team is willing to sacrifice a lot, and that's when we had a pretty hard conditioning workout in the summer, and our coach gave us the option of doing the day's lift in the weight room. He said, "It's optional. You can do it if you want." And he said, "I understand that a lot of you are going to be tired and exhausted after this workout." And indeed we were, but every single one of our players slowly worked their way into the weight room and did their lift, and nobody asked anybody, nobody forced anyone, but the leaders went and the rest followed.

Like I said, it wasn't that moment where we were like, man, we're going to make it to the National Championship. It was just one of those moments where we said, okay, we have a chance here. Like Coach said, we constantly worked every day and focused on the day's tasks and were making sure that by the end of the day we were better than the start.

Q. What was the time frame, just to narrow that down, when everybody started coming in, winter conditioning or --

BOB DIACO: Summer conditioning in June.

Q. Coach, maybe it's a little awkward with Manti sitting next to you, but besides being an All-American and a Heisman finalist, what does he bring to the team?

BOB DIACO: Oh, it's well-documented how I feel about Manti. For as talented a player he is, which you guys have all had an opportunity to see over his career, he's a better person. His family, just the roots of his family, you think about he's his father's son, and his father is a guy that when he was a kid, the father wasn't a coach, but he would go to coaching clinics around to find out the small nuances and techniques to help teach Manti. That kind of commitment, that kind of love, that kind of bond, the culture that he's from, he brings all that to the position, to the unit, to the team, to the university, just happy, full of life.

You know, on a day where maybe as a coach you might be feeling a little down or maybe slightly distracted with the world's polls, Manti is easy to see, look at and see his face and immediately be energized.

So that's just the kind of guy that he is. He's going to be a success at whatever he does, and God willing, he'll have a large, loving family, and he's going to be great at whatever he does.

Q. Manti, you talked about practicing harder this past week, coming off the awards circuit and everything. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but is that perhaps validating some of those awards or the recognition you've received is part of why you have practiced harder in the past week or so?

MANTI TE'O: No, it's for the simple fact that I know that a lot of the success that you experience on game day was already done throughout the week, and if I don't prepare myself the best I can throughout the week, I won't be ready for Saturday. I can't just -- Coach always talked about you can't just turn it on and off. I can't just slack the whole weekend and when game day comes, say okay, I'm ready, I'm going to go all out now.

It's like how we talked, it's a day-to-day process, and I know that, and everybody on our team understands that. If we want to be successful on Monday, we have to be better on Wednesday and better on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and then Monday hopefully will take care of itself.

Q. Manti, from the outside looking in, it would appear this particular team has a shared vision between the coaches and the players. A, would you agree with that? And B, how long do you think it took you to reach that point?

MANTI TE'O: A, obviously I would agree with that. The connection that we have with our coaches is a bond that's very different. It's kind of like a family members; we know all their children, their children know us by name. They don't know us as, oh, you're No. 5 or you're No. 89, or oh, you're Kapron Lewis. They know us as "hi, Kap." "Hi, Manti." That's the bond that we have with our coaches and their families.

B, I can't say when. The growing process was gradual. It was us getting to know our coaches and our coaches getting to know us, and knowing how we click and knowing how they click. Once we made that mesh, it was perfect. I'm just very grateful to be a part of this team and part of this family, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Q. A lot of people said that you're leaving Notre Dame better off than when you arrived in that several top players now want to come to Notre Dame because of you. I guess I'm wondering what's your sales pitch?

MANTI TE'O: I think our sales pitch is done on the field, and I think when you get to Notre Dame, for those who have been at Notre Dame, it speaks for itself. You know, 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.

I spent four years there, and I just tell people my experience, and all these guys who come to Notre Dame aren't because of me. They see the success that we've had on the football field. Now you combine that with the success we have in the classroom and the tradition and just the whole -- the aura of the school. Walk through the locker room, and movies are made about that locker room, and movies are made about that stadium. For me to run out of 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.

Q. Your defense had a few big goal-line stands this year, obviously Stanford and USC. What did it take to master the art of the goal-line stand? Is there a blueprint that you're comfortable with, that you're confident in? What has to go right for that to work?

