

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Build Momentum Before Break; Primed For Push To BCS Bowl

As the Irish enjoy a bye week, fans are trying to figure out the first half of the season. Sitting 4-2 after stumbling out of the blocks, ND rooters know in their hearts that their team could well be undefeated if the defense hadn't collapsed in the fourth quarter against South Florida and Michigan. So, let's look at the team's report card at mid-season.

Offense

Coach Brian Kelly has developed another high-powered offense that is rolling up 467 yards a game and averaging 6.6 yards per play. ND is outscoring opponents 32-21. Kelly's crew has racked up 1,164 yards on the ground and 1,641 through the air.

Grade: A

Passing

Quarterback Tommy Rees has a great season going. He's completed 140 of 212 passes with a super completion rate of 66%. If he can eliminate the costly interceptions and fumbles in the second half of the season, then the Irish really could be dangerous and headed for a BCS Bowl. Now sophomore Andrew Hendrix, Kelly's selection as his mobile quarterback, is on the scene and looked solid against Air Force. Michael Floyd is averaging 106.5 yards a game and 12.1 per catch while scoring four times. Tight end Tyler Eifert has 32 catches and wideout Theo Riddick has 24.

Grade: A

Running Game

With the maturation of the offensive line, Kelly now has a twin barreled running attack that has been very effective. Starter Cierre Wood is averaging 5.8 yards per carry while piling up six scores. Back up Jonas Gray has rebounded from the disastrous fumble in the opener that triggered a 14-point swing, to average 8.4

yards. He has banged into the end zone four times. Both backs have shown breakaway speed, Wood going 55 yards and Gray 79.

Grade: A

Offensive Line

Anchored by senior center Braxton Cave, this year's experienced offensive line has finally provided Rees with adequate protection and opened good holes for the running backs. Kelly has been giving some of his younger players valuable action, so he is building here for the future.

Grade: B+

Defense

Defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's unit has allowed 21 points per game and suffered two terrible late collapses that have prevented a perfect 6-0 slate at this point. The defensive line has not been able to consistently pressure the passer, and the secondary gives up too many big plays. Although ND came into the Air Force game ranked #19 in the country on defense, the Falcons riddled the Irish and destroyed them statistically. For the year, Diaco's charges have allowed 362 yards a game. Major grade deduction for South Florida and Michigan.

Grade: C+

Defensive Line

They're finally holding their own in the trenches this year, but still are looking for that big, agile, pass rusher to emerge. Newcomers Aaron Lynch, Stephon Tuitt, Chase Hounshell and Ishaq Williams already are making their impact.

Grade: B

Linebackers

As expected, Manti Te'o is leading the way with a team-high 59 tackles. Darius Fleming, Carlo Calabrese and Dan Fox have been 'grinders' so far. Hopefully, this group will produce more big plays in the second half.

Grade: C+

Secondary

Opponents have passed for 225 per game, much of it coming when the corners and safeties made major mistakes. Safety Harrison Smith is second in tackles with 40.

Grade: C-

Special Teams

Even Kelly admits Special Team play has been a major disappointment. Both punter Ben Turk and placekicker David Ruffer have been inconsistent. Except for George Atkinson's long TD kickoff return against Michigan State, the return game has been disappointing, and Kelly better get Floyd out of there on punt returns before he gets killed.

Grade: C

Coaching

It now looks like Kelly is back in his 'you gotta outscore 'em' Cincinnati mode because the defense will be under pressure with some high-scoring opponents on tap. No doubt Kelly has developed a good offensive line and running game to augment the aerial circus. However, major deduction for falling apart against South Florida and Michigan.

Grade: B-

Second Half

USC and Navy will test ND the next two weeks, and road games against Wake Forest and Maryland won't be easy. Then it's long time nemesis Boston College before the finale with top-ranked Stanford and its All-American QB, Andrew Luck. Can the Irish run the table and earn a coveted BCS Bowl bid?

Grade: ?

Go Irish!

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