

Shamrock smackdown

Ground game, fast-paced offense power Irish to 45-21 victory over Maryland

By ERIC PRISTER
Senior Sports Writer

LANDOVER, Md. — Irish coach Brian Kelly said Notre Dame’s focus throughout the week leading up to its Shamrock Series game against Maryland was to pick up the tempo and to start fast.

The Irish did just that, scoring on their first possession of the game and three other times in the first half on their way to a 45-21 win over the Terrapins on Saturday.

“We asked our team to get off to a fast start,” Kelly said. “We did that. I thought that was important for us to come here and really make a statement early on. I thought we did that — put some points on the board. So when we look at it, [it was] a very good victory for our football team, and I liked their preparation. I had mentioned to many of you around us that I liked our preparation during the week and that paid off today.”

Senior running back Jonas Gray topped the 100-yard mark on the ground for the first time in his career, carrying the ball 21 times for 136 yards and two touchdowns, including the first score of the game on Notre Dame’s first drive. Kelly said Gray’s performance has come to be expected at this point in the season.

“Jonas Gray was what we have all been talking about,” he said. “He’s been a consistent performer for us, and he’s really emerged as a big-time back. That’s why we went with two backs in the backfield for the first time this year; we played both Jonas and [sophomore running back] Cierre [Wood] because they’ve been so productive for us.”

Wood came up just short of rushing for 100 yards as well, gaining 99 yards on the ground against the Terrapins. He took one of his 18 carries into the end zone, scoring from three yards out with just under nine minutes to go in the third quarter.

“We knew we would be able to run the ball so we started with a physical mentality and continued that throughout the game,” Gray said. “It was a big emphasis this week to play at a fast tempo and we did that well. When we do that, we’re a pretty good offense that’s hard to stop. [The defense] can’t line up as



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Irish senior running back Jonas Gray runs through Maryland tacklers as they try to bring him down. Gray headlined a dynamic rushing attack Saturday, rushing the ball 21 times for 138 yards and two touchdowns.

fast as they want to, just things like that, and [Kelly] is doing a great job of dialing plays up.”

The Irish defense also put points on the board when sophomore cornerback Lo Wood intercepted Maryland sophomore quarterback Danny O’Brien’s pass in the third quarter and returned it 57 yards for the score.

“[Senior safety] Jamoris [Slaughter] did a great job of closing on that screen and had read that screen out and forced a high throw, and Lo was in a good position,” Kelly said. “It was good to get Lo in the game — he’s going to have to play for us next year so it was nice to see him get a pick six.”

Gray put the Irish on the board first, capping off an eight-play, 67-yard drive by barreling his way into the end zone from one yard out. After senior kicker David Ruffer added a career-

long 52-yard field goal, sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees connected with senior receiver Michael Floyd to give the Irish a 17-0 lead.

The Terrapins answered on the very next drive when O’Brien completed a 13-yard pass to senior wide receiver Quentin McCree for a touchdown. McCree led Maryland with five catches for 76 yards and the score.

Not to be outdone, the Irish took the kickoff and drove 70 yards on 13 plays to take a 24-7 lead going into halftime. Gray once again finished the drive for Notre Dame, powering through the line on fourth-and-one from the one-yard line with just 29 seconds left in the half.

“We felt like it was about — it was less than a foot,” Kelly said of the decision to go for the touchdown on fourth-and-one. “Even if we weren’t a very good running team I was going to probably go for it no matter what. But we’ve been running the ball physically and controlling the line of scrimmage against most teams, so we felt that was not a difficult call at the time.”

Rees, who completed 30 of his

38 pass attempts and threw for two touchdowns, said the increased tempo kept Maryland on their heels and was the key to Notre Dame’s offensive success.

“We wanted to go with a hurry-up with the tempo a little bit, and it worked out,” he said. “I think we caught them when they weren’t lined up a little bit and we could tell throughout the game, the guys were getting tired and I think that has a lot to do with how we pushed our tempo.”

Maryland coach Randy Edsall said that, while there were bright spots for his team, it suffered from too many mistakes throughout the game, as it has all season. “Notre Dame has an outstanding football team,” he said. “They had something to do with those missed tackles, and offensively we couldn’t get a whole lot going and, same thing, dropped passes. That didn’t help with the continuity of what we needed to get done.”

The Irish scored twice more in the third quarter — Cierre Wood’s three-yard touchdown and Lo Wood’s interception return — to extend their lead to

38-7. Notre Dame has now outscored its opponents 77-13 in the third quarter this season.

“I think our guys settle into the game,” Kelly said when asked about the halftime adjustments he makes. “They’re tuned in. We can talk to them and they know exactly what we want to do in the third quarter and they go out and do it. Again, our guys understand how important it is to get some adjustments made at halftime. There’s good communication, and our guys go out and execute.”

