

## An ugly victory

*Notre Dame struggles but comes through when it matters for 15-12 victory over Pittsburgh*

By ANDREW OWENS  
Associate Sports Editor

PITTSBURGH — It wasn't pretty. It wasn't easy. But it was a win.

Notre Dame (2-2) scored with less than seven minutes remaining to defeat Pittsburgh (2-2) 15-12 and in doing so, avoided losing its third game in four attempts to start the season.

"Well, [it was] a good win for us obviously," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "Hard fought four quarters came down to our ability to put together a very good drive at the end of the game."

The Irish trailed 12-7 until sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees found junior tight end Tyler Eifert in the end zone for the go-ahead score. The two connected again on a two-point conversion to give Notre Dame a three-point advantage it would not relinquish. Eifert reeled in four passes on that drive alone for 34 yards.

"Just guys making plays on the last drive was really what stands out," Kelly said. "Obviously two fourth down conversions, our offensive line getting a big enough push to convert — those are good signs for us in terms of being able to win closely contested football games, because you're going to have those on the way."

Pittsburgh coach Todd Graham said he was proud of Pittsburgh's game plan.

"We're capable of playing good coverage," Graham said. "We pressured the quarterback. We had a great plan."

"Defensively, I thought we played well enough to win the game. I like the character of this team and how the players have bought into it. I believe in our football team. We're getting better."

The Irish sealed the win late in the fourth quarter when Kelly kept the offense on the field on fourth-and-one from the Pittsburgh 35-yard line with 52 seconds remaining. Rees kept the ball and dove forward to gain the yard and ensure an Irish victory.

"I'm really pleased with our resilience and our toughness," Kelly said. "We're playing the kind of football we want our teams to play. It's not going to be an instant classic, but it certainly is from a football standpoint. [These are] games you have to win on the road."

Notre Dame compiled 398 yards of total offense but only mustered two scoring drives. Early in the second quarter, senior running back Jonas



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

**Notre Dame junior tight end Tyler Eifert catches a pass for a two-point conversion in the fourth quarter. Eifert also caught the preceding touchdown to give the Irish the lead they would not relinquish for the rest of the game.**

Gray sped away from the Pittsburgh defense and scampered down the sideline for a 79-yard touchdown run. It was the longest Irish run since Terrance Howard broke away from the West Virginia defense for an 80-yard burst in 2000.

"[Gray] only had three carries, but obviously a big run," Kelly said. "He showed great speed. It was a big time run, when your two-back gets in there and gets a chance and makes a big play, and that's what we expect from Jonas and that was a big play."

Overall, Notre Dame rushed for 182 yards. In addition to Gray's 84 yards, junior running back Cierre Wood added 94 yards on 23 carries.

"I thought [Wood] was solid," Kelly said. "He picked up tough yards inside. A lot of his runs were inside-out and, again, here's a guy everyone talks about his breakaway speed, but he's not afraid to stick his nose up in there between the tackles and that's what he did today."

Rees was only able to connect with senior receiver Michael Floyd four times for 27

yards due to the defensive game plan, employed by Graham.

"[They were doing] a lot of things," Kelly said. "A lot of different coverage variations. They just did a nice job. I thought we adjusted to the things we needed to."

"We started to get some pretty nice flow and rhythm and they had one three-and-out in the third quarter, but other than that we made some adjustments at halftime based upon what their game plan is and it's the first time someone has really aggressively tried to take Michael out of the game."

After racking up over 500 yards of total offense in the first two games and a 31-point effort against Michigan State, the Irish offense struggled against the Panthers. The Pittsburgh defense utilized new looks against Rees, especially coverages he had not seen before, Kelly said.

"Again, [Rees was] growing up and seeing some things," Kelly said. "There were some new looks out there for him that he hadn't seen before that we had to adjust a lot with

him. After he sees it, he gets much more comfortable. You could see his comfort level that last drive. Like I said at one time it was close to being 13- or 14-out-of-15 at throwing the football."

