Irish Insider

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Comeback canceled

Irish drop second straight game as comeback falls short at Pittsburgh

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Pittsburgh running back Ray Graham spins out of Irish safety Sergio Brown's tackle during a 53-yard run in the second half of the Panthers 27-22 win over Notre Dame Saturday. The loss dropped the Irish's record to 6-4 on the season.

PITTSBURGH — Golden Tate nearly brought the Irish back, but he couldn't quite do it alone.

Neither could Dion Lewis, but he did enough.

Lewis rushed for 152 yards and a touchdown and No. 8 Pittsburgh beat Notre Dame 27-22 Saturday.

"It was a great win for the program, a great win for the kids, particularly those who were around here five years ago when we had a bad experience here," said Panthers coach Dave Wannstedt, referring to Notre Dame's 42-21 win over Pittsburgh in 2005 in both his and Irish coach Charlie Weis' debuts.

The loss dropped the Irish to 6-4, while the Panthers moved to 9-1, 5-0 in Big East play.

"It's dismal," junior linebacker Brian Smith said of the mood in Notre Dame's locker room.

Pittsburgh quarterback Bill Stull completed 15-of-27 passes for 236 yards and a touchdown.

Irish quarterback Jimmy Clausen threw for 283 yards, most of them in the second half, and a touchdown and an interception.

Tate wouldn't let the Irish lose. Down 27-16, he caught a punt, dodged a tackler and burst through the coverage team for an 87-yard return touchdown to make the score 27-22 with 7:16 left in the fourth quarter. On the two-point conversion attempt, Clausen's shovel pass to tight end Mike Ragone fell incomplete and the score stayed the same.

Tate also had nine catches for 113 yards and a touchdown.

"We got Golden out there because he's the one guy with the ball in his hands who has a chance of making a big play," Weis said.

As good as he played, though, Tate wanted more.

"I didn't get open enough," he said. "Put it on me. I need to make more plays."

Notre Dame forced a punt and got the ball back near the end of the game, but Clausen was hit as he threw on third down and the pass fell incomplete. The play was reviewed and ruled a fumble, and Pittsburgh ran out the clock. Clausen said he couldn't tell during the play whether or not he fumbled or the ball was knocked out when his arm was moving forward.

"You have to have faith and know who you're throwing to and I knew who I was throwing to with [Baldwin]."

Bill Stull
Pittsburgh quarterback

The Irish started to move the ball in the fourth quarter. Clausen completed 6-of-8 passes on an 11-play, 71-yard drive that ended with an 18-yard touchdown pass to Tate. That made the score 27-16 with 9:10 remaining. Clausen completed 9-of-12 passes for 95 yards and a touchdown in the fourth quarter.

Before that, however, the offense stalled.

"It was kind of weird looking back on it, I know we were moving the ball and then something happened to set us back," Clausen said.

Pittsburgh gained 193 yards on the ground while Notre Dame had only 66. Running back Armando Allen played well in the first half, but was used sparingly in the second. He finished with 14 carries for 77 yards.

Punter Eric Maust struggled again for the Irish. He punted five times for an average of 24.8 yards per punt and three punts traveled less than 20 yards.

Notre Dame's defense picked up for the offense in the first half. The Irish defense stopped Pittsburgh on the Notre Dame 43-yard line and forced a punt, but Irish linebacker Darius Fleming was called for a personal foul when he ran into punter Dan Hutchins, extending the Panthers' drive. Pittsburgh got into the red zone, but stalled, and Hutchins kicked a 34-yard field goal to make the score 3-0 with 9:40 left in the first quarter.

Junior kicker David Ruffer, filling in for freshman Nick Tausch because he was hurt during warm-ups and could not play, made a 42-yard field goal in the first quarter to tie the score at three.

In the second quarter, Clausen heaved the ball up to receiver Michael Floyd in double coverage. Safety Jarred Holley came down with the ball, which flew long of Floyd, for Clausen's fourth interception of the season.