BOB DIACO: No, and I wouldn't say even the question that you had asked Manti about, about this arrival point of the bond and a mastering of that. It's all evolving. You know, everything can continue to get better, everything. Our relationship will continue to grow if we don't take it for granted. Our unit fundamentally will continue to improve if we make sure that that's the identity of the day.

The goal-line stands are a function of players knowing clearly exactly what to do, playing with whole heart, whole body, whole mind, being physically talented enough to get their job done and win their individual match-up at that particular moment.

So they're culturally with our defense, and our whole program started with Coach Kelly. Coach Kelly sets the identity, the personnel, the vision, the family, the culture. And he is a guy that it's next man in; nothing will ever derail the energy, the program. You just, next person in, next call in, next man in, and it permeates through the defense, and we continue that same identity on the defense in that no situation will be too much for us to take on, and no place on the field will we get discouraged, no matter how many times, no matter how many turnovers, no matter how many opportunities, no matter where the ball is placed.

So 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.

Q. Manti, Coach talked about how important your father was to your development, how many sacrifices your family made, for them to be able to share this with you, I know they're coming up tomorrow, to have them go through everything they went through, the awards ceremonies and now National Championship, do you feel like this is your way of repaying them for everything they've done?

MANTI TE'O: Yeah, I think any child's greatest accomplishment is when they see the joy in their parents' eyes, and they're able to do something for them that they couldn't do before, and to repay them for the countless hours and days that they've sacrificed to make sure that you live your dream. And as Coach said, my dad, he started off coaching Pop Warner, but he knew that his son was going to play football, and he would go to every coaching clinic to learn just the different techniques and just about this game they call football, so that he could be the best mentor and best teacher for his son.

I just happened to be that lucky guy to learn from him, and now I'm learning from Coach D and applying what I already know to what he has taught me, and that has made me the player that I am. But for me to be able to go around on these circuits and see my parents and see my dad take pictures of food in New York and videotape us driving around New York, I'm like, dad, we complain about the tourists in Hawai'i, and them driving 10 miles per hour on the highway. What are you guys doing? It's just water, it's just coconut trees, and you're taking pictures of lasagna. For me that's a joy; that's what life is about. It's not about the money, it's not about the big homes, it's about those experiences, those little experiences that you get to share with the ones you love, and I'll get to have that last chance as a collegiate player here in South Florida with my parents and with Coach D and my team.

Q. Manti, how have the football-related commotion and excitement of the past year helped you get through the turmoil you've faced with your grandmother and girlfriend? And how have the quiet periods been for you, given you more time to reflect? Is that a good thing or double edged?

MANTI TE'O: I think whenever you're in football, it takes your mind off a lot of things. You know, this team is very special to me, and the guys on it have always been there for me, through the good times and the bad times. I rarely have a quiet time to myself because I always have somebody calling me, asking, do you want to go to the movies. Coach is always calling me asking me, "Are you okay? Do you need anything?" I have three roommates, Zeke, Carlo and Robby Toma, who are always yelling at each other, who's going to play Call of Duty. I'm rarely by myself, and that's how I like it. I'm always around my guys, always around my family.

Q. Bob, what does the Broyles Award mean for you that you got this year?

BOB DIACO: It's a great honor. You know, representing assistant coaches all across the country, I speak probably for most when I say that that's an award that we really point to to identify, like we said, a job well done of service, to serve the university and its students, to serve the head football coach and the vision he has for his program, to serve the other assistant coaches.

I see it as a staff award, 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.

So the Selection Committee is all coaches, all basically Hall-of-Fame coaches, guys that we really point towards to say, hey, someday I'd just love to be like that guy. So it's a great, great honor, one that I don't take lightly at all. I've talked about it. I mean, I've talked about it with my family. I've talked about it with my wife through this grind of years from stop to stop and place to place.

It's just a great honor as it relates to a job well done in service.

Q. And for Manti: Think back three years ago to the Navy game and the frustration that the defense had in that game. What's the development process been? How far has this defense come in those three years?

