

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Stumble at Stanford;

Hendrix Finally Shows His Ability

There was no Cinderella story Saturday.

After quarterback Tommy Rees suffered bruised ribs from being steamrolled by Stanford's aggressive defense, sophomore Andrew Hendrix finally got on the field and showed he can pass and run against a first-class defense.

But, as is usually the case when Coach Brian Kelly's troops take the national stage against a top opponent, the Irish succumbed quietly to The Cardinal 28 – 14, and the game wasn't that close because ND scored in the last minute.

With another disappointing loss, the Irish can now only look forward to a minor Bowl game – probably the December 29 Champs Sports Bowl. No wonder ND fans can't get excited after three losses in four games against teams that were ranked nationally. The #4 Cardinal (11-1) demonstrated to the world just how far the #22 Irish (8-4) have to go to be a good team.

"We got off to a bad start," Kelly said. "We battled our butts off. But against a good football team, that's not good enough."

Still No Consistency On The Field

All year Kelly has been preaching consistency, but obviously his staff and players aren't on the same page. ND again came out without passion and was systematically dismantled by Stanford, which did not play its 'A' game.

- **ND offensive line was unable to protect the quarterback or pave the way for runners until the second half when the game was lost**
- **Turnovers continued to derail the offense**
- **Poor tackling killed the team all night**
- **No one came up with a big play, which is a 'must' in a big game**

All-American Luck Throws Four TDs

Both quarterbacks were named Andrew, but Stanford's Heisman candidate was efficient throughout the game, carving up the Irish with four touchdown throws.

Luck engineered three scoring drives in the first half, then put Notre Dame away for good with a 55-yard TD bomb in the fourth quarter. Luck now holds the all-time Stanford TD passing record with 78, moving ahead of legend John Elway.

Meanwhile, Notre Dame's Hendrix was getting his baptism under fire. The young QB finished with 11 of 24 for 192 yards. He ran for a touchdown, but threw one interception.

Said Kelly: "Obviously he can run the ball. It's a change of pace in a sense that we haven't seen that all year. That's not Tommy's strength. We needed to run the quarterback a little bit and he did some of that. We got a long way to go, but again, we'll evaluate all those things at a later time. We were just trying to win a football game today."

"To have a quarterback who hasn't had the experience jump in there and be proficient in what he's doing and knows what he's doing," Irish receiver Michael Floyd said, "shows he's matured and doing a great job."

Cardinal Own Line Of Scrimmage

Games are won in the trenches, and the Cardinal overpowered the Irish the entire first half. By then the game was lost.

"I remember last year," Kelly said. "We got knocked off the ball. I didn't think physically we were strong enough. Physically, when we match them, they made some plays. We didn't make some plays. I want guys who love to compete and we competed. I'm disappointed in the loss. We got off to a bad start and it came back to bite us in the end."

Fate didn't wear green Saturday. The Cardinal fumbled the opening kickoff and it looked like the Irish had recovered, but the review ruled otherwise. Rees went down on the first ND offensive series when the 'O' line couldn't contain a Stanford blitz, and he tried to come back on passing downs before Hendrix took over for good in the second half.

Stanford Displayed Balanced Attack

The Cardinal proved that it could run as well as pass on its second series, pushing the Irish down the field before Luck hit his first scoring pass to go up 7-0.

Early in the second quarter the Irish had a chance to knot the score when Darius Fleming picked off Luck and returned it to the 11. On first down, Cierre Wood gained seven. Then, a false start. Then, another seven-yard run by Wood. Then, another false start. Then Rees threw behind Theo Riddick. Then the usually-reliable David Ruffer missed a field goal. No points... plenty of frustration over more on-field futility.

Luck then threw two more touchdowns passes for a 21-0 half time lead.

Meanwhile the sputtering Irish offense accounted for only 75 yards in the first 30 minutes. The banged-up Rees had two turnovers – an interception and a fumble.

At the intermission, ND fans were hoping that Hendrix could somehow pull a 'Joe Montana' and wear the magic slipper at the end of the game. But, he has a long way to go to match Montana's skills.

"I struggled with consistency today," Hendrix said. "Maybe a little timing. When you have a package like that, your job is, whenever you come in, you have to do well. In the second half it was a little different because I was able at times to get the consistency where I wanted it to be. At times, it wasn't. Moving forward that's the thing I have to work on the most."

Kelly's offense didn't get on the board until midway in the third quarter when Hendrix drove the Irish 77 yards in just seven plays, hitting Floyd with a sharp pass on the goal line. The young quarterback sneaked in for a meaningless late TD to make it 28-14.

Viewers who watched the exciting Michigan – Ohio State game saw what quarterbacks in Kelly's mode can do. It will be very interesting to see who Kelly starts in the Bowl game. Right now, it is quite possible that both experienced signal-callers, Rees and Dayne Crist – are looking into transfer possibilities.

ND partisans had expected more this season, and linebacker Manti Te'o agrees.

"We don't come to Notre Dame to be 8-4. We come to be the best." After Saturday, Kelly and his Irish still have a big mountain to climb.

Abromatis Out For The Year; Brey's Season Gone South?

When Captain Tim Abromatis tore an ACL in practice and was ruled out for the year, Coach Mike Brey's slim Big East hopes went right down the drain. Brey was counting on Abromatis, an all Big East pre-season selection, to be his leader and top scorer. Now, everything is up for grabs.

On the women's side Coach Muffet McGraw's #7 Lady Irish got smoked by #1 Baylor, but bounced back to nip #7 Duke 56-54 on Natalie Novosel's last second shot.

Go Irish!

Paul 'Splinters' Fullmer

psfullmer@gmail.com

