

IRISH INSIDER

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THE

FACTOR

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Grant Tobin and Steph Wulz

COMMENTARY

Struggling defense will determine fate



Andrew Gastelum
Editor-in-Chief

Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco has to be calling 5-1-1. Without No. 5, this defense just looks lost.

There is not one person who stands out, yet at the same time there is not one person who has really fallen short either. Various media outlets are currently picking on KeiVarae Russell. Last week it was Stephon Tuitt. Next week it will probably be Jaylon Smith's turn.

But the point remains: No one sticks out or stands out in any fashion. That is, at least to the fans.

To opposing offenses, there are two gigantic, gargantuan stand-outs and their focus on these two is even greater. To opposing of-

Without No. 5, this defense just looks lost.

fenses, the only greater goal than limiting Louis Nix and Stephon Tuitt is putting points up on the scoreboard.

What most see are the low numbers this dynamic duo provides in comparison to last season when their numbers were bigger than they were. Nix only has eight tackles and zero sacks through the first three games. Meanwhile, Tuitt has four tackles and one sack.

But all of that has been against double teams, triple teams, quick runs, three-step drops and passes away from their 66 percent of the defensive line. Dan Fox, Jarrett Grace and Carlo Calabrese are reaping the benefits of opposing offensive lines keying on Nix and Tuitt, as the three inside linebackers are the three leading tacklers on the Irish.

But this whole "next-man-in" philosophy has taken off to a completely different level. No philosophy can replace "that man." This defense has plenty of seasoning to it and some stern voices among it, but there is no face to it. As the Diaco saying goes, sometimes you have to throw some "chili powder" into the recipe to bake a different kind of cake when you run out of vanilla.

But not when it is supposed to

be a vanilla cake.

With the loss of that man, this Irish defense went from Cake Boss to North Dining Hall: exciting and dynamic to just generic and a little strange at times.

As I said in this space last week, Notre Dame cannot continue to run off the success and energy of last season. That was evident when Michigan quarterback Devin Gardner turned into Colin Kaepernick with both his eyebrows and Purdue quarterback Rob Henry became Joe Flacco.

Who does this Irish defense turn to in order to lead it? It seems like a difficult job for Bennett Jackson to do as a member of the secondary since he plays along the margins of the field. It also doesn't help his status that Jackson has to play man coverage, expecting a blitz to hurry the quarterback into a tizzy, only to find out said gunslinger has an entire open canvas in front of him and time to paint it downfield.

If there is one major comparison to make between last year's and this year's team, it's that this defense is going to have to carry the load once again and lead Notre Dame to a BCS bowl. It's that this defense is going to be the meal ticket once again, whether Brian Kelly believes it or not.

The only problem: They're trying to make a vanilla cake and they've run out of vanilla quite some time ago.

Contact Andrew Gastelum at agastell1@nd.edu

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

RECRUITING

Tranquill lone visit as Irish enter 'dead' period

By **MIKE MONACO**
Sports Editor

There may be only one 2014 prospect taking an official visit to Notre Dame this weekend, but the Irish still have a strong chance of garnering their 17th commitment from the senior class.

Fort Wayne, Ind., native Drue Tranquill, who committed to Purdue on July 23rd and received an offer from Notre Dame soon thereafter, will visit South Bend this weekend just a week after his official visit to Purdue to take in the primetime matchup between the Irish and the Boilermakers. Notre Dame recruiting expert Mike Frank, who runs the ESPN-affiliated Irish Sports Daily, says concerns over Tranquill's fit on the Notre Dame defense are likely holding up a decision.

"I think Drue likes the idea of Notre Dame quite a bit, but I'm not sure he's sold on the fact that they're recruiting him as a linebacker. I think sometimes he thinks he's a safety prospect," Frank said. "So I'm not exactly sure which way that's going to go. I think it all depends on how he fits in with all the players this weekend. ... And then I also think it depends on what they talk to him about as far as his position and how he'll adapt."

Frank did say there is the possibility Notre Dame could view Tranquill as a safety after the news that broke in late August that former Notre Dame safety Chris Badger is transferring. ESPN rates Tranquill as the eighth-best player in Indiana and classifies him as the No. 82 outside linebacker in the nation.

Outside of Tranquill, Frank said most of the major 2014

movement should come in the next few weeks, when roughly a dozen prospects will make official visits for either the Oklahoma or USC games. For now, Frank characterized activity as "dead."

