

Chopped down

Irish stumble to another 8-5 season after surrendering second-half lead

By ERIC PRISTER
Senior Sports Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. — Capitalizing on a turnover and offensive inefficiencies from Notre Dame, Florida State overcame a 14-point third quarter deficit to win the Champs Sports Bowl 18-14 on Dec. 29.

“I’m proud of my team,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We have the motto, ‘the pride and tradition of Notre Dame football will not be left to the weak, the timid or non-committed.’ Our kids are strong mentally; they love to compete. They’re a committed group. I’m disappointed we lost the football game today.”

Neither offense could put points on the board in the first half, but the Irish defense picked up the slack early in the first quarter. Junior linebacker Manti Te’o forced freshman running back Devonta Freeman to fumble, and junior safety Zeke Motta scooped up the loose ball and took it into the end zone from 29 yards out.

“It’s nice to be able to talk about a Notre Dame football team that plays championship defense because they did that today,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “Now we’ve got to get our offense obviously to play that level, as well, and that will be the next step for our football program, is getting our offense to play at the same level that our defense is evolving to.”

Notre Dame came out strong to start the second half, capping an eight-play, 62-yard drive as senior receiver Michael Floyd bobbled but then hauled in a five-yard touchdown pass from sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees to give the Irish a 14-0 lead.

“It was a great catch,” Rees said. “I tried to put a jump ball up there for him, but it looked like it got out of his hands as he was coming down. But he’s such a good player that with his concentration to find it and secure it was great.”

Floyd finished the game with five catches for 41 yards, but was injured on the play. Floyd, who finished his Notre Dame career as the school’s all-time leader in receptions, yards and touchdowns, was forced to sit out most of the second half.

“He’s just an incredible competitor,” Kelly said. “This is my 22nd year and I’ve had great players, guys that have gone on to great careers in the NFL or are doctors and lawyers, and you remember the guys that overcome, the guys that compete in battle, and he did that today.”

But the Irish were unable to add to their total, throwing two interceptions along with three punts on their next five drives. Kelly said it was mistakes that cost his team the game.

“We turned the ball over,” he



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Irish senior receiver Michael Floyd attempts to haul in a deep pass from sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees. Notre Dame lost 18-14 to conclude an 8-5 season, during which Floyd became the first receiver in school history to record 100 receptions in one season.

said. “We had miscues with special teams, we had some penalties that really hurt us. When you play quality opposition — and we do that week in and week out — you have to clean up the little things, and that is what I concern myself more with than whether we’ve got a good lead and we’ve got our hands around the opponent.”

Meanwhile, Florida State took advantage, scoring on its first four drives of the second half on the way to the victory. Junior quarterback E.J. Manuel connected on 20 of his 31 passes, including two fourth-quarter touchdown passes, leading the way for the Seminoles.

“I think defensively we did pretty good,” Te’o said. “We still allowed the opposing offense to put points on the board, and that’s not something that we want to do, but we just have to keep building off of this year. It starts with the winter and winter conditioning, and we’ll start to get better as a team, not only as a defense because we’re going to win or lose as a team. It doesn’t matter, and we just have to stay together and just focus on the little things.”

After Floyd’s touchdown put the Irish up two scores, sophomore

safety Lamarucus Joyner returned the kickoff 77 yards, setting up a field goal, Florida State’s first points of the game. Then, after Rees was sacked and the Irish forced to punt, the Seminoles drove 84 yards in 10 plays to cut the lead to three after they failed on a two-point conversion attempt. Manuel connected with receiver Bert Reed from 18 yards out for the score.

Sophomore quarterback Andrew Hendrix, who split time with Rees under center for the Irish, was intercepted on the next drive, which set up another Seminoles touchdown.

“I think [Kelly] does a good job communicating with us, letting us get warmed up and get our arm ready,” Rees said of splitting snaps. “But it kind of hurts the rhythm to come in and out. But it’s something coach thought would help our team win, so it’s something I’ve got to play with.”

Notre Dame was forced to punt yet again on the following drive, and Florida State marched down the field in nine plays, a drive which ended in a field goal, giving the Seminoles an 18-14 lead.

“We had situations when we had the ball and the lead and we gave

it away and we came up short,” Rees said. “We’ve got to get better closing out games, and it starts with the quarterback position. You miss some things here and there and you’ve got to move forward, but we definitely let this one go.”

