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IRISH FALL TO ALABAMA IN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

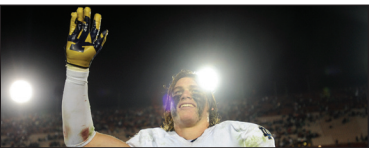
Photo Illustration by Sarah O'Connor and Brandon Keelean



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THE OBSERVER

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SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Irish receiver DaVaris Daniels runs in the open field with the ball during Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama. Daniels returned from injury and caught six passes for 115 yards. Daniels will return to Notre Dame for his junior season in 2013.

Bright spots in Sun Life Stadium give hope for the future



Allan Joseph
Editor-in-Chief

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — It wasn't pretty, and it was a deeply unsatisfying end to a storybook 2012 season. But once you step back from the chaos and the heartbreak, some bright spots emerge — not just in the big picture of the 2012 campaign, but in the 42-14 loss. There aren't many to highlight, but the ones there are suggest the Irish will be back for more next fall.

By far the best thing about Notre Dame's title game performance was the play of sophomore quarterback Everett Golson. His stat line wasn't phenomenal (21-of-36 for 270 yards, one touchdown and one frankly unlucky interception), but the young quarterback played one of the best games of his career. After more than 40 days of preparation, Golson had more control of his pre-snap reads, better footwork and better timing with his receivers than at any point this season, save perhaps for the second half of the Oklahoma contest.

He missed a few long throws, but he was accurate when finding T.J. Jones and DaVaris Daniels on curl and out routes. He saw Alabama's safeties playing in the middle of the field to take away Tyler Eifert's seam routes and knew that meant he had one-on-one coverage outside — so he took advantage, earning the majority of his yards outside the hash marks.

Golson didn't rush the ball very much, but he did repeatedly extend plays with his scrambling ability, all the while keeping his eyes downfield.

Perhaps the best part of it all, though, is that Golson got truly invaluable experience against a fantastic Crimson Tide defense — and played well. Barring any major upheaval, he should be able to go into spring practice focusing on improving his specific weaknesses, not on competing for the starting job.

"His motivation in the off-season is going to be to get back to this game," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "And the experience that he is able to take from this game, you can't duplicate it if

The Irish were not close to Alabama. But there was more to be happy about than first appeared.

you're sitting home or playing in a bowl game. When you're playing for a national championship, that stuff doesn't leave you."

Daniels and Jones were also bright spots for the Notre Dame offense. Both showed their ability to do more than run their routes, but to improvise with Golson to find a way to get open downfield. They will become true weapons next fall.

Not enough can be said about junior nose guard Louis Nix and the effort he put forth. Despite being somewhat winded and somewhat injured, Nix went up against All-American center Barrett Jones admirably all night long and proved equal to the future first-rounder. Given Nix's incredible motivation (dropping 50 pounds, as he's done since he arrived at Notre Dame,

is no easy task) to go from very good to dominant, he will wreak havoc in 2013.

One of the biggest reasons the loss in the BCS National Championship is still a bright spot, however, is that the entire program, from Kelly down to the walk-ons, saw exactly what it takes to become a national champion. It takes top-to-bottom athleticism. It takes the ability to peak at the right time. It takes dominance at every position. And while the Irish aren't there yet, they're on their way.

"Our guys clearly know what it looks like," Kelly said. "[The Crimson Tide] are back-to-back national champs. So that's what it looks like. Measure yourself against that, and I think it was pretty clear across the board what we have to do.

"We all now know what we have to do to move from where we are, which is a 12-0 football team, pretty darned good football team, but not good enough."

Kelly should know. When he first took Grand Valley State to a national championship game in 2001, his Lakers lost. But in 2002, he took them back and won the title before doing it again in 2003.

The Irish were not close to Alabama. But there was more to be happy about than first appeared. It's not just that Notre Dame exceeded all expectations for the 2012 season. It's that if you look closely, 2013 might be even better.

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

Tide rolls

Lacy runs over Irish defense as Alabama repeats as national champion



SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer

Alabama freshman running back T.J. Yeldon runs into the end zone for a touchdown during Alabama's 42-14 victory over Notre Dame in the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7. Yeldon and fellow running back Eddie Lacy both ran for over 100 yards on the ground as the Alabama running game carried the Crimson Tide to another national title.

By **ANDREW OWENS**
Assistant Managing Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Just minutes after the final whistle sounded in Alabama's 42-14 domination of Notre Dame, Sun Life Stadium employees hurriedly assembled the stage for the postgame ceremony.

Crimson Tide players were waving flags embroidered with "Back-to-back champions."

Notre Dame limped off the field, some figuratively and others, like junior nose guard Louis Nix, literally.

On this night and this stage, it was unquestionable: Alabama is the king of college football.

The Irish were denied their first national championship in 24 years, and the Crimson Tide hoisted the crystal football for the third time in four seasons under head coach Nick Saban.

"We were beat today by a better football team," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "They beat us today, and we've got another step that we have to take in the development of our program, and it'll be left up to those that have been led by these seniors, and that'll be the challenge moving forward."

"As for the game, it was pretty clear. I mean, we had a hard time getting off the field, and a lot of that had to do with Alabama."

From the first possession, Alabama (13-1) left no doubt. The Crimson Tide received

the opening kickoff, and engineered a five-play, 82-yard touchdown drive, forcefully punctuated by running back Eddie Lacy's 20-yard touchdown run.

Alabama's quick work marked the first touchdown drive Notre Dame (12-1) allowed this season of more than 75 yards.

"I think Coach Kelly told us before the game that there are eight minutes that are very important in the game," Irish senior linebacker Manti Te'o said. "The first two minutes of the game, the last two minutes in the second quarter, the first two minutes of the third quarter and the last two minutes of the game, and obviously the first two minutes of the game didn't pan out the way we thought it would go."

"But you know, we had a lot of opportunities ... and we didn't capitalize on those opportunities, and Alabama did."

After a three-and-out by the Irish offense, it appeared Notre Dame received the spark it needed on the punt when Alabama returner Christian Jones muffed it. The Irish recovered, but the referees ruled sophomore safety Matthias Farley interfered with Jones.

Alabama shredded the Notre Dame defense again on a 61-yard drive that put the Crimson Tide in front 14-0. It was just the second time all season that the Irish trailed by double digits.

"They are a great team," Nix

said after the game. "They have one of the best offensive lines in the country — probably the best offensive line, but they did not dominate our defensive front. We just missed tackles."

After another Notre Dame punt and Alabama touchdown drive, it was 21-0 after one play in the second quarter, and the rout was on. The Crimson Tide added two additional scores before the Irish reached the end zone for the first time at the 4:08 mark in the third quarter.

"Notre Dame had a really highly sort of statistical defensive team, and I thought that a real challenge for us in the game is how we would control the line of scrimmage, and I think that that's probably the thing that was the most surprising to me is how we were able to control the line of scrimmage, especially early in the game," Saban said. "We had a really good plan, and players did a really good job of executing it. But I didn't think that we would be able to control the line of scrimmage."

Lacy rushed 20 times for 140 yards and a touchdown, while freshman running back T.J. Yeldon's number was called 21 times for 108 yards and a score. Alabama's rushing prowess allowed senior quarterback A.J. McCarron to complete 20 of 28 passes for 264 yards and four touchdowns.

"We've got to get physically stronger, continue to close the

gap there, and just overall you need to see what it looks like," Kelly said. "Our guys clearly know what it looks like. When I say, 'know what it looks like,' a championship football team. They're back-to-back national champs. So that's what it looks like. Measure yourself against that, and I think it was pretty clear across the board what we have to do."

Alabama's defensive front limited Notre Dame to 32 rushing yards, putting the offensive weight on quarterback Everett Golson's shoulders. The sophomore finished 21-of-36 for 270 yards, an interception and two total touchdowns.

"Well, the beginning of the game I don't think it was necessarily nerves," Golson said. "I was more so anxious to play. I think all the players were anxious to play, and we had that mindset of really going out and executing and giving us the best chance to beat Alabama. Obviously things didn't work

out the way we planned."

"But how I feel right now, I'm kind of just taking this game under my belt. Like I said, I'll just gain the experience from it, and really looking forward to next year knowing that I've got to be more of a leader, and just being more of a leader to this team and trying to make this team better."

Notre Dame fell one win short of a national championship, but if the Irish are to remain among the nation's elite, this season will be considered the program's revival.