News, however, has surfaced recently that Florida athlete and Alabama commit Bo Scarbrough may consider an official visit to Notre Dame. Scarbrough, whom ESPN ranks as the No. 20 player in the nation, profiles as a running back. The Irish are currently without a back in the class of 2014 after Elijah Hood decommitted from Notre Dame on Aug. 20 and pledged to in-state North Carolina shortly after.

Scarbrough, however, has been committed to the Crimson Tide for over a year. Frank said until the 6-foot-2, 215-pounder steps foot on campus at Notre Dame, the Irish can only be considered a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit.

"First of all, [Irish assistant coach and recruiting coordinator] Tony Alford is recruiting him and you can't count Notre Dame out for anybody when [Alford] is recruiting them," Frank said. "[Freshman running back] Greg Bryant was committed to Oklahoma for a while and then backed off and nobody thought Notre Dame had much of a shot at him. But Tony just keeps selling, selling and selling his vision for what Greg could be at Notre Dame and all it took was a trip and he bought into it and committed."

Breaking down the 2014 commits

Of Notre Dame's 16 commitments in the class of 2014, Frank highlighted eight he considers to be particularly intriguing.

"I love the two wide receivers," Frank said. "I mean Notre Dame has a lot of wide receivers right now but I think Corey Holmes and Justin Brent can easily compete with the vast amount of talent they have on campus right now."

Holmes, from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is the 77th-best player in the nation, according to ESPN. Brent, who hails from Indianapolis and plays for Speedway Senior High School, has played running back for the Sparkplugs out of necessity. Frank said Brent could make the switch to running back at Notre Dame if the Irish feel thin in the backfield and well-stocked at receiver.

Frank said Tennessee offensive lineman Alex Bars is probably the closest to seeing early playing time at Notre Dame, whether he lines up at tackle or guard. Frank added that New Jersey offensive lineman Quenton Nelson has versatility on the line and a body that suggests a quick transition to the collegiate game.

Frank highlighted California defensive end Matt Dickerson and Missouri linebacker Jonathan Bonner as two underrated players, defensively, in addition to Illinois tight end Nic Weishar.

Meanwhile, Frank said he is also high on Florida linebacker Richard Yeargin III, who Frank described as "relentless in his pursuit."

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank's irishsportsdaily.com

Email Mike at mikefrank18@sbcglobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

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THE QUEST FOR CONSISTENCY

By **JOSEPH MONARDO**
Associate Sports Editor

There are no doubts about DaVaris Daniels' ability.

His speed, talent and power are a matter of the public record, on display across the web and, intermittently, for live viewing on football Saturdays. What the public is left to wonder, then, is when the player seen jumping off the screen in highlight videos will come to play every down.

The Irish junior receiver is coming off a career game, turning heads and dropping jaws, but also begging the question: Can he be as consistent as he is exciting?

"That's been my main focus, even this offseason, coming into this season," Daniels said. "Just trying to stay consistent. And we've still got a long season ahead of us so I'm working at that every day."

Entering 2013 as the clear No. 2 receiver behind senior tri-captain TJ Jones, Daniels has become the ultimate X-factor for the Irish offense. Jones is a well-defined entity with 33 starts under his belt, as is senior quarterback Tommy Rees, who has ascended into the top six in program history in both passing yards and passing touchdowns in his 21 starts. Notre Dame's running game showcases a bevy of talent, and while the production thus far has been moderate, the position has been, at worst, consistent. As for Daniels, consistency is the dimension of his game most in need of significant improvement, Irish coach Brian Kelly said.

"Well, he's two quarters of the way," Kelly said of Daniels' development. "He needs to be four quarters of the way. He can obviously impact a football game. We want him to impact it four quarters, and he's capable of doing

that."

Descriptors like 'high ceiling' cling to Daniels, but mostly as a way to denote the sentiment that he is still standing with his feet on the ground, yet to reach his full potential. And perhaps that is the most remarkable thing about the wide-out. Daniels is leading the team with 299 yards receiving and four touchdowns through three games, well on pace to shatter his career highs in all categories, and yet the areas in which he can stand to improve remain a major part of the conversation surrounding him.

"You know, to be that great player, you've got to have it all going for you in everything that you do, and he's growing up and he's get-

"He's two quarters of the way. He needs to be four quarters of the way."