After a botched Florida State punt, Notre Dame took over with 3:56 to go on its opponent’s 28-yard line. But on the third play of the drive, Rees was intercepted in the end zone on a pass intended for senior receiver John Goodman, effectively ending Notre Dame’s chances.

“It’s a high-low on the safety, and you miss a couple reads and try to force one to try to get six,” Rees said. “That’s something that I’m committed to getting better at and something I can work on in the offseason. You’ve just got to try to keep your head up after that.”

Rees finished the game 16-of-27, throwing for only 163 yards and two interceptions to go along with the touchdown pass. Despite some rotation at quarterback, he said he did not see the bowl game as a try-out for the starting job next season.

“I don’t treat a game like that,” he said. “I’ll come into the offseason and I’ll battle and work hard

and see where that takes me.

“It’s the most frustrating [to struggle when the defense is playing so well]. When the defense is playing so well, you want to do your part and make sure they know you have their back. And when you’re unable to come up with a lot of points, especially when they’re playing so well and so hard, it’s not great. But it’s a team game and the offense has to be better than that.”

After a second-straight 8-5 finish, Kelly said he is going to have to go back and reevaluate his approach heading into the offseason, especially on the offensive side of the ball.

“I’m going to have to evaluate everything that I do and how we do it because we have to get our offense better,” Kelly said. “And when I say better, I’m not talking about the way our guys compete. I’m talking about we turn the ball over, and we cannot win football games at the highest level if we continue to turn the ball over, so the coaches have to get better. The players have to get better, and we have to solve this issue if we’re going to be in an elite football team.”

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player of the game

E.J. Manuel
Florida State quarterback

It was not his strongest game, but he made several big throws in the second half once Notre Dame’s pass rush slowed down.

stat of the game

three interceptions

Tommy Rees threw two critical interceptions and Andrew Hendrix added another as turnovers once again doomed the Irish.

play of the game

Tommy Rees’ interception in the fourth quarter to seal the loss

Down four points with 2:48 remaining, Rees’ pass to the end zone was intercepted, sealing the Seminole victory.

quote of the game

“The turnovers were, again, the large reason for us not being able to win this football game, and it’s been the case all year.”

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

report card

- F

quarterbacks: Tommy Rees and Andrew Hendrix combined for three interceptions, and Michael Floyd made an incredible catch on the lone touchdown to prevent another one.
- B-

running backs: The Irish rushed for 133 yards, but at a measly rate of 2.7 yards per carry. Cierre Wood and Theo Riddick ran hard, but could not consistently move the chains for the offense.
- B+

receivers: Floyd reached the 100-reception mark for the season, a Notre Dame first, on his remarkable third-quarter touchdown before leaving with an injury. Eifert added 90 yards on six catches.
- C

offensive line: The athletic Florida State pass rush picked up four sacks and was in the backfield most of the game. The Irish could not consistently get an effective push in the running game.
- B+

defensive line: Notre Dame held Florida State to 41 rushing yards. The Irish were all over quarterback E.J. Manuel in the first half before Florida State's halftime adjustments stymied the Irish.
- B

linebackers: Manti Te'o once again paced the Irish defense with 13 tackles and a forced fumble that was returned for a touchdown, but his supporting cast made little impact.
- B

defensive backs: Zeke Motta returned a fumble for a touchdown and Jamoris Slaughter continues to impress, but coverage breakdowns in the second half led to the Seminole win.
- B

special teams: David Ruffer missed a 47-yard field goal, but Ben Turk pinned the Seminoles inside the 20 four times. George Atkinson also made a touchdown-saving tackle on kickoff coverage.
- C+

coaching: The timing of the quarterback substitutions was puzzling and Notre Dame was unable to overcome Florida State's halftime adjustments that protected Manuel in the second half.
- 2.54

overall: Once again, the Irish dropped a game they should have won because of turnovers. A strong showing by the defense was overshadowed by the offense's struggles.

adding up the numbers

- The number of games Notre Dame lost the turnover battle during the 2011 season.

10
- 100

Receptions during the season hauled in by Michael Floyd, a Notre Dame record.
- Jamoris Slaughter sacked E.J. Manuel twice in the loss, the first sacks of his career.

2
- 1.4

The average number of yards gained per rush by Florida State's offense, as the unit gained only 41 yards.
- The average yard per punt by Florida State's Shawn Powell, giving the Irish bad field position throughout the game.

47.2
- 0

The number of times Notre Dame has won a bowl game in consecutive years since 1993.



Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees, right, looks downfield during Notre Dame's 18-14 loss to Florida State in the Champs Sports Bowl on Dec. 29. Rees threw for 163 yards, one touchdown and two interceptions.

Irish need strong QB play to be elite

ORLANDO, Fla. — After another 8-5 season, Notre Dame finds itself in the same position as a year ago, wondering what direction it is headed and what quarterback will lead it that direction.

The pull-out-your-hair frustration by the Irish signal callers was a chaotic whirlwind in 2011 that started with a fall camp position battle, continued with a quick hook of senior Dayne Crist by Irish coach Brian Kelly at halftime of the South Florida game and concluded with a turnover-riddled performance by sophomores Tommy Rees and Andrew Hendrix.

If the Irish have any chance of contending for a prized BCS bid in 2012 against a schedule that will cause more nightmares over the next 226 days than a Stephen King novel, they need to shore up the quarterback position, and quickly.

While the quarterback position is often the headline-grabber, Kelly has made great strides in many other aspects of the program that are often overlooked because of the signal callers' struggles.

The defense is on the verge of becoming one of the country's elite units under the direction of defensive coordinator, and newly-named assistant head coach,



Andrew Owens
Associate Sports Editor

Bob Diaco. If recruiting serves as trustworthy foreshadowing (it often does not), Notre Dame's defense should be very strong in the near future, with immense depth on the defensive line and a promising secondary that will be very raw next season.

For the first time in a few coaching regimes, the Irish are reeling in top defensive talent and, with 15 days to go in this recruiting cycle, are primed to reel in another top-10 class.

A third reason for optimism is the ability of the coaching staff to develop talent. While offensive line coach and running game coordinator Ed Warriner and running backs coach Tim Hinton will be missed after Warriner developed the offensive line into one of the more cohesive units in recent Irish memory and Hinton's tutelage led to the emergence of senior Jonas Gray this past season, the reshuffling of the staff was done in a way to maintain stability despite the moves.

But, even with all these factors in mind, Notre Dame cannot take the next step as a program until it figures out how to eliminate costly mistakes at the quarterback position.

Rees started 12 games because of the perception he was a strong game manager and could protect the football, but that was far from the case this season, as Notre Dame's turnover issues plagued the squad throughout the season, due mostly to Rees' play.

While Rees' physical limitations have always been apparent, it is the lack of growth in

decision-making that has become an issue. On Florida State's fourth-quarter and game-sealing interception of Rees in the end zone, the sophomore threw it deep rather than the underneath route. Kelly said after the game the ball should have gone underneath, as the safety had committed to the post route, a disastrous mistake by Rees.

Kelly's decision heading into spring camp is a simple one: Does he want to continue with a known, yet limited, commodity in Rees or choose one of the three younger quarterbacks, Hendrix, freshman Everett Golson or newly-enrolled Gunner Kiel to lead the team next season.

Sure, Golson, Hendrix or Kiel would make rookie mistakes early on, but they have a much higher ceiling of growth than that of Rees. With Navy and Purdue first and second on the schedule in September, the Irish have a larger margin for error than in recent September slates, allowing them some time to grow before being thrown to the wolves against the elite opponents the Irish will face.

The decision Kelly makes will set the tone for next year and could set the trajectory of the program moving forward: Is Notre Dame set for a revival at last, or will fans see more of the same in future years?

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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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Miscues cost Irish in bowl loss



Irish sophomore quarterback Andrew Hendrix runs with the ball during Notre Dame's 18-14 loss to Florida State at the Champs Sports Bowl on Dec. 29. Hendrix threw for 24 yards and rushed for 26 in the Irish defeat.

By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

ORLANDO, Fla. — It started against South Florida, it reared its ugly head against USC and, finally, it prevented Notre Dame from picking up a season-ending bowl win. Turnovers once again led to Notre Dame's demise, as Florida State took full advantage of three takeaways en route to its 18-14 victory in the Champs Sports Bowl.

"The turnovers were, again, the large reason for us not being able to win this football game, and it's been the case all year," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "We know what we need to do. We've already talked about it, and players that are going to be back for the 2012 football season will be committed to getting that end done."

The Irish finished the season with 29 committed turnovers and 14 takeaways, good enough for a minus-15 takeover differential. Against the Seminoles, Notre Dame forced just one turnover while committing three, losing the turnover battle for the 10th time this season.

"We made turnovers — that's the biggest stat of the game. That's where you start," junior tight end Tyler Eifert said.

The Irish wasted little time turning the ball over.