BOB DIACO: That was like the longest media spell we've ever had to not get the three-year Navy question. That's awesome. (Laughter.)

MANTI TE'O: I think the fact that we're here in South Beach and we're about to play the National Championship speaks for itself. We played a hard game in the Meadowlands against a real good team, and we experienced some growing pains. And I think all of the growth of our team has to do with this man sitting beside me and the rest of our defensive coaches, because a lot of people ask us what's different, and to be honest with you, the players haven't changed, it's the coaches.

I was here during that Meadowlands game, and I'm the same person that I am here, but what makes us different is understanding what our coaches' expectations are. Our coaches don't just tell us to go from point A to point B, they tell us how to get from point A to point B in whatever that is, whether it's a play, whether it's a blitz, whether it's life, they show us how to get from point A to point B.

And reiterating what Coach talked about the goal-line stands, that's true wherever we go, wherever the ball is. It doesn't matter if it's on the goal line our their 1-yard line or our 1-yard line, we're going to play the same. That's the mentality we have, and to be honest with you, it's not a mentality that we always used to have, and to be honest with you, that growth has shown this year and will continue to get better.

That's the scary part is this team will be a lot better in the future than it is right now.

Q. You talked about those awards banquets and AJ McCarron wasn't a part of all those, and yet all he does is win and lead the country in passing efficiency. Talk about how you won't be overlooking him and what he brings to that Alabama offense.

BOB DIACO: Yeah, he's the driver. He's the coach on the field. You can see he puts them in the right spots. Their organization led by Coach Saban is so fun to watch from a football purist standpoint, and like Manti said, hey, we look at those guys and say, hey, we'd love to have them as teammates. We do that. We actually -- as part of our study, we'll say, here's the tangible traits and intangible traits of this player. This would be a guy that would fit perfectly in this room.

Now, when you watch Alabama operate, that's rampant all over. They play football the way football should be played. They run their organization the way it should be run. It's a class outfit. It's not a false bravado. It's so deeply rooted in Coach Saban's core beliefs that permeate through the whole staff, I'm sure, and all the players, and you could see. So what's the connection with the quarterback? The quarterback conducts the game, just like if Nick Saban was taking the snap himself. I mean, 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.

I mean, it's really an incredible organization to watch offensively led by the quarterback.

MANTI TE'O: I think the same thing. Watching AJ and watching film and watching how he conducts his offense and just the confidence he has back there to first know what play to run, to make the checks for that play, and having confidence in his arm. You know, he's very accurate, and he's just -- like how Coach 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.

Q. Alabama is known for their offensive line, running game, downhill running game. As a linebacker, now that you're here at this pinnacle of the sport, do you relish that type of match-up?

MANTI TE'O: Yeah, we definitely do. That's football at its finest, and 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.

I think that's the thing that as a linebacker -- coach played linebacker, as well, that's something you look forward to, and we understand obviously what Alabama can do. 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. And 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.

Q. You talked about your father and the lasagna and everything. Talk about your shift of the culture at Notre Dame from where you came from. How long did it take you to get comfortable? What differences were unexpected, that kind of thing?

MANTI TE'O: I think once I broke down those walls that I built when I first got there -- when I first got there, I was like, this is a totally different place, I'm not going to really let anybody in at first, I'm just going to feel it out. Once I broke down those walls, I was just surprised to see that Hawai'i is just -- Hawai'i and South Bend are very similar. The people there are very loving, they're very caring. South Bend loves Notre Dame. That's what I've experienced there, and the people there have been nothing but great to me and my teammates.

Like I said, once I broke down those barriers, the similarities between the two places were -- there were a lot of them.

Q. Alabama is obviously very comfortable, they're familiar with the BCS National Championship stage. How do you expect that to manifest itself in the game on Monday, and how do you guys create the same sense of comfortability with a game like this?

BOB DIACO: I believe that that could definitely be an advantage initially. We talk about both teams in each contest, no matter what the contest is, no matter what time of year it is, no matter what stakes are on the line, that both teams are about the same for the first few minutes of the game, and then the game kind of settles into itself.

So 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 overall game moments that were as big as big can be. There is no bigger for a competitor. All that other stuff is external stuff. 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, and 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.

