



Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman greets a player before the Orange Bowl NCAA College Football Playoff semifinal game against Penn State, Thursday, Jan. 9, 2025, in Miami Gardens, Fla. (AP/Rebecca Blackwell)

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Having led the University of Notre Dame's Fighting Irish to victory on Thursday, Jan. 9, in the Orange Bowl, Marcus Freeman will be the first Black head coach in the national championship game for Division I Football Bowl Subdivision — an achievement more than 150 years in the making.

The Fighting Irish defeated the Penn State Nittany Lions — featuring another Black head coach in James Franklin — in the semifinals of the newly expanded College Football Playoff. They triumphed 27-24 in the showdown at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida.

Following the nail-biter, punctuated by a late-game interception of Penn State quarterback Drew Allar and an ensuing field goal for Notre Dame, Freeman spoke of the win as a result of players' commitment to a team-first strategy.

"It takes 120 guys saying, 'Who cares how many plays I get? Who cares what type of individual praise I get?' It's all for Notre Dame and to make sure we achieve team glory," the Black Catholic coach said during a postgame press conference.

"We have a locker room made up of guys like that and that to me is a reflection of what you saw today. The guys did whatever it took to find a way to make sure we achieve the outcome we want."

With the victory, Notre Dame is set to compete for its 23rd national championship and the first since 1988, when the crown was still determined by a combination of rankings and select bowl games. A four-team tournament format was introduced in 2014, with an expansion to 12 this year.

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The Fighting Irish, in their fourth season under 39-year-old Freeman, have lost only one game all year, in a shocking defeat at home against Northern Illinois in September. They ended the regular season on a 10-game winning streak, including wins over several teams ranked in the AP Top 25.

They entered the 2024 College Football Playoff as the seven seed, defeating in-state rival Indiana before facing two-seed Georgia in the quarterfinals — a game that would be delayed due to the deadly New Year's Day car attack in New Orleans. The

ensuing win over the Bulldogs brought the first 13-win season in Notre Dame history.

Freeman, the son of an African American father and Korean mother, is the first Black or Asian head coach to compete for a championship in the FBS, which was founded in 1869.

Asked about the achievement on the field after defeating Penn State, Freeman deflected praise and instead pointed to the dedication of his players.

"I don't ever want to take attention away from the team," Freeman said.

"It is an honor, and I hope all coaches — minorities, Black, Asian, white, it doesn't matter, great people — continue to get opportunities to lead young men like this. But this ain't about me. This is about us. We're going to celebrate what we've done because it's so special."

Notre Dame will play the Ohio State Buckeyes in the national championship game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta on Monday, Jan. 20, at 6:30 p.m. CST.

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