After forcing Florida State into a three-and-out in the first possession of the game, senior receiver Michael Floyd gave the offense excellent field position with a 41-yard punt return, the team's longest of the season.

Starting deep in Seminole territory, sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees marched the Irish down to the 4-yard line before throwing an interception to Lamarcus Joyner in the end zone, capping a nine-play drive and denying Notre Dame the first score of the game.

"We turn the ball over, and we cannot win football games at the highest level if we continue to turn the ball over, so the coaches have to get better," Kelly said. "The players have to get better, and we have to solve this issue if we're going to be an elite football team."

Heading into the fourth quarter, the Irish clung to a precarious 14-9 lead before two more turnovers up-ended Notre Dame. Trading snaps with Rees, sophomore quarterback Andrew Hendrix threw the second interception of the game, a short pass that was picked off by Nigel Bradham. Two plays later, Florida State took its first lead of the game.

"Their defense made plays with turnovers close to their goal line. On defense, we always harp on making stops, no matter what," senior safety Jamoris Slaughter said. "As a defense, we feel like we could have made more stops when they got

turnovers."

Slaughter, who finished with a game-high two sacks, and the Irish defense came up with a key stop late in the quarter, forcing a Seminole punt with 3:56 remaining and the score 18-14 in Florida State's favor.

But Notre Dame's third and final interception proved to be the nail in the coffin. On first down, Rees heaved a deep pass to senior receiver John Goodman and it was picked off in the end zone. Minutes later, Notre Dame's season ended in a loss.

"There's definitely some high points, and every season has its ups and downs," Rees said. "There were games where our offense was firing, and I think we developed some guys that really stepped up this year. There's always things to take away, but to focus on the negatives — that's really where you get better."

In Notre Dame's case, eliminating just one negative — turnovers — may be enough to help Kelly and the Irish avoid a third consecutive five-loss season in 2012.

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Irish lose turnover battle again

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Editor-in-Chief

ORLANDO, Fla. — As was the case for most of the 2011 season, turnovers determined Notre Dame's fate against Florida State in the Champs Sports Bowl. When sophomore safety Zeke Motta returned a Seminoles fumble, forced by junior linebacker Manti Te'o, for a touchdown in the first quarter, it was the first Irish fumble return for a score since Brian Smith ran one back in September of 2008.

But from there, Notre Dame committed three turnovers, while not forcing any. The three interceptions spelled doom for the Irish, as turn-

overs have since the season-opener.

"Today, as you know, the turnovers were, again, the large reason for us not being able to win this football game," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "It's been the case all year."

Notre Dame finishes the season with 29 turnovers, including six games with at least three.

Slaughter's sacks

Senior safety Jamoris Slaughter showed up in Orlando having played 35 games for Notre Dame. He had amassed a grand total of zero sacks in those four seasons.

When he left the field after the loss, he suddenly had two career sacks, tying the Champs Sports

Bowl record in the first half.

"We feel like the skills the teams that spread the field so much now, Jamoris holds up in the running game there," Kelly said. "And obviously he's a guy that can cover and blitz off the edge."

"He's one of the guys that has all the tools, and so we need to get him on the field, and he's been able to impact greatly what we've done defensively."

Slaughter is expected to return in 2012 for a fifth year with the Irish, as he has one remaining year of eligibility.

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scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
FSU	0	0	3	15	18
ND	7	0	7	0	14

First quarter
Notre Dame 7, Florida State 0
Zeke Motta 29-yd fumble recovery (David Ruffer kick) with 9:04 remaining

Third quarter
Notre Dame 14, Florida State 0
Michael Floyd 5-yd pass from Tommy Rees (David Ruffer kick) with 11:24 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 62 yards, 3:36 elapsed

Notre Dame 14, Florida State 3
Dustin Hopkins 42-yd field goal with 9:03 remaining
Drive: 4 plays, -3 yards, 2:08 elapsed

Fourth quarter
Notre Dame 14, Florida State 9
Bert Reed 18-yd pass from E.J. Manuel (two-point conversion failed) with 14:54 remaining
Drive: 10 plays, 84 yards, 4:10 elapsed

Florida State 15, Notre Dame 14
Rashad Greene 15-yd pass from E.J. Manuel (two-point conversion failed) with 13:18 remaining
Drive: 2 plays, 18 yards, 0:42 elapsed