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

ting better," Kelly said. "But there's definitely more there for him to grow into.

"It just requires, you know, that mental approach, which is coming, you know. And you can see it. I mean, you can see it in practice. You can see it in the way he's maturing off the field. He's doing all the little things."

Although an upperclassman, Daniels is still relatively young in terms of field experience. After not seeing game action as a freshman, Daniels caught 31 balls, racked up 490 reception yards and made three starts in 11 games in 2012. Although he did not find the end zone in his sophomore season, Daniels averaged a team-leading 15.8 yards per reception.

After missing the final two

games of the 2012 regular season with a broken collarbone, Daniels returned for Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the national championship, compiling 115 yards on six receptions.

"You know, having the game that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.

Just a quarter of the way through Notre Dame's regular season, Daniels has already made 2013 a breakout campaign for himself. Just 1:26 into Notre

of those guys."

The quick start did not make Daniels complacent, however, as the receiver readily acknowledged he has areas of his game he would like to develop.

"My route running, things like that," Daniels said. "Just trying to have an overall complete craft is something that I kind of focused in on this offseason. So I'm just trying to keep getting better and better at that and see what happens."

Daniels said some of the increased focus on refining his routes has already paid dividends this year, most recently by freeing him for the first of his two touchdown receptions against Purdue on Saturday. Still, Daniels said his success thus far represents a step in the right direction rather than an arrival at the finished product.

"I think I'm getting there," the Vernon Hills, Ill., native said. "I'm still working, I still gotta work every day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go."

"He's developed a lot," Jones added. "From last year to this is night and day. But the sky's the limit for him. As long as he keeps pushing, working hard, stays dedicated — who knows how far he'll go, how great he'll be."

Daniels offered the most significant glimpse yet of how great he can be with his second touchdown reception against the Boilermakers. In the fourth quarter of a tie game, Daniels snagged a pass from Rees on the sideline and battled off Boilermakers senior cornerback Ricardo Allen, finishing his 82-yard score with a powerful stiff arm.

"That's the physicalness that we need to play with ... and he displayed it," Jones said. "He basically pushed [Allen] to the ground



and scored a touchdown in a clutch situation."

As impressive as the touchdown was from a physical perspective, the circumstances surrounding the play were equally significant. With the catch and run, Daniels showed himself to be a player capable of answering the call in a big situation.

"[A consistent player is] somebody that you know is going to make a play when a play needs to be made," Daniels said. "And somebody that's going to do it over and over again. And that's the type of person I want to be and am practicing to become."

"That's all practice. That's all mindset. You know, going into games, you have to have that mindset that, 'I'm going to be that guy.' And that's what it comes down to."

If the opening three contests of the 2013 season are any indication, Daniels will have plenty more opportunities to prove he can consistently deliver in high-pressure situations. Jones said Daniels is on the right track to turn into that player he wants to be.

"You know, once you make that first clutch play ... you're more comfortable with yourself, you're more comfortable with your game," Jones said. "He's developed as a person and an athlete and kind of gets to see the results of what he put in the work for all these months off."

The physical tools have been there. The focus and the consistent will to perform in key moments are getting there, by all accounts. If everything comes together for Daniels, he could turn his blistering start into a standout season. How high the Irish offense will reach this season relies, in large part, on where their X-factor is able to take them. Although he is not looking at his role in such broad terms, Daniels' commitment to consistency could be just what Notre Dame needs this year.

"You want to come off the field at the end of the season saying, you know, 'I did everything I could,'" he said. "The end result is going to be the end result, no matter what. So the only thing that you can really do is focus on today and try to get better and do the things that you know you can do on a consistent basis."

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2-3 p.m., Donald Savoie
ND faculty member; Memphis R&B, Motown, and Detroit boogie

3:30-4:30 p.m., Kat Quinn '10
Singer/songwriter with poetic lyrics

4:30 p.m., Notre Dame Spirit
Welcome the Notre Dame Irish Cheerleaders and Leprechaun

2-3 p.m., On The Sidelines Academic Series in Eck Visitors Center

Timothy Judge, Ph.D.,
Franklin D. Schurz Professor
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Observer File Photo



KEVIN SONG | The Observer

SPARTANS PASSING

Michigan State sophomore Connor Cook has thrown for 276 yards this year, 202 of which came last week against Youngstown State. He also threw four touchdowns against the Penguins in a blowout victory. As a whole, the Spartans have accumulated only 480 yards passing through the air in three games, when three different players have seen time under center. Senior Andrew Maxwell is 15-for-30 for 114 yards in two appearances and one start, while redshirt freshman Tyler O'Connor has entered two games, as well.