Rees completed 24-of-41 passes for 216 yards and turned the ball over twice, giving Notre Dame an NCAA-worst 15 turnovers in 2011. The sophomore was poised toward the end of each half, Kelly said.

"The end of the half he did some really good things in terms of throwing the football," Kelly said. "He was on a really good streak. He had to step up and he didn't get enough on the interception he threw to Eifert, but you look at him and he knows what's going on out there. You don't feel like he's rattled."

Senior kicker David Ruffer missed a field goal and the offense was hamstrung by the team's eight penalties, which lost them 85 yards overall.

"We won't do anything different [in practice]," Kelly said. "We'll keep coaching our guys. We do not accept penal-

ties as being part of the game. We demand our guys to pay attention to those things over and over again and hope it turns out better next time."

With Notre Dame's September slate now complete and the team holding a 2-2 record, Kelly said he is happy with the competitiveness and development of the squad.

"I told you this many times — I like the way we compete," he said. "I'd like to win 37-0 too, but winning's winning. It's not easy. You go on the road against a BCS team and hold them to 12 points, and find a way to win. I like that development. We're developing an expectation with our guys that in a close game we're going to win. Those are good dynamics. We put this one behind us and we have expectations that we're going to win every game."

"It was a tough, blue-collar kind of day and that's what was required of everybody and that's what we got out of our team and it was enough to win and get out of here."

Contact Andrew Owens at [aowens2@nd.edu](mailto:aowens2@nd.edu)

### player of the game

**Tyler Eifert**  
Notre Dame tight end

*With Michael Floyd double-covered on every play, Eifert took advantage, recording eight catches for 75 yards and a touchdown.*

### stat of the game

**8 for 8 completed passes**

*Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees completed each of his eight passes on the game-winning drive late in the fourth quarter.*

### play of the game

**Eifert's six-yard touchdown catch from Rees in the fourth quarter.**

*Notre Dame took back the lead for good when Rees found Eifert at the goal line to cap off an 11-play, 85-yard drive.*

### quote of the game

*"It was a tough, blue-collar kind of day ... that's what we got out of our team and it was enough to win and get out of here."*

**Brian Kelly**  
Irish coach



# report card

- B

**quarterbacks:** Tommy Rees was inaccurate all game long and struggled to read Pittsburgh's coverages. But when he was most needed, Rees played his best football.
- B+

**running backs:** Cierre Wood had a quiet 94 yards in another typically solid outing. Jonas Gray only had three carries, but one of those was a crucial 79-yard touchdown run.
- B+

**receivers:** Tyler Eifert had a stellar game at tight end, but Michael Floyd could not find a way to shake double coverage. Theo Riddick and TJ Jones struggled to replace him.
- B+

**offensive line:** Pittsburgh's complex and varied blitzes often confused the line and made Rees' day difficult. On the late fourth-and-one play, however, the line came up with a huge push.
- A-

**defensive line:** Quality play has simply become standard for this unit, which harassed Tino Sunseri all day long and limited dynamic running back Ray Graham to just 61 yards.
- A-

**linebackers:** Darius Fleming had his best game of the season, with three tackles for loss and two sacks. Prince Shembo and Manti Te'o each added sacks and helped contain Graham.
- B

**defensive backs:** The secondary allowed Sunseri to complete 22 of his 30 passes. Sunseri only had 165 yards, however, as the Irish prevented any long passing plays.
- C-

**special teams:** David Ruffer missed his only field goal attempt, Kyle Brindza had a kickoff go out of bounds and Ben Turk was again underwhelming for a unit that continues to struggle.
- B+

**coaching:** Brian Kelly and Charley Molnar were slow to adjust to Pittsburgh's defensive changes, but the late-game playcalling focusing on Eifert was absolutely spot-on.

3.15

**overall:** There were a lot of mistakes, and the Irish very easily could have lost this game. But they didn't, and that's what really matters.

# adding up the numbers

- After three catches on the opening drive, senior receiver Michael Floyd had just one catch the rest of the game.