"[Losing] definitely sucks, to be quite honest," Te'o said. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything. I wouldn't trade this team for anything. I wouldn't do anything differently. Obviously we wish that the night could have ended in a different way. ... Regardless of what happened tonight, I'm proud of my team."

Contact Andrew Owens at aowens2@nd.edu

PLAYER OF THE GAME

EDDIE LACY

ALABAMA RUNNING BACK

The bruising junior Lacy, who has declared for the NFL Draft, made a huge impact in his final college game. He ran for 140 yards, added 17 receiving yards and scored a touchdown on the ground and through the air. Lacy knifed through the Notre Dame defense on the game's opening drive and wore down the Irish defense en route to victory.

REPORT CARD

B-

QUARTERBACKS

Everett Golson initially looked like an inexperienced starter facing a championship defense. But as the game progressed, Golson began to be Golson. He threw for 270 yards, kept plays alive with his feet and made the game look closer than it was with two late touchdowns.

D+

RUNNING BACKS

The early deficit took the backs out of the game more than anything but when Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood did carry the ball, the results were not favorable. The two senior backs combined for 39 rushing yards in their final game with the Irish.

C

RECEIVERS

DaVaris Daniels returned from injury to haul in 115 yards while T.J. Jones and Tyler Eifert also had solid games. But Robby Toma, John Goodman and Theo Riddick combined to catch one ball as Notre Dame averaged 13 yards per catch.

D+

OFFENSIVE LINE

The strength of the Irish offense struggled against the massive Crimson Tide defensive front. Golson was sacked twice, Notre Dame managed just one run of longer than 10 yards as the Irish struggled to sustain long drives.

D

DEFENSIVE LINE

Against the vaunted Alabama offensive line, Notre Dame's defensive front failed to pressure Crimson Tide quarterback A.J. McCarron and, more notably, slow the Alabama rushing duo of Eddie Lacy and T.J. Yeldon.

C-

LINEBACKERS

The Notre Dame linebackers were consistently overpowered by Lacy and Yeldon. Each of the Irish linebackers — even Manti Te'o — often failed to wrap up and gave Alabama too many yards after contact

C-

DEFENSIVE BACKS

McCarron torched the Irish secondary to the tune of 264 yards and four touchdowns, and freshman receiver Amari Cooper tortured the defense. Zeke Motta's woes carried over into the rush defense, where he consistently missed tackles.

B-

SPECIAL TEAMS

The return units were below average, yes, but coverage made up for it. The Irish stopped returns before they could start and nearly forced a turnover in the first quarter. Ben Turk also averaged more than 42 yards per punt.

C-

COACHING

It was the coaching staff's first experience preparing for a championship game and it showed. The offensive gameplan was off from the start. Defensively, Alabama players spoke of a "predictable" Irish approach.

OVERALL GPA: 1.82

Notre Dame's uncharacteristically bad tackling and poor line play meant the game was no contest just four seconds into the second quarter. The Irish tied Alabama in the second half but the Crimson Tide was just too much for an overwhelmed Notre Dame squad. The team of destiny that found a way to win 12 games could barely find its way to 12 points.

PLAYER OF THE GAME

ALABAMA JUNIOR RUNNING BACK EDDIE LACY

Lacy ran for 140 yards on 20 carries. Lacy set the tone early with dominating stampedes of 10 and 20 yards on the opening drive and had 72 first-quarter yards. He also added a receiving touchdown on a short pass before spinning off Danny Spond and into the end zone.



SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer

Sophomore quarterback Everett Golson throws a pass during Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama on Jan. 7 at Sun Life Stadium. Golson threw for 270 yards on 21-for-36 passing with a touchdown.

Golson looks to grow after championship loss

By **CHRIS ALLEN**
Sports Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — At the conclusion of Alabama's 42-14 victory over Notre Dame on Monday night in the BCS National Championship Game, the two starting quarterbacks went in separate directions. As Alabama's experienced redshirt junior A.J. McCarron won his second national title as a starter, Notre Dame's sophomore Everett Golson walked off the field quietly.

Notre Dame had fallen short, but the first-year starter focused after the game on the opportunity to grow, in the hopes of one day standing where McCarron was.

"I'm kind of just taking this game under my belt," Golson said. "Like I said, I'll just gain the experience from it, and really looking forward to next year, knowing that I've got to be more of a leader, and just being more of a leader to this team and trying to make this team better."

In the biggest game of his life, Golson had a mixed performance statistically but was one of Notre Dame's best performers on either side of the ball. The sophomore was 21-of-36 through the air for 270 yards and one touchdown with an interception. He added a rushing touchdown to put Notre Dame on

the scoreboard in the third quarter.

But Notre Dame's offense failed to convert consistently on third-down conversions as Golson could not establish the rhythm needed to put up points with Alabama.

"We just had to go out and affect [Golson]," Alabama linebacker Nico Johnson said. "We felt he was their true leader and if he was rolling, the team was rolling. We wanted to go out and affect him the best we could and stop them."

Golson gave Notre Dame fans a bright spot with his second-half performance, bringing the Irish from a 28-0 hole at halftime and putting 14 points on the board in the second half. After a first half in which the young signal-caller made some questionable throws on short-distance conversions, Golson settled in with 182 passing yards after throwing for just 88 in the first half.

Much of that production owed to downfield connections with sophomore wide receiver DaVaris Daniels and junior wide receiver T.J. Jones, who both produced big numbers in the loss.

"It took us a while to get a feel for their defense," Jones said. "They played more press-man than we thought they would, which changed their look in the box. We tried to carve out a run game

while having an effective pass game, but it took us a while to get used to it.

"I just had to find a way to keep the play open when Everett [Golson] got into space. I played more physical with the DBs rather than finessing them, which helped me out."

After the game, Irish coach Brian Kelly was asked to reflect on the future of his offense with the trio of Golson, Daniels and Jones returning in the passing game. Kelly asked his young quarterback a question instead.

"Well, if Everett would come back for another year — are you coming back?" he said.

The quarterback who came up short against a counterpart with multiple national championships responded with a laugh that he would return.

"We worry about whether he wants to play basketball," Kelly said jokingly. "These guys have played great competition across the board from the start of the season to the end, and obviously it's only going to help them going forward."

For Golson and his emerging offensive weapons, going forward will mean returning to the same stage again and achieving a far different result.

Contact Chris Allen at callen10@nd.edu

Lackadaisical first quarter buries Notre Dame

By **MATTHEW DeFRANKS**
Associate Sports Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Two plays into the game, it all looked okay for No. 1 Notre Dame.

After a 17-yard kickoff return and a 1-yard run, the Irish (12-1) had stuffed No. 2 Alabama on consecutive plays — but then it all unraveled. Three of the next four plays went for at least 10 yards, Notre Dame committed two penalties and the Crimson Tide retained possession of the ball following a questionable fair catch interference penalty on Notre Dame that negated a recovered fumble by the Irish.

Alabama stunned the Irish with a game-opening 5-play, 82-yard touchdown drive capped by junior running back Eddie Lacy’s 20-yard romp into the end zone. The quick march down the field was the first drive of at least 80 yards against Notre Dame this season.

“I think [Irish coach Brian Kelly] told us before the game that there are eight minutes that are very important in the game, the first two minutes of the game, the last two minutes in the second quarter, the first two minutes of the third quarter and the last two minutes of the game, and obviously the first two

minutes of the game didn’t pan out the way we thought it would go,” Irish senior linebacker Manti Te’o said.

“And so there’s nothing that we can say, but we know now that the first two minutes are very, very important to the momentum and your success in the game.”

After a three-and-out by the Irish and a 15-yard penalty on Notre Dame, the Crimson Tide took over again at its own 39-yard line. The Crimson Tide retained possession of the ball following a questionable fair catch interference penalty on Notre Dame that negated a recovered fumble by the Irish.

“That would have been a nice play to go our way early in the game,” Kelly said. “Obviously it didn’t go our way, but as you mentioned, it certainly didn’t change the outcome of this football game.”

Alabama gained positive yards on all but one play during a 10-play, 61-yard touchdown drive. The Crimson Tide kept the Irish off balance by alternating running and passing plays on the drive. Junior quarterback A.J. McCarron connected with senior tight end Michael Williams on a 3-yard touchdown pass.

Entering the BCS National

Championship Game, the Irish defense had allowed just nine points in the previous 12 first quarters. Against the Crimson Tide, Notre Dame yielded 14 points and four ticks in the second quarter, Alabama added another touchdown to go up 21-0.

