

# Notre Dame Scholastic Football Pages

Volume 143

Issue 7

6 December 2001

# Rebuilding the House of Rockne

With Davie gone, Jon Gruden is an early favorite to lead the Irish back to glory

GERARD MESKILL

It's almost eerie the way recent major events for Notre Dame football happen to correspond to the liturgical calendar. In 2000, Kevin White arrived in South Bend to take the helm as athletic director just one day after Palm Sunday. Just as Christians celebrate the anniversary of Jesus' triumphant arrival into Jerusalem as they await Easter, Irish fans celebrated White's arrival as the beginning of a resurrection in Notre Dame football.

Nineteen months later, White has made his first major stride toward such a rejuvenation. On Sunday, the first day of Advent, White informed the college football world that Bob Davie had been dismissed. True to form, as that Sunday marked the beginning of the vigil for the birth of Jesus, so too did it begin the wait for Notre Dame's savior.

Of course, there's no real connection between religion and Notre Dame football. (Basilica bells ringing after home football wins is just a coincidence.) Nevertheless, after Davie's lackluster five-year tenure, the Irish faithful are not willing to settle for much less than a football god at the team's helm.

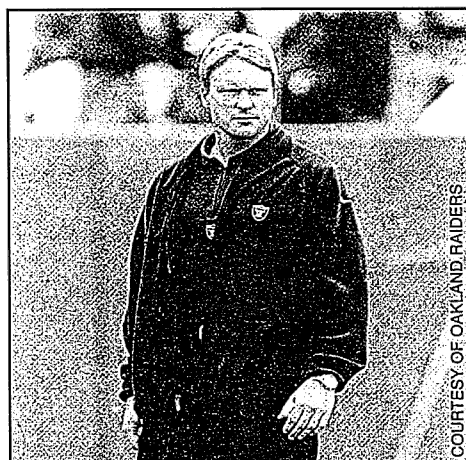
Such job requirements eliminate 99 percent of the football world. What remains is a short list of football deities, namely the Oakland Raiders' Jon Gruden, the Jacksonville Jaguars' Tom Coughlin, and the University of Oregon's Mike Bellotti. Here's a breakdown of why any of these three gridiron titans would make a perfect elixir for what ails the Irish:

## Jon Gruden

Now that Davie is officially gone, speculation has reached a crescendo that Gruden might be headed to South Bend. His wide appeal with the Notre Dame community is obvious. He grew up in South Bend an ardent Notre Dame fan. His mother painted a mural of Notre Dame Stadium on his basement wall. His father was an assistant under Dan Devine. Gruden was even quoted recently as saying: "To see that marching band walking across campus at 8 o'clock in the morning, to look up and see Touchdown Jesus and the Golden Dome, to feel Rockne's

ghost, the best word I can use to describe it is chilling. Every time I see Notre Dame on TV, it gives me goose bumps."

Enough said. Jon Gruden loves Notre Dame, and, right now, Notre Dame loves Gruden right back. But that doesn't answer two very important questions: One, will Jon



**THE CHOSEN ONE** Jon Gruden, well-known as an Irish supporter, is many fans' favorite to replace Bob Davie. The unexpired contract he holds with the Oakland Raiders is, however, a factor that must be considered.

Gruden leave Oakland for Notre Dame? And two, is Jon Gruden the right man for the job?

The answer to the first question is fiercely debate. According to ESPN's Joe Theismann, there's no chance. "If I could pick one NFL coach I would want at Notre Dame, it would be Gruden because I know him and his commitment and his passion and love for the university," he says. "But it ain't going to happen — period."

I'm not wholly convinced, though. Yes, Gruden is locked up by the Raiders through next season. Yes, his team looks poised to make a run at the Super Bowl. And yes, all of this means that the Irish would have to wait until late January or early February to get the man in here. But it still is not hopeless.

It doesn't really matter that the Irish would have to wait. The buzz has been that leaving the office vacant that long will hurt recruiting. The truth is that Notre Dame has more

than half of its recruiting class signed. Even with a vacant office, the entire country is aware that a big name is highly likely to succeed Davie. So, if anything, the rest of Notre Dame's prospects should be enticed. No matter how long it takes to fill the void, rest assured that the Irish recruiting class will be strong.