Stull connected with receiver Jonathan Baldwin for two important passes on the ensuing drive, one a 21-yard third down conversion to the Notre Dame 36-yard line and the next a 36-yard touchdown. The score gave Pittsburgh a 10-3 lead with 2:31 left in the first half.

"He [Baldwin]'s awesome," Stull said. "You have to have faith and know who you're throwing to and I knew who I was throwing to with him."

Early in the second half, Stull and Baldwin again connected for a long gain. Stull threw the ball up to Baldwin, who has five inches on cornerback Darrin Walls, and he came down with it for a 51-yard completion. Walls had good position but couldn't get high enough to make a play on the ball. That play set up a 38-yard field goal from Hutchins to make the score 13-3 with 9:15 left in the third quarter.

Freshman running back Ray Graham finally broke through Notre Dame's run defense with a 52-yard run down the sideline, thanks in part to a block from Stull. Graham scored on the next play from two yards out to make the score 20-3 with 6:36 left in the third quarter.

Two penalties almost derailed Notre Dame's drive after Graham's touchdown, but Clausen scored on a quarterback sneak. Panthers defensive end Greg Romeus blocked the extra point, however, so the score remained 20-9 with 14:56 left in the fourth quarter.

After waiting all game, Lewis finally broke free. He broke a 50-yard touchdown run right up the middle of Notre Dame's defense to make the score 27-9 with 12:44 left in the game.

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player of the game

Dion Lewis
Pittsburgh running back

Lewis piled up 152 yards and scored the 50-yard touchdown to put the Panthers up by 18.

stat of the game

3

The number of first half points for Notre Dame in the past two games as the Irish have struggled to move the ball.

play of the game

Jimmy Clausen's fourth-quarter fumble

The controversial turnover ended any hope of another late comeback for Clausen and the Irish.

quote of the game

"It felt like we were moving the ball and we let it slip away."

Jimmy Clausen
Irish quarterback

report card

B- **quarterbacks:** Jimmy Clausen was constantly under pressure and had an average game. The deep interception looking for Floyd was a poor decision, but the ending fumble can't be held against him.

B **running backs:** Armando Allen ran for 5.5 yards per carry in his return, but again the Irish fell behind early and abandoned the run game in the second half.

B+ **receivers:** Golden Tate had another incredible performance, but couldn't win the game on his own. Michael Floyd had 100 yards for the second straight game, but again had a couple of drops.

D+ **offensive line**: The Irish faced a very talented Pittsburgh front four, and struggled all night trying to give Clausen time to throw. The Panthers did not have to bring blitzers to pressure Clausen.

C **defensive line:** Pittsburgh running back Dion Lewis ran for 152 yards, and the Irish did not record a sack against Pittsburgh quarterback Bill Stull.

C **linebackers:** Harrison Smith led the Irish in tackles and Brian Smith had a couple of nice defensive plays. Manti Te'o was surprisingly quiet in this game.

C+ **defensive backs:** Darrin Walls had a nice game in his return to Pittsburgh, but just gave up two big plays against a phenomenal receiver in Jonathan Baldwin. Tackling needs improvement.

C+ **special teams:** David Ruffer filled in nicely for Nick Tausch in the game but had an extra point blocked. Tate's punt return was critical, but Eric Maust's struggles killed the field position game.

D **coaching:** The offensive gameplan was extremely tentative in a game where an early momentum swing could have gone a long way. The Irish never seem to start games well or seem fired up early.

2.22 **overall:** A close loss to a very good Pittsburgh team, but an all-around frustrating performance.

adding up the numbers

48 Straight starts made by senior offensive tackle Sam Young, tying the Notre Dame record set by Maurice Crum Jr. and Tom Zbikowski

7 100-yard receiving games for Golden Tate this season, the most of any player in FBS.