MANTI TE'O: Yeah, I think -- I've always been told we have to understand ourselves, understand our opponent, and to understand the terrain. We know who we are, obviously, and we obviously know who Alabama is, and as this week goes on and the practices continue, we'll know the terrain.

For me, I've always been a believer that regardless of the situation, the field is still 120 yards long, football is still the same shape, and everybody straps on their chinstraps the same way. So we understand that this is a big game, but at the end of the day, it's still football, and 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.

Coach Kelly and Coach Diaco do a tremendous job of keeping us settled, keeping us focused, keeping us calm and ensuring and letting us know that, hey, do the same thing we've done for the past 12 games, and we should be fine. If we start to waver from that, that's when we're going to get into trouble.

BOB DIACO: And to add to that, Manti mentioned Coach Kelly. Coach Kelly, as it relates to the culture change at Notre Dame, he infected the team with his personality in that he is the most fearless coach I've ever been around, and he's probably one of the most fearless coaches in the country, period. So there's no -- he doesn't believe that any team, any opponent, anywhere, anytime, it's not coach speak, he really believes that, that he can take any team he's coaching into any other venue against any other team and whip them.

Q. You started to kind of answer this a little bit: In what ways, if any, would you say Coach Kelly has changed in the last year?

BOB DIACO: From a coaching perspective, Brian Kelly is the very best boss that I can have in the country. I've enjoyed working for him every single day at the three universities that I've worked for him at.

As it relates to the challenges of different jobs, every different job poses a new challenge, that he, in short order, in short order, figures out and assimilates. Coach Fry used to say "scratch where it itches," and scratches where it itches. Going from Grand Valley to Central Michigan and Division I-A, recruiting, he dove into that. The city is surrounded by an Indian reservation, he assimilated into that culture and used all those resources as assets for the program. Then moving from Mount Pleasant, Michigan to a major city, a spectacular city in Cincinnati, and

assimilating into that culture and how to recruit that niche in Ohio. He did that with spectacular form. And then at Notre Dame and Notre Dame's distinctions, and Notre Dame's distinctions are well documented worldwide. They fit him and his world nicely.

So I would say just the normal growth that he's had at every institution he's worked at.

MANTI TE'O: I think from a player's point of view, coach this past off-season and in the winter took time out of his schedule to just meet with his team, not to talk about Xs and Os but talk about just schemes or whatever. He just talked about us as players, as individuals, and about school and how we're doing, how we're doing socially, and just to meet with his guys and to just -- it was an opportunity for us to get to know him and an opportunity for him to get to know us. That has definitely showed itself on the field and in the bond that we have with him, and the trust that we have in him not only in the things he does, but how he leads this team. Every player trusts him and loves him, not only for the success that we've had as a team, but what he's done for us off the field.

Q. Manti, a year ago at this time, a lot of people were projecting you as a first-round draft pick and you had some options and your teammates were talking about the lift they got when you announced you were going to return for your senior year. Can you talk about your decision why you decided to come back for another year at Notre Dame.

MANTI TE'O: Yeah, everything I've done, I've always prayed about it and I've always exercised my faith and utilized that. Definitely the temptation to leave school and to provide a better future for my family financially, it's always tempting to a 20-year-old boy. And so for me, that's something I definitely looked at.

But after praying about it and talking to a lot of people about it, money has never been the reason for me doing something. It's always been the experiences. And I've experienced a lot of things throughout my career at Notre Dame, and one of the most amazing experiences was that senior walk. And I think for me, to be able to experience that with my parents -- going back to my parents again, that was the greatest feeling that any young man could ever experience, and for me to be around my coaches and to be around my teammates. People don't understand to what effect this team has had on me until you're with me every day with my coaches. My coaches, their doors aren't closed. It's always open. And Coach D knows, I always walk up and I just pop my head in the room, and I say, "Hey, what's up, Coach." And everybody celebrates as if that's the first time they've seen me since I've been here at Notre Dame. And it's the same thing with Coach.