In the first quarter alone, Lacy had 72 yards on eight carries and a touchdown. Only six players had more than 72 rushing yards in a game against Notre Dame this season. He finished with 140 yards on the ground.

Alabama had 202 total yards in the quarter while holding Notre Dame to 23. In the remaining three quarters, Notre Dame allowed 327 yards.

The Crimson Tide ran 22 plays and held the ball for more than 12 minutes in the period; the Irish, eight plays and less than three minutes. Alabama was also a perfect three-for-three on third downs.



“We didn’t do a good job at all in the first half of getting our defense off the field. They played too many plays and we have to do a better job of getting them off the field,” senior offensive tackle Zack Martin said.

Contact **Matthew DeFranks** at mdefrank@nd.edu



Two Irish defenders try to tackle Alabama sophomore wide receiver Christian Jones on Jan. 7 at Sun Life Stadium. Jones recorded two receptions for 40 yards in the game.

SCORING SUMMARY

	1 ST	2 ND	3 RD	4 TH	TOTAL
	14	14	7	7	42
	0	0	7	7	14

1 ALABAMA 7, NOTRE DAME 0

Eddie Lacy 20-yard run (Shelley kick)

 **12:03** *remaining*

Drive: Five plays, 82 yards, 2:57 elapsed

ALABAMA 14, NOTRE DAME 0

Michael Williams three-yard pass from McCarron (Shelley kick)

 **6:14** *remaining*

Drive: 10 plays, 61 yards, 4:49 elapsed

2 ALABAMA 21, NOTRE DAME 0

T.J. Yeldon one-yard run (Shelley kick)

 **14:56** *remaining*

Drive: Eight plays, 80 yards, 4:26 elapsed

ALABAMA 28, NOTRE DAME 0

Eddie Lacy 11-yard pass from McCarron (Shelley kick)

 **0:31** *remaining*

Drive: Nine plays, 71 yards, 3:21 elapsed

3 ALABAMA 35, NOTRE DAME 0

Amari Cooper 34-yard pass from McCarron (Shelley kick)

 **7:34** *remaining*

Drive: 10 plays, 97 yards, 5:37 elapsed

ALABAMA 35, NOTRE DAME 7

Golson two-yard run (Brindza kick)

 **4:08** *remaining*

Drive: Nine plays, 85 yards, 3:26 elapsed

4 ALABAMA 42, NOTRE DAME 7

Amari Cooper 19-yard pass from McCarron (Shelley kick)

 **11:27** *remaining*

Drive: 14 plays, 86 yards, 7:41 elapsed

ALABAMA 42, NOTRE DAME 14

Riddick six-yard pass from Golson (Brindza kick)

 **7:51** *remaining*

Drive: 10 plays, 75 yards, 3:36 elapsed

STATISTICS



PASSING			
Golson	21-36-270	McCarron	20-28-264
RUSHING			
Riddick	10-37	Lacy	20-140
Wood	4-2	Yeldon	21-108
Golson	5-(-)7	McCarron	1-9
RECEIVING			
Daniels	6-115	Cooper	6-105
Jones	7-90	Norwood	3-66
Eifert	6-61	Jones	2-40
Riddick	1-6	Williams	3-17
Wood	1-(-)2	Lacy	2-17
TACKLES			
Motta	16	Mosley	8
Te’o	10	Clinton-Dix	7
Russell	8	Lester	6
Farley	6	Belue	4
Fox	6	Collins	3
Nix	5	Depriest	3

KICKOFF RETURNS

Atkinson	3-47	Jones	2-31
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Experience proves its worth in managing layoff

By **ALLAN JOSEPH**
Editor-in-Chief

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The 2013 BCS National Championship Game was Alabama coach Nick Saban's fourth appearance in a national title game and third with the Crimson Tide. With all that experience, Saban knows exactly how to prepare a squad over the over-month-long layoff between its final regular-season game and the biggest one of the season — and he proved it again in Sun Life Stadium.

"We kind of have a program, an approach that we use that is a little different

defense.

"I think with the time that we had to prepare, our players had a really good understanding of Notre Dame's defense and how they played defense," he said. "They play a 3-4 defense, which is similar to ours, so it wasn't a unique thing for our players to get accustomed to."

On the other sideline, the Irish started sloppy, missing countless tackles in the first quarter and going down 21-0 after five seconds had elapsed in the second quarter. Two days before the game, Notre Dame defensive coordinator Bob Diaco had expressed confidence in the

"I think with the time that we had to prepare, our players had a really good understanding of Notre Dame's defense."

Nick Saban
Crimson Tide coach

than what we used to use because there's so much time between games," Saban said Jan. 8. "And I feel like our players are comfortable with that in terms of how we practice, how we prepare, how we sort of don't try to carry the psychological momentum from the season to the game, and let that happen when we get closer to the game."

Offenses and defenses traditionally practice against scout teams in practice, but Alabama defensive end Damion Square said a big part of the Crimson Tide's philosophy over the layoff, put together in conjunction with defensive coordinator Kirby Smart, is maintaining players' physical edge having the first-team offense and first-team defense practice against each other regularly.

"We practiced hard so we could make this happen. We went 'ones against ones' and got ready," Square said. "We know that we are the most physical team in the country. You have to know that you are the stronger team because that is how you will play. We knew one team would break and it wasn't going to be us."

Crimson Tide offensive tackle D.J. Fluker said Alabama had prepared to play a more physical game than the Irish.

"When we watched film, we saw Boston College push them around. We knew that if they could do it, we could do it," Fluker said. "They were kind of predictable on defense. We knew what they would do so it was just a matter of executing. They have great players but we came here on a mission. We weren't leaving without it. They are physical, but we outplayed them."

Saban said extensive film study helped his offense find holes in Notre Dame's

practice schedule Irish coach Brian Kelly had put together.

"Coach Kelly put a great schedule together and really managed it well," Diaco said. "We get our fundamental work done in segmented drills. We try to be as careful as we can, but we understand it's critical that we get our work in fundamentally."

Kelly, who had talked to the LSU and Oregon programs for advice on dealing with the layoff, said after the game he would reevaluate how he prepared his team.

"I have to evaluate whether I did a good enough job as the head coach in getting tackling done for our players," he said. "I think everything is on the table when you see so many missed tackles. But again, that will require a little bit of research and looking at it a little bit more in



SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer

Alabama defensive coordinator Kirby Smart looks on during the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7 at Sun Life Stadium. Smart's defense held Notre Dame to 32 rushing yards.

depth."

Irish running back Cierre Wood said he thought Alabama's experience preparing for the game — it was the Crimson Tide's third appearance in for years — provided Saban's squad an advantage.

"If you've been there numerous times, you know how

to act. You know what it takes to be successful in that type of game," he said. "I'm not saying we didn't have what it took to be successful, we just didn't have it as down pat as they did."

After seeing the success of Saban's method, Kelly said he and his staff would continue to grow while looking

toward the future.

"We're all going to learn, not just the players, [but the] coaches. We hadn't been in this game, either," he said. "So we're going to learn a great deal from it and be better coaches from it as well."

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A SEASON TO REMEMBER

Notre Dame goes from unranked in the preseason to No. 1 in shining regular season, plays for first title in 24 years

By OBSERVER FOOTBALL WRITERS

Irish coach Brian Kelly entered his third season at Notre Dame with what seemed to be many question marks and few answers. With an unresolved quarterback situation, off-season turmoil with disciplinary issues and player departures following a bumpy 2011 season, a daunting 2012 schedule — ranked the most difficult in the country before the season — awaited the Irish. The

sentiment among the fanbase was clear, if unspoken: 2012 would be a rebuilding year, with 2013 the coming-out party. But Kelly had different plans.

As has been the case with so many Irish coaches before him, Kelly's third year marked the breakthrough — the defense reached championship levels, he found his quarterback in sophomore Everett Golson and his squad learned how to win close games, a characteristic the Notre Dame

program had missed for years.

Behind a 12-0 regular season, the Irish asserted themselves among the nation's elite and reached the BCS National Championship Game. Their star linebacker set a record for national awards won and finished second in the Heisman trophy balloting.

Most of all, they showed that the program so desperate for a resurgence has finally found a coach capable of returning the Irish to the pinnacle of college football.



SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Senior running back Theo Riddick celebrates after scoring a rushing touchdown in Notre Dame's 50-10 victory over Navy in Dublin on Sept. 1. Riddick led Notre Dame in rushing in 2012 with 880 yards on the ground after the BCS National Championship Game. The former slot receiver was Notre Dame's third-leading receiver with 35 receptions on the year.

