

Back on track

Notre Dame takes early lead, wins its first game of the season behind a strong defensive effort

By ANDREW GASTELUM
Sports Writer

Last year, No. 15 Michigan State rode a fake field goal play called “Little Giants” to a thrilling overtime victory over Notre Dame. It turns out the sequel is no success, as Notre Dame rolled to a 31-13 win Saturday to avoid an 0-3 start.

Down 21-10 with 48 seconds left in the first half, the Spartans (2-1) attempted a fake field goal on fourth-and-goal from the Irish 2-yard line. Notre Dame senior defensive end Ethan Johnson broke through the Spartan front and disrupted the shovel pass intended for sophomore running back Le’Veon Bell, swinging momentum to the Irish heading into halftime.

“They got some push right there on the wing side and they got penetration right there,” Spartans coach Mark Dantonio said. “It knocked the tight end back, the guard back, and because of that it didn’t go. He could not get around. Had he gotten around, it looked like [Bell] would have walked in.”

“We had some time to talk about it and just reminded our guys to be gap-conscious and do their jobs,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We just did our job on that and obviously were able to come up with a big play.”

Sophomore running back Cierre Wood led the Irish attack with two first-half rushing touchdowns. The Irish (1-2) set the tone early with an eight-play, 76-yard drive to start the game and never gave up the lead after Wood capped the drive with a 22-yard touchdown run.

Wood also scored on a 6-yard run with three minutes left in the first half to put the finishing touches on a 92-yard drive. Wood and senior running back Jonas Gray combined for 112 rushing yards in the first half.

“[Getting the running game going early] helps a lot,” sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees said. “It keeps the defense on their toes, not having to go out there and throw it a lot. It all starts with the offensive line. They did an awesome job, not only protecting me but providing running lanes. It’s fun having the whole offense click like that.”

Rees balanced the attack, throwing for 161 yards, including an interception and a touchdown — a perfectly-thrown 26-yard strike to sophomore wide receiver T.J. Jones with nine minutes remaining in the third quarter to make the score 28-



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Irish freshman running back George Atkinson runs into the end zone on an 89-yard kickoff return touchdown in the first quarter. With a 31-13 win over No. 15 Michigan State on Saturday, Notre Dame improved to 1-2 on the season.

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“T.J. and I came in together [in the spring of 2010],” Rees said. “We have a great chemistry out there. [We’re] just building the confidence with each other. [The receivers] are getting a little more used to how I’m playing, and me the same way, and I think we have done a really good job staying on the same page.”

Rees spread the ball out to four different receivers, as senior wide receiver Michael Floyd led the effort with 84 yards on six receptions.

“I thought [Rees] managed the game well,” Kelly said. “He went in there knowing that we had to find a way to control the line of scrimmage to the point where we could run the football and set up some passes later that gave us big-play touchdowns.”

Rees struggled in the first quarter, turning the ball over twice on consecutive drives. But with a minute remaining in the first quarter, freshman running back George Atkinson bailed out the struggling Irish offense and electrified the crowd with an 89-yard kickoff

return for a touchdown, giving the Irish a 14-3 lead.

“[Atkinson] certainly is someone we looked at all year,” Kelly said. “We felt like, based upon some of the things that happened on kickoff return against Michigan, this would be the right opportunity for him.”

With the return, Atkinson became the first freshman to return a kickoff for a touchdown since Raghib Ismail in 1988.

“It feels great,” Atkinson said. “[Ismail] is a great returner. I’d like to see some film and see how he does things and pick up some pointers and stuff. I was on the sideline [after scoring] and I was like ‘what just happened.’ It was like a dream come true. I thought I was dreaming. It was a great feeling to get the points on the board and to know the special teams unit put some points on the board.”

The Irish defense pressured the Spartan backfield throughout the game, which was highlighted by a colossal blind-side hit by freshman defensive end Aaron Lynch that caused Spar-

tans senior quarterback Kirk Cousins to fumble the ball in the first quarter.

“There were a number of times where they were forced to throw the football,” Kelly said. “We were able to pin our ears back, and Aaron is an outstanding pass rusher. I think he showed that today.”