The fact that I've had all that to experience and the fact that in May I'm going to graduate, and I'm going to walk across that stage and get that diploma from the University of Notre Dame is definitely something that I'm very fortunate to have experienced, and to hopefully experience in the near future.

Q. Two rushing touchdowns speaks for itself, but I'm curious if there's another metric, because I know you guys get all kinds of stats, or if there's another way, perhaps the way they've graded out, that tells you how special these guys have been in the red zone?

BOB DIACO: That's the main piece, the points. You talked about rushing touchdowns. That specifically talks about rushing, but the main word is touchdown, in that our main objective is to keep the points down. We don't know what the other side is going to bring, so we try not to worry about it. If the team can't score, then we're going to have a great chance to win. So we're interested in keeping the points down. That's everything we do.

So there are some core fundamentals that go along with keeping the points down that can't waver. So that's where the systems are built, that's where the personnel is placed, that's where when we make a cut-up of the plays that cause losing, they all have to do with point-producing moments or potential point-producing moments.

So the metric that you're speaking about for us is keeping the points down.

Q. How unusual has this group been? You've been in coaching a while. Anybody can look at two touchdowns and figure out they're pretty good. How unusual is this group?

BOB DIACO: It's an incredible group of young men to work with, and like Manti pointed out, it's not going to change. The group that's going to be added in February will be in fit right lockstep with the rest of the 2012-13 Irish defense, mentally, physically, every piece.

So I don't want to take away and say it's business as usual how awesome a job this Irish defense has done, the players. But every single day, every play, every player, every play, every day, everything they do is graded and inspected and feedback is given back to the player. So it's so drilled down that it's hard big-picture-wise to say -- and not to mention we really haven't had an opportunity to sit back and relish in a team's success or a specific unit's success. It's just not that time frame.

I don't mean to be coy with it, but we really haven't had the opportunity, and our brains really don't work that way anyway. It's not part of our culture.

Q. Can you guys talk about Danny Spond and his comeback from where he was in August and September and how remarkable that's been to watch?

BOB DIACO: Dan Spond is to me one of the players of the year. I'm not sure what's been documented or what hasn't, but there was a moment at the beginning of the season where he was really struggling physically. He had an episode that set him back, and I wasn't sure whether he was -- forget about play football again; I wasn't sure that he was ever going to have the functional life he was going to be able to have before that moment.

And to watch him battle and fight and stay positive and become the player that he has become for his teammates in 2012, he is a stalwart out there to the field. It's very hard to get a play on him in the pass game or the run game. It's just really been inspirational for me to watch and be a part of. So I'm so thankful for Danny Spond specifically in my life.

MANTI TE'O: I think, yeah, Danny, even going further back than his episode, Danny came out of high school as a quarterback, and for a quarterback to go to outside linebacker and to be setting the edge on 300-plus-pound linemen, that takes character and courage in itself.

You know, how Coach said, his episode that he had, yeah, we were just wondering if he would ever be able to function regularly on a daily basis. And then for him to come out, what was it, a week and a half later and said I'm going to practice said, we were like, oh, Danny, you can just chill, you know; this is life we're talking about, not just football. Just chill. But he goes, "I'm going to get ready."

And for him to come out there -- and in the meeting room, we can always count on Danny Spond answering Coach D's hardest questions. Coach D asks such a hard question and we're sitting there and there's silence, and all of a sudden you hear Danny blurt out an answer as if he knew the whole time and just wanted to see who was going to answer. That's Danny Spond. He's a very smart player. He doesn't complain at all. He's always positive, and he's just a great teammate to have.

You know, I don't have to tell him much when I'm out there. He just basically does it. He's just a great asset to our team.

Q. Manti, you're one of those players who's been described as a coach on the field, and your preparation is legendary. Do you look at the long layoff as an opportunity in that sense? And also, can you talk a little about your long-time relationship as a best friend with Robby Toma and evaluate Robby's performance yesterday with the media.

MANTI TE'O: I'll address the first question. I think, you know, with all this time, it's a great opportunity for us to get better. It's a great opportunity for our eyes to get familiar with Alabama, and the best way that we can do that is to watch film. The days off has given us the opportunity to sit down and watch tons and tons and tons of film. Coach D always said the best way to simulate the speed of the game and to simulate the speed of the players is to watch them on tape. That's the best thing you're going to get besides the game itself.

