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A Season Gone TERRIBLY Wrong

'66, '77, '88 ... '63? After a season marked by a tough schedule, uninspired play and unworthy coaching, the only game left is finding someone to blame

BY CHRISTOPHER HAMILTON

Heading into this season, Irish supporters once again openly fancied thoughts of a national title, even as Head Coach Bob Davie continually reminded anyone who would listen that the Irish were "still a year away" from competing with the big boys of college football. And though most Irish fans readily would have admitted to putting too much stock into national championship numerology before the season, never did they anticipate the 5-7 disaster that unfolded this season, which marked the first time since 1963 that the Irish lost as many as seven games in one season.

Not surprisingly, alumni, students, fans and subway alums alike have vented their growing frustration at yet another lackluster edition of Notre Dame football, something that has been all too common in the latter portion of this decade. And let's face it, Irish followers have every reason to be upset. By no stretch of the imagination has it been easy to be a Notre Dame fan the past decade.

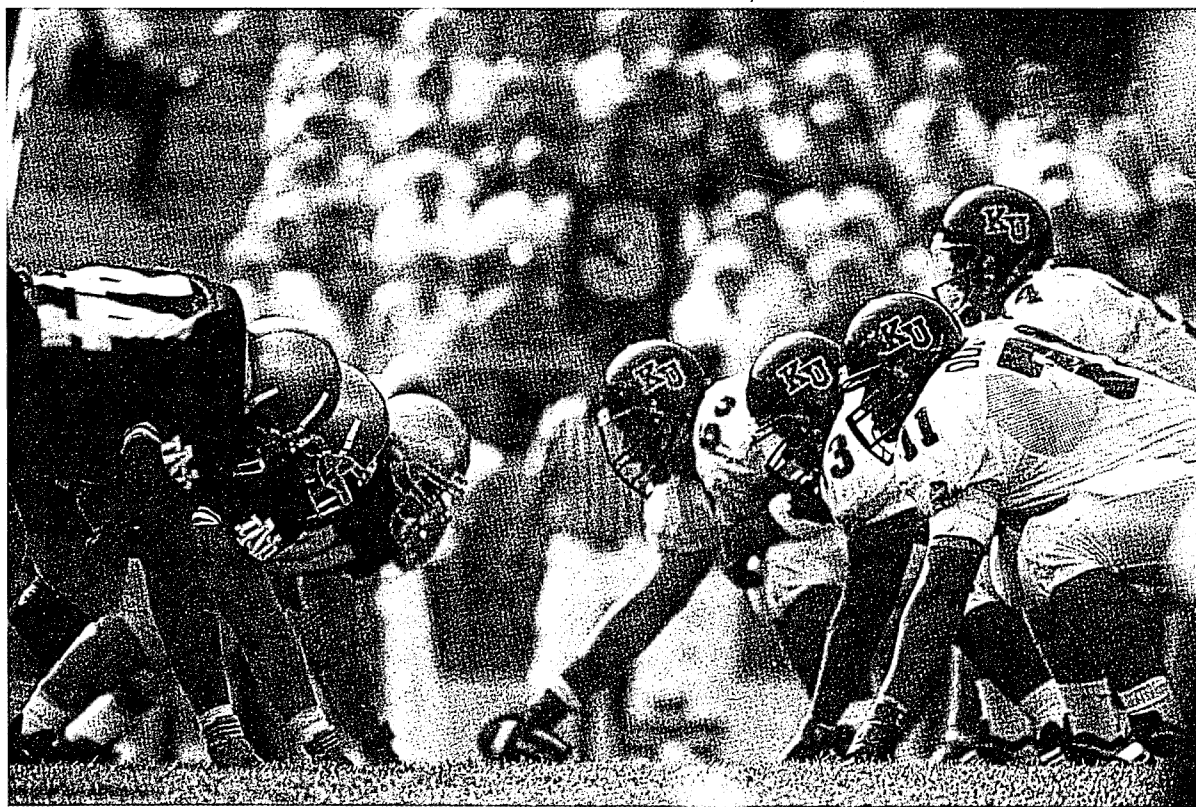
In the '90s, Irish fans have had to watch their team lose out in a popularity contest for the na-

tional title to Florida State's Bobby Bowden in 1993, see the Irish sink to mediocrity during the Ron Powlus era, and then Bob Davie's unsuccessful attempts at rebuilding a noticeably struggling program. Throw in what seems to be an annual summer scandal, no bowl wins in six years and a ridiculously drawn-out, full-blown NCAA investigation, which likely will result in the first major infraction penalty in school history.