Notre Dame limited the Spartans rushing attack to just 29 yards, a year after Bell and junior Edwin Baker combined for 204 yards in Michigan State’s 34-31 victory.

“Credit Notre Dame in what they were able to do,” Dantonio said. “I thought they played hard and they made plays. They made plays on the ball down the field as a secondary and got a push out of their defensive front. Cousins was on his back a lot after throwing the ball.”

Up 28-13 with four minutes left in the fourth quarter, Irish senior cornerback Robert Blanton intercepted a pass from Cousins at the Irish 3-yard line and returned it 82 yards to the Michigan State 12-yard line. Blanton’s interception set up senior kicker David Ruffer’s 33-yard field goal to put the game

out of reach.

“We woke up Monday and we went to work, and we did the same thing Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday,” Blanton said. “We just keep taking [the] coaching and knowing that we can keep getting better as a unit. We need to play great to win. The coaching staff makes sure we practice that which makes us prepared on game day.”

The Irish gained only 275 yards of offense compared to their 500-plus yard outputs in losses to South Florida and Michigan. Despite the lowest offensive showing of the season, Notre Dame came away with its first victory, something Kelly felt his team had coming.

“[It was a] much-needed victory for our kids today,” Kelly said. “We obviously felt, coming into the ballgame, we hadn’t lacked any confidence in our ability to win football games ... Sooner or later you got to get paid. You got to be validated in what you do, and so it was a big win for us.”

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player of the game

Robert Blanton
Notre Dame cornerback

Blanton recorded three tackles for a loss, deflected three key passes and sealed the game with a fourth-quarter interception.

stat of the game

29 rushing yards

Notre Dame held Michigan State to only 29 rushing yards Saturday, forcing the Spartans into a one-dimensional offense.

play of the game

George Atkinson’s 89-yard kickoff return touchdown

Atkinson gave the Irish a 14-3 lead with his kickoff return touchdown in the first quarter, the first since 2008 for Notre Dame.

quote of the game

“It was a much-needed victory for our kids today ... You got to be validated in what you do, and so it was a big win for us.”

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

report card

B

quarterbacks: Overall, Tommy Rees managed the game well, but he committed two more turnovers against Michigan State, giving him seven on the season.

B

running backs: Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray were an effective duo as the Irish gained 113 first-half yards, but were ineffective in the second half, when they garnered only one yard.

B-

receivers: Michael Floyd highlighted the receiving corps' effective downfield blocking, but the unit was mostly quiet outside of receptions by Floyd and T.J. Jones of 33 and 26 yards, respectively.

B+

offensive line: The big men up front continue to play well as a unit. The first half blocking allowed Notre Dame to take an early advantage and gave Rees time to throw for much of the game.

A

defensive line: Notre Dame allowed only 29 rushing yards in the contest and pressured Kirk Cousins throughout the game, highlighted by Aaron Lynch's sack and forced fumble.

B

linebackers: The linebackers were effective while blitzing and containing the run, but some miscues in pass coverage allowed Cousins to bail out the offense.

A-

defensive backs: Gary Gray was much improved after struggling at Michigan, and Blanton shut down the passing game before sealing the victory with his fourth-quarter interception.

A-

special teams: Between George Atkinson's kickoff return touchdown and Ben Turk's improvement after switching to rugby-style punts, the unit played a key role in the win.

A-

coaching: Bob Diaco's defensive gameplan was nearly flawless as the defense shut down Michigan State's running game. The offensive gameplan was effective in establishing the run early.

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overall: The Irish must be relieved after a nightmarish start to September, but the team still has mistakes to correct before all is well at Notre Dame.

adding up the numbers

Notre Dame gained 275 yards of total offense Saturday, its lowest total of the season.

275

3

The Irish again committed multiple turnovers Saturday, giving them 13 on the season.

7

Notre Dame sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees has turned the ball over seven times in just 10 quarters in 2011.

53

Kirk Cousins attempted 53 passes Saturday, surpassing his previous career-high of 43.