Notre Dame 50, Navy 10

The 2012 season began across the Atlantic Ocean as Notre Dame played in Dublin for the first time in 16 years. The Irish were without junior quarterback Tommy Rees, senior linebacker Carlo Calabrese, junior defensive lineman Justin Utupo and senior running back Cierre Wood, all of whom were left in South Bend due to various suspensions.

In Golson's first game action, Notre Dame trounced Navy 50-10. The Irish jumped ahead 27-0 in the second quarter when sophomore defensive end Stephon Tuitt returned a fumble 77 yards for a touchdown.

"Stephon is a tremendous athlete with some speed," senior linebacker Manti Te'o said. "When you see No. 7, he can outrun pretty much any skill player on offense."

The Irish held Navy's triple-option rushing attack to 149 yards, while Notre Dame amassed 293. Sophomore running back George Atkinson scored his first career offensive touchdown with a 56-yard score in the first quarter.

"I think we're just carrying on where we were last year as a

defense that's very stingy against the run," Kelly said. "That's a huge reason why. We're very blessed with a physical group, a great scheme, they're well-coached and it's not often you can hold Navy down to 10 points."

Te'o recovered a fumble and intercepted a pass in the victory — both career firsts.

Roughly 35,000 Americans traveled to Ireland for the game and 49,000 fans packed sold-out Aviva Stadium to see the Irish win the season opener.

Notre Dame 20, Purdue 17

After beginning the season in a foreign country, the Irish returned home September 8 to the most familiar of territory — Notre Dame Stadium.

As celebrations rang out across campus to ring in the 125th season of Notre Dame football, inside the Stadium the Irish tangled with a physical Purdue team in Golson's home debut.

Golson's debut in front of the home faithful took an unexpected turn after a late turnover, as Rees came off the bench to lead Notre Dame on a game-winning drive in

the fourth quarter. A 27-yard field goal by sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza in the game's final seconds secured a 20-17 victory and a 2-0 start.

After the game, Kelly heralded his team's resiliency after several key starters were relegated to the bench due to injury.

"The story for me as the head coach is our mantra: next man in," Kelly said. "We had seven guys go down today. Our key players. We had two captains go down. ... Our guys just kept fighting. The next guy came in and battled. And as you know, the story finishes with Tommy Rees coming in for Golson and leading us on a two-minute drive to win the game."

Golson and his Purdue counterparts under center — Caleb TerBush and Robert Marve — struggled to put points on the board in the first half against fierce pass rushes, and the teams entered the locker room tied at seven.

On the strength of a third-quarter touchdown pass to junior wideout T.J. Jones and Brindza's first career field goal, the Irish held a late 17-10 lead. Golson, who finished the day with 289 yards



KIRBY MCKENNA | The Observer

Sophomore wide receiver DaVaris Daniels escapes a Purdue defender. Daniels tallied 70 receiving yards against the Boilermakers.

passing, was stripped of the ball inside his own 25-yard line and Purdue capitalized with another touchdown to Edison to tie the score at 17. That set the stage for the former starter Rees to enter the game, to a chorus of boos, and lead the Irish to victory.

"[Golson] had trouble gripping the ball. I think he could have probably still have gone," Kelly

said. "We also made the decision with the flow of the game that Tommy could come in there and manage our two-minute [drill] and he did a great job."

"Tommy's a guy, if you look at it in baseball terms, he's a closer. He can close for you."

With the win, the Irish moved to

see GOLSON **PAGE 8**



KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Senior running back Cierre Wood runs through the Spartan defense. Wood returned against Michigan State after serving a two-game suspension.



KARLA MORENO | The Observer

Junior quarterback Tommy Rees relieved sophomore Everett Golson in Notre Dame's win against Michigan on Sept. 22. Rees rushed for Notre Dame's only offensive touchdown in the 13-6 victory.

Golson

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2-0 for the first time since 2008 and set the stage for a prime-time clash with also-undefeated Michigan State.

Notre Dame 20, Michigan State 3

This was supposed to be the one that got the No. 20 Irish.

Golson, fresh off a late-game benching the previous week, was about to face his first true road game in a raucous East Lansing, Mich., environment. Spartans junior running back Le'Veon Bell (who would finish the season third in the NCAA with 138 rushing yards per game) was still a Heisman Trophy candidate.

History was against Notre Dame, too. It had been 10 years since Notre Dame began the season 3-0 and seven since the Irish topped a top-10 opponent. Michigan State had not yet allowed an offensive touchdown and carried a 15-game home winning streak into the matchup.

So when Notre Dame pulled off a 20-3 upset of No. 10 Michigan State, which eventually finished 7-6, Kelly had a simple way of describing the win.

"It's a signature win," Kelly said. "There's no question that when you go on the road against the No. 10-ranked team in the country and you beat them, it's definitely going to build some confidence in that locker room."

The Irish defense, led by Te'o's 12 tackles, stifled Bell and the Spartans. Bell was held to just 77 yards and sacked Spartans junior quarterback Andrew Maxwell four times. Michigan State's only points came on a first-half 50-yard field goal as the Spartans totaled only 237 yards of offense.

"Obviously we felt like if we can get [Bell] under control and force [Michigan State] to throw the football, we would much rather have that scenario than him grinding the football at us," Kelly said. "I think once they started to throw the football more, that was exactly where we're hoping the game would kind of shift towards, and it did."

Te'o's performance came on the heels of one of the toughest weeks in his life. Within 24 hours, Te'o found out about the deaths of both his grandmother and his girlfriend but still played just days later with a heavy heart.

He also recovered a fumble, recorded a tackle for loss and broke up two passes.

Golson finished the game an unimpressive 14-for-32 for 178 yards but it was one play that proved the difference for the Irish.

On 2nd-and-9 from the Michigan State 36-yard line, Golson rolled to his right and evaded pressure before stopping and launching a cross-field pass to graduate student receiver John Goodman. Goodman fought off a Spartan defensive back before making a spectacular one-handed touchdown catch to give the Irish an early 7-0 lead.

"That's who I was looking for. It wasn't really designed in the play," Golson said. "I think that's one of the things I talked about previously about improvising. I think me and Goodman kind of connected a little bit and we scored a touchdown."

Through three games, the Irish had yielded just 30 points, the lowest total since the 1988 team allowed 27 during Notre Dame's last national championship season.

"The most important thing is that our defense continues to be the group that we had committed to in building when we started this process, and they're starting to get to that level that can play against anybody," Kelly said.

Notre Dame 13, Michigan 6

Denard Robison had tormented the No. 11 Irish for the previous two years.

The senior quarterback's 944 total yards and eight touchdowns

were impressive, but his two last-second, come-from-behind wins over the Irish meant Notre Dame seniors were 0-3 against the hated Wolverines.

But thanks to another inspired showing by Te'o and another relief appearance by Rees, the Irish notched another win and moved to 4-0 with a 13-6 victory.

Te'o, a week after a 12-tackle performance in a 20-3 win over Michigan State, tallied eight tackles, two interceptions and added two quarterback hurries as the lei-wearing fans in Notre Dame Stadium rallied around him in a difficult personal time.

"[Manti] is the guy in there," Kelly said. "I mean, it all evolves around him, his personality, his strength. He's a special guy. Take advantage of him while you've got him now, because I've never been around a kid like that."

Te'o and the Notre Dame defense forced the Wolverines into six turnovers and limited them to 299 total yards. At one point in the first half, the Irish intercepted five consecutive Michigan passes.

"Defensively, what can I say, six turnovers, limited what we felt is one of the most dynamic offensive players in the country to no touchdowns," Kelly said. "[It was] just an incredible performance by our defense."

The win marked the second straight week the Irish did not allow a touchdown. It was the first time since 1943 that Notre Dame kept Michigan out of the end zone.

"I think, for us, we are trying to not let [the offense] get any points,"

Te'o said. "I think, you know, when your defense is disappointed that they kicked a field goal and made it, that's when you know, like, 'Dang, we are going to be good.'"

A week removed from a solid road showing at Michigan State, Golson could not get the offense going. He threw two interceptions on his first eight passes and finished with just 30 yards before Kelly pulled him in the second quarter. Golson threw a pick on his first pass and one on his last pass into the end zone.

Rees replaced Golson and finished 8-for-11 for 115 yards. He also added a two-yard touchdown plunge for his first career rushing score after starting 12 games the previous season.

