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FOURTH DOWN

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*In year five of the Davie Era,
can the Irish maintain the momentum they
built this season?*

The Fiesta Bowl is over. College football analysts and fanatics have turned their attention to next year, and one of the hot topics of debate is: "Has elite football returned to South Bend?" Those that bleed blue and gold insist that a national title is merely a year or two away, while the Irish haters point out that the 41-9 bludgeoning in the Fiesta Bowl indicates that Notre Dame is still riding a dying tradition. All eyes, both hateful and hopeful, rest on Bob Davie, whose tenure has been more serpentine than a country road and more of a roller-coaster ride than Coney Island's Cyclone.

Coming into the 2000 football season, head coach Bob Davie could not have imag-

ined a more daunting scenario. The program was coming off its worst season in more than 30 years; Notre Dame's defense allowed more points than any in the history of the school (27.6 ppg), and the kicking game was atrocious. The man who gave Davie his job, Athletic Director Mike Wadsworth, had been dismissed, and the projected starting quarterback, Arnaz Battle, had never started a collegiate football game in his career. Some experts projected that the Irish would have to win at least eight or nine games for Davie to even keep his job. To make matters worse, Notre Dame faced an opening schedule that would have frightened even Knute Rockne: No. 25 Texas

A&M, No. 1 Nebraska, No. 15 Purdue, No. 24 Michigan State and Stanford. Add that Notre Dame failed to crack the top 25 in both major preseason polls for the first time in more than a decade, and you have yourself one ugly situation. More than a few writers across the nation projected the Irish to go 0-5 on this critical run, prophesying the end of Davie's short tenure. On campus, students paraded in T-shirts reading, "Bob Davie's Farewell Tour 2000." Nevertheless, Davie forced himself to remain focused.

"I kind of read something about those T-shirts, but I never actually saw one," Davie says. "I guess I'm glad I didn't. Certainly I was aware of all the things swirling around, but I plan on being in coaching for a long time, and I understand that that is all part of it. It was never that big an issue with me from the beginning because when you start worrying about things like that, I think your priorities get out of line."

Looking at last season's struggles, Davie decided that defense was his top priority. In order to produce the complete turnaround necessary to be successful at containing the nation's top offenses, Davie decided early that he would spend the majority of his time drilling the defense.

"Last January, I made the decision that I was going to be totally involved with the defense and the special teams," he says. "I just felt going into this season with the problems we had on defense last year, with who we played this year ... that it was in our best interests for me to spend the majority of my time with the defense and to call the defenses."

However, the Irish defense was not the only part of the team that needed a serious overhaul: Notre Dame's 1999 kicking numbers were downright awful. The Irish were only 8-18 on field-goal attempts, and they missed five PATs. Worse yet, Notre Dame failed to sign any kickers to replace Jim Sanson, who graduated last spring. The position came down to a three-man race: Sanson's backup David Miller, former Irish soccer player Matt McNew and untested sophomore Nick Setta. The job appeared to be Miller's — until three days before the season opener against Texas A&M. Setta's performance in practice caused Davie to name him the starting kicker against the Aggies.

"People saw there were problems with the kicking game and wanted to make a

change," Setta says. "The biggest thing for me was to get that first extra-point kick and then go out and have fun."

It took some time before Setta got the opportunity to kick that PAT. Early in the second quarter, the Aggies took a 7-0 lead, and Irish fans became very nervous. Battle was struggling to run the offense, and Texas A&M appeared in control. The second half of that game set the tone for the rest of Notre Dame's season. The defense held the Aggies to 10 points, Battle gained momentum and Setta proved he could kick. Notre Dame trampled a major football program and picked up its first win in 10 months, putting to rest the prophesy that Notre Dame would begin 0-5.

"It's funny in retrospect looking back on comments at the beginning of the season, saying ND would go 0-5 and finish with a losing season," says defensive end Grant Irons. "The only people who believed in us were us, and by that I mean the students, this team, the coaching staff, the alumni and everyone who makes up the Notre Dame family."