The best person to answer questions about prying Gruden from the Raiders is none other than Gruden, himself. And guess what? He isn't saying anything. Gruden's silence is all the more reason to believe he's coming to South Bend. He knows full well that all he needs to do is definitively say that he isn't interested in the Irish head-coaching job, and all of the hype will fade away. If he really weren't interested, this is exactly what he would do. Yet he chooses not to say anything definitive, even at the expense of being distracted from his duties as an NFL coach. Don't be misled; Jon Gruden is very interested in this job, and if he receives the right offer, he's coming back to South Bend.

Will he receive that offer? Is he the best man for the job? The answer to both of those questions should be "yes." In four years with the Oakland Raiders, he transformed them from a 4-12 team into a Super Bowl contender. Gruden is considered one of the best offensive minds in football today, a quality sorely needed at Notre Dame. Unlike most NFL coaches, he favors a running-based offense, which makes him an even more valuable commodity to Notre Dame, a school whose offense has been tailored to the running game both by playbook writing and recruiting. He is a charismatic leader who demands excellence and produces results. He's perfect for Notre Dame. He should be the next coach of the Fighting Irish.

## Tom Coughlin

What if Gruden doesn't work out? The next best answer is Coughlin. True, his team is 3-7 and hasn't been competitive lately, but losing at the pro level has much less to do with the coaching staff than it does in collegiate football, since player acquisitions are the responsibility of a front office and not the coaches themselves. Of all coaches in NFL history, only five with more than

100 career wins have averaged 10 wins per season or better, a feat that Coughlin has accomplished with the Jaguars. In six full seasons of NFL football, Coughlin matched Davie's .583 winning percentage at Notre Dame. Keep in mind that lofty long-term winning percentages do not come as easily in the NFL as they do in the NCAA, making Coughlin's record appealing while Davie's is appalling. Furthermore, Coughlin's record includes Jacksonville's expansion year, a 4-12 season that set the record for most wins by an expansion team in the NFL.

Like Gruden, Coughlin is respected as an offensive mastermind, demonstrated by Jacksonville's NFL leading numbers in passing (1996) and rushing (1999). Such statistics show the versatility of Coughlin's playbook, which would revive Notre Dame's own stale offense. The 2001 Irish ranked 110th in total offense, a statistic more shameful than Davie's three 6-loss seasons.

Unfortunately, Coughlin also is under contract. However, his team's disappointing season means he will not be working this year's NFL playoffs, making him easier for the Irish to access should they decide not to wait for Gruden.

