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Notre Dame 17, USC 31

'Crazy Train' derailed

Despite raucous Notre Dame Stadium, Irish drop to 4-3 with 31-17 loss to USC

By SAM GANS
Sports Writer

With Notre Dame's biggest rival coming to town, the first home night game since 1990 and the debuts of brand-new gold Irish helmets and piped-in stadium music, the stage was set for one of the most anticipated games in Notre Dame Stadium in years.

But it was USC who finished with more points for the ninth time in 10 seasons, walking out of South Bend with a 31-17 victory.

The Trojans (6-1) got off to a fast start against the Irish (4-3) by forcing a Notre Dame three-and-out on the game's first drive. USC then marched 66 yards on its opening possession, which culminated with junior quarterback Matt Barkley finding freshman tight end Randall Telfer alone in the end zone for a 2-yard touchdown pass with 6:16 remaining in the first quarter.

After another Irish three-and-out, Barkley again drove the Trojans down the field and connected with sophomore receiver Robert Woods on a 3-yard strike to push the USC margin to 14-0, leaving the once-frenzied crowd in a stunned silence.

The first 15 minutes ended at that score, with USC holding a 128-14 advantage in total yards, leaving a disappointing taste in the mouths of the Irish, who had two weeks to prepare after a bye week.

"We had time off, we had time to rest and we played sluggish," Irish junior tight end Tyler Eifert said. "You can't come out and play like that. It cost us in the end."

USC appeared to be fully in control of the contest when freshman kicker Andre Heidari booted a 25-yard field goal late in the second quarter to put the Trojans up 17-0. But Irish freshman running back George Atkinson returned the ensuing kickoff for a touchdown, bringing the stadium back to life and pulling Notre Dame within 10 points.

"Whenever a big play on special teams occurs, you hope to spark the whole team," Atkinson said. "I think that happened coming out."

It appeared the momentum had shifted, as the Irish defense was able to get a stop on the next drive, allowing Notre Dame to take over possession with just under two minutes remaining in the half. Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees was able to successfully take the Irish offense to the



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

Irish senior receiver Michael Floyd walks off the field during Notre Dame's 31-17 loss to USC on Saturday night. Floyd struggled Saturday, catching just four passes for 28 yards as part of a feeble Irish attack.

red zone, but the drive stalled there and a 25-yard field goal from senior kicker David Ruffer sent the Irish into halftime with a seven-point deficit.

Despite scoring the final 10 points of the half, in the first 30 minutes the Irish were outgained 253-127 and nearly doubled in time of possession.

"Our guys came in and just wanted to make sure that we played really well and didn't worry about everything else," USC coach Lane Kiffin said. "It was good to see, because usually young teams don't do well in the beginning of games in this type of environment, so it was good to see."

The second half started out as a different story as Notre Dame forced a USC punt and proceeded to move the ball down the field, looking for the tying score, until Rees was knocked out of the game with a knee injury. But senior and former starter Dayne Crist stepped in at the quarterback position and effectively went 4-for-5, marching Notre Dame down to the USC 1-yard line.

Then came perhaps the

game's biggest turning point.

On third-and-goal and just one yard away from tying the game, a Crist fumbled snap was batted around and then picked up by USC junior safety Jawanza Starling, who returned it 80 yards to put USC up 24-10.

"Dayne went right in," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "[He] did a nice job, moved us down there ... and then we had the fumbled snap."

For what seemingly was a back-breaking play, the Irish responded strongly. With Rees back in the game, Notre Dame quickly moved into USC territory and again came within one score as senior running back Jonas Gray ran 25 yards into the end zone with 14:07 remaining in the fourth quarter. Following a missed 32-yard field goal attempt from USC's Heidari, Notre Dame had the ball with 80 yards to go and 9:13 on the clock to tie the game.

But on the second play of the drive, junior running back Cierre Wood dropped a pass from Rees in the backfield, which was fallen on by

USC senior linebacker Chris Galippo. The ball was ruled to be a backwards lateral by the officials and was therefore a fumble, resulting in USC possession.

"We thought we were past that," Kelly said. "That's the toughest part is when you think you've moved past that kind of self-inflicted wounds, to come back and have those hit you again, it's disappointing."

Barkley, who finished the day 24-for-35 for 224 yards, three touchdowns and zero interceptions, put the icing on the cake by finding a diving Woods near the back pylon of the end zone on a 14-yard play to put the Trojans up 31-17 with 7:47 left in the game.

Notre Dame tried to mount one final rally, but USC sophomore cornerback Nickell Robey intercepted Rees with 6:43 remaining. The Irish never got the ball back.

The win was a dominating effort by the Trojans, who finished the game with a 443-267 advantage in yards and had the ball for 39:41 of the game's 60 minutes.