To add even more fuel to the fire, this year Notre Dame sustained the second 0-4 November in school history. That's not exactly the way Irish faithful would have hoped to close out "A Century of Greatness."

In response, the disgruntled pack of Irish followers around the nation have banded together to offer their latest quick-fix solution to a program that appears to be headed toward an unalterable state of decline: fire Davie.

After all, Bob Davie has posted a very ordinary 21-16 record during his three years as head coach and is 4-10 against ranked opponents during his tenure. Against the "staple" teams on the Irish schedule (Michigan, Purdue, Michigan State and USC), Davie is a combined 3-9. He is also the first head coach in school history to lose as many as six games in two of his first three seasons.



MIKE MCNARY

DEFENSE

Defensive coordinator Greg Mattison must take some of the blame for the dismal season: his defense allowed 331 points, more than any team in Notre Dame history.

Obviously, these are not the types of numbers the winningest college football program of all time is accustomed to or wishes to be associated with.

And Davie will be the first to acknowledge that he is the point man for a season that went terribly wrong this year.

"Someone's responsible," Davie commented before the season finale against Stanford. "That's the bottom line. And that's the head coach. That's how it is and how it will always be."

Yet, as neat and easy as it is to place the blame for this season's misfortunes solely on Davie's shoulders, it is not entirely justified. The rest of the coaching staff, not to mention the players, the schedule and plain old bad luck are all partly responsible for this disastrous season.

Greg Mattison, the affable, hardworking defensive coordinator and recruiting guru, seems the unlikeliest of all people to be deserving of blame for this season's misfortunes. However, it is hard to ignore the

counted for only 17 total sacks. As a comparison, Stanford, owner of statistically the worst defense in college football, compiled 45 sacks, and the Cardinal played in one less game. Yet another glaring statistic is that Notre Dame allowed its opposition to convert on third downs 44 percent of the time, which is way too high for a squad that annually expects to be playing in a New Year's Day bowl game.

A dominant defense is almost required in order to become an upper-echelon team; this is evidenced by the fact that no team in the defensively-challenged WAC or PAC-10 currently is ranked in the top 20. Notre Dame may not be expected to manufacture a defense as intimidating as Florida State or Virginia Tech, but the Irish certainly have the personnel to field a strong, quality unit.

Again, just as Davie is not completely responsible for the events that unfolded this season, Mattison is not entirely responsible for the defense's shortcomings. However, like Davie, Mattison must assume some of

of the time when in the red zone, as compared to scoring 91.1 percent of the time last season. Notre Dame scored a touchdown 58 percent of the time when in the red zone this year, as compared to 71 percent of the time last year.

Notre Dame's new offense also displayed itself to be rather high-risk, contributing significantly to the team's 27 turnovers this season, which were more than double the amount of last year.

But perhaps the biggest complaint about this year's offense was its lack of identity. Notre Dame earned the recognition of being a balanced team, but the coaching staff never felt completely comfortable with either the passing or ground game. This overall lack of confidence, especially in the running game, cost the Irish in numerous "key down" situations throughout the season. Notre Dame shied away from the run, its traditional bread-and-butter, like no other Notre Dame outfit in recent years. It can be argued that Notre Dame's "horrific" run-

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—BOB DAVIE

statistics of the defense he oversees. The Irish defense, led by seven seniors who started for a majority of the season, was thought by many analysts to be an improvement over the '98 troops. But this was far from the case as the Irish defense went on to yield more points this year (331) than any team in Notre Dame history, for a 27.6 average per game. Even worse, Notre Dame deteriorated as the season progressed. In the last four games, the Irish yielded 146 points, an average of 36.5 points per game.

This season the Irish also allowed a whopping average of 383.7 total yards per contest, 241.5 of which came in the air. As a comparison, in Davie's final season as Irish defensive coordinator in 1996, the Irish allowed 270 total yards per game, including 150 passing yards. And back then many considered Notre Dame's defense to be merely average.

This season Notre Dame held only Kansas and Arizona State to less than 20 points. Even more disappointing was the defensive line's inability to consistently put pressure on the quarterback. Many outsiders and Notre Dame coaches expected the defensive front to anchor the defense, yet, heading into the Stanford game, they had ac-

counted for only 17 total sacks. As a comparison, Stanford, owner of statistically the worst defense in college football, compiled 45 sacks, and the Cardinal played in one less game. Yet another glaring statistic is that Notre Dame allowed its opposition to convert on third downs 44 percent of the time, which is way too high for a squad that annually expects to be playing in a New Year's Day bowl game.