2 Jimmy Clausen's rank in school history in passing touchdowns after notching one against the Panthers.

2 Field goals missed by Nick Tausch after the freshman kicker had converted a school record 14 straight.

24.9 Average yards per punt for Eric Maust on his five attempts, with a long of 35 yards.

3 Times Tate and Michael Floyd have each had 100 receiving yards in a game this season. The Irish have lost all three games.

.583 The winning percentages at Notre Dame of coaches Charlie Weis, Tyrone Willingham and Bob Davie.

1 Wins for Charlie Weis against ranked opponents in his five seasons. Weis' record at Notre Dame is now 35-25.

IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Sophomore wide receiver Michael Floyd leaps for a catch on 4th-and-1 late in Notre Dame's 27-22 loss to Pitt. Floyd caught seven passes for 107 yards in the loss.

Irish need to get aggressive

Bill Brink

Managing Editor

PITTSBURGH — Ever watch Golden Tate get up after a tackle?

He stands there for a second, sometimes staring down the guy who caught him, thinking.

"I'm only on the 37-yard line right now," he thinks, frustrated. "Why am I not in the end zone?"

He's got a passion that leads him to believe every play he's a part of should result in a touchdown. He's fiery, he's talented and he's aggressive.

Aggressive. Interesting idea. Going out there throwing everything you've got into winning the football game.

Notre Dame played too conservative against Pittsburgh, biding its time near the ropes while dodging Pitt's punches.

"It was how we called the game," Weis said. "We were playing the game relatively conservatively. When you're playing on the road, raucous crowd, you don't play the same way at home as you do on the road."

Weis has somewhat of a point. You don't want to be overaggressive when you step into the ring against Pittsburgh, especially since the ring is in Pittsburgh's backyard. Don't go throwing haymakers or the Panthers will duck and retaliate. So yeah, don't heave it up to Tate or run double reverses every play, because they'd be swinging at air and Pitt would eventually pop them in the jaw.

But don't stay conservative and dance around Pittsburgh either. Don't let them come to you, because they'll wear you down with body blow after body blow so eventually you're sucking wind and will be unable to protect the quarterback in the final minutes.

Wait for your chance and time your punches.

Here's the thing: that aggressiveness isn't dormant, or hiding, or impossible to use against Pittsburgh for whatever reason. It's there, in plain sight.

Take the fourth-and-one play fake to Floyd against Pittsburgh. Easily Charlie Weis' best call of the year aside from the fake field goal. Floyd is wide open, but Clausen had to throw off his back foot because he had a man in his face. If he hits Floyd in stride it's a touchdown. Either way, the Irish land a big hook that has Pitt reeling.

Same thing with the Wildcat plays with the Irish backed up on their own goal line. What's the vanilla call there? Run the ball, avoid a turnover that would give the Panthers the ball in plus territory. But no, the Irish took a chance at getting something started. Weis called the plays "drive starters," and they were great play calls, because they gave the Irish a chance to rip off a 25-yard first down and get some momentum. The execution is a different story, but the idea was there.

But that was it.

Why? Clausen, Floyd and Tate are the same players at home or on the road, and the Irish had Armando Allen healthy in this game. Coming into the game 6-3 off of a home loss to Navy, Notre Dame should have thrown the whole playbook at Pittsburgh.

The Wildcat failed twice, but the Irish never revisited the formation at any point during the rest of the game. Who knows what happens? We all saw Tate's playmaking ability. Get him the ball enough, in any formation, and good things happen. Allen ran well out of traditional backfields, racking up 77 yards on 14 carries. He could spark something as well.

Instead, Allen's main role in the second half was the depository for Clausen's short dump-off passes.

In short, the Irish needed to approach this game the way Tate did: every play presents the opportunity to knock Pittsburgh senseless. Tate took a short pass from Clausen and powered his way into the end zone, then zipped by the entire Panther punt coverage unit for an 87-yard return touchdown two minutes later. A quick jab followed by an uppercut to the chin. He wanted this.