1
- 2

Notre Dame had its lowest turnover total of the season against Pittsburgh, losing the ball only twice.
- Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees found junior tight end Tyler Eifert four times on the game's pivotal drive.

4
- 8

Notre Dame recorded eight tackles for loss against the Panthers, including a season-high six sacks.
- Panthers running back Ray Graham managed only 89 yards after averaging 140 yards in his first three games.

89
- 154

Notre Dame earned 154 yards on the ground in the first half, the most in one half under Irish coach Brian Kelly.



Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees, right, struggled throughout much of the game but completed all eight of his pass attempts on the game's pivotal drive, including four to junior tight end Tyler Eifert, left.

# Irish finally able to win an ugly game

PITTSBURGH — Last week, the Irish took down a ranked team at home, completely shutting down a prolific running game and executing well on offense.

This week, Notre Dame struggled mightily to even break 10 points against a Pittsburgh team that came into the contest ranked 119th in the country against the pass.

Yet this week's win is more encouraging than last week's, and it might even be more important — because this week, the Irish displayed a quality too often missing in the last few years: the ability to find a way to win despite playing extremely poorly.

Notre Dame teams of the recent past have been talented. When that talent was in sync, the Irish could compete with nearly any team. But when an opponent unveiled an unexpected defense, or concentrated on taking the primary offensive weapon out of the game, the Irish were flummoxed. When a game got ugly, the Irish fell apart and rarely found a way to win despite poor play.

After showing flashes of changing that attitude at the end of 2010,



Allan Joseph  
Sports Editor

Notre Dame opened 2011 looking like it had regressed. Despite over 500 yards of offense in each of their first two games, the Irish could not find a way to make a play when they needed one. While 90 percent of the plays went very well for Notre Dame, all of their mistakes happened in the most critical 10 percent.

Not so this week. It was an ugly game, especially for the offense. Tommy Rees struggled to find receivers all day, displaying very little of the trademark accuracy that had earned him prolific passing numbers in each of the first two games. Facing blitzing schemes it had never seen on film, the offensive line struggled to adequately protect Rees for much of the game.

Yet when 90 percent of the plays went very poorly, the most important 10 percent were the best snaps the offense took all game. Needing a touchdown to retake the lead, the Irish marched down the field and got the critical points. It wasn't pretty, but they got it done. After struggling all game, the offense clicked into gear at the most critical moment.

The defense also got in on the act. Two weeks ago, the defense only needed to hold Michigan scoreless for just 30 seconds and couldn't do so. Saturday was a different story. Pittsburgh quarterback Tino Sunseri had had some success throughout the game, but he had no chance of succeeding late, when it

mattered most.

This is an encouraging sign for the Irish. For too long, Notre Dame has struggled in ugly games. It has had difficulty gritting out wins through sheer willpower. Yet that is what elite teams do.

Rarely do top-10 teams breeze through every game on their schedule. There comes a time when every top-tier team must find a way to win in spite of poor play against an inferior — or sometimes superior — opponent.

The Irish are not an elite team. But it cannot become one without the instinct to win. Notre Dame always finds itself in close games. Less-talented teams always play their best against the Irish, even if the Irish don't. These are the games Notre Dame lost in the past — Tulsa and Navy from 2010 come to mind.

Now it seems things are changing. Notre Dame can grit out an ugly victory. It will have to do so again for this season to be a success. Talent is not enough. Recent history shows that.

But if the Irish can continue to play their best during the most critical points of the game, look out. They will find a way to win a lot more in the future.

Contact Allan Joseph at [ajoseph2@nd.edu](mailto:ajoseph2@nd.edu)  
The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.

Check out more coverage at  
**ndsmcobserver.com**



# Eifert steps up with Floyd covered



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Junior tight end Tyler Eifert was Notre Dame’s leading receiver Saturday, hauling in eight passes for 75 yards, including a fourth-quarter touchdown that would eventually be the game-winner.