"We're fairly comfortable if we need Tommy to come in and handle some of the offense for us, if we feel like it's necessary, we will," Kelly said. "He's a great asset to have if you need him. To close out a game, we'll continue to go that route. We'd like to continue to develop Everett so that we don't have to do that, but we're still going to try to win football games anyway possible."

Despite forcing six turnovers and holding Michigan in check, the Irish still needed late heroics to seal the win. Rees found senior tight end Tyler Eifert for a 38-yard strike on third-and-four and senior running back Theo Riddick converted another third down three plays later to close the game out.

The win pushed Notre Dame into the top 10 for the first time

since 2006. The Irish would not leave the top 10 the rest of the season.

Notre Dame 41, Miami 3

The annual home-away-from-home contest known as the Shamrock Series took the Notre Dame home game experience just down the road to Chicago against old rival Miami.

The trip to the Windy City proved to be a breeze for the rising Irish as running backs Cierre Wood and George Atkinson broke out to lead a 376-yard rushing performance for Notre Dame. The Irish ran the Hurricanes off the field in a 41-3 blowout at Soldier Field.

"Clearly, we felt like we found a way to run the football today," Kelly said. "We felt like if we could keep them from getting the big plays, and we could run the football, that was going to be our recipe for success."

The Irish got a break in the early going as Miami wide receiver Phillip Dorsett got behind the Notre Dame secondary on two early plays, but dropped two certain touchdown passes. The Irish recovered and shut down Miami's offense for the remainder of the game.

Though they held a slim 13-3 lead at halftime, the Irish offensive line dominated the line of scrimmage in the second half as Wood, Atkinson and sophomore running back Cam McDaniel combined for four second-half rushing touchdowns to complete the rout.

"When you start to break the other team's will, it starts to show," senior guard Chris Watt said. "We were able to do that—that was our goal going into the second half. We knew we had

established the running game. We wanted to keep up with it too."

Moments after Notre Dame completed the victory to go 5-0, ESPN's "College GameDay" announced on social media it would bring its weekly on-campus pre-game show to South Bend for the clash between the Irish and Stanford the next week.

Notre Dame 20, Stanford 13

With a 5-0 record and "GameDay" on Notre Dame's campus for the first time since 2005, the Irish welcomed Stanford to Notre Dame Stadium as the seventh-ranked team in the nation.

The game turned out to be



MACKENZIE SAIN | The Observer

Junior quarterback Tommy Rees hands the ball off to sophomore Cam McDaniel in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's 41-3 win over Miami. McDaniel and the rest of the Irish rushers combined for 376 yards rushing.

Stanford

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exactly what pundits expected — a defensive brawl between two of college football's most physical teams.

Stanford did not score an offensive touchdown during the entire game and Notre Dame didn't reach the end zone until the first minute of the fourth quarter, when Eifert hauled in a 24-yard pass from Golson in the end zone.

The game went to overtime after Rees led the Irish down the field for a game-tying field goal after Golson suffered a concussion.

In the extra period, Rees connected with junior T.J. Jones on a seven-yard touchdown pass to give Notre Dame its first lead since midway through the second quarter.

The Irish defense, after allowing Stanford to reach the 5-yard line, achieved a goal-line stand that secured the 20-13 overtime victory.

"It comes to fruition in the way the game ended and our team coming up with great goal line stand," Kelly said. "Classic."

With four downs and three yards from the end zone, the Cardinal gave the ball to star running back Stepfan Taylor four times, and four times he was denied a score.

"That's what Stanford does," Kelly said. "I don't think you can fault [Stanford] for doing what they do. That's their offense."

Following the fourth-down stop, players and coaches ran onto the field, but the officials cleared the playing area to review the play. The decision, however, was upheld, and Notre Dame was 6-0 and eyeing a Bowl Championship Series (BCS) berth for the first time in six years.

Golson fumbled in Notre Dame's end zone in the second quarter. Stanford recovered it for a touchdown and, for the first time all season, the Irish trailed. Notre Dame, however, did not allow the Cardinal offense to score a touchdown, extending the Irish defense's streak of not allowing a touchdown to four games.

Notre Dame's defense came up with some critical plays to halt a few early Stanford drives. Senior cornerback Bennett Jackson intercepted a pass at the 1-yard line in the first quarter to end a five-play, 27-yard drive. Two possessions later, Farley returned an interception

49 yards to the Stanford 16-yard line. After a 12-play, 67-yard drive by the Cardinal, sophomore defensive end Stephon Tuitt blocked a field goal.

"I think they know that they are a good football team more than anything else," Kelly said. "I think they feel they earned the win today. They came from behind, right. They didn't luck into it. They won in overtime. I think if they lucked into it, you know, maybe a fumble on the goal line or something happened, maybe you could make that case."

"But they won that game. They earned that win. And so I think I would rather have them believe that each and every week, if they prepare, that they can beat any opponent."

For the third time this season, Rees replaced Golson (though this time for injury reasons), and led Notre Dame to the win.

"Tommy is level-headed, locked in," Te'o said. "As the game gets on, it's easy to let your guard down a little bit thinking you're not going to go in. But Tommy is always locked in and taking notes from where he's standing so that when he gets in opportunity, he can go in there and help our team win, just like he did today."

Notre Dame 17, BYU 14

Sandwiched between an emotional overtime win over Stanford and a giant road test at Oklahoma, the matchup with the Cougars was heralded as a trap game.

When Golson was ruled out because of a concussion, Rees again took the reins of the Irish offense and No. 5 Notre Dame squeaked out a tight 17-14 win over BYU.

Rees, who led Notre Dame to victories over Purdue, Michigan and Stanford, finished the game 7-for-16 for 117 yards, one touchdown and one interception. Kelly said he went with Rees despite Golson's desire to play.

"[Golson] wanted to play," Kelly said. "He made his case. I just felt like where we were during and my evaluation of him cumulatively, I felt like this was the best thing to do... We feel like we've got a kid now that's 100 percent ready to go for Oklahoma."

Riddick added a career-high 149 yards while Wood chipped in 114 of his own on the ground. The Irish defense allowed just 66 rushing yards to the Cougars.

"It was pretty clear that we were going to be able to control both sides of the ball on the offensive line and defensive line," Kelly said. "And you know, [we] really stuck with our game plan. Came in here wanting to run the football. Thought we controlled that quite well."

The Cougars became the first team since Purdue to score an offensive touchdown against the Irish with a touchdown midway through the second quarter. They scored again two minutes later.

"We weren't used to [giving up touchdowns]," Te'o said. "It made me mad, and it made a lot of guys mad and when they scored again, it really made us mad."

Notre Dame 30, Oklahoma 13

Despite being No. 5 in the BCS standings, Notre Dame went into Norman, Okla. as heavy underdogs to the No. 8 Sooners. Yet the Irish emerged with more than just a 30-13 win, but also a legitimate shot at contending for a national championship.

"Our kids were confident," Kelly said. "They came in well prepared. I told them that I was very confident in their ability to go out on the road and play very good football."

"I thought that they exhibited that confidence in the first half and in the second half the focus was on physical and mental toughness."

The game-changing play of the night came from a pair of underclassmen with 8:29 left in the fourth quarter and the score knotted at 13. On second down at the Notre Dame 35, Golson dropped backed to pass and pinpointed freshman receiver Chris Brown 50 yards downfield behind the Sooner secondary at the Oklahoma 15.

"We saw that they were in man coverage and I think the play action set it up," Golson said. "[Brown] ended up winning with a great move and I just kind of stepped up in the pocket and gave it a little bit of air and let him run under."

Golson ran the ball into the end zone five plays later to give the Irish a lead they would never give back in a game that proved to be a big step in the development of a first-year starting quarterback.

"I don't think six or seven weeks ago I could've done something like that," Golson said. "I didn't have the same feel for the guys then."

The Irish gave up their first rushing touchdown of the season to backup quarterback Blake Bell but also limited the Sooners to only 15 rushing yards in the entire game.

"That always is tough when you're not able to run it and when you throw it more than you want," Sooners coach Bob Stoops said.

With his performance Manti Te'o recorded his 400th tackle in his collegiate career jumped to the forefront of the Heisman Trophy race. Te'o recorded eight tackles in the first quarter alone and also added an acrobatic interception that sealed the game in the fourth quarter.

"He represents all of the things the Heisman Trophy espouses: integrity, character, a great football player," Kelly said.



SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer

Sophomore running back George Atkinson evades a Stanford defender. Atkinson and the Irish prevailed 20-13 over Stanford in overtime.