USC also limited Irish senior receiver Michael Floyd to just four catches for 28 yards. But according to Kelly, that was mostly due to Irish miscues.

"We were out of sync," Kelly said. "We had Mike two or three times and we didn't connect with him."

With Notre Dame's pre-season goal of playing in a BCS game likely out of reach now, Kelly is focused on making sure the Irish are ready for the next game against Navy on Saturday and not mulling over long-term possibilities.

"The fact of the matter is, they have got to play Navy and they have to get ready in a short period of time," Kelly said. "We didn't think in big picture terms. I'll talk to [the media] in big picture terms. But [the team], all they know is Monday is not going to be a great place to be around me. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday — that's what they are thinking about. They are not thinking about those bigger picture items."

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player of the game

Robert Woods
Notre Dame running back

Woods delivered on all of his pregame hype, hauling in 12 catches for 119 yards and two touchdowns.

stat of the game

14 first quarter yards

Notre Dame managed just 14 yards of offense in the first quarter as the Irish fell behind the Trojans 14-0 to start the game.

play of the game

Jawanza Starling's 80-yard fumble return for a touchdown

The Irish were on the verge of tying the game when Starling returned a fumbled snap 80 yards to put the game away.

quote of the game

"We had time off, we had time to rest and we played sluggish. You can't come out and play like that. It cost us in the end."

Tyler Eifert
Notre Dame tight end

report card

- D+** **quarterbacks:** Tommy Rees showed signs of life in the second half, but overall it was a rough day for the gunslingers, who committed two devastating turnovers that killed any hope.
- D-** **running backs:** It was an abysmal night for Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray, who mustered just 43 combined yards. Wood only had five yards, and Gray's 25-yard score was the only positive moment.
- C-** **receivers:** Tyler Eifert is developing into an elite tight end, but for the rest of the receiving corps, it was a rough night. Michael Floyd especially struggled — and no one picked up the slack.
- D+** **offensive line:** They may not have allowed a sack, but 41 rushing yards is a mortifyingly low total. Much of the shortfall in the rushing game was caused by the USC defensive line.
- D** **defensive line:** The defensive line got flat-out bullied by the Trojan front all night long. USC ran roughshod over the Irish, and Matt Barkley was rarely pressured.
- C-** **linebackers:** Manti Te'o played well, as usual. But linebackers were missing assignments and tackles all across the field, and Carlo Calabrese's personal-foul penalty really cost Notre Dame.
- D+** **defensive backs:** Except for when he was matched up against Robert Blanton, USC's Robert Woods had an absolute field day against the generally disorganized secondary.
- A-** **special teams:** Ben Turk punted well enough, and George Atkinson's electric kick return gave the Irish life in the first half. Special teams may have been the only bright spot of the night.
- C-** **coaching:** USC simply outplayed Notre Dame, and much of the blame falls on the coaches. Give Brian Kelly and his staff credit for getting the Irish to make it a game in the second half.

1.59 **overall:** On the biggest stage of their season, the Irish fell flat. On both sides of the ball, it was an all-around miserable effort for Notre Dame.

adding up the numbers

The Irish had the ball for just 2:24 in the fourth quarter, effectively killing any hopes of a dramatic comeback. **2:24**

5 USC has now won five consecutive contests over Notre Dame in Notre Dame Stadium.

Despite coming out to a raucous environment, the Irish could not muster a single first down in the first quarter. **0**

22 Since they held the ball for nearly twice as long as the Irish, the Trojans ran 22 more offensive plays than Notre Dame.

USC has now won nine of the last 10 meetings, with Notre Dame's lone victory coming last year in Los Angeles. **9**

5 The public-address system played music for the first time, but the Stadium heard only five different songs.



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

USC safety Jawanza Starling tackles Notre Dame senior running back Jonas Gray. Gray and the Irish managed just 41 rushing yards on the night.

After all the hype, Irish weren't even close

Despite months of hype, weeks of preparation, days of anticipation and hours of tailgating, in the end Saturday came down to 60 minutes on the field.

And it wasn't even close.

Notre Dame had all of the advantages in this game. It was playing in a Notre Dame Stadium that was the loudest it's been in decades, if Lane Kiffin's memories of 2005 are to be believed. It had a team that had reeled off four straight wins, including a 59-33 thumping of Air Force. It had two weeks to rest and prepare. It was facing an inconsistent Trojan squad hamstrung by sanctions. It had, for once, what seemed like dominant line play. But then the game started.

And it wasn't even close.

It's perplexing, really. This was an Irish squad that seemed like it had come so far. Its first two games were, in fact, close. After shooting itself in the foot twice to open the season, Notre Dame came out and blew away a very good Michigan State squad — a Spartan team that looks better and better every single week. At the halfway point of the season, the offensive

and defensive lines had been the surprises of the season. The Irish were running the ball effectively and harassing opposing quarterbacks. BCS bowls were real possibilities. A 10-win season wasn't out of the question at all. It seemed like Notre Dame was on the verge of something great.