### Mike Bellotti

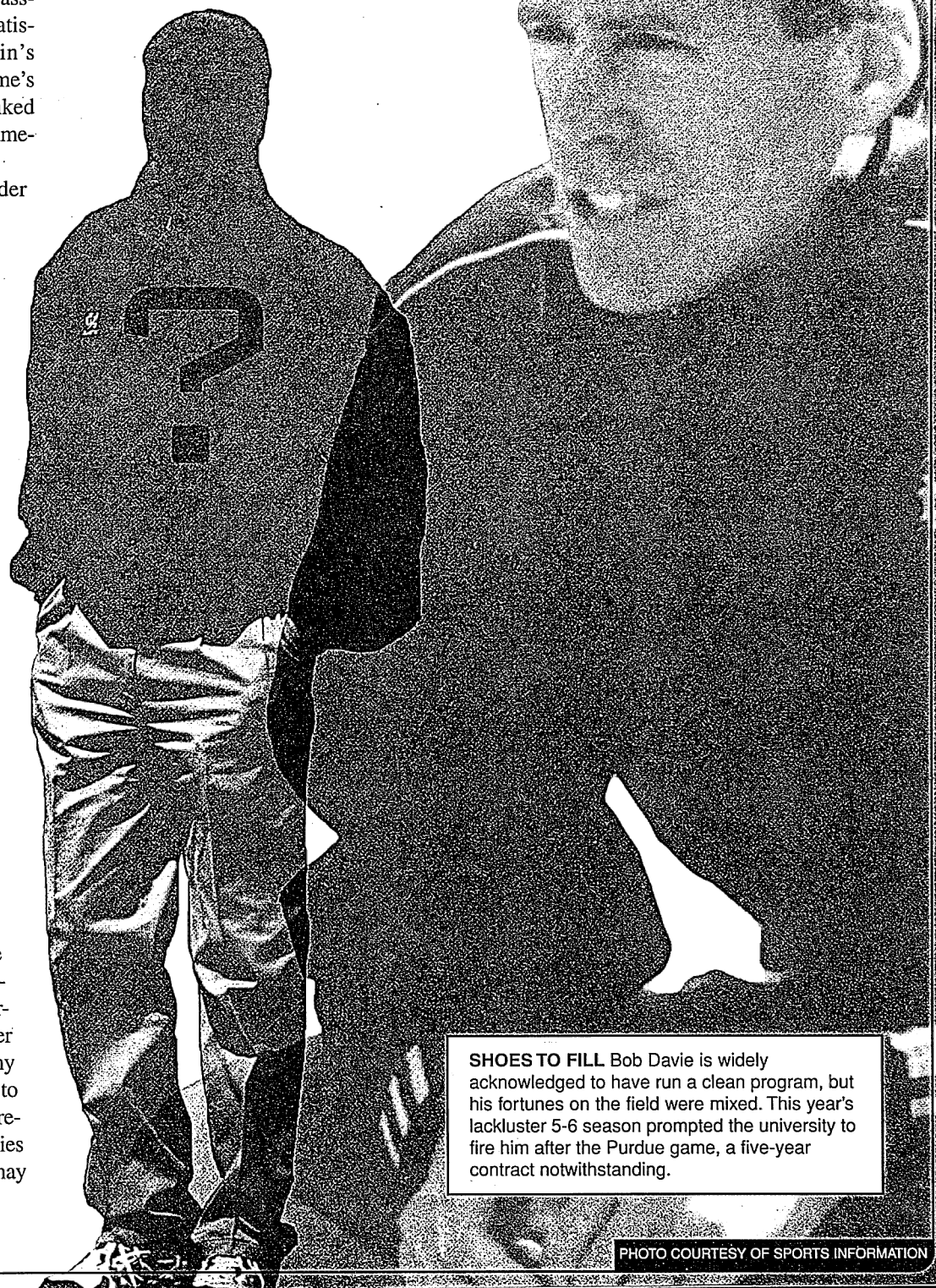
If the Irish choose to go with a college coach, Bellotti probably will be at the top of their list. His .690 winning percentage in six full seasons with the Ducks is second in school history, ranking only behind legendary Hugo Bezdek's tenure from 1913-17. For the past two seasons, Bellotti's Ducks have challenged for the national championship, ringing in an era of success never before experienced at the University of Oregon.

More enticing to the Irish is Bellotti's offensive numbers at Oregon: 55,000-plus total offensive yards and sixty-six 30-point games, both of which are Oregon records for the time period in which they have been amassed.

However, it is difficult to tell whether or not Bellotti will leave Oregon for Notre Dame. On one hand, he has achieved unparalleled success during his time at Oregon. Yet, it is also questionable whether he can improve the Oregon program any more than he has, which may lead him to seek a change. Also, it is important to remember that Kevin White has Pac-10 ties from his time at Arizona State, which may help him bring Bellotti to Notre Dame.

### The Rest

Many other names are swirling around the rumor mill. Notable among them are Stanford's Tyrone Willingham, Georgia Tech's George O'Leary, Wisconsin's Barry Alvarez and Washington's Rick Neuheisel. While all of these men are excellent football coaches, none of them deserve much consideration until Gruden, Coughlin and Bellotti all get the opportunity to turn down the Irish. But in my opinion, the offer sheet won't get past the top man on the list. □



**SHOES TO FILL** Bob Davie is widely acknowledged to have run a clean program, but his fortunes on the field were mixed. This year's lackluster 5-6 season prompted the university to fire him after the Purdue game, a five-year contract notwithstanding.