Te'o wasn't the only one to turn heads on the defensive side of the ball. Freshman cornerback KeiVarae Russell led the secondary with nine tackles against Landry Jones and a vaunted Oklahoma passing attack.

"There's a young man that keeps getting better and keeps competing," Kelly said. "Who would've thought a true freshman would be able to go out and do the things he's done? He's been so instrumental in what we're doing on the back end of the defense."

After the game, Kelly warned his team against looking past Pittsburgh the following week.

"They're a pretty smart group and know if they start with what we've done and the process of preparing for Pittsburgh, they'll be fine," Kelly said. "That's what I told them in the locker room — I said to enjoy a great victory against Oklahoma. Now let's find a way to beat Pittsburgh."

Notre Dame 29, Pittsburgh 26

After making a national statement in Norman, No. 3 Notre Dame returned home to face what appeared to be the beginning of the easiest stretch of its schedule. Sitting pretty at 8-0, it appeared finding a way to surpass the two

unbeaten teams ahead of the Irish would be a more challenging task than the visiting 4-4 Panthers.

But Pittsburgh gave Notre Dame the biggest scare of the season, as the Irish would need a heroic late-game performance from Golson, a couple fortuitous breaks and three overtimes to defeat the Panthers 29-26 and keep the dream season alive.

"We all believe in each other," Riddick said. "I think we showed a lot of courage and a lot of belief out there today, because there were a lot of times we could have gave up."

The Irish came out uninspired after their best performance of the season and trailed for most of the game, including by a 20-6 margin at the end of the third quarter. Early in the fourth quarter, however, Notre Dame showed signs of life with a Golson-to-Jones touchdown pass, immediately followed by a missed extra point.

With just minutes remaining, Golson engineered another touchdown drive — but for it to matter, Notre Dame needed a two-point conversion. After being benched shortly before halftime and returning later in the game, the young quarterback scrambled to his right and dove into the end

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SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Senior linebacker Manti Te'o lunges to make an interception. Te'o led the nation in interceptions by a linebacker with seven on the year.



SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Freshman wide receiver Chris Brown hauls in a 50-yard reception in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's 30-13 win over Oklahoma on Oct. 27.

Kelly

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zone to convert the two-point try, sending Notre Dame Stadium into a frenzy.

"I did a good job of being with the team down the stretch. Coming out today, I know we came out a little flat," Golson said. "But I felt like down the stretch we came together, and I felt like I did a great job in the end."

The teams traded field goals in the first overtime, and Notre Dame was on the goal line in the second overtime when Wood fumbled the ball away. Pittsburgh kicker Kevin Harper lined up for a 33-yard field goal that would win the game and missed it wide right, keeping the Irish in the contest.

In the third overtime, the Panthers managed just a field goal on their possession, and Golson found the end zone moments later on a quarterback sneak to complete an improbable comeback.

"It feels great," senior captain and tackle Zack Martin said. "That's the biggest message in that locker room. We're 9-0. We're still undefeated. And although we had a lot of mistakes and we have a lot of things to clean up, we've still got that 'zero' on our record."

Notre Dame 21, Boston College 6

No. 4 Notre Dame converted on its first 10 third downs and Golson completed 16 of 24 passes for 200 yards and two touchdowns as the Irish cruised to 10-0 with a 21-6 win over Boston College.

Golson and the Irish were lethal on third down from the beginning, converting on three third downs on a 95-yard touchdown march on their first possession. Golson capped the 13-play drive with a 2-yard dive into the end zone.

"Everett Golson played the way he needs to play, especially in the red zone," Kelly said. "Once he starts playing at the level we need him in the red zone, we'll start scoring touchdowns and not just field goals."

Dating back to the Pittsburgh game, Notre Dame converted on 12 consecutive third downs before an incompleteness in the third quarter stopped the streak.

"We did a nice job on third down," Kelly said. "Our quarterback play was really good, picked

up one of the best plays I think he had when he ran it on third down, put his foot in the ground and ran north and south and showed some real toughness. We were effective because our quarterback was effective tonight."

Notre Dame suffocated the Eagles' rushing attack, holding Boston College to 53 yards on the ground and junior linebacker Prince Shembo sacked Eagles junior quarterback Chase Rettig three times.

"I wasn't doing anything special, just chasing quarterbacks," Shembo said. "In the past weeks, I would get to the quarterback and he would throw the ball every time, throw it out of bounds. This guy wanted to hold it so I was like 'All right, cool, it's about time.'"

Tuitt and graduate student Kapron Lewis-Moore each had a sack and Te'o grabbed his sixth interception of the season.

Notre Dame 38, Wake Forest 0

Senior Day started with a standing ovation for Te'o in his last home game and ended with a No. 1 ranking. In between, No. 3 Notre Dame ran away with a 38-0 blowout win to complete an undefeated season at home.

"It's just a relief for us to win in the fashion that we did, you know, just clicking on all cylinders and everybody is playing with a lot of enthusiasm and energy just on all sides of the ball and just getting after it," Te'o said. "That's a great way to end my career playing here in Notre Dame."

Due to losses later that evening to No. 1 Kansas State and No. 2 Oregon, Notre Dame vaulted to No. 1 in the BCS standings for the first time in program history.

The Irish jumped out to a 21-0 first quarter lead behind two touchdown passes from Golson and a 68-yard touchdown run on the opening drive from Wood. Golson finished with 346 passing yards, three touchdowns and one interception and Wood finished with a season-high 150 yards on 11 carries as Notre Dame compiled 584 yards of total offense.

"We have a paradigm for winning," Kelly said. "It's something we talk about actually in our locker room. It's called four quarters of winning."

"I think that came together in

this football game more than any game we've played this year."

With 13:27 left in the fourth quarter, Kelly called a timeout to let the seniors — Zeke Motta, Lewis-Moore and Te'o — on the nation's No. 1 scoring defense to exit the game to standing ovations.

"Just magic," Te'o said, describing the moment. "Like everything's come full circle, [I'm] just very grateful."

All eyes then went to Los Angeles, with a berth in the BCS National Championship Game on the line.

Notre Dame 22, USC 13

Sitting atop the BCS standings and needing just a win to clinch a trip to Miami, Notre Dame had only to vanquish a foe it had only beaten once in the previous decade: USC. After a back-and-forth battle highlighted by yet another goal-line stand, however, the Irish earned one of the most important wins in the rivalry's history and celebrated a perfect regular season in the Los Angeles Coliseum.

"It was as you would've expected," Kelly said of the postgame scene in the locker room. "There was a lot of singing, dancing. It was what you would expect it to be for a team that's this close and has won so many games in that fashion. It was fun to be in there."

After USC senior quarterback Matt Barkley was unable to start due to a shoulder injury, freshman Max Wittek started his first game for the Trojans. Wittek struggled to find a rhythm with his talented duo of receivers all night long, and the Notre Dame defense held its opponent to under 20 points for the 11th time all season.

"I think Notre Dame showed me they have phenomenal senior leadership," embattled USC coach Lane Kiffin said. "You can see those guys understand the game and they really play well together. They're really physical and pretty old school — that's why they have so many close scores — but they don't screw up. You have to play really well to beat them. They don't hand you things."

Riddick had perhaps the best game of his career in his final regular-season game, rushing for 146 yards on 20 carries and adding 33 receiving yards while breaking tackle after USC tackle.



MACKENZIE SAIN | The Observer

Everett Golson drops back in the pocket against Boston College. Golson rushed for a touchdown and threw two against the Eagles.



KARLA MORENO | The Observer

Notre Dame's defense stuffs the Wake Forest rushing attack. The Irish recorded the program's first shutout since 2009 against the Demon Deacons.

"You just look at his jersey after the game and you go, 'There's no wonder why this team has the toughness that it does,'" Kelly said.

After leading 16-10 at halftime, the Irish extended their lead to nine into the fourth quarter. With just five minutes standing between Notre Dame and a perfect regular season, the Trojans found their stride, facing first-and-goal with five minutes to go. But the Irish stuffed three consecutive rushing attempts, USC fullback Soma Vainuku couldn't hold onto a fourth-down pass in the end zone and Notre Dame had yet again preserved its season with an iconic goal-line stand.

"If you followed us at all this year, that was how we play," Kelly said. "We come up big defensively at sometime during the game. We did that again. Unbelievable goal-line stand to hold any program, any team ... to get inside your two and come up with a great goal-line stand."

