

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Collapse Again In Second Half; Lose 18-14 To FSU To End Disappointing Season

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Coach Brian Kelly's second season was supposed to be much better. Another late melt-down and terrible quarterback play (2 end zone interceptions) allowed Florida State (9-4) to score on four consecutive second half drives to pull out an 18-14 win over the dazed Irish in the Champs Sports Bowl in Orlando.

A sell-out crowd watched Kelly's team make the same mistakes they've made all year, especially costly interceptions, critical penalties and special teams mistakes at key junctures.

Kelly's team has made the same mistakes now for two years – turning way too many victories into bitter defeats.

When the new coach arrived in South Bend, he announced a new conditioning and strength program that would assure fans that his teams wouldn't wilt in the fourth quarter. Well, the failure to finish strong has cost ND at least five games over the past two seasons – the difference between a satisfactory debut and a disappointing one.

Discouraging End To Uneven Season

All year Kelly promised evolution and progress, but there was no hint of either against Florida State... more like regression!

- **Tommy Rees and Andrew Hendrix proved they are not prime time quarterbacks** (to show how far they have to go to get up to speed, all one had to do was watch the second game Thursday – a 67-56 shootout between Baylor and Washington)
- **If both Michael Floyd and Tyler Eifert go to the NFL next year, whoever is the starting QB will have an inexperienced set of receivers**
- **The Irish play-calling left much to be desired when they didn't take advantage of an ideal opportunity to pull out a win in the last four minutes** (maybe they missed offensive coordinator Charley Molnar, who left in early December to become head coach at Massachusetts)
- **Why did defensive coordinator Bob Diaco get away from the blitzing that destroyed the Seminoles in the first half?**

Maybe the defeat should be pinned on former coach Lou Holtz, who inexplicably said during his TV half time show that ND had all the points it needed to win (only 7 at that time). Don't jinx us like that, Lou. Although the defense played great in the first half, putting pressure on quarterback EJ Manuel and scoring a TD on a fumble return, you knew the Seminoles would begin to make adjustments and penetrate the porous Irish pass defense.

Kelly Still Positive After Game

Always looking as if the glass were half full, Kelly said, "It's nice to be able to talk about a Notre Dame football team that plays championship defense because they did that today. Now we have to get our offense to play at that level as well. That would be the next step for our program."

A disappointed Floyd, whose career ended with a chest injury when he caught his 100th pass of the year, was a bit more realistic, "We see it as we could have run the table this year, but with our mistakes and not been disciplined at certain times, we fell short."

When reporters started pressing Kelly about how he juggled his quarterbacks (several changes during one possession), the coach who arrived in South Bend as an offensive wizard, snapped back, "I guess I'm not an offensive guy. So I'm going to have to evaluate everything that I do and how we do it because we have to get our offense better. And when I say better, I'm not talking about the way our guys compete. I'm talking about how we turn the ball over. So, the coach has to get better. The players have got to get better and we have to solve this issue if we're going to be an elite football team."

Despite the three turnovers, the game would not have been a nail biter if Rees and Floyd had been on the same page. In the first quarter, with a 7-0 lead, Rees overthrew a wide-open Floyd, who was streaking down the sideline for the end zone. Floyd, who missed most of the second half with his injury, juggled and then dropped another TD bomb in the second quarter. With those two scores, ND could have been up 21-0 at the half and then their score on the first series of the second half would have salted away an easy victory.

Kelly defended his mixing and matching quarterbacks. "We just wanted to get them both in the game without setting a series here or there. It's not easy when you play two quarterbacks. We were just trying to get them into a flow the best we could. We wanted Andrew to run the entire offense." Whatever the thinking, it didn't work.

Defense Rallies Team After Interception

ND faithful thought all would be right when Rees marched his team down the field to the 4 on the first possession, but then he committed another mortal sin, throwing an interception into obvious double coverage in the middle of the end zone. Why not run down close (although the Irish really missed the injured Jonas Gray and his power) or at least toss a high-percentage pass?

The turnover was the eighth in the red zone the Irish committed this season. In all, Kelly's team had 29 turnovers in 2011. Pathetic!

Diacó's defense picked everyone up when Manti Te'o, who had a great Bowl game after announcing he'd return for his senior year, stripped the FSU runner near the sideline on the Seminole's first possession, and Zeke Motta picked up the loose ball and roared 29 yards in for the score. So, the Irish got their early TD after all and nursed the 7-0 lead until half time because the defense applied constant pressure on quarterback Manuel (five sacks for the game).

Jamoris Slaughter, who made some outstanding plays in his new roving linebacker position, had a terrific first half. The only problem was that neither of Kelly's quarterbacks could muster any sort of offense for the Irish.

Strong Start To Second Half

Kelly alternated quarterbacks on Notre Dame's first drive of the second half and Irish Nation got excited as Hendrix ran four times to move the team to the FSU 5. Rees then came in and almost blew everything. He nearly threw another pick in the end zone, but Floyd out-battled his defender, bobbled the ball four times like a circus juggler, and somehow came down with it to give the Irish what looked like a comfortable 14-0 lead.

Just when things looked bright, the Irish screwed up again, as they were prone to do all year when they got the upper hand. Poor special teams tackling permitted a 77-yard kick-off return that set up a Seminole field goal to cut the score to 14-3.

Instead of continuing his blitzing tactics, Diaco called off the pressure and Manuel jumped at the opportunity and tossed two TD passes in less than two minutes. The first came after a long drive when the quarterback had time to survey the field and find his receiver. The 18-yard TD pass cut the ND lead to 14-9.

Manuel's second touchdown was set up by a terrible decision by Hendrix that resulted in another FSU interception. Manuel quickly hit Game MVP Rashad Greene with the scoring pass that put the Seminoles up for the first time, 15-14. Florida State went for two points after both touchdowns, but failed both times.

They did kick a field goal on their next possession to bring the score to the final 18-14. To underscore how Notre Dame fell apart at the end, the freshman-dominated Seminoles scored 18 unanswered points on their last four possessions while completely throttling the Irish.

ND Blows Chance To Pull Out Win

A short Florida State punt and 15-yard penalty gave the Irish the ball on the Seminoles' 28-yard line with four minutes to go. Plenty of time for another storybook finish for Notre Dame to add to its Bowl lore. Not to be! Rees, throwing awkwardly off his back foot, floated the ball into double coverage. Instead of a season-saving Bowl victory, the young sophomore had his second interception of the day.

Game, Set, Match.

Hard to stomach for lots of reasons. The acid bubbles accelerate when you look at the 2012 schedule – a much tougher one than this year.

Kelly, who has a ton of off-season work to do to make his team competitive remains upbeat. “I’m proud of my team. We have a motto – the pride and tradition of Notre Dame football will not be left to the weak, timid or non-committed. Our kids are strong mentally. They love to compete. They’re a committed group.”

Go Irish!

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