

Ohio State's Tuf Borland, Trey Sermon Preview CFP National Championship Showdown With Alabama



Coming off a 49-28 victory over Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinals, the Buckeyes are amid preparation for a national championship showdown with the Crimson Tide, who defeated Notre Dame 31-14 in their semifinal game.

Ohio State fifth-year senior linebacker Tuf Borland, a three-time captain, and standout senior tailback Trey Sermon, an Oklahoma transfer, spoke to members of the media via Zoom video conference Jan. 4, previewing the highly anticipated title game. What follows is a rundown of what Borland and Sermon said:

Ohio State fifth-year senior linebacker Tuf Borland:

Ryan just said as good as you guys played against Clemson, you'll have to be even better against Alabama. From a defensive standpoint I'm sure there's a number of things that stand out when you watch them, but what are the one or two things that stand out the most from the Crimson Tide offense?

Yeah, unbelievable team, unbelievable players. They've got talent all over the place; big, physical offensive line; playmakers on the perimeter.

Coach Day said we're going to have to play our best game. We're going to have to play our best game this week. We're going to have to find another level for sure.

I want to ask you about Justin Hilliard. You guys have both overcome a lot, and he's overcome even more than you have. Can you kind of speak to his journey and what it means to everybody on the team to see him succeed the way he has and how well is he playing right now?

Yeah, he's a guy that's pretty much seen it all. The good, the bad, the ugly, he's seen it all. He's fought through so much on and off the field, and to see the success that he's having, it's awesome.

Justin, he's an unbelievable player, but he's an unbelievable person, as well. Again, just to see the success that he's having, one, nobody is surprised because of how hard he works, and two, he just deserves everything that comes his way because he's a warrior, always has been, and he's getting everything he deserves.

Coach Day just described how basically Justin's leadership skills have developed, how he won over the team. I wonder if you would talk about that, just maybe starting with the Michigan game where he came back from that hit and I think hit Garrett Wilson for a big gain or a touchdown, and just playing with the ribs this week. What kind of leader is he?

Yeah, he's a guy that's come in, since day one he's been here he's done everything that the coaches have asked of him. Really built that trust and that respect of everyone in the program. You can go every week. He's always battling something, and you guys saw it. It was one of the gutsiest performances from a player that I can remember in my time here.

So you can't say enough good things about Justin and what he's doing and what he means to this program.

If I'm not wrong on this, I think you committed to Ohio State a few months after they won the national title against Oregon, and I'm wondering what that run meant to you and maybe what specifically seeing Ohio State beat Alabama in the Sugar Bowl that year did to alter your perception of Ohio State's program at all.

I mean, sure, it was cool to see them have the success that they did have that year, but that wasn't a deal breaker for me, whether or not they were going to win. I think you win with people, and that's why I ultimately chose this place, just how special the people are.

Flash forward five, five and a half years later, we have an opportunity to do that again. But Alabama is a great team. We have a great challenge ahead of us. So we're going to have to have our best week of practice and play our best game.

It's pretty remarkable how far this front seven and linebackers have come since this time two years ago. How much credit does Al Washington get for that, and what has he been like as your position coach?

Coach Washington has been amazing. Deserves a lot of credit in what we've done. Day in, day out he's always there for us. Just the way he approaches his business every day, with the energy, the passion. It's truly contagious, and I think it just shows in how we've kind of taken off in this last season. I give him a lot of credit.

I heard you were talking about the skill that Alabama has on the perimeter there. Just wondering if you can talk to how you guys are going to have to control that kind of explosiveness they have on Monday.

I mean, I don't want to get too into specifics, but we talk about keeping them inside of us and keeping them in front of us, and that's certainly something we're going to have to do this week.

More on that aspect of the game, when a team has an established big-time back like Najee Harris, how does it change your focus? I know you're always focused on stopping the run, et

cetera, but how does it change your focus as a play starts to know there's a big-time running back back there like pretty much Alabama is going to be looking at Ohio State in the same way with Trey Sermon?