The goal-line stand capped a season filled with moments that will find their place in Irish lore, and Lewis-Moore said it exemplified Notre Dame's attitude.

"We did it," Lewis-Moore said. "We did it. It's crazy, you know? No. 1 and keeping that No. 1 and being 12-0 and playing for a

national championship, it's something spectacular.

"It's awesome. You just put the ball down and if there's time on the clock we're going to battle. We're not going to give up. This team and this defense, we've got a lot of character. We've got a lot of guys that play hard, and they play with heart. As long as you put the ball down and they're not in the end zone we're going to fight."

After the clock expired and the celebrating players trickled from the field towards the visiting locker room, Te'o found his head coach in the tunnel and embraced him.

"I said, 'I love you.' I love him," Te'o said. "[Our relationship] was bumpy at first, but it's great [now]. I'm happy to be part of this and have him as our coach. He's the best coach in college football."

After a victory over their hated rival, the Irish were able to celebrate what had seemed only a few months earlier to be nothing more than a dream: an undefeated regular season and a return to college football's elite.

"We've brought a lot of pride back to Notre Dame," Te'o said. "I'm grateful to be a part of it."

Contact The Observer's beat writers at observersports@gmail.com



KIRBY MCKENNA | The Observer

Theo Riddick celebrates a touchdown against Pittsburgh. Riddick caught a game-tying touchdown late as Notre Dame prevailed in triple overtime.



SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Tyler Eifert hauls in a pass over a USC defender as Notre Dame completed a 12-0 regular season. The Irish completed a late goal-line stand to preserve a 22-13 victory and ensure a trip to the national title.

Seniors reflect on final game, collegiate careers

By CHRIS ALLEN
Sports Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — For four months, Manti Te'o's senior season at Notre Dame unfolded in storybook fashion. Twelve times he walked off the field a victor as the Irish marched to the BCS National Championship Game.

Yet the linebacker made his final walk solemnly as crimson confetti rained down following Notre Dame's season-ending 42-14 loss to Alabama. Following his final game in an Irish uniform, Notre Dame's unquestioned leader said he was disappointed in the loss.

"I'm obviously disappointed. Not necessarily that we lost, but just we didn't represent our school, our team, our families the way that we could have," Te'o said. "But at the same time I'm proud to be a part of this team. What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger. The best thing about this experience is it creates fire. It creates fuel for both the guys staying here and the guys leaving. And everybody here ... will be better for it."

Playing for a championship to cap off a season in which he energized the Notre Dame fan base with a runner-up Heisman Trophy campaign, Te'o recorded 10 tackles against Alabama as



SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer

Irish senior linebacker Manti Te'o recorded 10 tackles in the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7 at Sun Life Stadium. The 42-14 loss was his last game in a Notre Dame uniform.

his defensive unit was gashed for 42 points by a powerful and precise Crimson Tide attack.

"It definitely sucks, to be quite honest," Te'o said. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything. I wouldn't trade this team for

anything. I wouldn't do anything differently. Obviously we wish the night could have ended in a different way."

Te'o's fellow seniors all dealt with an unceremonious end to a senior year that few saw coming at the outset of

fall training camp. Graduate student defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore went down early in Notre Dame's defeat with a knee injury that was later diagnosed as a torn ACL. Senior tight end and Mackey Award winner Tyler Eifert caught six passes for 61 yards and had a crucial catch on Notre Dame's first offensive drive ruled incomplete on replay. Senior safety Zeke Motta recorded a career-high 16 tackles in the loss. Motta said the seniors and the team played together despite the poor performance.

brought Notre Dame from a 6-6 season in 2009 to the brink of a national championship. After the game, Irish junior nose guard Louis Nix said it is up to the returning players to build on the progress made by Te'o, Eifert and the other seniors.

"[The seniors] set the tone for us. They didn't get the results we wanted, but they made history," Nix said. "We came back to the national stage, going 12-0. We got here against one of the best teams in the country. The seniors left their mark and we have to

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"I'm proud to be a part of this team. What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger. The best thing about this experience is it creates fire. It creates fuel for both the guys staying here and the guys leaving."

Manti Te'o
Irish senior linebacker

"I mean, our whole team is a brotherhood, and I'm proud to say that we came out and kept fighting no matter what the situation was," Motta said. "Like I said earlier, like everybody has been saying, Alabama came out and executed. You can't put it on one person or the other, it's just a team thing. And we just need to fight and learn from it."

"I love all these brothers, and I'm fortunate to say that I've been here for four years and grown from that."

Though the senior class departed with a loss in its final game, it leaves having

continue to build."

With the 2012 season in the books, several Irish seniors will turn to the NFL Draft in April in hopes of playing football professionally. Te'o and Eifert are expected to be selected early, but Te'o said he would forever identify himself with Notre Dame.

"The season, the year, my career here, I've been truly blessed to be at Notre Dame," he said. "I'll forever be proud to say I'm a Notre Dame Fighting Irish."

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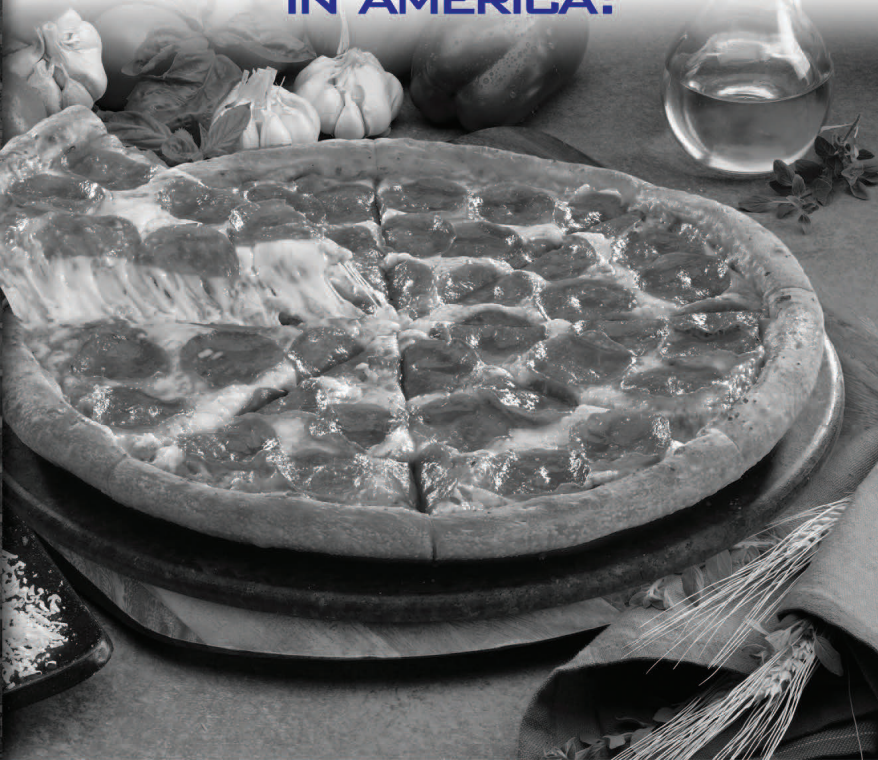
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2012 success paves the way for 2013



Andrew Owens
Assistant Managing Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — 2012 wasn't supposed to go like this.

If Notre Dame had stayed true to the script, it would have gone 8-4 this season. Improvement would have been evident, even if not in the final record. The stage would be set for a 2013 BCS berth and Irish resurgence.

But, thanks to a marvelous 12-0 regular season and No. 3 ranking in the final coaches' poll after a championship game loss to Alabama, 2013 looks brighter than anyone could have imagined four a little more than four short months ago.

Irish coach Brian Kelly found a quarterback this season after a fruitless search during his first two seasons that caused many of the hair-pulling and skepticism by the Notre Dame fan base.

Everett Golson will start under center for the Irish for three more seasons after a remarkable freshman campaign that culminated with a learning opportunity against the

"The experience that he is able to take from this game, you can't duplicate it if you're sitting home or playing in a bowl game," Kelly said. "When you're playing for a national championship, that stuff doesn't leave you."

Golson enters 2013 as the program's unquestioned leader. The unit loses running backs Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood and tight end

The true measuring stick for 2013 achievement is reaching a BCS bowl and, for the first time in program history, winning it.

nation's top defense seemingly every season and on a stage unlike any other.

Tyler Eifert to the NFL, but the continued development of No. 5 and young contributors such as receiver DaVaris Daniels should offset the loss. Golson will take the offense by the reins and do what needs to be accomplished.

