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Notre Dame 20, South Florida 23

Bull rushed

Irish fall 23-20 to South Florida in season opener delayed twice by weather

By MATTHEW DEFRAKES
Sports Writer

It was sunny at first, and then the rain came. And it came again. Then it got darker, and darker again, until everything was black.

Just as the weather ebbed and flowed, so did the Irish offense, as a mistake-ridden Notre Dame dropped its season opener to South Florida 23-20 Saturday.

“The disappointing thing is that we thought going into a year where we had some experience that we wouldn’t have to go through this,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “But it looks like we’re going to have to make sure that our players are understanding what it takes to win football games.”

Highlighted by a couple of long passes from senior quarterback Dayne Crist, the Irish (0-1) marched 79 yards in just seven plays to the South Florida one-yard line in the game’s opening drive. But the Irish squandered their chance when senior running back Jonas Gray fumbled at the goal-line. Cornerback Kayvon Webster scooped the ball up and ran 96 yards to give South Florida (1-0) an early 7-0 lead.

“[Notre Dame] had the ball and driven the whole length of the field, and you look up and you’re winning 7-0 — kind of a good feeling at that point with where we are,” Bulls coach Skip Holtz said. “Kind of symbolized a little bit of the day, especially when you look at this game statistically.”

Notre Dame racked up 508 yards of total offense while the Bulls were held to just 254 yards. The Irish, however, finished the game with five total turnovers while the Bulls played 60 minutes without committing a single one.

“People make mistakes in the first game all the time,” senior wide receiver Michael Floyd said. “Making mistakes is the way you lose games.”

In addition to the five turnovers, the Irish committed eight penalties, including four personal fouls that resulted in five South Florida first downs.

“You lose football games because you turn the ball over. You lose football games because you miss field goals. You



SARAH O’CONNOR/The Observer

Irish junior wide receiver Theo Riddick fails to come down with a pass during Notre Dame’s 23-20 loss to South Florida on Saturday. Riddick struggled, losing a fumble on a punt return and amassing only 32 receiving yards.

lose football games because you have four personal fouls penalties,” Kelly said. “The list is long.”

The Irish committed three first-half turnovers that resulted in just 10 South Florida points and a manageable 16-0 halftime deficit.

Crist, named the starter a mere two weeks ago, finished the game 7-for-15 for 95 yards and an interception before sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees replaced him at the start of the second half.

“We didn’t feel like we produced the way we should have,” Kelly said. “It wasn’t a difficult decision to make that. It was difficult because it threw us into an area where we weren’t thinking we had to go.”

Rees’ entrance followed a 2 hour, 10 minute weather delay due to lightning and heavy rain

in the area. For the first time in Notre Dame history, weather forced the stoppage of play.

“The chaos was on the field for me,” Kelly said. “I think everyone that was involved in that should be commended. All those other things were left up to very capable people.”

On its first drive with Rees at quarterback, Notre Dame drove 44 yards to the South Florida five-yard line before a red-zone turnover ended another promising opportunity. Rees fired a pass over the middle to sophomore wide receiver T.J. Jones, who did not see the ball coming his way. The pass deflected off Jones’ helmet before being intercepted by Bulls linebacker Michael Lanaris, ending a drive in similar fashion to the game’s opening possession.

Notre Dame’s second possession of the half ended with the first score of the season, as Rees connected with Floyd on a 24-yard strike to narrow the deficit at 16-7. Floyd finished the day with a career-high 12 catches for 154 yards and two touchdowns. He also passed former Irish wide receiver Jeff Samardzija for first place in ca-

reer receptions at Notre Dame.

“I just go out there and play,” Floyd said. “Whatever the records are, that doesn’t bother me. My main focus is to help the team win in any way possible.”

South Florida responded with a 14-play, 80-yard drive, capped by Bulls quarterback B.J. Daniels’ two-yard touchdown pass to wide receiver Evan Landi, pushing the score to 23-7. The score marked South Florida’s lone offensive touchdown of the game.

After a one-yard touchdown by junior running back Cierre Wood and a failed two-point conversion cut the lead to 23-13, the Irish defense forced a punt and Notre Dame began the possession at its own nine yard-line.

One play later, a second weather delay postponed play for another 43 minutes.

When the game resumed again, Rees committed Notre Dame’s fifth and final turnover of the day, throwing an interception to South Florida safety Jerrell Young. The Bulls, however, were unable to score on the ensuing possession.