Yeah, got to be locked in every play because he can hurt you. He's a bigger back, like you said, but he shows great patience and great acceleration when he wants to turn it up into the hole. Huge challenge. He's a great player.

And a great offensive line, as well. I know we'll have to be ready for the challenge.

Just what kind of a confidence boost did the Clemson game give this defense, and did you feel like it was something that this defense needed to see after just how choppy the second half of the season had gone?

I mean, I think we've always had confidence in ourselves. I think it just showed us kind of what we're capable. I think we've always believed we can compete with anybody in the country on any particular week.

We practiced against the best offense in the country every week, so we have confidence we can compete with everyone. Yeah.

Ohio State senior running back Trey Sermon:

Can you tell us about that smirk into the ESPN camera that was caught on the camera there?

Just looking at the replay and once the call got reversed, I kind of smirked because I didn't really think I was down. And then once I kind of saw my knee hit the ground I was just like, it just barely touched it. But it was funny.

Coach said that something changed in the Michigan State game for you, just in terms of things coming together. Can you just explain why perhaps the light switch went on for you in that game and how you've been able to put together these last two?

I just wanted to be able to contribute more and just make the most of my opportunities. I mean, I feel like before, I just wasn't playing my best. I mean, it just kind of started in practice. I just started practicing a lot harder than I was, just trying to just do whatever I can to just help myself improve.

In your eyes how much did it further Justin's standing as a leader on this team when he spoke so forcefully for you all to play a season this year? And then did he take it to a whole other level in a game like the semifinal?

Wait, what did you say? I couldn't really hear you.

How much in your eyes did he grow as a leader when Justin spoke so forcefully to play for a season this year?

He's grown a lot. I mean, he took on that role and he spoke out, and he was trying to do whatever he could just to make sure we had the opportunity to play. I mean, that just shows what type of guy he is.

Everybody on this team respects him, and we know he's a great player. He just kind of took on that role,

and he's been doing a great job.

I'm curious if you would compare your hurdling skills with Najee Harris and if you were a former track guy, and if you could go into your decision on why you chose to leave Oklahoma?

I just wanted a better opportunity for myself, and I felt like it was just a good fit for me to come here.

This has obviously been an emotional year filled with some really high highs and some low lows. I'm wondering if you can just put in perspective for us how special this opportunity is, how gratifying this is for you given you guys were fighting just to make sure you could even play a game this season, let alone have a chance to play for a National Championship.

I mean, it's very special. This team, this program, we persevered through so much. To have the opportunity to play on such a big stage, it means a lot to us.

We've been through a lot. I mean, we fought to just play, and just to be able to get the job done, to make it to this level, it just means a lot to us.

We know the job isn't finished yet, but we're definitely excited for the opportunity.

Does this feel to you like a dream, or does it feel like this is something that you expected all along, or both?

It's a little bit of both. When I came here, my goal was to do whatever I can to help this team out and play for a National Championship. It's all happened, and it does kind of seem like a dream.

But it's just very exciting, just to know that we've come this far as a team. We've executed, and we believe in each other. Just having this opportunity, it's amazing. We're all excited.

Just wondering what you remember about the time you played Alabama in the Orange Bowl. Any memories coming out of that game and anything you can take into this game from that experience?

I still just remember them being a tough, physical team. I know at the time, I mean, they were flying around, which is the same that they do now. They fly around all over the defense.

Another thing that I can take into this game is that it goes by quick. It's great competition and the games really go by fast. You definitely have to execute, and you just have to make sure that you don't have any mistakes.

I wonder if you remember watching Zeke's postseason run now six years ago? I know you were just in high school then, if you had any memories of watching him, and what that's like to see that you're now putting yourself in that same conversation.

