

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Finally Wake Up; Dominate MSU 31 - 13

FINALLY!

Finally... ND played a complete game with the offense, defense and special teams all making major contributions.

Finally... ND's defense shut down an opponent, in the fourth quarter.

Finally... ND dominated the line of scrimmage all afternoon.

Finally... ND's special teams made special contributions, with freshman George Atkinson thrilling fans with an 89-yard kickoff return.

Finally... ND controlled its penalties while the Spartans got flagged in crucial situations.

"Finish... Finish... Finish." That's what Coach Brian Kelly preached to his team all week after turnovers snatched away victories in its first two games. This time the Irish followed orders and dominated arch-rival Michigan State 31 – 13.

"We expected it because we worked hard for this," senior Ethan Johnson said. "We never lost confidence and we kept our heads up, but, we still have a lot of work ahead of us."

Kelly told the press, "I think all the basic tenets of good football start with stopping the run. We've done a really good job of that. The question was: when we force you to throw, how are we going to play on the back end? And I thought we played very well, mixed the coverages up well, played some new nickel coverages and got really good pressure."

The lopsided score was somewhat misleading because fans were still nervous until Robert Blanton came up with a huge interception in the end zone and rambled back 82 yards in the fourth quarter to set up the final field goal.

Blanton had a big game - six tackles (three for losses), a sack that resulted in an 11-yard loss, three pass break-ups and the big return that closed out Michigan State (2-1). When all is said and done, the ranked Spartan running attack made only 29 yards on 23 carries. Meanwhile, Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray had 126 yards and two touchdowns for the Irish.

Strong First Quarter Sets Tone

The Irish (1 – 2) posted 14 first quarter points and that turned out to be enough to win the game, but Irish fans weren't comfortable with an early fourth quarter lead of 28 – 13 because two scores and two 2-point conversions would have caused another late game acid reflux attack for Notre Dame partisans.

Quarterback Tommy Rees marched the Irish right down the field after the kickoff and Wood finished things off with a 22-yard scoring sweep. MSU countered with a field goal (set up by a Rees fumble) to make it 7 – 3. Atkinson retaliated with the scintillating kickoff return to give the Irish a 14 – 3 lead.

MSU made things interesting in the second quarter by driving 80 yards on 11 plays to tighten the score to 14 – 10. But, the patient Rees took his team 92 yards on 10 plays to make it 21 – 10 at the half.

A pass interference call on Michigan State, one of six penalties that helped sink the Spartans, and a 33-yard bomb to Michael Floyd helped set up Wood's six-yard scoring run. Floyd had another outstanding game, grabbing six balls for 84 yards, three on drive-saving third down situations.

Sophomore Rees completed 18 of 26 for 161 yards and a touchdown. However, he coughed up a fumble and threw an interception. The Irish added three more turnovers to their nation-leading 10 give-aways coming into the game.

Irish Finally Play Solid Second Half

Another nice scoring drive in the third quarter – 71 yards in 8 plays – gave ND and Kelly more breathing room. Rees hit Floyd for 22 yards on 3rd-and-10 and then TJ Jones in the corner of the end zone for a 26-yard score.

So, the Irish took a comfortable 28 – 10 lead into the fourth quarter, but after swoons to South Florida and Michigan, fans still were uptight. MSU picked up a field goal to make it 28 – 13, but David Ruffer retaliated with a 33-yarder to come up with the final score of 31 – 13.

“We took our punches and we learned to roll with them,” linebacker Manti Te'o said after the game. “Now we're throwing the punches.”

Freshmen Come Into Their Own Under Pressure

Heralded freshman lineman Aaron Lynch had a breakout day – an important sack, five tackles, six quarterback hurries and his quickness caused Michigan State to commit several of their crucial holding calls.

Kelly also praised kick returner Atkinson, linebacker Troy Niklas, who started in place of Prince Shembo, whose father suffered a brain aneurism in a South Bend hotel Friday night. First year kicker Kyle Brindza, who wears those eye-catching lime green shoes, is displaying a major league leg and made a touchdown-saving tackle when kickoff coverage broke down.

Angry Pitt Challenge On Road

The Pittsburgh Panthers (2 – 1) will be snarling when the Irish arrive because they blew a 17 point lead in the fourth quarter before losing to Iowa 31 – 27 Saturday.

The Panthers always play physical football and will be out to derail the revitalized Irish. But, Kelly thinks his troops are now focused on what counts and will start tacking up victories and restoring BCS Bowl hopes.

With the highly-touted freshmen starting to make major contributions, Kelly has the fire power to make things happen... if turnovers, penalties and mistakes can be minimized.

Te'o reflected the team's attitude when he said, "We're hungry. We want to win. We're tired of people saying stuff. We're tired of it!"

Good. Stay mad and win again!

Go Irish!

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