And it wasn't even close.

To be honest, the Irish were lucky to lose by only 14 points. The postgame stat sheet is positively gruesome. When a team amasses only 41 rushing yards, 25 of which came on one play, it's really impossible to expect to win. The Irish only had the ball for 20 minutes total. It's extremely difficult to fight back from a 14-point first quarter deficit when you only have 15 minutes of possession the rest of the game to do it with.

Turning the ball over three times while not taking it away even once ... well, the Irish have been down that road. Only painful memories of the season opener and the Big House remain there. Still, after being outplayed and yes, outcoached in the first half, the Irish somehow, some way, kept it close.

But when a team is in a game it shouldn't be, it has to take advantage of opportunities. Notre Dame was on the wrong side of that experience twice this season already. The Irish outplayed South Florida and outplayed Michigan. Those teams, however, made timely plays and pulled out victories.

The Irish instead turned the ball over on the goal line, committed silly penalties, left the USC's dynamic Robert Woods all alone and turned the ball over some more. Even worse, the normally solid defensive line got manhandled on nearly every play. Save for George Atkinson's return, every single facet of the game was miserably bad all game long — and worst when the Irish could have most used high-quality play.

Maybe this was an anomaly. After all, Notre Dame had an entire half-season with two running backs rushing the ball extremely well. It had six games where the receiving corps made plays once it caught the ball. For a month and a half, the young players on the defensive line found a way to disrupt opposing offenses. Sure, this team struggled at times, but it looked like it was coming together in time for the biggest game of the Brian Kelly era.

That's what's most troubling about Saturday's result. After what looked like an encouraging winning streak, with every possible advantage on the Irish sideline and with everything to gain on the season's biggest stage, how come it wasn't even close?

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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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Sluggish start dooms Notre Dame



JAMES DOAN/The Observer

USC defenders tackle senior running back Jonas Gray. The Notre Dame offense amassed just 14 yards in the entire first quarter, two of which came on rushing plays.

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

After two weeks of hype, the Irish took the field for the opening kickoff Saturday night with the lights shining and the Dropkick Murphys blaring. But from the moment the ball was kicked, USC took the upper hand.

With the Trojans' outgaining the Irish 128 yards to 14 yards in the first 15 minutes of play, Notre Dame fell behind USC and never recovered during Saturday's 31-17 loss at Notre Dame Stadium.

"We started poorly," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "I just told our team that, you know, very disappointed in the way we played the first half. Sloppy football. Didn't tackle well. Timing was off. Just unacceptable for the amount of time we had off to play that way in the first half."

In the subsequent quarters, the Irish were able to string together a few scoring plays and worked their way up to almost evening the score before a turnover at the one-yard-line sent the Trojans ahead. Though the remaining quarters fared better for Notre Dame, USC's 17-0 lead midway through the second quarter made any chance of an Irish win unlikely, and their lack of momentum showed.

"I thought, again, you can precisely know the times when we got in good rhythm. We were running the ball in the third quarter and were very effective in mixing things up," Kelly

said. "Early on, we didn't get in that kind of rhythm because we got down 14-0."

In the previous six opening quarters of the 2011 season, the Irish (4-3) averaged 6.9 yards per play, while the opposing teams averaged 4.8 yards. Against the Trojans, Notre Dame maintained an uncharacteristic 1.8 yards per play in the first quarter, while USC averaged 6.7 for two touchdowns by the end of the first period.

"This is the first time that I've leaned on my guys pretty hard in the locker room," Kelly said. "I was not happy because we are better than that. We are better than that. And, to turn the ball over in the ridiculous fashion that we have, it just, just, makes me crazy. I just don't understand how something so easy can come out the way it does."

The loss ended Notre Dame's four-game win streak and revealed a team largely reminiscent of the first two games of the season, which were the team's only previous losses.

"We went away from what we did the previous four games, paying attention to detail and playing with poise," senior running back Jonas Gray said. "Along the way we made a lot of mistakes on both sides of the ball, and we just didn't make enough plays to win."

Fresh off of its bye week, Notre Dame's on-field rust during the first quarter came at an inopportune time for Kelly, who said that the flaws could not have been from the two-

week break.

"I'm certainly not going to go back and second guess the way I've prepared over 21 years in a bye week," Kelly said. "Sometimes there's some accountability from everybody, coaches and players alike and sometimes it falls on us a group, all of us. But they just they didn't play as well as they needed to play."

Individual responsibility, rather than any bye-week preparations or coaching leadership, were at the root of the problem for Notre Dame's early lack of energy, Gray said.

"The coaches did a great job in preparing us," Gray said. "For whatever reason, we didn't come out with that urgency."