Rees led the Irish down the

field in 10 plays on the next drive, culminating in Floyd’s second touchdown of the day, this one an eight-yard strike with just 21 seconds remaining. Irish junior tight end Tyler Eifert caught three passes for 45 yards during the drive.

“He’s a great player. He’s a big target, athletic, great hands,” Rees said of Eifert. “Tyler stepped up and he played extremely well down the stretch for us.”

Notre Dame nearly recovered Irish senior kicker David Ruffer’s onside kick, but South Florida wide receiver Lindsey Lamar snatched the ball before it fell into Irish hands. South Florida took a knee to run out the clock and hand Notre Dame its first loss of the season.

“We say this all the time. You can’t start winning until you stop losing, and the things that we did today out there obviously go to the heart of how you lose football games,” Kelly said. “There’s no quit in the group, but you can’t win playing like that.”

Contact Matthew DeFrakes at mdefrank@nd.edu

player of the game

**Jerrell Young
South Florida safety**

Young came up with seven tackles and an interception, but it was his strip of Jonas Gray that set the tone for the game.

stat of the game

-5 turnover margin

The Irish turned the ball over five times, losing two fumbles and three interceptions. On the other hand, South Florida had zero turnovers, providing the difference.

play of the game

Kayvon Webster’s 96-yard fumble return for a touchdown in the first quarter.

While the Irish opened the game effectively moving the ball, the turnover near the goal line gave the Bulls a quick upper hand.

quote of the game

“You can’t start winning until you stop losing, and the things we did out there obviously go to the heart of how you lose football games.”

**Brian Kelly
Irish coach**

report card

B-

quarterbacks: Dayne Crist struggled mightily in the first half, but Tommy Rees had a pretty decent day in relief. Three interceptions always make it hard to win, though.

B+

running backs: Cierre Wood was on his way to a huge day on the ground before the Irish had to throw. On the other hand, Jonas Gray's red-zone fumble really cost the Irish.

B

receivers: Michael Floyd had another typical stalwart effort with 150 yards, and Tyler Eifert racked up 80 yards of his own. But aside from that, the receivers were largely mediocre.

B+

offensive line: The offensive line did a great job of opening up holes for Wood, but they couldn't seem to win the battles on the goal line. In general, though, they were solid protection.

A-

defensive line: Louis Nix led the way in a generally strong effort from the defensive front. The ends contained South Florida's athletic B.J. Daniels, and Nix was nearly impossible to block.

B+

linebackers: Manti Te'o was all over the field, as usual. Beyond that, the linebackers had a good, if not great game and helped limit Daniels to 165 total yards of offense.

B

defensive backs: Gary Gray and Robert Blanton played well, for the most part, and the two safeties didn't get beat. Gray's two fourth-quarter penalties, however, cost the Irish dearly.

C-

special teams: David Ruffer missed an easy field goal. Theo Riddick was lucky to hold onto a punt return. The only bright spot was Kyle Brindza on kick-offs, but it was overall ugly.

C+

coaching: Kelly's willingness to make the change from Crist to Rees paid dividends in the second half, but the preponderance of mental mistakes prompts questions about preparation.

2.93

overall: There was some reason for optimism, but not much. This was a game the Irish should have won and didn't. They have only themselves to blame.

adding up the numbers

Cierre Wood racked up 90 of his 104 rushing yards in the first half before the Irish took to the air to try to catch up.

90

2

Notre Dame had 508 offensive yards, twice as many as South Florida, who only gained 254 yards.

Ben Turk averaged only 27.4 net yards per punt, which hurt the Irish in the field position game.

27.4

2:10

The game was delayed for 2 hours, 10 minutes due to inclement weather at halftime.

Notre Dame trailed South Florida by 16 points at halftime, its largest halftime deficit since 2008 against USC.

16

9

The Irish had nine scoreless possessions before they finally broke through to get on the scoreboard.



Senior safety Harrison Smith commits a facemask penalty against South Florida quarterback B.J. Daniels. The Irish committed eight penalties on the day, resulting in 73 yards.

Poor fundamentals are concerning

Saturday's game was, to say the least, unusual. From the first weather delay in Notre Dame history, to how quickly Dayne Crist got benched, to the second weather delay in Notre Dame history, everything about the 2011 season opener was bizarre. But despite all of the distractions, one surprise stood out more than most, and it's the most worrisome — the Irish fundamentals were, quite frankly, terrible.