Notre Dame is now 5-0 in the month of November under Kelly. The Irish will try to continue that streak Saturday when they take on Boston College in their last home game of the season.

“I think for us the process is what we do during the week because we’re not at the point where it’s habit, that we do it the right way all the time,” Kelly said. “We’re making good progress there. We really can’t fly at 35,000 feet, so to speak. We have to really focus on the day-to-day.”

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player of the game

Jonas Gray
Notre Dame running back

Gray rushed for two touchdowns and tallied a career-high 136 yards on 21 carries, powering the Irish rushing attack to a big night.

stat of the game

49 first-half plays

The Irish ran 49 plays in the first half, showing off a higher-tempo offense that helped Notre Dame open up a 24-7 halftime lead.

play of the game

Receiver Michael Floyd’s 19-yard second-quarter touchdown catch

Floyd’s athletic catch midway through the second quarter gave the Irish a 17-0 lead, leaving no doubt about who would win.

quote of the game

“I thought that was important to come here and really make a statement early on. I thought we did that.”

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

report card

A-

quarterbacks: Tommy Rees missed a couple of throws, but overall he played a very solid game. There's no arguing with 296 yards, two touchdowns and most importantly, no turnovers.

A

running backs: Jonas Gray and Cierre Wood were an absolute nightmare for the Terrapin defense, as Gray ran for 136 and Wood for 99. The backs are playing their best football right now.

A-

receivers: Robby Toma played superbly in place of the injured Theo Riddick, and Michael Floyd had another great game. Tyler Eifert continues to be a very good tight end.

B

offensive line: While rolling up 212 yards on the ground is an accomplishment for any offensive line, the Terrapins recorded 10 tackles for loss, including three sacks.

B

defensive line: Aaron Lynch had five tackles, and Louis Nix was active at nose guard all game long, but the defensive line didn't create much pressure or stop the run particularly well.

B+

linebackers: Danny Spond, Troy Niklas and Kendall Moore saw some much-needed playing time late in the game and generally played well. Spond did get run over on Maryland's late score.

A-

defensive backs: Maryland had some success throwing the ball downfield, averaging nearly 11 yards per completion, but Lo Wood's interception return for touchdown was a great moment.

A-

special teams: David Ruffer and Ben Turk turned in two of their best performances of the season, highlighted by Ruffer's 52-yard field goal. The punt-return ineptitude continues.

A-

coaching: The decision to play at a faster tempo paid off, and Brian Kelly's willingness to stick with the running game is paying big dividends. The third-quarter domination is impressive.

3.52

overall: It wasn't perfect, but it was a very good effort against a vastly inferior opponent. It's good to see the Irish beat up on a far-worse team, but it doesn't tell us much.

adding up the numbers

During his tenure at Notre Dame, Brian Kelly has won all five games played in November.

5

5

The Irish racked up 508 yards of offense Saturday, the fifth time Notre Dame has surpassed 500 yards this season.

The Irish have triumphed in 32 of the last 33 times they have outrushed their opponent.

32

3

The Irish have given up just three rushing touchdowns to opposing running backs this year.

Senior running back Jonas Gray scored a touchdown for the seventh straight game.

7

6

With 31 career touchdown passes, Tommy Rees is tied with Joe Theismann for sixth in school history.



Freshman cornerback Josh Atkinson, left, and sophomore linebacker Danny Spond sing the Alma Mater after Notre Dame's 45-21 victory over Maryland in FedEx Field on Saturday.

This was just one game — nothing more

LANDOVER, MD. — Let the record show on Nov. 12, 2011, Notre Dame defeated Maryland by a score of 45-21 at FedEx Field, home of the Washington Redskins of the National Football League.

Let the record show Notre Dame should have won that game, just as it did.



Douglas Farmer
Editor-in-Chief

Let the record show the Irish fulfilled expectations in their Washington, D.C., experience.

And let the record show nothing more than that.

This was not more than one game. This was not a trendsetter. This was not a beginning.

"It was just today," Irish coach Brian Kelly said in his postgame press conference. "We'll see what happens on the 19th of November."

For 15 years, Notre Dame fans have waited for the Irish to routinely demolish lesser foes. Such has happened twice this year — Saturday's win and the 38-10 shellacking at Purdue. Both games were nowhere near as close as their scores reflect. Notre Dame's second-team defense gave up one touchdown to the Boilermakers and two to the Terrapins.

But Notre Dame has also twice limped to victory over far inferior

teams this year, against Pittsburgh and Wake Forest, winning by a combined total of 10 points. Neither the Panthers nor the Demon Deacons should have been able to hang with the Irish for more than a quarter, yet both games came down to the closing minutes.

And let's not even discuss the embarrassment of handing a victory to an over-matched team in your season-opener. Oh yes, that happened.