On the days off, it could definitely be a distraction, but by the way that our coaches scheduled everything and just by the way that our players approached every day's tasks, it was a great experience for us to get out there and practice and to get in the film room.

And to address Robby, everybody talks about my story and how I came from Hawai'i, and how I was highly recruited and chose Notre Dame, and I finished off my career at Notre Dame, the way I'm finishing off, the way it's unraveling now. But I think a greater story is the Robby Toma story, a guy who's about 5'9", a buck 80 on a good day, and he is starting on a Division I football team, I don't know if there's anything else you can say about that.

BOB DIACO: He's one of the toughest players on the team.

MANTI TE'O: Yeah. He's somebody that he will always go and perform, and he will work hard and he won't complain, and he always comes up to us and especially Coach D, "hey, Coach, if you need a DB, put me in there." We're like, "Rob, you don't have the guts." But everybody knows that No. 9, Robby Toma, has what it takes.

I didn't see his interview, I just heard a lot about it, and he's my roommate, and I just shook my head, and I was like, "man, you're in trouble."

But the growth that he's taken and the growth that he's done since he's been here has been tremendous.

Q. Manti, is it almost like there are two Brian Kellys in the sense of the one that we see on Saturdays on the sideline, incredibly intense, incredibly emotional, red-faced, typical sideline boss character, if you will, and then the one you guys speak of off the field, the one who takes the time like you

said a few minutes ago, and talks to you about anything but football? How are the two the same and different?

MANTI TE'O: I think he's all the same. He's not different. I think that guy that you see on the sideline, and a lot of people from the outside looking in, he looks like he's always angry, but he's not. It's because he cares and because he loves his players that he gets on us. If he didn't love us, he'd just stand there and let us run off the field after throwing an interception or letting the offense score a touchdown, the type of coach that just lets us run off the field. He doesn't care. But the fact that he cares about you, whether you're on the football field or off, he's the same way when we make a mistake off the football field, when we make a mistake out in public. He'll get on us, because he's one of the most character individuals out there for our players. You can always trust Coach to not only be the most loving but to be the guy who's the first one there to say, "hey, you're doing something wrong."

And so the guy that you see on the football field and the guy that we know is the same guy. It's his way of showing how much he cares.

Q. What is unique about Alabama's offensive line?

BOB DIACO: Like Manti pointed out already, they're the finest collection tackle to tackle, group of players that we've faced so far. We've faced some very talented offensive lines, we've faced some very talented players. You may be able to pinpoint a player here or there from other teams to say, well, that player has got, whatever, a higher profile. But tackle to tackle it's the best group, collection of offensive linemen we've played against. 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. 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.

So those are some unique traits as it relates to describing their offensive line, which again, we believe -- the backs, what we talk about the backs are really the battery of that team, the battery of that offense, which is the battery of that team. But they're facilitated by the offensive line. The offensive line is really the marquee position group of that pretty marquee offense.

MANTI TE'O: Yeah, and just echoing what Coach said, they're very big, and they can move. They're very physical, and we understand that, and just watching them on film, those guys, they're not out there to just shield you. They're out there to drive you back and to try and make the biggest hole they can make.

It's going to be a great opportunity for our defense to go against such a great O-line.

LB Danny Spond

On what it has been like waiting for this game:

"It has been a very anxious feeling I would say. Ever since the USC game and to finally be announced that we would be in this game, it's been an exciting time. I speak for myself and my teammates as we're all very anxious and happy to finally be down here."

On Alabama:

"They are a great team. They are obviously in this game for a reason and they have proved that in the past couple of years. Coach (Nick) Saban has built a very strong program over there so we're preparing for their best; they'll give us their best."

On Alabama's Eddie Lacy:

"Both backs are just tremendous runners; Lacy in particular is a strong, big back and is the run-you-over type, so we've had to prepare for that these past six weeks and we'll be ready."