Allan Joseph
Sports Editor

Missed blocks. Dropped punts. Personal fouls. Miscommunication. Shanked field goals. Turnovers, turnovers and turnovers. Dumb penalties. An interception off a receiver's helmet because he wasn't looking for the ball. The list grows from stupid oversights to infuriating mistakes all the way to so-ridiculous-you'd-be-laughing-if-you-weren't-crying mishaps. And yes, it's a season opener. I understand that the first game of a season is always sloppy — in fact, I mentioned that in my pregame prediction. But there's no reason it should have been anything like this. First-game jitters are no excuse for a dropped pass, much less a late-hit penalty in the fourth quarter by an experienced player like Gary Gray. What's more, many of the mistakes, if not nearly all of them, were committed by veteran players who should have known better. A senior running back like Jonas Gray should know that defensive players want nothing more than to knock

the ball loose inside the red zone. A senior receiver like Michael Floyd should know how to block his man correctly instead of committing an obvious holding penalty that negated the touchdown. A senior defensive end like Ethan Johnson should know better than to commit a personal foul that turned a potentially pivotal USF third down into a first down — especially in the fourth quarter when the Irish were trying to make a comeback against all odds. Notre Dame is too talented to keep making mistakes like this. The sky is still the limit. But despite all of the raw ability, all of the comfort in the offensive system and all of the young talent on the defensive front, the Irish are destined for mediocrity unless they fix it. It's possible that the team got too comfortable this offseason. The talk throughout spring and fall camp was about becoming more familiar with Brian Kelly's complex offensive schemes and about having a full arsenal on both the offensive and defensive sides of the ball. Maybe the focus on the complex parts of the game precluded focus on the fundamentals — and if that's what happened, it was a potentially disastrous mistake. It doesn't matter if you can out-scheme your opponent if you turn the ball over five times. It doesn't matter if you have airtight coverage against the pass if you commit penalties and keep giving the other

team first downs. There is room for hope. The offense put up over 500 yards, highlighted by Cierre Wood's impressive day on the ground. His 104 yards came largely in the first half and suggest that the Irish may be able to establish a bona fide running game. The defense did a generally good job of corraling South Florida's explosive quarterback, B.J. Daniels, especially on third down, where the Bulls converted only two of their 14 attempts. Most importantly, despite five turnovers and countless mistakes, the Irish still had a chance to win it in crunch time — and South Florida is a very good team. These all suggest that the season is not lost. If the Irish can

stop making the small mistakes, they can be a very good team. But they don't have a lot of time to get better. Saturday's atmosphere is going to provide more of a challenge than many of these players have ever faced, as it is the first night game in Michigan Stadium history. Beating Michigan in Ann Arbor will be impossible if the Irish don't get it together. Kelly said it best in his postgame press conference: "You can't start winning until you stop losing." What's more fundamental than that?

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

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Quarterback switch adds drama



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees replaced senior quarterback Dayne Crist at the beginning of the second half. Rees completed 24 of his 34 attempts for 296 yards. Rees also threw two touchdowns and two interceptions.

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

The quarterback controversy that has been brewing in South Bend since the beginning of last year’s spring practice took yet another twist Saturday, leaving fans, players and even coaches apparently befuddled.

Less than two weeks after Kelly named sophomore Tommy Rees as the backup quarterback behind senior Dayne Crist, Rees was called on to lead the Irish in the second half of their 23-20 loss to South Florida.

“Well, you know, we didn’t expect to have to make this move, obviously, so it’s going to require us to obviously evaluate the quarterback situation and make another decision,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “This was a step back for us as it relates to where we thought we were going.”

In the first half under Crist, the Irish offense was ineffective, as two early drives ended in red-zone turnovers. Crist unleashed a number of errant throws and was hurt by dropped balls, as the Irish were forced to punt three times in the second quarter. Heading into the half down 16-0, the coaching staff decided to make the switch to Rees.

“We didn’t feel like we produced the way we should have,” Kelly said. “It wasn’t a difficult decision to make that it was difficult because it threw us into an area where we weren’t thinking we had to go to.”

The decision came early in the 130-minute halftime, which was prolonged due to severe weather.

“They told us when the coaches came over, and they pulled Dayne and I aside and just let us know,” Rees said. “We

just went from there. You guys know how Dayne is. He’s been supportive of me since day one. He was there on the sideline, he was here in the locker room walking me through stuff.”