"We regressed a bit, and we didn't do the things that we did the previous four games. We're just back to the drawing board."

Though the environment may have added pressure on the Irish, the answer to Notre Dame's weakness was simple, junior tight end Tyler Eifert said.

"It was just not executing," Eifert said. "You can make all the excuses you want, that we had time off, that we were rusty or that they hyped this game up so much and took our focus off what was really important, but I don't think any of that. We just didn't execute and go out the way we had to."

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Atkinson's kick return sets records

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

Freshman running back George Atkinson's 96-yard touchdown kickoff return was the longest at Notre Dame Stadium since Julius Jones' 100-yard runback against Nebraska in 2000. Atkinson's return just three minutes before the half is tied for the fifth longest in stadium history. Atkinson is one of four players in the NCAA that has two kickoff returns for scores in 2011, and his pair of touchdowns matches the program record.

Rees' streak snapped

Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees closed his streak of consecutive games with a completed

touchdown pass after 11 games. Brady Quinn and Jimmy Clausen are the only other quarterbacks in program history with longer records. Quinn's 16 passes earned him the first place slot, above Clausen's 13. Rees also threw his first interception in 135 passes, the third longest streak in Notre Dame football history.

First quarter struggles

The Trojans are the first team this season to outgain the Irish in the first quarter. Before the loss against USC, Notre Dame averaged 6.9 yards per play while their previous opponents gained a combined average of 4.8 yards.

USC outgained the Irish 128-14 in the first period of play and completed eight first downs be-

fore Notre Dame's first. The first quarter's 14 yards were a team low among all the quarters in Notre Dame's seven games in 2011.

Night game numbers

After their first night game at home in 21 years, the Irish dropped their overall night game record to 6-2 at Notre Dame Stadium, a .646 percentage. Overall, Notre Dame has faced USC and Miami (Fla.) most often in night games with 11 night games each. Against the Trojans at night, the Irish are 3-7-1. The six night games on the schedule this season mark a Notre Dame record.

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scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
USC	14	3	7	7	31
ND	0	10	0	7	17

First quarter

Notre Dame 0, USC 7

Randall Teifer 2-yd pass from Matt Barkley (Andre Heidari kick) with 7:39 remaining
Drive: 13 plays, 66 yards, 7:39 elapsed

Notre Dame 0, USC 14

Robert Woods 3-yd pass from Matt Barkley (Andre Heidari kick) with 1:01 remaining
Drive: 6 plays, 62 yards, 2:47 elapsed

Second quarter

Notre Dame 0, USC 17

Andre Heidari 25-yd field goal with 3:34 remaining
Drive: 14 plays, 68 yards, 4:54 elapsed

Notre Dame 7, USC 17

George Atkinson 96-yd kickoff return (David Ruffer kick) with 3:22 remaining
Drive: 1 play, 96 yards, 0:12 elapsed

Notre Dame 10, USC 17

David Ruffer 25-yd field goal with 0:21 remaining
Drive: 10 plays, 68 yards, 1:34 elapsed

Third quarter

Notre Dame 10, USC 24

Juwanza Starling 80-yd fumble recovery (Andre Heidari kick) with 0:53 remaining

Fourth quarter

Notre Dame 17, USC 24

Jonas Gray 25-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 14:07 remaining
Drive: 5 plays, 62 yards, 1:46 remaining

Notre Dame 17, USC 31

Robert Woods 14-yd pass from Matt Barkley (Andre Heidari kick) with 7:47 remaining
Drive: 3 plays, 18 yards, 0:59 elapsed

statistics

rushing yards



passing yards



time of possession



passing			
Rees	23-37-190	Barkley	24-35-224
rushing			
Gray	4-38	McNeal	24-118
Wood	5-5	Tyler	13-67
receiving			
Eifert	7-66	Woods	12-119
Wood	6-41	Lee	2-36
field goals			
Ruffer	1-1	Heidari	1-2



ASHLEY DACY/The Observer



JAMES DOAN/The Observer

Same old story

Despite an electric environment at Notre Dame's first home night game in 21 years, USC jumped out to a fast start and never let the Irish catch up, claiming the Trojans' fifth consecutive victory in South Bend. While Notre Dame fought to catch up in the second half, an untimely fumble from senior quarterback Dayne Crist less than five yards from scoring a game-winning touchdown swung the momentum back to USC. The Irish never had another true shot at catching the Trojans, who dominated nearly every statistical category in a complete victory that dropped the Irish to 4-3 on the season.



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer



JAMES DOAN/The Observer



JAMES DOAN/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Linebacker Manti Te'o and safety Harrison Smith tackle USC running back Curtis McNeal; Te'o pursues Trojan quarterback Matt Barkley; running back Cierre Wood searches for running room; receiver Michael Floyd fights to catch a ball; running back George Atkinson breaks free for a touchdown on a kick return.