On the road, against a top-10 team at night, is not the time for conservative playcalling. The Irish had danced around so much that by the time they had to land a knockout blow, late in the fourth quarter, they had no rhythm and instead took a right cross that dropped them to the canvas.

The Irish offense is stacked with playmakers and can hang points on anyone in the country. But those playmakers have to be utilized for this to occur. If they're not, the offense is no better than average.

Average won't win football games. With Notre Dame's season slowly careening out of control, now is not the time for the coaches to ease off the accelerator and pump the brakes. They need to floor it.

They can land the punches. But they've got to throw them first.

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

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Tune in to the Irish Insider podcast at ndsmcobserver.com/podcast

Panthers control line of scrimmage

IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Junior quarterback Jimmy Clausen looks over the Pittsburgh defense Saturday in Notre Dame's 27-22 loss to the Panthers. Clausen was sacked twice and hurried throughout the game by the Panthers defensive line.

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

Even though Dion Lewis and Ray Graham are the ones that will show up on the highlight reels, Pittsburgh's offensive and defensive lines were just as crucial in the victory over Notre Dame Saturday night.

"Pitt's defensive ends gave us a lot of pressure which forced Jimmy Clausen to step up," Irish coach Charlie Weis said. "He was under heat all game long."

Even though the Panthers, sacked Clausen just twice on the night, the second resulted in a game-ending fumble, and the junior quarterback had defenders in his face throughout the game.

Pittsburgh junior defensive end Jabaal Sheard said after the game that the Panther line worked as a unit during the week to bring the heat Saturday night.

"I think in the past, I was getting a little bit predictable on my moves," Sheard said. "This week I really studied my opponents and with the help of [junior defensive lineman] Greg [Romeus] getting a good push, I was able to get some good pressure."

"Pitt's defensive ends gave us a lot of pressure which forced Jimmy Clausen to step up."

Charlie Weis
Irish head coach

The Irish are 69th in the country in sacks allowed, having given up a total of 21 so far this season.

An offensive line that was supposed to be much improved coming into the season also cost the Irish when senior guard Dan Wenger was whistled for a 15-yard personal foul penalty for a chop block on Notre Dame's final drive of the game. The penalty pushed the Irish back from 2nd-and-1 to 2nd-and-16.

"Just when we had momentum on that last drive, all of a sudden we're up by the [40-yard line] and now there's a chop block," Weis said.

While the Irish pass blocking struggled, Notre Dame's rushing attack appeared to be effective early, and junior running back Armando Allen finished with 77 yards on just 14 carries. Once the Irish fell behind, though, they were forced to all but abandon the run in an effort to play catch-up.

On the other side of the ball, the Pittsburgh offensive line was just as effective, allowing no sacks on senior quarterback Bill Stull. The Irish only hurried Stull four times on the night.

The Panther offensive line also dominated in the running game, as freshmen combined for 209 yards on the ground. Each also had a run of over 50 yards.

"We let up too many big plays," Irish junior linebacker Brian Smith said. "We lost."

Notre Dame's run defense appeared to have improved in games against Washington, USC and Boston College. In each game, the Irish were able to limit the yards of usually explosive running backs.

Last week against Navy, though, the defense appeared to take a step back, allowing 348 yards on the ground to the Midshipmen's triple option offense.

The Irish now rank 72nd nationally in rushing defense, allowing an average of 153.2 yards per game.

Notre Dame also notched only two tackles for loss, while Pittsburgh racked up a dominating eight tackles behind the line of scrimmage.

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Notes: Record number of close games

By JENN METZ
Sports Writer

The Irish loss to the Panthers Saturday marks the eighth game Notre Dame has played in decided by seven points or less this season — a school record. The 1990 team played in seven such close games, including the Orange Bowl.