As Kelly alluded, the home finale against Boston College is another chance of this nature: Run a lesser team off the field, or slouch to the Eagles' level and hope for the best. More of the former is necessary before Notre Dame fans can breathe easily. More complete performances — from the rushing game to the passing defense to clean special teams play — are necessary before any game can be approached with comfort.

"Our players truly understand how to win football games now, and it starts with our preparation during the week," Kelly said. "They know that they have to be able to bring all three phases. We'll look to repeat that next week, and that's the challenge to our football team."

If the Irish rise to that challenge, repeating a dominating performance one week later, then perhaps it will be time to trust in the talent on the field. Notre Dame is more talented than the vast majority of teams in the country, and certainly more talented than most teams it plays

(though not Stanford). But that talent has been overshadowed by clumsiness and apathy for nearly 15 years.

That talent needs to shine against teams like Maryland more often. Unfortunately, having shined against Maryland is not enough. That was just one day, one game.

Then again, that was senior running back Jonas Gray's first career 100-yard game. Junior receiver Robby Toma set career highs in both receptions and yards. Sophomore cornerback Lo Wood even found the end zone.

The special teams unit made no mistakes, even pinning the Terrapins deep in their own territory on one punt. Irish sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees did not make as many knuckle-whitening throws as he usually does. The Irish defense continued its third quarter dominance, holding the ninth of its 10 opponents scoreless in the 15 minutes following halftime.

Are these isolated performances, or the beginnings of trends? Are these encouraging signs, or the fruit Kelly can finally reap? Are these the product of a terrible Maryland team, or an it-has-actually-arrived Notre Dame team?

We'll see what happens on the 19th of November.

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

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Toma steps up in Riddick’s absence



Irish junior receiver Robby Toma runs after a catch during Notre Dame’s 45-21 victory over Maryland on Saturday. Toma finished the game with seven catches for 73 yards.

By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

LANDOVER, Md. — One man goes down, the next man comes in.

For a Notre Dame squad plagued by injury this season, Irish coach Brian Kelly’s philosophy of replacing injured athletes with capable replacements has been embraced successfully at several positions. Junior Robby Toma’s career-high seven catch, 73-yard performance Saturday as a starter in place of injured wide receiver Theo Riddick was just another chapter of the same book.

“He’s been waiting for his chance, his opportunity, and he’s a classic case of our ‘next man in’ [philosophy],” Kelly said.

Toma is no stranger to the starting lineup, moving up to the first team against Army and USC last season following injuries to Riddick and sophomore receiver TJ Jones. When Riddick was unable to recover from a hamstring injury in time for Saturday’s contest, Toma said Kelly notified him just moments before kickoff.

“Coach [Kelly] came up to me and asked me if I was in, and I didn’t know, so I looked up at the board, and I told him I was in,” he said.

Featuring soft hands and uncommon acceleration, the 5-foot-9-inch Toma ignited an Irish offense in the

first half. The receiver contributed a 26-yard catch to keep Notre Dame’s first drive alive, eventually leading to the first of five offensive touchdowns in the game.

“Last year I was put in a similar situation when Theo also went down, so I was ready for this. Football’s a game I love, and I prepare for it, so it felt like a normal game for me,” Toma said.

Obviously keeping in mind that one of my best friends, Theo, went down, but just to get out there and play felt really good.”

Toma credits the talented cast of fellow Irish receivers for drawing the Terrapin defense’s attention away from him, allowing Toma to find open space and create an easy target for sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees.

“[Toma] played great,” Rees said. “He’s a special player, and he’s got a knack out there on the field. It’s good to have him back out there. We can’t wait to get Theo back and get all those playmakers out there together.”

The Laie, Hawaii, native, who maintains a close relationship with junior linebacker Manti Te’o, committed to Notre Dame after the two led Punahou School to its first state football championship in 2008. Toma said both players take a similar approach to the game rooted in their

high school playing days.

“Growing up, football is a game that our parents and our friends and people we look up to play,” he said. “It really isn’t a game where we’re from, it’s a lifestyle, and we just love playing football.”

While Te’o became one of the nation’s most heralded recruits, Toma’s commitment to Notre Dame under former coach Charlie Weis went largely unnoticed. Despite less attention and less playing time than Te’o thus far into their careers, Toma’s determination and disciplined approach carried him through a difficult period.

“It was tough. Everybody had their two cents,” he said. “They thought my recruiting was this, or they thought it was that. I just never paid attention to it because I felt Coach Weis recruited me because he felt I could play. Now, I feel like I’m showing everybody that I was recruited to come here.”

While Riddick’s status remains questionable for Notre Dame’s next contest against Boston College, moving forward Kelly said the coaching staff faces the additional challenge of incorporating both slot receivers into the Irish attack.

