

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Escape With 16 – 14 Win Over BC; Avoid Another Senior Day Disaster

It was ugly.

Somehow another ND team showed up with a flat, uninspired performance on Senior Day, barely beating 24-point underdog Boston College 16 – 14.

After a solid all-around game last week in overwhelming Maryland, the offense disappeared after scoring a TD on its first series. Luckily, the defense came to play and saved the Irish bacon.

“Senior Day, it’s all about the ‘W’,” receiver Michael Floyd said after his final home game. “It doesn’t matter how you get it.”

A relieved Irish Coach, Brian Kelly said, “Those kids stepped up in November and with a lot of guys out, found a way to win.”

Kelly’s football team completed a double header sweep of Boston College after the ND hockey team dumped the top-ranked Eagles Friday night.

What was supposed to be a romp in perfect fall weather turned into a nail-biter because the offense was stymied by poor field position the entire game and never got the big play to get out of the hole. Six times Tommy Rees and the Irish started inside their 15 (three times within the five) and never had enough fire power to generate long drives.

After the opening scoring drive, ND (8-3) had to rely on three David Ruffer field goals, big plays by the defense and an alert grab of a last-minute BC (3-8) onside kick to secure their fourth straight win.

Problems Surface Before And During Game

Captain Harrison Smith, the dependable safety who is the heart of the defense, spent Friday in the infirmary and was playing on a half tank. Freshman Stephon Tuitt was out sick and senior running back Jonas Gray suffered a possible season-ending knee injury in the third quarter that

took away a key piston from Kelly's offense. Gray, who had rebounded from his disastrous fumble in the opener against South Florida, scored a touchdown in his eighth straight game.

With Gray out, Kelly only had one experienced running back - Cierre Wood - during crunch time. Wood responded with 94 yards on 26 carries. Wood's final run in the last minute pushed him over the 1,000-yard mark for the season, the first Irish back to hit that milestone since Darius Walker did it in 2006. Gray had a chance to get 1,000 yards too, until the leg injury knocked him out of action.

Where's The Consistency Kelly Promised?

ND fans, who thought the Irish were finally on track after a fine performance against Maryland, couldn't believe how the ND offense faltered against the country's 118th ranked defense.

- **Why couldn't the vaunted Irish passing attack riddle the low-flying Eagles?**
- **Where was the bruising running game?**
- **How come interceptions and penalties continue to plague the Irish?**
- **When will freshman kickoff specialist (?) Kyle Brindza learn to keep the ball in-bounds (two of his kickoffs went out-of-bounds, giving BC great field position on the 40)?**

Again, Kelly was aggravated by reporters' questions about his offense. "We won again," Kelly snapped when asked about his quarterback's performance. "I think he's 12 – 2 as a starter. I think that's pretty good."

Rees finished 24 of 39 for 256 yards. The young sophomore often threw into coverage and suffered his 11th interception of the season. He failed to throw a TD pass.

Early Touchdown Just A Tease

Irish Nation was looking for a blowout after Gray burst through on third-and-one for a 26-yard touchdown scamper on the first series to put ND up 7 – 0 and excite Senior Day attendees.

Rees followed with another nice drive, but overthrew a wide-open Floyd (10 catches for 92 yards), so had to settle for a Ruffer field goal to go up 10 – 0.

BC punter Ryan Quigley kept ND pinned within the shadows of its own goal post. The Eagles didn't cross mid-field until late in the second quarter when they scored to narrow the margin to 10 – 7.

Another Ruffer field goal made it 13 – 7 at intermission. TV viewers were scratching their heads watching Notre Dame out-gain Boston College by 100 yards in the first 30 minutes, yet only having a six-point lead. It didn't get any better in the second half. The Irish rolled up 417 yards Saturday, but couldn't score a TD in the final 57+ minutes.

Kelly's Team Survives Scary Second Half

ND was still behind the 8 ball on field position in the second half when the opening kickoff went out of bounds, giving BC the ball at the 40. The Irish 'D' held but then Rees made a bad decision and threw into a crowd, giving up another costly pick.

The punting duel continued and Kelly drew a chorus of boos when he sent in punter Ben Turk on 4th-and-1 in BC territory.

After another ND drive stalled with eight minutes to go in the game, Ruffer chipped in with another field goal to move the score to 16 – 7.

The Eagles got it on the 40 after another out-of-bounds kickoff, but turned the ball over on downs at the 39 as the 'D' again stiffened.

The BC offense finally awakened with 3:40 to go and QB Chase Rettig, after missing ten straight passes, engineered a 74-yard scoring drive on just seven plays as the ND defense again gave up a late score.

Now trailing 16 – 14, the Eagles were poised to cover the onside kick and again ruin a Notre Dame Senior Day. But Robby Toma, who again stepped up with some beautiful receptions, timed his leap perfectly to cleanly grab the onside kick.

The tension didn't end there because the Irish couldn't make a first down, so had to punt to BC with 15 seconds to go. Mercifully the final gun gave the relieved Irish their fourth straight win. They had survived another unnecessary scare.

"There are going to be games you have to grind out and win, and that just kinda shows the maturity of this team," Captain Smith concluded.

Upset Of Stanford Would Be Great

Maybe the reason ND played so poorly Saturday was they were looking forward to the big finale with Stanford in Palo Alto. If All-American and Heisman favorite QB Andrew Luck is on his game it could be a very long day for the Irish. The Cardinal (10 – 1) still is shooting for a BCS title, so will go all out to run up the point total.

The Irish defense will be sorely tested in the nationally televised game. Rees and the offense, limping along without Gray in the backfield, need to revitalize their game and eliminate costly penalties, ill-timed drops, fumbles and killer interceptions.

The Irish need to finish the regular season with a bold exclamation point. This is their chance.

Go Irish!

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