◆ Junior quarterback Jimmy Clausen became the second Irish quarterback to achieve over 3,000 passing yards in both multiple and consecutive seasons in Notre Dame history (2008 and 2009). He joins Brady Quinn (2005 and 2008) in holding that title. Clausen's one touchdown pass (to junior wide receiver Golden Tate at 9:10 in the fourth) grants him sole possession of second place on the career passing touchdown list. Saturday's game was his 11th-straight with at least one touchdown pass.

◆ Tate registered Notre Dame's first punt return for a touchdown since Tom Zbikowski against North Carolina in 2006. His 87-yard run was the seventh-longest punt return in school history and the longest since 1989.

◆ Tate and sophomore wide receiver Michael Floyd both recorded more than 100 receiving yards at the game, with 113 and 107 yards respectively. For the first time in school history, two players have had over 100 receiving yards in two straight weeks. Last week against Navy, Tate had 132 yards and Floyd had 141 yards. The 100-yard receiving game is Tate's seventh of the season and the 13th of his career. He now is tied with Tom Gatewood (1969-71) for the Notre Dame record for 100-yard receiving games.

◆ Tate's 113 receiving yards bring his season total to 1,172 this season, placing him behind only Jeff Samardzija (1,249 in the 2005 season) for best in single-season school history. Tate has 2,383 career receiving yards, which ranks fourth best in Notre Dame career history.

◆ Senior right tackle Sam Young registered his 48th consecutive start against Pittsburgh, tying the school record held by Tom Zbikowski (2004-07) and Maurice Crum (2005-08). He is the only Notre Dame offensive lineman to start every game of his career.

◆ Junior kicker David Ruffer started in Saturday's game after freshman Nick Tausch suffered an injury in pregame warm-ups. The former kicker for Siegfried's interhall football team recorded his first career point with his 42-yard field goal at 4:21 in the second quarter. He later made one of two point after attempts. Ruffer joined the team in the 2008 season before the game at Washington.

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scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
Pittsburgh	3	7	10	7	27
Notre Dame	0	3	0	19	22

First quarter

Pittsburgh 3, Notre Dame 0
Dan Hutchins 34-yd field goal with 9:40 remaining.
Drive: 13 plays, 62 yards, 5:20 elapsed.

Second quarter

Pittsburgh 3, Notre Dame 3
David Ruffer 42-yd field goal with 5:40 remaining.
Drive: 9 plays, 43 yards, 4:21 elapsed.

Pittsburgh 10, Notre Dame 3
Jonathan Baldwin 36-yd pass from Bill Stull (Hutchins kick) with 2:31 remaining.
Drive: 6 plays, 80 yards, 3:09 elapsed.

Third quarter

Pittsburgh 13, Notre Dame 3
Hutchins 38-yd field goal with 9:15 remaining.
Drive: 5 plays, 59 yards, 2:32 elapsed.

Pittsburgh 20, Notre Dame 3
Ray Graham 2-yd run (Hutchins kick) with 6:36 remaining.
Drive: 2 plays, 55 yards, 0:47 elapsed.

Fourth quarter

Pittsburgh 20, Notre Dame 9
Jimmy Clausen 1-yd run (Ruffer kick blocked) with 14:56 remaining.
Drive: 11 plays, 80 yards, 6:40 elapsed.

Pittsburgh 27, Notre Dame 9
Dion Lewis 50-yd run with 12:44 remaining.
Drive: 5 plays, 80 yards, 2:12 elapsed.

Pittsburgh 27, Notre Dame 16
Golden Tate 18-yd pass from Clausen (Ruffer kick) with 9:10 remaining.
Drive: 11 plays, 71 yards, 3:34 elapsed.