Most of the Irish players were not aware that a change was made until Rees took command of the huddle early in the second half, but Bulls coach Skip Holtz said he wasn’t surprised to see Rees take the field.

“Was I surprised or shocked?” Holtz said. “No. You’re down 16-0. I certainly understand that mindset to say, ‘Hey, we’ve got to do something, we’ve got to do something to get a charge out of our football team.’”

Rees seemed to have provided that immediate spark, but interceptions killed the momentum once again for the Irish, one coming on the South Florida four-yard line and another coming in the fourth quarter with Notre Dame trying to pull out the miracle victory. Rees finished the game completing 24 of 34 passes for 296 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions. Crist, on the other hand, completed only seven of his 15 attempts in the first half, gaining 95 yards and throwing an interception in the end zone.

Moving forward, the Irish have re-entered the realm of uncertainty regarding the quarterback position, and nobody seems to have the answer. Kelly did not announce a starter Sunday, and so Crist and Rees will begin the week of practice just like the weeks leading up to this first game.

“Nothing really changes,” Rees said. “Dayne and I both prepare like we are going to be the guy, so not much changes for me. It’s up to the coaches, and I’ll be ready. I’ll prepare like I’m going to play and we’ll see what happens.”

As the rest of the season unfolds, the entire team looks to actively prevent the quarterback battle from interfering with the team’s focus. That process begins, of course, with the two men fighting for the starting job.

“We have no choice,” Rees said. “As the quarterback, you are the leader and you can’t have a distraction take over the team. It’s a long season and we can’t let that get ahold of us.”

Referring to the quarterback play in Saturday’s game, specifically the turnovers in the red zone, Kelly pins most of the blame on himself.

“Poor coaching,” he said. “Didn’t do a good job with our quarterbacks, obviously. That’s my responsibility.”

Notre Dame did not employ either sophomore Andrew Hendrix or freshman Everett Golson at quarterback, whom many Irish fans expected to see in special packages or to provide a change of pace.

Whoever will be under center for Notre Dame’s upcoming game against Michigan, Irish fans hope he will be able to right the ship and lead the team to a rebound victory. As for the rest of the players, they are ready to follow either quarterback in search of a win.

“We don’t care [who starts at quarterback],” senior wide receiver Michael Floyd said. “They’re great quarterbacks, they both know what they are doing. The whole team made mistakes, and we have to go back to the drawing board and make sure we don’t make the same mistakes again.”

Kelly is expected to announce the starting quarterback Tuesday during his weekly press conference.

Contact Joseph Monardo at
jmonardo@nd.edu

scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
ND	0	0	7	13	20
USF	13	3	0	7	23

First quarter

South Florida 7, Notre Dame 0
Kayvon Webster 96-yd fumble return with 11:00 remaining.
Drive: 1 play, 96 yards, 0:00 elapsed

South Florida 10, Notre Dame 0
Maikon Bonani 49-yd field goal with 4:45 remaining.
Drive: 8 plays, 41 yards, 3:04 elapsed

South Florida 13, Notre Dame 0
Maikon Bonani 17-yd field goal with 1:08 remaining.
Drive: 5 plays, 39 yards, 2:31 elapsed

Second quarter

South Florida 16, Notre Dame 0
Maikon Bonani 36-yd field goal with 4:04 remaining.
Drive: 4 plays, 1 yard, 0:59 elapsed

Third quarter

South Florida 16, Notre Dame 7
Michael Floyd 24-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 7:12 remaining.
Drive: 5 plays, 66 yards, 1:21 elapsed

Fourth quarter

South Florida 23, Notre Dame 7
Evan Landi 2-yd pass from B.J. Daniels (Maikon Bonani kick) with 11:05 remaining.
Drive: 14 plays, 80 yards, 5:02 elapsed

South Florida 23, Notre Dame 13
Cierre Wood 1-yd run (two-point conversion failed) with 7:35 remaining.
Drive: 12 plays, 76 yards, 3:30 elapsed

South Florida 23, Notre Dame 13
Michael Floyd 8-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 0:21 remaining.
Drive: 10 plays, 99 yards, 1:58 elapsed.

statistics

rushing yards



passing yards



Time of Possession



	passing		
Rees Crist	24-34-296 7-15-95	Daniels	18-30-128
	rushing		
Wood Gray	21-104 4-17	Murray Daniels	14-40 12-37
	receiving		
Floyd Eifert Jones	12-154 6-93 6-58	Griffin Landi Love	8-75 3-14 2-26

Floyd sets new receiving records

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

Senior wide receiver Michael Floyd began his final season in an Irish uniform with perhaps the best performance of his career. Floyd reined in a career-high 12 catches for 154 yards and two touchdowns.