1

The Spartans scored just one touchdown in five red zone appearances Saturday. They also added a field goal.

5

The Spartans converted a first down on only five of 17 third-down attempts.

MATT SAAD/The Observer

Irish freshman defensive end Aaron Lynch recorded five tackles, three for a loss, including a sack of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins on Saturday. Lynch forced a fumble on the sack, one of two Spartan turnovers.

It was not perfect, but a win is a win

It wasn't perfect but a win is a win, and that's exactly what Notre Dame needed to prevent a stunningly disappointing start from turning into a lost season.

"We just had to find a way to win," Irish coach Brian Kelly said after his team's 31-13 win over No. 15 Michigan State on Saturday. "By any means, just find a way to win the football game."

Kelly's words couldn't be truer, as the Irish mixed-and-matched its way to a crucial victory with changes in personnel.

Freshman running back George Atkinson scored in his first game handling the kickoff return duties and punched Michigan State in the stomach, a blow from which it never recovered.

Freshman linebacker Troy Niklas and senior linebacker Steve Filer replaced starting sophomore Prince Shembo, who was absent due to a family emergency. The two did well enough for a unit that pressured Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins all day.

Junior punter Ben Turk pinned the Spartans deep in their territory a couple times after switching to the rugby-style punt midway through the game. His performance in the first two games put the defense in difficult

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positions and the team could not afford to continue to lose valuable field position.

Kelly said he was impressed with the performance of the six true freshmen who contributed Saturday, highlighted by Atkinson and defensive end Aaron Lynch's sack and forced fumble in the first quarter.

Now that the Irish seem to have found some answers at a few puzzling positions and some playmakers have sparked the team at others, the team finds itself at 1-2 and with an opportunity moving forward.

The next three opponents before the pre-USC bye week are Pittsburgh, Purdue and Air Force. The Panthers and Boiler-makers have struggled mightily in September and the Falcons are simply not a team that should give the Irish headaches.

But before Notre Dame fans prematurely place a 'W' next to those three dates, they should remember what happened in 2010.

After a 1-3 start, Notre Dame seemed to be rolling again with wins over Boston College, Pittsburgh and Western Michigan to improve to 4-3. The next two games, Navy and Tulsa, were assumed to be a cinch for Kelly's inaugural squad.

Long story short, the Irish lost both games to fall to 4-5 on the season, before reclaiming its consistency and finishing 2010 on a four-game winning streak.

While Notre Dame should (soundly) defeat its next three opponents, nothing can be taken for granted by a team that has a tendency to take two steps forward

and one step back.

At this point in time, that cannot happen. Notre Dame needs to take the next step forward and roll over the teams it should roll over. It cannot expect to rejoin the top-25 and truly belong there until it does so.

Kelly described Notre Dame's play down the stretch Saturday as "outstanding." For the team to continue to rehabilitate its 2011 campaign, it will require more mixing-and-matching and more sparks from the playmakers.

When a kickoff returner sparks the squad by bringing one back or a freshman defensive lineman forces a turnover in a key situation, it removes some of the pressure from an offensive unit lacking consistency.

Contrary to what many people believe, the 2011 squad will not be defined by the first two games. Sure, they will not be forgotten whatever their final record may be, but it is how the team responds to the 0-2 start that will determine how they are remembered.

If Notre Dame takes care of business, as it should, the next three weeks, it will enter the USC game with a 4-2 record, which, while not perfect, would mark a shift in the right direction for the program.

And that's exactly what Notre Dame needs right now.

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.

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Blanton’s key plays lead Irish ‘D’



Senior cornerback Robert Blanton returns an interception in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame’s victory Saturday. Blanton recorded three tackles for a loss and three pass deflections in the game.

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

After a week of criticism, questions and scrutiny following last week’s loss at Michigan, Notre Dame’s secondary raised questions that needed answering, and senior cornerback Robert Blanton did just that in a 31-13 Irish victory Saturday.

“We needed to show that we can go out and get the job done,” Blanton said. “It was very important because we’ve got great coaches we work with every day, and great players in the secondary. We played great as a defense, and everybody stepped up and made a lot of plays.”