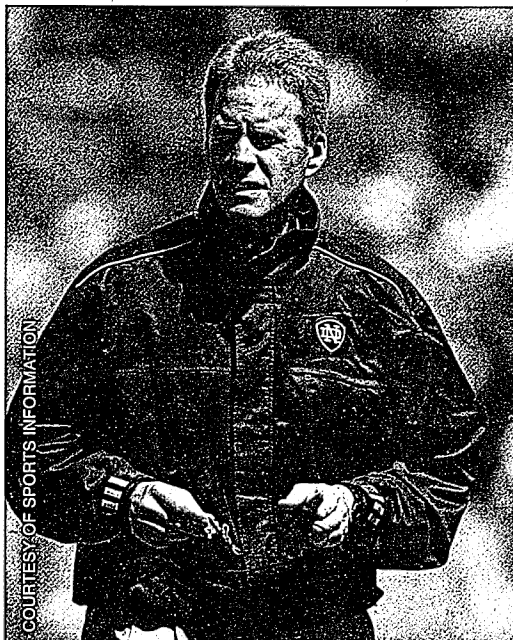
Despite the victory, the Irish were far from over the hump. The top-ranked Cornhuskers rolled into town, and virtually no one thought Notre Dame had any chance of victory. Four quarters later, the Irish were tied at 21 with Nebraska. However, they were without Irons, whom they would later discover was lost for the season. In addition, Battle was playing with an injured wrist. A day after the game, Notre Dame discovered that Battle was also done for the year. The eventual 27-24 overtime loss was scarcely the worst news of the weekend.

Davie immediately searched for the answer to a question he had not anticipated: Who would replace Arnaz Battle? Listening to the plea of several members of the team, Davie chose Gary Godsey, a 6-foot-7, 240-pound sophomore, rather than handing the ball to one of his three freshmen recruits.

The situation was a nightmare for Rogers. "We used Arnaz Battle almost like he was another tailback back there," he says. "We kinda designed the offense around him — in hindsight, probably too much. So when Arnaz Battle goes down, now we have Gary Godsey in hand, [and] the option game is essentially no aid. He's not really the accomplished passer he needs to be because of his inexperience,

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and, consequently, the offense went into a shell."

The team's only hope was to get to the open weekend following the Michigan State contest, since a single week was not enough time to completely revamp an offensive strategy. The campaign started well, with a narrow victory over Purdue in which the special teams supplied the majority of the offense. However, the luck of the Irish ran dry a week later in East Lansing. Sparked by a late touchdown pass on fourth down, the Spartans defeated Notre Dame, setting the Irish back to 2-2.

"What we were trying to do was get to the open date," Rogers says. "We damn near made it. Other than the long pass Michigan State made, we had a chance of coming out of that 3-1."

The offense was largely ineffective under Godsey, and the fate of the football team was handed to a freshman: Davie and Rogers chose Matt LoVecchio to lead the Irish down the homestretch.

"We get to the open date and things have got to change," Rogers explains. "We have to get more production out of

the quarterback position, so we kind of rolled bones. We go with Matt LoVecchio. Matt LoVecchio was really chosen because I felt he could manage a game better than the other two kids at this point in time."

LoVecchio did not disappoint. In his first collegiate start, he threw two touchdown passes, both in the first half and both to David Givens, leading the Irish to a 20-14 victory over Stanford. Each of his next six starts yielded similar results. LoVecchio provided the charge the Irish needed, rattling off seven consecutive victories and a 9-2 regular-season finish.

"I think [LoVecchio] played a major role [in the Irish success]," Battle says. "I went down in the quarterback position. Matt stepped up as a freshman into a big role and showed character and how he could lead this team."

Rogers was also impressed by LoVecchio's performance. "Because of who he was, he handled the situation great," he says. "He's a guy who's calm, collected, really wasn't taken up with the idea that Joe Montana played the position or [that] we've got Southern Cal this week. That's not part of his makeup, and, consequently, we were good enough with the other 10 people on the field to get things done for those seven games."

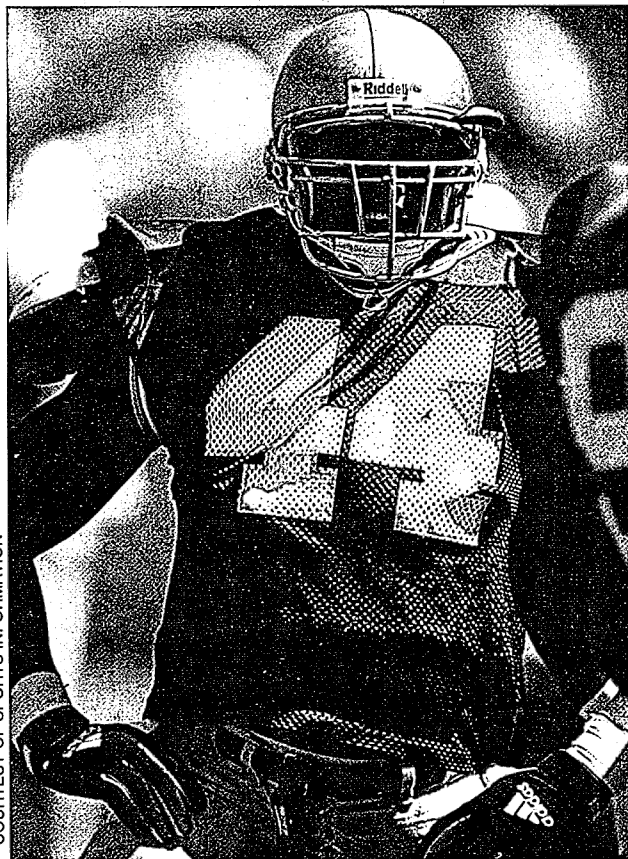
Finally, it was what the other 10 people on the field did that caught the nation's attention. Notre Dame tied the NCAA record for fewest turnovers in a season, relinquishing the ball only eight times.