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Offensively, Notre Dame increased its scoring average to 29 points per game under new offensive coordinator Kevin Rogers this season, up from 27.3 last year. Though it may sound as though Notre Dame's offense improved over the Jim Colletto-led version last year, a strong case can be made suggesting quite the opposite.

Rogers received a great deal of fanfare when he joined the Irish staff earlier this year, replacing the much-maligned Colletto, who bolted for the NFL. Rogers came to the Irish from Syracuse, where he molded quarterback Donovan McNabb into a first-round NFL draft pick in four years. The new offensive coordinator was expected to re-create the same high-powered, multidimensional attack for the Irish as he did with the Orangemen.

After one season, Rogers' new offensive scheme displayed the potential to be explosive at times, yet ultimately the Irish offense was much more inconsistent and inefficient than it was a year ago. Notre Dame was least efficient within the opponent's 20-yard line — the opponent's "red zone." This season Notre Dame scored a meager 66.6 percent

ning game this year was not a result of the play of the inexperienced offensive line or the performance of the running backs (both Tony Fisher and Julius Jones averaged five yards per carry), but was due to the lack of opportunities granted to and the little amount of confidence instilled in the ground attack.

Instead of concentrating on establishing a running game, Rogers' offense often resorted to misdirections and trick plays, in some games resembling a three-ring circus more than a football team. Irish fans also have expressed concern for yet again failing to incorporate tight end Jabari Holloway, one of the premier players in the country at his position, into the offense this season.

To Rogers' credit, he did inherit an inexperienced offensive line and tailbacks with no or relatively little experience. He also spent this past season laying the groundwork for his highly complicated offensive scheme, which NFL rookie quarterback Donovan McNabb, who was coached by Rogers at Syracuse, says is more complex than Philadelphia Eagles' offense. In future years the team may very well come to embrace Rogers' offensive scheme, and the Irish may eventually be better for it.

But given Notre Dame's inconsistencies and inefficiencies on offense this past season, whether or not they are due to the growing pains of implementation of a new system, Rogers must also accept some of the blame for this season.

Yet some of the guilt also belongs to the players. There is no question that Irish players worked extremely hard before and throughout the season. Their intense desire to make this season a success is evidenced by the fact that the team unanimously voted to schedule the Kansas game, thus forcing themselves to give up their summer vacation.

But after the heart-breaking losses to Michigan and Purdue it was evident to coaches and fans that the Irish failed to play with a consistent level of passion and enthusiasm for the remainder of the season. The Irish did indeed show occasional sparks of enthusiasm in the come-from-behind wins over Oklahoma and USC. However, there were games, such as Navy and Pittsburgh, where the Irish seemingly played without any passion at all.

"Did we play hard enough?" asked Davie rhetorically after the disappointing loss to Pittsburgh. "Probably, though not as passionate as we had to play in that environment to win. That bothers me."