The effort was enough to move him up the ranks in several categories of the Notre Dame record book. With his ninth reception of the game, Floyd moved past Jeff Samardzija for the most receptions in Notre Dame history. Floyd finished the game with 183 career receptions, four ahead of Samardzija.

Floyd also recorded the 14th 100-yard receiving game of his

career, moving him into second behind only Golden Tate, who had 15 such games.

Floyd jumped into second place in career receiving yards with 2,693, only 14 yards behind Tate’s Notre Dame record.

Already the owner of Notre Dame’s all-time touchdown receptions record, Floyd pushed his career touchdown mark to 30 scores Saturday.

“I think Michael Floyd is a great player on film. I think he’s a lot better than he is on film,” Bulls coach Skip Holtz said. “I think he is one of the special players in college football. I think he’s a difference-maker.”

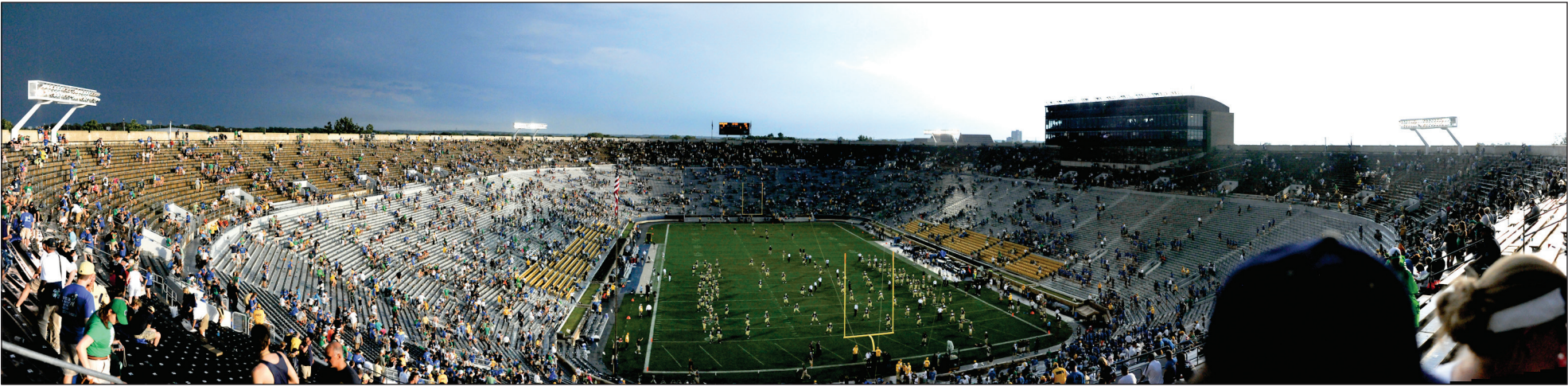
Ruffer’s first home miss
Senior placekicker David Ruffer

sent a 30-yard field goal attempt wide with 1:07 remaining in the third quarter with the Irish trailing 16-7. The miss marked only the second missed field goal of Ruffer’s career and his first miss at home.

With five made field goals in 2009 and 18 straight made field goals to begin last season, the former walk-on had converted the first 23 attempts of his career.

However, the streak came to a halt in Notre Dame’s Sun Bowl victory over Miami last December when Ruffer missed a 46-yard field goal in the third quarter of the game.

Contact Joseph Monardo at
jmonardo@nd.edu



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

A bizarre opener

Notre Dame's 2011 season got off to a whirlwind start Saturday when the Irish dropped a 23-20 decision to South Florida. The game was marked by the first two weather delays in Notre Dame football history, a two-quarter term as starter for quarterback Dayne Crist and five turnovers for the Irish. South Florida turned an early 96-yard fumble recovery into a touchdown, then built up a 16-0 halftime lead before the first delay. While the Irish mounted a comeback in the second half, South Florida iced the game with a touchdown midway through the fourth quarter just before the second weather delay.



NICOLE TOCZAUER/The Observer



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Fans file into Notre Dame Stadium as the Irish warm up after the first weather delay, which stretched halftime past two hours; Notre Dame quarterback Dayne Crist looks for a receiver; running back Cierre Wood evades South Florida defenders; wide receiver Michael Floyd drops a pass.