The Irish have looked anything but impenetrable on the backline thus far, but Michigan State hasn't proven it is anything to fear through the air, either. Spartans sophomore Aaron Burbridge earned recognition on the Biletnikoff Award Preseason Watch List and has 80 yards on eight catches this season. Sophomore Macgarrett Kings, Jr., leads Michigan State with 99 yards and one touchdown on eight grabs in 2013.

Notre Dame has the edge in talent, and if the Irish secondary can tighten things up, it could be very difficult for Michigan State. Irish senior tri-captain cornerback Bennett Jackson's pick-six in the Purdue game could serve as a wake-up-call for the rest of his unit. While far from a sure thing, the talent and experience on the Irish back end give Notre Dame a ceiling well above anything Michigan State could reasonably expect to reach in week four.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

SPARTANS RUSHING

Junior running backs Jeremy Langford and Nick Hill lead the more accomplished dimension of Michigan State's offense. The Spartans have rushed for 209.7 yards-per-game this year. On 44 attempts, the 6-foot-2, 206-pound Langford has 200 yards on the season and has scored four touchdowns, while the smaller Hill has added 179 yards and one score on 7.2 yards-per-attempt. Redshirt freshman running back Riley Bullough adds a power dimension to the Spartan running game. The 230-pounder has 82 yards on 21 carries in 2013.

Although Notre Dame's defense has struggled mightily in comparison with last year's unit, the Irish still rank 26th in the nation in rush defense. Notre Dame has

only surrendered 112.7 yards-per-game, although last week's dominant effort against the Boilermakers, in which the Irish held Purdue to only 38 rushing yards, stands in stark contrast to the games against Temple and Michigan, who accumulated 134 and 166 yards rushing, respectively. If Notre Dame can approximate its performance from last week, it should be more than enough.

EDGE: EVEN

SPARTANS OFFENSIVE COACHING

Recently-hired co-offensive coordinator Jim Bollman brings 36 years of experience, including 11 seasons as the offensive coordinator at Ohio State (2001-2011). Bollman will split the offensive coordinator duties with Dave Warner, who has served as the quarterbacks coach for the Spartans during the past six seasons. Bollman, Warner and the rest of the decision-makers at Michigan State have presided over a quarterback situation in flux, although Cook presumably secured the job for the time being by throwing four touchdowns last week. Field-goal formations might make Irish fans flinch as long as Dantonio still roams the sideline, and Notre Dame is still figuring things out on defense, but Diaco gets the edge here.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

SPARTANS SPECIAL TEAMS

Senior kicker Kevin Muma handles both the kickoff and placekicking duties for Michigan State, and he has handled them well this season. Spartans Junior punter Mike Sadler has sent his punts 41.2 yards on average. The Spartans' punt returners have averaged 9.6 yards-per-return, most of which has come from sophomore receiver Andre Sims, Jr.

EDGE: MICHIGAN STATE

SPARTANS SCHEDULE (3-0)

Aug. 30	Western Michigan	W	26-13
Sept. 7	South Florida	W	21-6
Sept. 14	Youngstown State	W	55-17
Sept 21	@ Notre Dame		
Oct. 5	@ Iowa		
Oct. 12	Indiana		
Oct. 19	Purdue		
Oct. 26	@ Illinois		
Nov. 2	Michigan		
Nov. 16	@ Nebraska		
Nov. 23	@ Northwestern		
Nov. 30	Minnesota		

HEAD T

3:30 P.M.