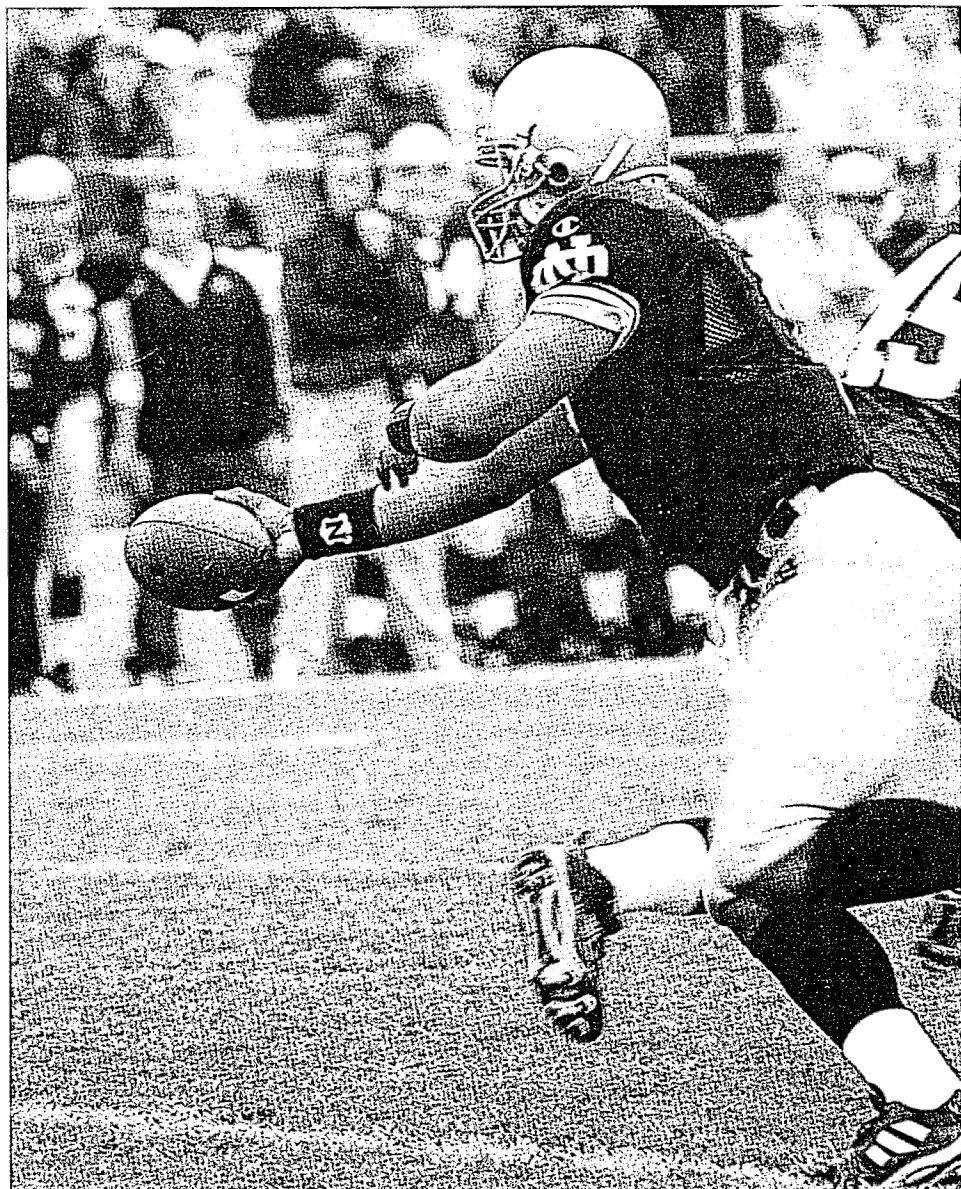
Overall, this season it is safe to say that the leprechaun consistently displayed the most emotion and enthusiasm than anyone on the field.

The Notre Dame players may have some legitimate reasons for not always being able to display enthusiasm. After all, who can honestly say they are excited to play Navy? But the fact still remains that college football is a game greatly affected by momentum and emotion. How else can you explain Notre Dame's loss to Pittsburgh? And few Irish fans will argue that Notre Dame played some its best football during the times when the players were displaying emotion.

Therefore, the players must also be held accountable for this season's misfortunes.

As much as fans hate to hear it, this year's schedule played a substantial role in the demise of the Irish. The NCAA has ranked this past season's slate as the fourth toughest in the country. This year Notre Dame competed against eight teams that will be playing in bowl games this holiday season; and three of those squads likely will be participating in BCS match-ups — Tennessee, Michigan and Stanford.

Bob Davie already has an eye on next season's schedule because, quite possibly,



MIKE MCNARY

OFFENSE

Kevin Rogers was heralded as the perfect replacement for the scorned Jim Colletto, but he failed to turn around the offense significantly. Expecting Rogers to turn Jarious Jackson into another Donovan McNabb, many Irish fans were disappointed.

it could be tougher than the 1999 slate. Notre Dame's first five opponents next season are Texas A&M, Nebraska, Purdue, Michigan State and Stanford. That line-up would send chills down the spine of even the most confident athletic director. Series with Florida State, Tennessee and Alabama are all looming in the next decade, so it doesn't look like things will be getting easier anytime soon.

As the imposing schedule is also partly to blame, so are all the bad breaks, unlucky bounces, and the horrendous Big 10 officiating. It seems as though the Irish received more than their fair share of luck in '98, and a severe lack of it in '99.

Overall, it is important to remember that Bob Davie is not the lone man responsible for what occurred this season. Everyone

must assume their fair share of the blame, even though it remains true that Davie is ultimately responsible for the program's performance. Whether Davie should be fired after three years as head coach is not the point of this article, and it is a moot point nonetheless as just this past week athletic director Michael Wadsworth issued his support for Davie and ensured that the head coach will return next year.

What is certain is that Bob Davie has done an exceptional job by surrounding himself with some of the finest coaches and players in the country, all of whom would like to put the 1999 season behind them as soon as possible. And it is also certain that each of their performances will go a long way in determining Davie's status as head coach of the Irish in future years. □