Defensively, Manti Te'o highlights the crop of seniors defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's unit loses. Te'o, Kapron Lewis-Moore and Zeke Motta depart, but a young secondary will have a full season under its belts and should be primed for improvement in 2013. (It could also be aided by the return of Jamoris Slaughter, who has petitioned the NCAA for a sixth year of eligibility after suffering a season-ending injury in week three.)

The front seven will bulk up during the off-season and, even with the losses of Te'o and Lewis-Moore, be even more productive in 2013.

Defensive end Stephon Tuitt, nose guard Louis Nix and cat linebacker Prince Shembo all return, and linebacker Ishaq Williams and defensive linemen Sheldon Day and Jarron



SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Irish junior nose guard Louis Nix will be a staple on Notre Dame's defense in 2013 after passing up the NFL Draft.

Jones will provide the unit depth that rivals any defense in the nation.

It appears the coaching staff will remain intact, and that's

a blessing for the Irish. The coaches are on the same page and demonstrated a cohesiveness this season that the 2010 and 2011 groups did not.

But even with all the reasons for excitement for next season, it's a distinct possibility — maybe even a probability — that a more talented team's final destination falls short of the BCS National Championship Game in Pasadena, Calif., and that doesn't mean it will be a failure.

The true measuring stick for 2013 achievement is reaching a BCS bowl and, for the first time in program history, winning it.

Now that the Irish have asserted themselves among the nation's elite, the next step is to sustain the success annually. Kelly and his staff's plan has been embraced by the players and, if 2013 goes to script, the nation will realize Notre Dame is primed to remain a national contender.

Contact Andrew Owens at aowens2@nd.edu

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Tackling issues plague Irish defense in romp

By **ANDREW OWENS**
Assistant Managing Editor

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — After his unit had underperformed in a 42-14 drubbing at the hands of Alabama following elite play all season, nose guard Louis Nix sat in the Notre Dame locker room amidst a throng of reporters, cameras and notepads.

The 340-pound lineman languished in the game's aftermath, but stood firm in his explanation for the unit's poor play.

"We missed tackles," he said. "There isn't any other way to explain it. We missed tackles and they got yards."

"We just didn't play our ballgame, man. We missed tackles. Everything we did or had lined up should have worked, but we didn't make tackles. That's the ballgame."

The Irish defense, which had allowed 20 or more points in just one game this season, yielded 21 on Alabama's first three drives. Crimson Tide running backs Eddie Lacy and T.J. Yeldon ran wild on the Notre Dame defense for a combined two touchdowns and 248 yards, many of which were amassed after initial contact.

"We didn't tie up the ball carrier, and that's what happens," Nix said. "They did not dominate us. You can call it what you want."

Forty-four days passed between Notre Dame's

regular-season finale at USC on Nov. 24 and the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7, seemingly a day for each missed tackle registered by the Irish defense. But Notre Dame players steadfastly rejected the lay-off as a reason for the lackluster performance.

"We needed to make plays but we didn't," junior linebacker Danny Spond said. "Coaches put us in positions where we had chances to get them down but we didn't. We didn't execute the way that we have all year."

The 82-yard opening drive marked the first touchdown drive of more than 75 yards by a Notre Dame opponent this season. The two first-quarter Crimson Tide touchdowns — they completed a third on the first play of the second quarter — were the first touchdowns allowed in the opening stanza by the Irish all season.

One of the feathers in Notre Dame's cap that propelled it to a 12-0 regular season also proved to be its downfall when it mattered most: its ability to jump in front of the opposition early.

"It is something that we are not used to, but not one time did we get our heads down," Spond said. "We kept encouraging each other the whole time and I couldn't be more proud of my teammates."

Kelly said he attributes much of the tackling issues and



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

Alabama running back Eddie Lacy rushes past Irish junior nose guard Louis Nix during the Crimson Tide's 42-14 blowout win over Notre Dame in the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7.

defensive woes to Lacy's play-making ability, but that several factors played into the sluggish output.

"I think it's a combination probably of three things," Kelly said. "One, outstanding back; Lacy made us miss. I thought his ability to shake us down was outstanding."

"I have to evaluate whether I did a good enough job as the head coach in getting tackling done for our players. I think everything is on the table when you see so many missed tackles."

But again, that will require a little bit of research and looking at it a little bit more in depth. But I would put most of it on a really outstanding back in Lacy and the way he ran. I was very impressed with him tonight."

The overwhelming vibe in the locker room following the game was of regret for the uncharacteristic performance.

"It's disappointing. You feel bad," Nix said. "You don't want to go into a big ballgame missing tackles and causing your team to lose. Now it's time to get better."

Irish senior linebacker Manti Te'o said he was disappointed the team did not represent Notre Dame the way it could have.

"What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger," Te'o said. "The best thing about this experience is it creates fire. It creates fuel for both the guys staying here and the guys leaving. And everybody here, everybody here tonight will be better because of it."

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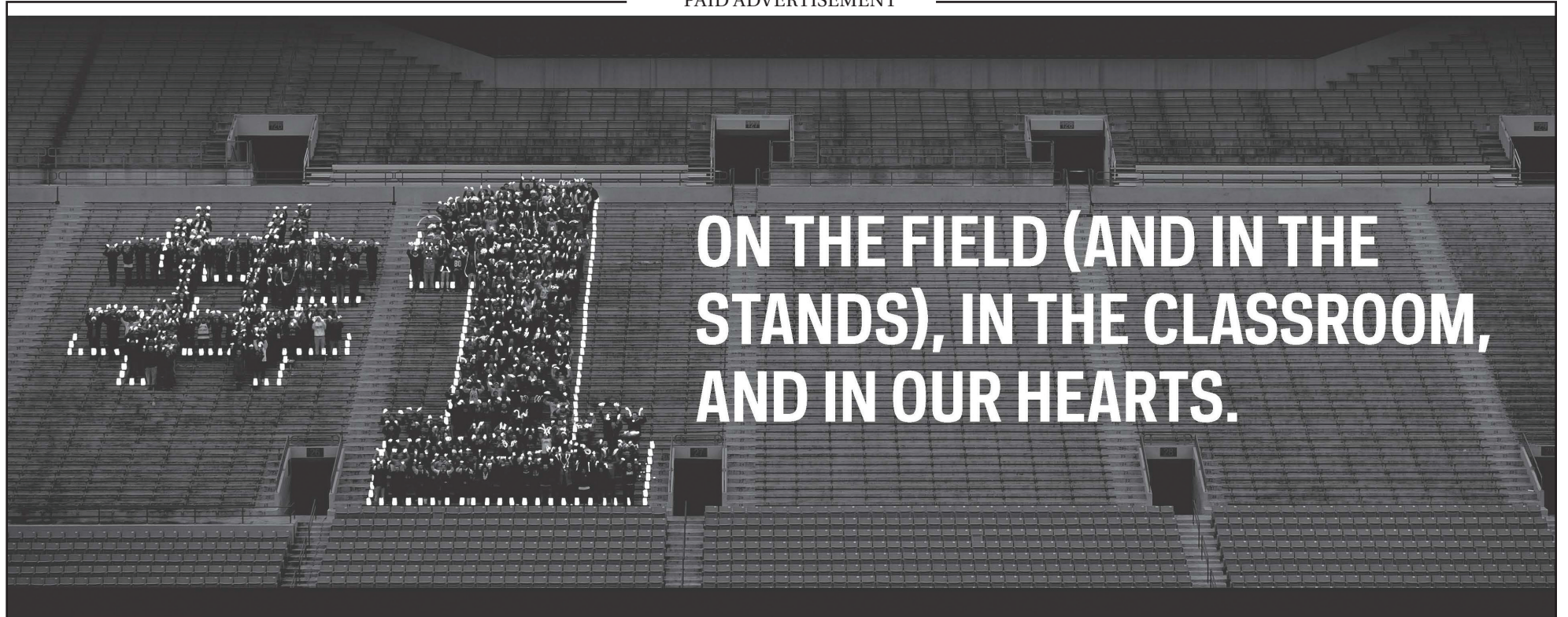
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SUZANNA PRATT | The Observer

Notre Dame senior linebackers Carlo Calabrese and Manti Te'o attempt to break through the Alabama offensive line during Notre Dame's loss against the Crimson Tide on Jan. 7. Alabama's win gave it back-to-back national championships and three in four years. Notre Dame ended the season 12-1 and with a No. 3 place in the final coaches' poll.

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