"In an era where people are more reckless with the football, to tie that record is really a feat," Davie says.

The 9-2 effort also impressed the commissioner of the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, earning the Irish its first Bowl Championship Series game appearance. Waiting for Notre Dame was upstart Oregon State University, a program that had recently broken a streak of 28 consecutive losing seasons. Their hunger was plainly evident, as they pounded the Irish in Tempe, Ariz., posting a 41-9 victory. The embarrassing loss caused many to conclude that Notre Dame did not belong in the game at all. Rogers was not among this crowd.

"I certainly don't believe that if you play them again that that kind of thing is going to happen," he says. "If they were better than us, they weren't that much better than us. That game is as disappointing for me as any I've ever coached be-

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COURTESY OF SPORTS INFORMATION

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— Grant Irons

cause I think we're a hell of a lot better football team than we showed that night. We flat out got out-played, we got out-coached, and, essentially, we didn't block."

Whether or not Notre Dame should have fared better is irrelevant now. The Irish completed a stunning turnaround, following a 5-7 season with an appearance in a BCS bowl. But Notre Dame is not out of the danger zone. Going into 2001, the Irish must fill major holes on the same defensive line that made 2000's success a possibility. Notre Dame's biggest loss is team MVP and captain Anthony Denman, who was the only 2000 Irish All-American (second team). However, the Irish must also replace Tony Driver, Lance Legree, B.J. Scott and Brock Williams, the latter opting last Friday to pass on his fifth year of eligibility in favor of entering the NFL draft. Irons's return should bring some stability to the defense, but without more help, the team could suffer.

"It's going to be tough," Irons says. "[Driver, Legree, Scott and Williams] are special players and special people. You can't replace those players, those people. But we do have a great nucleus returning to the defensive line, and we're excited to get to winter training to see what we can do."

The offensive situation presents an additional challenge. Rumors are swirling that freshman quarterback Jared Clark is considering leaving Notre Dame, since LoVecchio is established and the program is rapidly promoting Carlyle Holiday. Regardless, Notre Dame would once again be one injury away from a quarterback without a single collegiate game played. Davie denies any prospect of Clark considering a departure, although he failed to support his refutation.

"There are always going to be rumors," Davie says, chuckling. "I fully expect Jared Clark to be here competing for a starting position."

The wide receivers are without a coach. Shortly after the USC game, wide receivers

coach Urban Meyer left Notre Dame to become the head coach at Bowling Green State University. The timing of this move is pivotal, as Davie only recently decided to convert Battle into a receiver. Both Rogers and Battle were disappointed, but not discouraged by Meyer's departure.

"I was kind of hoping he'd stay and help me [become a receiver]," Battle says. "He's such a great coach. Hopefully, coach Davie can go out and get a great coach, and he'll do just as great a job."

"Any time a coach leaves, it's never good," Rogers adds. "Stability in the staff is one of the things that makes you successful."

However, other than Meyer, stability on staff has been Notre Dame's greatest strength this off-season. Davie signed a contact extension through 2005, Rogers turned down the opportunity to be head coach at Rutgers in order to remain offensive coordinator at Notre Dame and Kevin White's position as athletic director is secure.

Stability will be crucial in 2001, as the Irish face one of the toughest schedules in school history, including the first contest in Lincoln, Neb. against the Cornhuskers, who finished No. 8 in the AP poll after routing Northwestern 66-17 in the Alamo Bowl. Davie has an added concern for this contest. "I don't have the exact statistics, but I bet Nebraska has lost one game out of the last 60 at home," he says.

The Irish then have an open weekend before nine straight weeks without another bye week. They first travel to face Purdue in West Lafayette, Ind., another hostile college football environment. Then, following a home date against Michigan State, the Irish travel south to play Texas A&M under the September Texas sun.

"Those games we played at home last year [Nebraska, Purdue and Texas A&M], now we have to go play those teams *on the road*," Davie says. "We have to be that much better next year than we were this year."

"You're talking about playing nine straight games with no open date," Rogers adds. "You've got a hell of a schedule to play."

"Nine-and-two didn't just happen," he continues. "It was a concerted effort of a lot of people in there [in the football department]. They've got the ability to take us from a 9-2 season and a BCS invitation back to a BCS invitation and into a position where we can win a national championship in the next couple of years. That's the goal." □