Florida State 18, Notre Dame 14
Dustin Hopkins 29-yd field goal with 8:05 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 71 yards, 3:23 elapsed

statistics

rushing yards



passing yards



time of possession



passing			
Rees	16-27-163	Manuel	20-31-249
Hendrix	3-8-24		

rushing			
Wood	18-60	Freeman	13-48
Riddick	8-37	Wilder	4-10
Hendrix	4-26	Abram	1-3

receiving			
Eifert	6-90	Greene	5-99
Floyd	5-41	Shaw	4-64
Toma	4-34	Smith	4-34
Riddick	2-7	Wilder	2-14
Wood	1-8	Freeman	2-12

tackles			
Te'o	13	Bradham	9
Gray	7	Joyner	7
Smith	6	Parks	7
Slaughter	5	Harris	5
Lynch	5	Smith	5
Tuitt	3	Williams	5
Nix	3	Rhodes	4
Shembo	2	Carradine	4
Cwynar	2	Reid	2
Motta	2	Jernigan	2
Jackson	2	Jenkins	2



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New game, same story

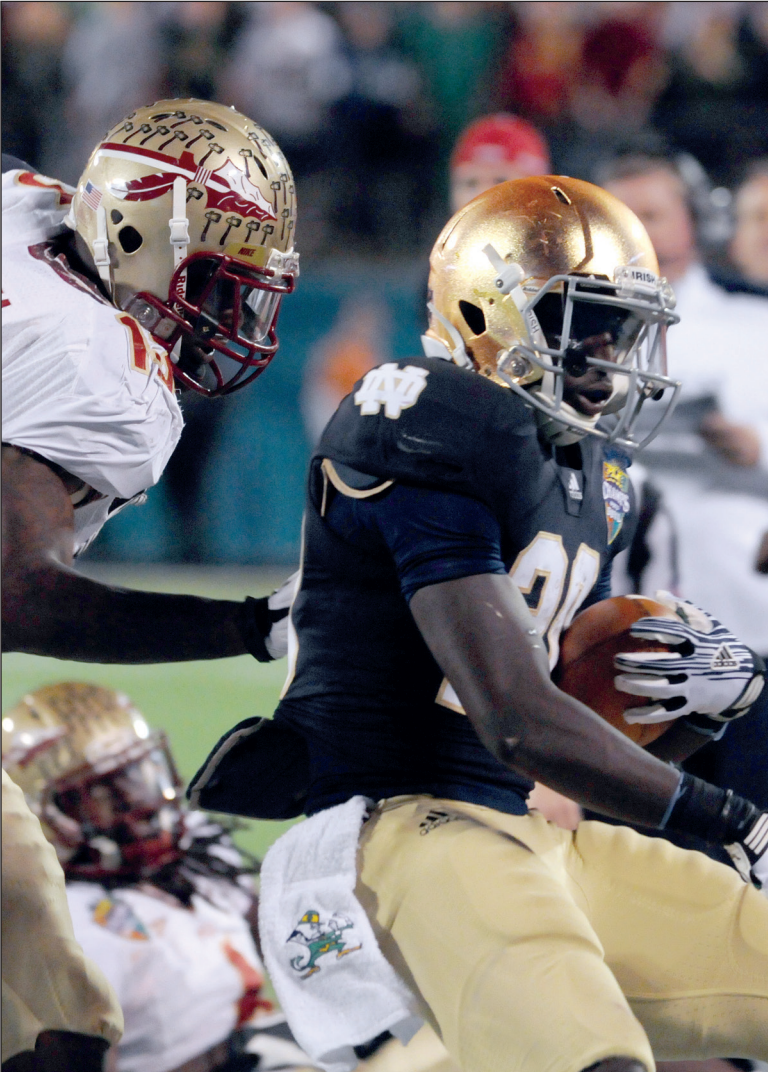
Notre Dame held a 14-0 advantage in the third quarter of the Champs Sports Bowl, but turnovers allowed Florida State back into the game. The Seminoles eventually won the contest 18-14 and the Irish finished the season with an 8-5 record for the second consecutive season. Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees threw two interceptions and sophomore Andrew Hendrix added another. In his last game in a Notre Dame uniform, senior receiver Michael Floyd caught five passes, including an acrobatic touchdown reception in the third quarter.



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JULIE HERDER/The Observer



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Irish safety Zeke Motta returns a fumble for a touchdown; Lamarcus Joyner outruns the Notre Dame kickoff coverage unit; Cornerback Robert Blanton breaks up a pass intended for Christian Green; running back Cierre Wood avoids Florida State defenders; Linebacker Manti Te'o wraps up a Seminole running back.