The entire defense did step up against the Spartans, holding a team that had averaged 173 rushing yards a game to just 29 yards Saturday. And while the front seven smothered much of the Michigan State running game, Blanton and the defensive backs chipped in with some crucial contributions as well. Blanton alone had six tackles, three for a loss, including a disciplined read and a sack on a third-quarter reverse.

“When the opportunity presents itself, [Blanton] is always a guy who makes the play, whether it’s a ball in the air, making a tackle or making that big tackle on that reverse wildcat play they were doing,” senior safety and team captain Harrison Smith said. “So he’s just a gamer and he has a true feel for the game.”

Between the Irish defense stopping the running game and the offense opening up an 18-point lead, senior quarterback Kirk Cousins and the Spartan offense had no choice but to launch an aerial attack for much of the game. That they did, attempting a season-high 53

passes in all. For Blanton and the secondary, it was just another day’s work.

“We were pretty busy because they threw the ball a lot, but that’s fun. You love that as a [defensive back],” Blanton said. “You don’t want to give up the big play, especially when you’ve got a great lead. We just wanted to make sure we didn’t do anything as [defensive backs] back there to cost us the game.”

Blanton swung the momentum of the game with a big play of his own. As the first half drew to a close, Cousins drove the Spartans into the red zone. On first-and-goal from the 12, Blanton knocked down a pass in the end zone intended for senior wide receiver B.J. Cunningham, one of his three break-ups on the day.

On the next play, Blanton batted away a pass intended for senior wide receiver Keith Nichol, and suddenly it was third-and-long. Michigan State was unable to score on the next play, and its drive ended with a failed fake field-goal attempt that gave Notre Dame all the momentum for the second half.

“The coaches make sure we work on playing the ball every day at the highest point and squeezing the receiver,” Blanton said. “So it was just doing what I was coached that allowed me to make those plays.”

Blanton was not finished when it came to big plays, as he sealed the victory with a fourth-quarter turnover when Michigan State was attempting to cut it to a one-score deficit. The Spartans had decreased the Notre Dame advantage from 18 to 15, and after a muffed punt, two offensive plays and a penalty, they faced a first-and-goal from the 3-yard line. Cousins looked right and threw towards running back Le’Veon Bell, but the ball never arrived. Blanton had de-

flected the pass and picked it out of the air before running it back 82 yards to the Spartan 12-yard line.

“Coach [Bob] Diaco and the coaching staff made a great call and put me in a great position,” Blanton said. “[Cousins] threw the ball and I was able to make a play on it. I had my teammates out there blocking for me, and [senior safety] Jamoris Slaughter kept yelling for me to pitch it to him. It was a great play.”

The play was similar to Blanton’s interception with 4:23 remaining in the fourth quarter at Michigan that appeared to put the game out of the Wolverines’ reach. On this occasion, Blanton’s pick put the game on ice. According to Irish coach Brian Kelly, it was just another instance of Blanton leading the defense.

“[Blanton] is extremely active,” Kelly said. “He’s got great instincts. The ball is in the air, he’s going to get it. I feel confident no matter who goes against him that when the ball is in the air he’s going to make a great play on the ball.”

“And he’s a spirited guy. You talk about guys that lead by example ... He’s probably one of our more emotional leaders back there.”

Moving forward, Blanton said he knows the secondary needs to stay focused in every game.

“We’ve just got to make sure we go out there and be the same guys every day,” he said. “We all motivate each other, we all lift each other up. We’re all the energy. We’re the battery for the team. We wake up every morning and prepare to win as a team and as a unit. And we need every win.”

