

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Can ND Offense Produce Points Consistently?

Kelly Selects Crist As Starting QB

Notre Dame's offense no longer is known as one that will score a bundle of points to win because Coach Brian Kelly recognizes that winning starts with a good defense and he has spent a lot of time building a strong unit.

In the non-surprise announcement of the year, Kelly confirmed that Dayne Crist is his starting quarterback. After a long evaluation this spring and summer, Kelly is convinced that Crist is healthy and has the talent, maturity and leadership skills to take the 2011 Irish to a successful year and to a BCS bowl game. Crist got the nod over sophomore Tommy Rees, who did such a great job coming off the bench when Crist got hurt last year, leading his team to four straight victories to finish the season 8 – 5.

Since injuries have knocked Crist out of the line-up two straight years, Kelly is taking no chances. He is splitting practice reps 60 – 40 between his two quarterbacks.

Crist Was Top-Ranked Recruit

Crist, a senior, has only played 13 games for the Irish, completing 58.6% of his passes for 16 touchdowns against 8 interceptions.

“He is a much better football player than a year ago, he's a much better quarterback and quite frankly and honestly, he's the kind of guy I want to coach,” Kelly said when announcing his decision. “He's tougher mentally. He handles himself in a leadership position the way I want quarterbacks to handle it.”

Kelly was one of the first college coaches to use the recently-developed camera that is mounted on a quarterback's helmet during practice. With this device, the coaches can see how the players react to the quarterback in the huddle and then they can follow the QB's progressions on each play.

ND partisans point out that only Ohio State's Terrelle Pryor was ranked ahead of the 6 – 4, 235 lb Crist, who one analyst had as the eighth best player in the country four years ago. Stanford's Andrew Luck, projected to be a top Heisman candidate and #1 NFL pick this year, was 20 spots below Crist.

Yet, ND fans will hold their breath this year when Crist takes a hit or is forced to scramble. At least this year Kelly knows he has a dependable relief pitcher in Rees.

Sophomore Andrew Hendrix and freshman Everett Golson are the runner – passer type quarterback preferred by Kelly for his spread offense, and they could see spot duty if the offense isn't putting together consistent drives. Most observers don't project as a high-scoring team this year because;

- **Unproven running game**
- **Inexperienced receivers**

Depth A Concern At Skill Positions

Notre Dame's only experienced running back is junior Cierre Wood and Kelly can't afford to lose this break-away threat or the running game will be suspect. Senior Jonas Gray is the only experienced back-up running back. But Kelly has high hopes for two freshmen backs - hard-hitting George Atkinson and scat back Cam McDaniel. Both will get their baptism under fire on special teams.

Even though All-American candidate Michael Floyd had been cleared to play after his third alcohol -related arrest, the coach knows that he can't throw every pass in Floyd's direction because the star receiver will be double or triple- teamed.

The coaches recognize that they are short of proven receivers, but feel that some of the young talent will bloom this season. Sophomore Daniel Smith has shown flashes backing up Floyd and senior Dion Walker is still hoping to make a contribution.

Converted running back Theo Riddick is anxious to prove he has mastered the nuances of the slot position and is looking forward to taking the heat off Floyd. Junior Bobby Toma, who went to high school in Hawaii with Manti Te'o, also is in the mix.

Sophomore T.J. Jones is recovering well from injuries, and has all the tools to be a standout wide receiver. Kelly has challenged senior John Goodman to step up and improve his performance so he can become a dependable target for Crist.

Experienced Offensive Line Should Be First Rate

Instead of being embarrassed by the offensive line's inability to protect the passer or open holes for the running back, this year's veteran 'O' line has plenty of big bodies to do the job.

Junior Zach Martin (6 – 4, 303) is looking forward to a big season at left tackle. Junior Chris Watt (6 – 3, 310) will share duties at left guard with senior Andrew Nuss, (6 – 5, 303). Senior Braxton Cave (6 – 3, 305) is one of the best centers in the country and Mike Golic Jr. (6 – 3, 295) backs him up. On the right side, senior Trevor Roberson (6 – 5, 311) and senior Taylor Dever (6 – 5, 307) return at guard and tackle.

That's an awful lot of beef and hopefully they're quick on their feet and get the job done.

Kelly Stockpiling Tight Ends

Somehow, over the years, ND has become known as Tight End University. The NFL seems to just wait for the next good one to come off the South Bend production line. The pros couldn't wait for last year's star, Kyle Rudolph, who skipped his senior year to join the Minnesota Vikings and cash a big paycheck.

But, Kelly has plenty of talent at the tight end position. Junior Tyler Eifert, who played so well when Rudolph was injured last year, is back in the starting role. His backup is senior Mike Ragone.

Look for Kelly to use a lot of two tight end formations, especially on critical third down situations. Sophomore Alex Welch showed in the spring game that he has the goods and freshman Ben Koyack was rated tops at the tight end position by recruiting analysts.

Special Teams Can Make The Difference

Since it doesn't look that the Irish will be a high-scoring machine this season, special teams play will be critical. Fans are hoping that freshman McDaniel or DaVaris Daniels, junior Toma or sophomore Bennett Jackson step up so that Riddick, a starting wide out and possible emergency running back, won't be exposed to open field hits returning kick-offs and punts that often lead to serious injury.

Reliable place kicker David Ruffer has been granted a fifth year of eligibility and a scholarship, so he is back to kick extra points and field goals.

Much-heralded freshman Kyle Brindza has been selected to handle kickoffs and serve as a backup to Ruffer and punter Ben Turk. Junior Nick Tausch provides insurance in the kicking department.

It's Basketball Season In China

Three Lady Irish - Skylar Diggins, Devereaux Peters and Natalie Novosel - played a major role for the U.S. team at the World University Games in China. ND's Tim Abromatis was a key player on the U.S. men's team.

Outdoor Hockey In ND Stadium?

Bill Richardson '55, an avid hockey fan, notes that Ohio State and Michigan are planning outdoor hockey games. Richardson wonders why the Irish couldn't play in Chicago's Wrigley Field, which hosted the NHL event several years ago, or even ND stadium.

"Since they have limited home football games," Richardson said, "shouldn't they use the stadium more? If they use my idea they should call it the Richardson Ice Bowl."

With Kelly's Irish ranked in the top 25 in almost every poll, hopes are soaring in South Bend and with good reason.

Go Irish!

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