By ANDREW OWENS  
Associate Sports Editor

PITTSBURGH — It isn’t easy to replace an All-American receiver who is responsible for 41 percent of the team’s receptions through three games, especially when facing a five-point fourth-quarter deficit in enemy territory. Tyler Eifert was up to the task however, and almost singlehandedly drove Notre Dame to victory Saturday.

“Tyler Eifert was huge,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “He went up in traffic two or three times, got hit, held on to the football.”

The junior tight end caught eight passes for 75 yards and a touchdown in the 15-12 Irish victory over Pittsburgh, but most important were his four receptions on Notre Dame’s game-winning drive, including the eventual touchdown toss from sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees.

“I wasn’t surprised [about the coverage],” Eifert said. “I turned and showed Tommy my numbers and there was a window there and he squeezed it in.

“It would normally go to Floyd or one of the outside guys. They backed off underneath Floyd, which left me open.”

Eifert slid between two defenders and snared the six-yard pass from Rees to culminate an 11-play, 85-yard drive.

Senior receiver Michael Floyd, who entered the contest with 31

receptions in three games, was bottled up for most of the afternoon and caught only one pass after the opening drive. He finished the day with four receptions and 27 yards.

Pittsburgh double-teamed Floyd for most of the game.

“[Eifert] was really big [on the final drive], obviously,” Kelly said. “He’s the one guy if you’re going to double Mike out and try to play three-on-two with our other two receivers, he got a lot of singular coverage and we found him and he made a lot of big catches.”

Rees also found an open Eifert in the end zone for the two-point conversion, which ensured Notre Dame would not lose on a field goal in regulation. Rees completed all eight passes on the drive and connected with Eifert for 34 yards. The junior said his role had more to do with responding to Pittsburgh’s coverage than the design of the play.

“It’s not like we call a play and say ‘throw it to Eifert,’” he said. “It’s just what their coverage is, how they’re playing and where the holes in the defense are.

As Pittsburgh continued to double-team Floyd on the drive, Kelly said the team made adjustments to get Eifert involved.

“Part of our overall passing game is you can’t take [all of the receivers] away ... It was just a matter of communication with Tommy. ‘Listen, here’s the guys you have to keep sight on,’ and Tyler was going to be one of those guys,” he said. “Tommy

did a nice job. The route combinations we had set up featured him. They were play calls to feature Tyler Eifert not as the third or fourth, but the primary receiver.”

Eifert said the team adjusted its plans according to the dynamic of the game.

“It’s just something that develops during the game,” Eifert said. “They come out and adjust to us and we make adjustments to them and just kind of go back and forth the whole game.”

While the offensive performance overall was sloppy, Kelly said it was important for the Irish to pull off the road victory and have the players elevate their game, as Eifert did in the final stanza.

“[Scoring] came a little easy for us the first three weeks, but this was a struggle for us, but we kept finding ways to move the football,” Kelly said. “You’re going to be presented with some of these kinds of closely-fought last drive and come up with a big stop or a big conversion.”

Eifert said it was a special feeling to catch the eventual game-winning touchdown, the first such experience of his collegiate career.

“I’ve been waiting,” he said. “It’s pretty cool to get a touchdown at that time ... Anytime you get a win at the college level it’s always exciting and something to be proud of.”

Contact Andrew Owens at  
aowens2@nd.edu

# Gray gets first career touchdown

By ALLAN JOSEPH  
Sports Editor

PITTSBURGH — Senior running back Jonas Gray’s 79-yard scamper in the second quarter was the first touchdown of his college career. It was also the longest touchdown run by a Notre Dame player since Terrence Howard’s 80-yard run at West Virginia on Oct. 21, 2000.

“It was a big-time run,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “When your two-back gets in there and gets a chance and makes a big play — that’s what we expect from Jonas.”

## Mistakes still a problem

Notre Dame had two turnovers in the first half against Pittsburgh, bringing its total to 15 on the season — most of which have come at bad

times. Six turnovers have occurred while the Irish were in the red zone, and another five occurred when Notre Dame was backed up inside its own 20-yard line.