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scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
MSU	3	7	0	3	13
ND	14	7	7	3	31

First quarter
Notre Dame 7, Michigan State 0
Cierre Wood 22-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 10:41 remaining
Drive: 8 plays, 76 yards, 4:19 elapsed

Notre Dame 7, Michigan State 3
Dan Conroy 40-yd field goal with 1:32 remaining
Drive: 4 plays, 4 yards, 1:27 elapsed

Notre Dame 14, Michigan State 3
George Atkinson 89-yd kickoff return (David Ruffer kick) with 1:20 remaining

Second quarter
Notre Dame 14, Michigan State 10
Dion Sims 6 yd-pass from Kirk Cousins (Dan Conroy kick) with 11:57 remaining
Drive: 11 plays, 80 yards, 4:23 elapsed

Notre Dame 21, Michigan State 10
Cierre Wood 6-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 3:36 remaining
Drive: 10 plays, 92 yards, 4:49 elapsed

Third quarter
Notre Dame 28, Michigan State 10
T.J. Jones 26-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 9:30 remaining
Drive: 8 plays, 71 yards, 3:47 elapsed

Fourth quarter
Notre Dame 28, Michigan State 13
Dan Conroy 35-yd field goal with 10:56 remaining
Drive: 8 plays, 42 yards, 3:53 elapsed

Notre Dame 31, Michigan State 13
David Ruffer 33-yd field goal with 3:11 remaining
Drive: 4 plays, -5 yards, 0:21 elapsed

statistics

rushing yards



passing yards



time of possession



passing

Rees	18-26-161	Cousins	34-53-329
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rushing

Gray	12-65	Bell	7-27
Wood	14-61	Baker	10-26

receiving

Floyd	6-84	Cunningham	12-158
Wood	6-5	Martin	5-32
Jones	3-40	Bell	5-23
Eifert	2-25	Caper	4-25
Riddick	1-7	Sims	3-38

kick returns

Atkinson	4-142	Hill	4-129
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punting

Turk	4-166	Sadler	6-238
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Rushing duo dominates first half

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

After coming together for 200 yards rushing last week, the running back tandem of junior Cierre Wood and senior Jonas Gray combined for 118 yards on 18 carries and two touchdowns in the first half. The duo had five runs of at least ten yards before the break. However, the Irish managed only two rushing yards in the second half.

Irish defense smothers the run
Michigan State entered the contest with a rushing average of 175 yards per game, but Notre Dame’s defense held the Spartans to just 29 yards rushing on 23 carries. The 29 yards is the lowest running total

by Michigan State against the Irish since 1987, when the Spartans ran for 21 yards in a 31-8 loss. The Spartans were only able to gain one first down on the ground in the first half, as their longest rushing play of the game was just eight yards.

Irish respond after turnovers
The Irish committed three turnovers, bringing its season total to 13. However, the defense allowed just three points from those three Michigan State possessions, despite all three occurring on Notre Dame’s half of the field. Two of those drives ended with the Irish generating turnovers of their own, as Aaron Lynch forced a fumble of quarterback Kirk Cousins on a sack and Robert Blanton recorded a key fourth-quarter interception.

Trophy case
For the first time since November 30, 1996, Notre Dame now has control of the Megaphone (Michigan State), Jeweled Shillelagh (USC), Ireland Trophy (Boston College) and Shillelagh (Purdue). Each trophy is awarded yearly to the winner of the respective rivalry matchup.

Home cooking
Notre Dame defeated Michigan State at home for the second consecutive time after losing six consecutive matchups in Notre Dame Stadium, dating back to 1997. The Irish win marked the second victory in the last three years of the series.

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On the board

Notre Dame jumped ahead 14-3 in the first quarter and never looked back in a 31-13 victory over Michigan State. Freshman George Atkinson recorded an 89-yard kickoff return touchdown and running backs Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray combined for 113 first-half rushing yards. Cornerback Robert Blanton made several key plays for the Irish secondary, including the game-sealing interception of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins' pass in the fourth quarter. The Spartans totaled only 29 rushing yards in the game. The win was Notre Dame's first, as the Irish improved to 1-2 on the season.



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TOM YOUNG/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Several Irish defenders tackle a Michigan State running back; wide receiver Michael Floyd makes a jumping catch; running back Cierre Wood dives into the end zone for a touchdown; Wood breaks a tackle attempt by defensive end William Gholston; wide receiver T.J. Jones holds onto the ball and scores a touchdown.