Pittsburgh 27, Notre Dame 22
Tate 87-yd punt return (Clausen pass failed) with 7:16 remaining.

statistics

total yards

ND	349
Pitt	429

rushing yards

ND	66
Pitt	193

passing yards

ND	283
Pitt	236

time of possession

ND	30:52
Pitt	29:08

passing

Clausen	27-42-283	Stull	15-27-236

rushing

Allen	14-77	Lewis	21-152
Tate	2-5	Graham	3-57
Riddick	2-0	Hynoski	2-1

receiving

Tate	9-113	Baldwin	5-142
Floyd	7-107	Dickerson	4-46
Allen	8-33	Byham	2-17
Kamara	2-25	McGee	2-11
Riddick	1-5	Turner	1-12
		Lewis	1-8

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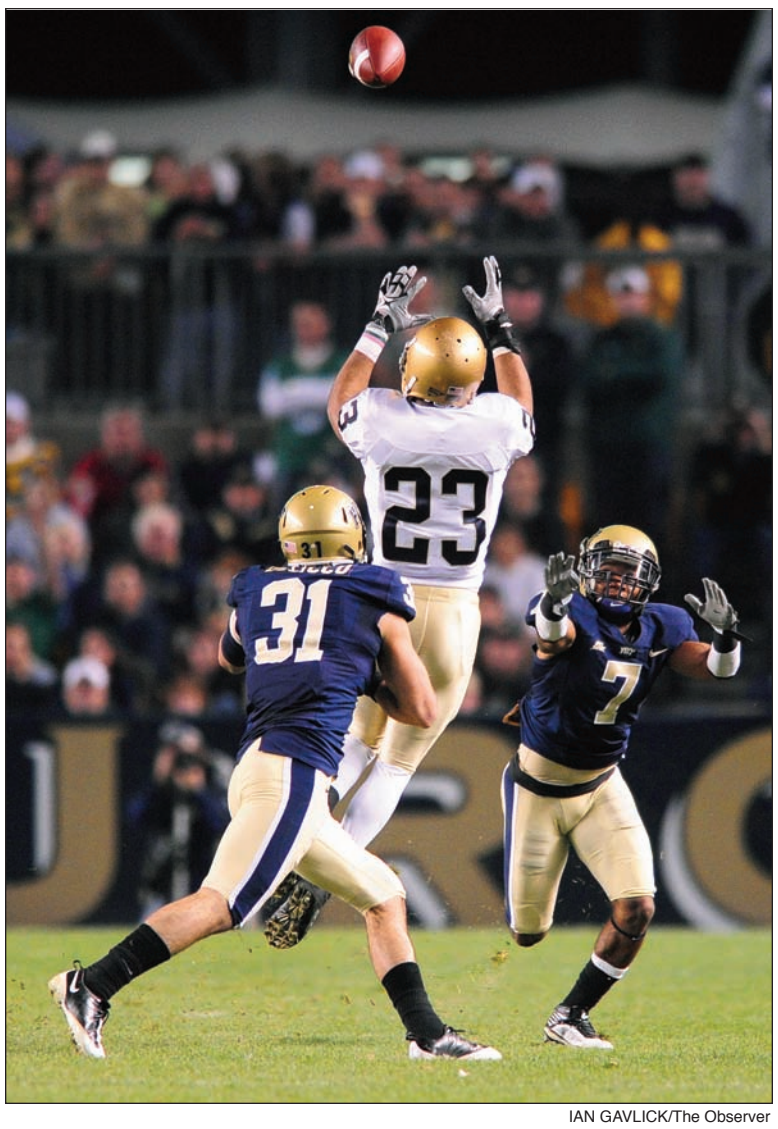
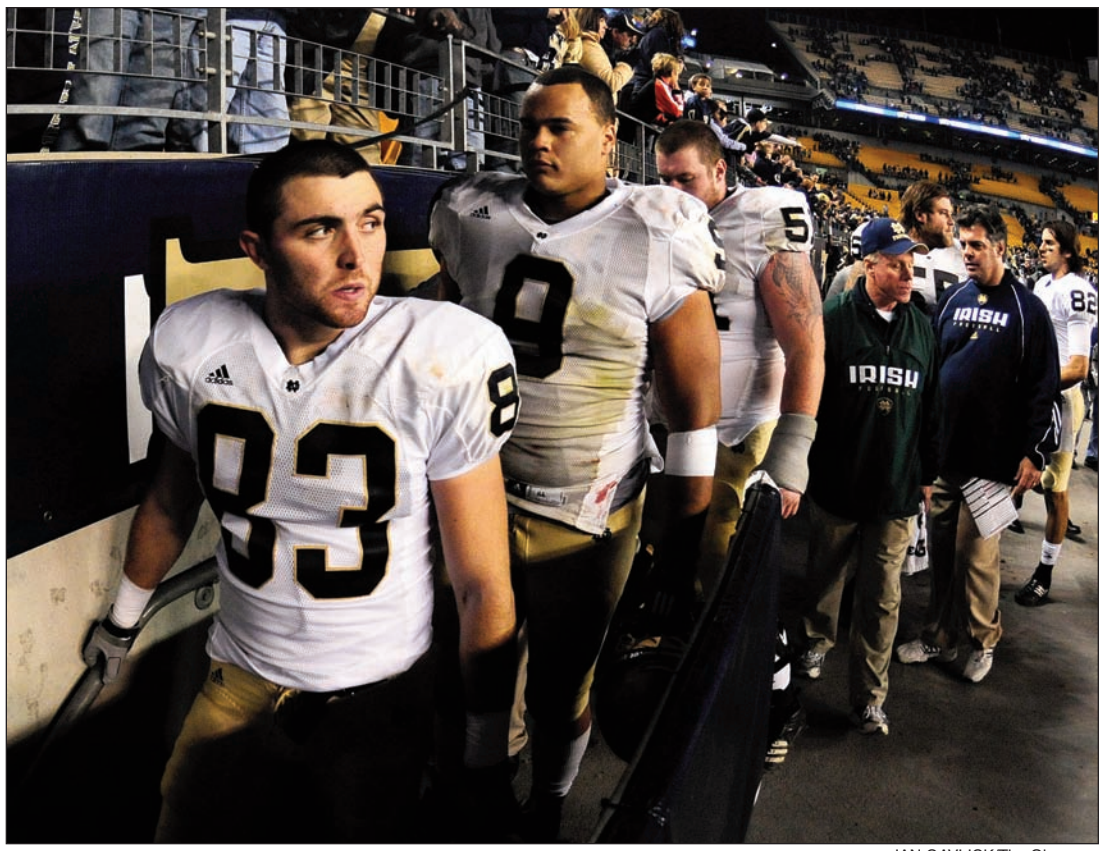


IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Pressure builds

For the second straight game, the Irish struggled to score in the first half. Throughout the game, Pittsburgh's defense put pressure from the edges on Jimmy Clausen and contained the wide receivers from deep passes. Fortunately, the Notre Dame defense held strong for most of the first two quarters, heading into halftime trailing 10-3. Sophomore wide receiver Jonathan Baldwin made several spectacular catches for the Panthers, who built up a 19-point lead in the fourth quarter. Freshman running back Dion Lewis broke free for a 50-yard run, and it looked like the game was over. But a Golden Tate punt return brought the Irish within a score of Pittsburgh, and a key defensive stop gave Jimmy Clausen and Notre Dame a chance at yet another late comeback. Pittsburgh's pressure proved too much, however, and what was originally ruled an incomplete pass was reviewed and deemed a game-ending fumble.

For more photos, check out the photo gallery at ndsmcobserver.com



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TOM LA/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Golden Tate breaks free on a punt return for a touchdown in the fourth quarter; Tate leaps for a catch over two Pittsburgh defenders; tight end Mike Ragone leaves the field with his teammates following the game; Jimmy Clausen slides after scrambling out of the pocket; defensive tackle Ian Williams tries to bat down a pass.