The Irish also committed eight penalties for 85 yards.

“We’ll keep coaching our guys,” Kelly said. “We do not accept penalties as being part of the game. We demand our guys to pay attention to those things over and over again.”

**Defense shines**

The Irish defense stepped up again Saturday, allowing the Panthers just 3.8 yards per offensive play and limiting the Notre Dame recorded six sacks Saturday, the highest total under Kelly and the most since the Irish had eight sacks against Hawaii in the 2008 Hawaii Bowl.

## Tuitt plays nose

Freshman defensive lineman Stephon Tuitt saw significant action at the nose guard position against Pitt, splitting time with senior Sean Cwynar and sophomore Louis Nix.

“It’s just another move towards getting [the freshmen] on the field,” Kelly said. “If you move one of the guards down to double him, it frees up two guys and they’re one-on-one — and you’ve got to double Tuitt. If you don’t double Tuitt inside, it’s a pass rush and you’re in trouble.

“Normally nose guards aren’t great pass rushers. Tuitt’s big enough to play the position every down, and he gives you a great pass rush.”

Contact Allan Joseph at  
ajoseph2@nd.edu

# scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
Pitt	3	3	6	0	12
ND	0	7	0	8	15

**First quarter**  
Notre Dame 0, Pittsburgh 3  
Kevin Harper 45-yd field goal with 2:16 remaining.  
Drive: 4 plays, -5 yards, 1:13 elapsed

**Second quarter**  
Notre Dame 7, Pittsburgh 3  
Jonas Gray 79-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 13:44 remaining  
Drive: 1 play, 79 yards, 0:14 elapsed

Notre Dame 7, Pittsburgh 6  
Kevin Harper 23-yard field goal with 9:13 remaining.  
Drive: 11 plays, 54 yards, 4:31 elapsed

**Third quarter**  
Notre Dame 7, Pittsburgh 12  
Hubie Graham 3-yd pass from Tino Sunseri (Two-point conversion failed) with 6:36 remaining.  
Drive: 19 plays, 80 yards, 8:24 elapsed

**Fourth quarter**  
Notre Dame 15, Pittsburgh 12  
Tyler Eifert 6-yd pass from Tommy Rees (Eifert pass from Rees) with 6:48 remaining.  
Drive: 11 plays, 85 yards, 4:40 elapsed

# statistics



passing				
Rees	24-41-216	Sunseri	22-30-165	
rushing				
Wood	23-94	Graham		21-89
Gray	3-84	Brown		3-12
Rees	5-6	Sunseri		12-6
receiving				
Eifert	8-75	Graham		8-43
Riddick	6-52	Shanahan		6-64
Floyd	4-27	Street		2-21
Jones	3-31	Jones		2-18
Toma	1-16	Saddler		1-8
Wood	1-10	Patton		1-5
kick returns				
Atkinson	2-60	Patton		1-16
field goals				
Ruffer	0-1	Harper		2-2
tackling				
Te'o	10	Gruder		8
Blanton	7	Williams		7
Shembo	6	Thomas		6





COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

# Gritting out a win

Notre Dame struggled for most of the game, stifled offensively by Pittsburgh's new blitzing schemes. The Irish came through in the fourth quarter, however, and escaped Heinz Field with an ugly 15-12 victory. Junior tight end Tyler Eifert played a key role in the victory, hauling in a team-high eight catches for 75 yards and the pivotal touchdown catch in the fourth quarter. The Notre Dame defense contained Pittsburgh's dynamic running back Ray Graham and held stiff in the fourth quarter to protect the three-point lead. While it wasn't a pretty win, it was enough for the Irish to improve to 2-2 before heading to Purdue next weekend.



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Linebacker Darius Fleming tries to block a pass from Pittsburgh quarterback Tino Sunseri; quarterback Tommy Rees hands the ball off to running back Cierre Wood; Wood stiffarms a Pittsburgh defender; the Irish celebrate after Jonas Gray's 79-yard touchdown run; Notre Dame celebrates a late sack.