On how it feels to finally be in South Florida:

"I think we're all just kind of relieved. It was a long travel day and coming from ten-degree weather to eighty-degree weather is quite nice, that's for sure. It's an exciting time but more than anything this is a business trip for us."

S Matthias Farley

On choosing to attend Notre Dame...

“From the very beginning I felt very strong about the coaches and I just fell in love with the place. I had an idea to stay around the south in general, but my parents were about me going to where I felt the most comfortable and where I wanted to be. Getting into Notre Dame was where I felt like I was supposed to be.”

On pressure for Notre Dame being in National Championship for the first time in so many years...

“Not really we’re just focusing on the game; it’s a great opportunity for us. Alabama’s a great team so to be in the game against them is a huge accomplishment for us. It’s an exciting thing, but I don’t think there’s any excess pressure from alumni.”

On Alabama...

“Alabama is a very very talented well coached team that’s going to [handle] their responsibility across the board on each and every play so you know you have to bring your A-game every snap because they’re very fundamentally sound. They’re very talented, and again they’re very well coached. They’re a very very strong team in every aspect of the game.”

“They’re an explosive group across the board; they have big-play ability from a number of guys. And you have to respect the fact that they’re well-coached and very talented. They have a lot of god-given talent on top of being very skilled at what they do and they’re all going to attack the ball so you know you have to stay deepest and you have to be on your assignment on every play.”

S Zeke Motta

On being in Miami for the National Championship

“It’s exciting. Leaving from South Bend you got white snow on the ground and landing here you got the sun and the palm trees. I’m from here [Florida] so it’s good to be back. You dream about this moment and to have this opportunity to be able to play in Florida, it’s just amazing and a blessing.”

On if Alabama on film relates to any other team he’s faced

“This proves [to be] our biggest challenge yet. Both those running backs [Lacy and Yeldon] are great running backs and they hit the hole with intensity and they’re aggressive. They are patient too so it will be a good challenge for us and I’m looking forward to that. I would say they [Alabama] are like a combination between Michigan State and SC [Southern California] because of the line and the running backs that they have.”

On the Alabama tradition

“I know they have a great history. They have I think nine national championships, one more than us, so we’re looking to even that up obviously. They obviously have a great tradition and so do we, it will be a great game for sure.”

On prevailing in close games all season long

“It’s just a matter of will. This game is all about passion and how you play it. We’ve come into some close situations where we’ve proved to be the bigger team

DE Kapron Lewis-Moore

On playing in warmer temperatures

“It is definitely important to adjust, but we have been practicing inside and did play out at USC. I think guys are doing a good job of hydrating. We are looking forward to getting out there on the field.”

On Alabama’s running backs

“Alabama’s running backs are tremendous, with [Eddie] Lacy and [T.J.] Yeldon. Yeldon is the guy who is a jump-cut runner, while Lacy is not going to hit you with moves and is going to cram for those extra yards.”

On past Notre Dame/Alabama games

“Honestly I don’t know too much about it, that’s in the past and is history. I don’t think the 1973 game has anything to do with the 2013 game. It is two different teams and two different coaches. It is also a whole new modern era, so guys can’t really focus too much on the past.”

On Alabama having played in this game before

"Alabama does have experience playing in the [BCS] National Championship before, but I think we will be fine as long as we prepare right."

On if ending the SEC national championship streak is motivation

"A little bit I guess you could say, but the motivation is being here in Miami, South Beach in a big game against a tremendous team."

On the success stopping the run this season

"I think it is a bunch of guys going out there and executing. It also helps having Manti Te'o back there calling the plays and getting everyone set. We just have a bunch of guys that like to go at it and play."

On whether the moment has hit him yet

"I think it is starting to get there, getting to the warm weather and seeing everyone greet us – that was pretty cool. I don't think it has hit me yet, it probably won't until gameday."

On the mentality of the team

"As long as they put the ball down and there is time on the clock, we are going to fight. That is the mentality of the team on offense and defense."

On whether things changed after beating Oklahoma

"I don't think our team changed. Coming into this season we had high expectations and had guys who held each other to a higher standard. Even after the Oklahoma win, we were going to stay as the same Notre Dame team."