Yeah, I definitely remember watching it. It's just a great feeling. It's been a lot of great running backs that have come through here, and Zeke is one of the best running backs, and just to be in that conversation, it's an honor. Those guys are great, and I just feel pretty good about what I've been able to accomplish so far with the help of my offensive line. Those guys are great, and they kind of made my job easy, and the tight end, as well.

(No microphone.)

They're a physical group. They're big and strong. They fly to the ball. Their linebackers, they can move well. They're pretty dynamic. Again, they just fly to the ball and they make plays.

You were asked earlier about the motivation to kind of get going, and you said you didn't feel like you were contributing, you started practicing harder. Was there a moment, maybe it was before the Michigan State game or maybe it was in the Michigan State game, where that light came on for you and you knew, okay, now I'm in comfort with the offensive line and now I've got it rolling?

It actually started happening, I want to say, like the week before in practice. I was just feeling good, just practicing, just hitting the holes and really just getting in sync with the offensive line.

Once I got that feeling, again, I just started to just try to be consistent, continued practicing hard, running a little extra, just doing all of that.

I felt like it translated over, and, I mean, it kind of showed in the Michigan State game.

I wanted to ask you about your relationship with trainer Rischard Whitfield, the 'Footwork King,' and how he helped you in the offseason, one, with your footwork, but also just getting your confidence back to get you to this point. What did you guys work on, and when did that all come together and you realized that he really helped you and how much credit do you give him?

Me and Rischard, Footwork King, we've been working with each other since my freshman year in college. I've kind of worked with him every off-season. Coming off the injury, we just kind of worked on, I mean, my foot placement so that I can get my explosiveness back.

Just working with him, doing the different drills and all that type of stuff, it just made me gain confidence in my knee after having surgery and everything, and I just kind of felt good going into the season.

I mean, he pushes me hard. He doesn't allow me to make mistakes in drills. If I do, I've got to start it back over. He catches me hard every single day when I was training with him the entire time. I mean, like if I'm a couple minutes late he makes me run extra. Like I said, he just coaches me really hard, and I definitely appreciate him.

Can you just take us back to when you actually got here and what the last six months have been like? You get here thinking you're going to play for a team that's going to compete for a National Championship, and then all of a sudden you're not playing, and I don't know what those emotions were like, and then how the season has kind of progressed for you? When did you start to feel comfortable around your teammates? How have the last six months gone for you as a transfer who didn't have a normal season?

It was pretty rough in the beginning, just coming here and not being able to be around everybody, and then everything gets shut down and then picks back up. It was pretty rough.

I mean, the guys, they welcomed me in from day one. Over time, of course I've gotten more comfortable

with those guys, and now they're my brothers. They care about me a lot. They push me to be better every day in practice. It's a good feeling that everything started to progress as the season went on.

We're all playing well, and we got to where we wanted to get to, so everything turned out pretty good. Now we've just got to finish.

Did that maybe getting comfortable as things kind of progressed maybe help you on the field, maybe some of the frustrations you were having there?

Yes, I think so. Just getting closer with the guys on the offensive side of the ball, knowing that I can trust them. They're going to do their best for me and I'm going to do my best for them. I feel like it contributed, as well.

Who was like major in that, one of the first people who reached out to you?

Really it was just a few people. I mean, it wasn't really just one person at once. I built relationships with really all the receivers, the offensive line, as well. I mean, just kind of continuing just talking with those guys and just hanging out with them. It just helped our relationship grow.

You can see on the field they fight for me and I fight for them, as well.

It sounds crazy that Ohio State has got something to prove in this game because you guys have won so many football games over the years, this program has. Considering the fact that Dabo Swinney ranked you guys 11th, Nick Saban ranked you guys fifth, how big is the chip on this team's shoulder right now?

We have a pretty big chip on our shoulder. We just feel like we're — we feel like we're one of the best teams in the country. We just try to go prove that every time we step on the field. We all believe in each other.

Yes, we have that chip and we play with it.

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