“Well, I think Robby is somebody we’ve always had high regard for,” he said. “We’ve tried to get him in the games, and I think we’ve managed to get him in early in games. It’s incumbent on us now to continue that rotation with Robby and Theo when Theo’s back.”

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Notre Dame returns to top-25 polls

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Editor-in-Chief

LANDOVER, Md. — Notre Dame jumped into the polls for the first time since the preseason Sunday. The current three-game winning streak landed the Irish as No. 24 in the AP Top 25, and No. 25 in the USA Today Coaches poll.

“I think when you get ranked you’re playing better obviously,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said Sunday. “We started 0-and-2, and to be ranked this late in the season means we’ve played better football since that 0-and-2 start.”

Four Notre Dame opponents finish higher than the Irish in the AP poll: No. 8 Stanford, No. 12 Michigan State,

No. 18 USC and No. 20 Michigan.

What’s a sack?

For the first time in nearly five complete games, Notre Dame gave up a sack Saturday, and then it gave up two more. Irish sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees was last sacked against Pittsburgh, a span of 195 pass attempts between the losses of yards.

“It was just a matter of time,” Kelly said. “When you’re throwing the football as much as we do at times, and they’re a pretty good front.”

Rees, meet Theismann

Legendary Notre Dame quarterback Joe Theismann spoke at a pep rally on the National Mall on Friday

night, receiving cheers from Redskins fans who remember his NFL days.

Come Saturday, Theismann’s name became relevant again, when Rees tied his mark of 31 career touchdown passes, good for sixth in Irish history.

At his current rate, Rees would rank one notch above Theismann in career winning percentage. The statistic necessitates a minimum of 20 starts, and Rees only has 13, but his .846 winning percentage would rank fifth among Notre Dame quarterbacks, just beating Theismann’s .840. John Lujack leads the rankings with a record of 20-1-1, good for .932.

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scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
ND	10	14	14	7	45
MD	0	7	0	14	21

First quarter

Notre Dame 7, Maryland 0
Jonas Gray 1-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 11:25 remaining
Drive: 8 plays, 67 yards, 2:33 elapsed

Notre Dame 10, Maryland 0
David Ruffer 52-yd field goal with 2:47 remaining
Drive: 11 plays, 57 yards, 2:39 elapsed

Second quarter

Notre Dame 17, Maryland 0
Michael Floyd 19-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 8:29 remaining
Drive: 7 plays, 80 yards, 2:31 elapsed

Notre Dame 17, Maryland 7
Quintin McCree 13-yd pass from Danny O’Brien (Nick Ferrara kick) with 5:18 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 61 yards, 3:04 elapsed

Notre Dame 24, Maryland 7
Jonas Gray 1-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 0:29 remaining
Drive: 13 plays, 70 yards, 4:43 elapsed

Third quarter

Notre Dame 31, Maryland 7
Cierre Wood 3-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 8:48 remaining
Drive: 14 plays, 84 yards, 6:06 remaining

Notre Dame 38, Maryland 7
Lo Wood 57-yd interception return (David Ruffer kick) with 7:18 remaining

Fourth quarter

Notre Dame 38, Maryland 14
C.J. Brown 24-yd run (Nick Ferrara kick) with 14:02 remaining
Drive: 14 plays, 84 yards, 6:06 remaining

Notre Dame 45, Maryland 14
Tyler Eifert 34-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 5:31 remaining
Drive: 7 plays, 77 yards, 3:23 remaining

Notre Dame 45, Maryland 21
D.J. Adams 2-yd run (Nick Ferrara kick) with 0:37 remaining
Drive: 13 plays, 67 yards, 4:47 elapsed

statistics

rushing yards



passing yards



time of possession



passing			
Rees	30-38-296	O'Brien	14-21-132
rushing			
Gray	21-136	Adams	16-55
receiving			
Floyd	9-90	McCree	5-76



MATT SAAD/The Observer



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

An easy victory

Despite playing just 12 miles from Maryland’s campus, Notre Dame took the field for its off-site, ‘Shamrock Series’ home game to raucous cheers and never looked back. The Irish started fast, jumping out to a 17-0 lead midway through the second quarter. Senior running back Jonas Gray and junior running back Cierre Wood combined for 235 rushing yards on the night, and junior quarterback Tommy Rees added 296 passing yards in another 500-yard performance for the Irish offense. The 45-21 victory improved Notre Dame’s record to 7-3 on the season and put the Irish back in the top 25 of the AP and USA Today coaches’ polls.



MATT SAAD/The Observer



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer



MATT SAAD/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Irish running back Cierre Wood stiffarms a Maryland defender; receiver TJ Jones goes airborne with the ball; receiver Michael Floyd runs downfield after catching a pass; tight end Tyler Eifert heads for the end zone; Wood runs through open space.