

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Struggling Irish Scare Everyone Again; Survive 24 – 17 At Wake Forest

Like millions of Americans, Coach Brian Kelly's ND team had clock adjustment problems Saturday night. They forgot to show up for most of the first half, but awoke in time to grind out a 24 – 17 win over Wake Forest (5-4).

Again, a supposedly heavyweight Irish squad looked sluggish against a middleweight opponent. The only bright side of the lackluster outing was it produced Notre Dame's sixth victory, finally making ND (6-3) Bowl eligible.

This win over a mediocre Atlantic Coast Conference opponent was like kissing your sister – no thrills. The offense never really got going. The defense was lucky the Demon Deacons didn't pass every play. Special teams allowed costly kick returns that gave the home team better field position most of the game.

"I just think it was all the little things and the toughness our football team showed tonight," Kelly said. "That's the stuff that we're trying to develop."

The coach seemed to look at this game through rose colored glasses. "I told our team that it's a trajectory that you want to be on, and that is when you go on the road, you want to play the kind of football that allows you to win consistently and that is closing games out." Most ND fans, however, would like to see the game end with more than a seven point lead.

Irish Unable To Maintain Offense

Fighting Irish fans can't figure out why this ND team can't maintain its momentum after strong starts. Against the Demon Deacons, Tommy Rees led his team to scores on their first two possessions of each half. Then – zilch. What happens? Do they lose focus? Does the play calling contribute to the problem of not being able to put together long drives? Or, is it turnovers? Saturday Rees again threw two interceptions that choked off promising drives.

Kelly managed to lose it again with reporters in his post game press conference when the media pressed him about the modest results produced by the passing game after another weak secondary kept Michael Floyd under control most of the game.

Kelly snapped, "Is there a negative to everything. We just won a football game on the road. We won 24 – 17 against a good football team, and you want to know what's wrong with the passing game. What's wrong with it? The coach doesn't call good plays. How's that? There's nothing wrong with it. We're fine. We just won a game."

The ND passing game only produced 166 yards as Rees completed 14 of 23 mostly short passes. He did make two excellent throws for touchdowns – one for 38 yards to Tyler Eifert and another for 16 to Floyd.

The running game posted 175 yards, but Saturday's total offense did not represent that of a top team and those who wanted to see how college defense should be played, only had to flip channels to the LSU – Alabama game where 30 players are expected to be drafted.

Defense Steps Up In Nick Of Time

Thank goodness the ND defense awakened in the second half when the Irish took the lead. Trailing 17 – 10 at the half, the heavily-favored Irish had their backs against the wall and had to step up to assure a win against a mid-level foe.

Step up they did. Safety Harrison Smith (game high 11 tackles) punched the ball out of the runner's hands as Wake Forest threatened and Gary Gray recovered. Later, Wake Forest had a first-and-goal but freshman Stephon Tuitt, who was pressed into service because of injuries, sacked the QB for an 11 yard loss. Two plays later the hosts missed a 42-yard field goal and the Irish were off the hook.

If Wake Forest had scored touchdowns both times, Kelly would be spending another week explaining a loss to a less-talented team.

Irish Fail To Show Much Early

The Demon Deacons waltzed through the somnolent Irish right off the bat, (just as other fired-up opponents have done this year), to go up 7 – 0. After another sparkling George Atkinson kickoff return, the Irish stalled and had to settle for a field goal, still trailing 7 – 3. Another short ND kickoff gave the hosts good field position and they picked up a three-pointer to go up 10 – 3.

On the next drive, Rees found tight end Eifert down the middle for a beautiful 38-yard scoring play to knot the score at 10. Late in the second quarter, Wake Forest benefitted from Irish penalties, one a questionable interference call on the two that set up a touchdown to make it 17 – 10 at the intermission. The 81-yard drive for the go-ahead touchdown just 28 seconds before the half really opened eyes on the Notre Dame sidelines.

“That kind of left a chip on our shoulders,” Co-Captain Smith said. “As a defense, we wanted to shut them out after that.” And, they did in a stout second half performance!

After allowing 197 yards in the first half, ND fans figured another beatable team was going to dump their favorites, but Kelly’s staff made critical adjustments in the locker room and the ‘D’ came out to limit the home team to just 60 yards and no points in the third quarter.

Different ND Shows Up For Second Half

Defensive coordinator Bob Diaco’s charges came out and started racking up three-and-outs on the Demon Deacons, who were ranked 106th nationally in rushing before the game.

At the same time, the alarm clock also woke up the offense and Rees & Co. marched down with the second half kickoff. Jonas Gray vaulted into the end zone to cap a six-play, 62-yard drive that tied it up at 17.

After another three-and-out, the Irish went 65 yards to go ahead 24 – 17. Rees lofted a soft ball that Michael Floyd, who again was double-teamed all night, gathered in for the 16-yard score at 9:04 in the third quarter.

Regaining the momentum, everyone thought the Irish would shift into high gear and bury the Demon Deacons. Instead, the offense checked out after Kelly called a flea-flicker that Rees threw weakly and Wake Forest had another interception to thwart a touchdown. When Wake Forest missed the field goal that could have caused another nail-biter finish, the Irish still had a long way to go.

Gaining possession with 5:24 left, ND ran the ball 11 straight times to kill the clock, making one first down by just an inch as fans held their breath as the refs stretched the chains.

Granted, the Irish had to play without starting defensive ends Ethan Johnson and Kapron Lewis-Moore who were out with injuries, and outstanding linebacker Manti Te’o was playing on one

leg and freshman standout Aaron Lynch was in and out with a bruised leg. But, where was the consistency and improvement that Irish Nation hoped for coming into this game?

Although now Bowl eligible, the Irish are unranked in national polls and need a miracle (upset win at Stanford!) to reach a BCS Bowl. ND must finish in the top 14 in the BCS rankings to be considered for one of the big Bowls. Right now, it looks more like the Champ Sports, Sun or Belk Bowls for this perplexing team.

Every Game A 'Must' Now

With winter coming on, Kelly is heading into his favorite part of the season. The coach's teams have won 16 straight in November (12) and December, including five in his first two years in South Bend.

In Notre Dame's glory years, Knute Rockne and Frank Leahy would have started their Shock Troops in the next two games against opponents that have only won four games all year between them, and the second stringers would have won handily.

Saturday night the Irish travel to Maryland to take on the 2 - 7 Atlantic Coast Conference Terrapins. (NBC, 7:30 EST).

The Irish defense better be ready because Maryland does have an excellent passer, Danny O'Brien, who threw for 241 yards last week against Virginia, and a talented receiver, Quintin McCree, who had 117 yards receiving in that game. Hopefully, the Irish won't be looking beyond Maryland and Boston College to their finale with unbeaten Stanford and it's All-American quarterback, Andrew Luck. One game at a time, please, so the Irish can travel to California with the Big Mo on their side and an 8 – 3 record, primed for the upset of the year.

Go Irish!

Paul 'Splinters' Fullmer

PSFUL@aol.com