NOTRE DAME STADIUM

MICHIGAN STATE



(So.) Aaron Burbridge **16** WR
(Jr.) Tony Lippett 14

(So.) Donavon Clark **76** LT
(R-Fr.) Jack Conklin 74

(5th) Blake Treadwell **64** LG
(R-Fr.) Kodi Kieler 79

(So.) Jack Allen **66** C
(Jr.) Travis Jackson 63

(5th) Dan France **59** RG
(Jr.) Connor Kruse 54

(R-Fr.) Jack Conklin **74** RT
(5th) Fou Fonoti 51

(Jr.) Michael Dennis **94** TE
(Jr.) Andrew Gleichert 92

(Jr.) Keith Mumphery **25** WR
(5th) Bernie Fowler 13

(So.) Macgarrett Kings, Jr. **3** WR
(So.) Andre Sims, Jr. 21

(So.) Trae Waynes **15** CB
(Fr.) Darlan Hicks 2

(Jr.) Taiwan Jones **34** OLB
(5th) Jaiirus Jones 23

(Jr.) Shilique Calhoun **89** DE
(Sr.) Denzel Drone 42

(6th) Tyler Hoover **91** DT
(So.) Damon Knox 93

(5th) Micajah Reynolds **60** NT
(So.) Mark Scarpinato 97

(Jr.) Marcus Rush **44** DE
(So.) Joel Heath 92

(5th) Denicos Allen **28** OLB
(So.) Ed Davis 43

(Sr.) Darqueze Dennard **31** CB
(So.) Arjen Colquhoun 36

(5th) Kevin Muma **17** PK
(Fr.) Michael Gelger 4

(Jr.) Mike Sadler **3** P
(Sr.) Kevin Muma 17

(Jr.) Nick Hill **20** PR
(Sr.) Andre Sims, Jr. 21

(5th) Kevin Muma **17** KO
(R-Fr.) Kevin Cronin 24

(Jr.) Nick Hill **20** KR
(5th) Kyler Elsworth 41

(So.) Taybor Pepper **52** LS
(Jr.) Leland Ewing 56



Andrew Gastelum
Editor-in-Chief



Matthew DeFranks
Assistant Managing Editor



Mike Monaco
Sports Editor

Things are starting to catch up to this Irish team. The offense is like a stalling car before finally getting going after a few tries and the defense is doing just enough to keep things close from the get go.

Over the past two seasons, the Irish have straight up embarrassed the Spartans both here and up in East Lansing. But unlike Purdue, Michigan State actually has the talent to do something about it and strike back with some clout of its own. Unranked and undervalued, the Spartans are out for revenge and Notre Dame is most likely looking towards a showdown with Oklahoma next week.

The troubles start here for the Irish, and 2-2 looks pretty scary considering where they were last year at this point, coming off a major win over Michigan in week four.

FINAL SCORE: Michigan State 27, Notre Dame 24

In the next four weeks, Notre Dame will play the No. 1 defense in the country, the player who scored the first rushing touchdown on them in 2012, a defensive line that rivals their own and USC. And it all starts with a date against Michigan State this weekend.

The Spartans have had their troubles with the Irish in the past two years, losing by an average of 17.5 points per game and scoring just eight points per game. But if these past two games have taught us anything about Notre Dame, it's that this is not last year's team. They are not the same on defense and are mysteriously improved on offense, putting up nearly 30 points per game.

The Irish defense should return to form (somewhat) against a very questionable Spartan offense but Tommy Rees has another solid performance to lead the Irish to 3-1.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 20, Michigan State 10

Notre Dame-Michigan State is always a battle. A game-winning score late in the fourth quarter or in overtime has decided eight of the last 13 meetings. Saturday will be no different. Brian Kelly said the winner will be whichever team is still standing when time expires.

Michigan State has a statistically dominant defense, but they've played a cupcake, a directional school and South Florida. Still, Sparty figures to match up fairly well with the Irish offense, which struggled mightily to run the ball against Purdue, averaging 2.5 yards per carry.

I give the slight edge in this contest to the Notre Dame defense, which — rough as it has looked in the first three games — goes up against a quarterback in Connor Cook playing in just his second game as the definitive starter. The Irish finally show up defensively and down the Spartans.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 24, Michigan State 17

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KEVIN SONG | The Observer

CB **6** KeiVarae Russell (So.)
23 Lo Wood (Sr.)

OLB **9** Jaylon Smith (Fr.)
30 Ben'Councell (Jr.)

DE **91** Sheldon Day (So.)
90 Isaac Rochell (Fr.)

NG **1** Louis Nix (Sr.)
96 Kona Schwenke (Sr.)

DE **7** Stephon Tuitt (Jr.)
94 Jarron Jones (So.)

OLB **55** Prince Shembo (Sr.)
11 Ishaq Williams (Jr.)

CB **2** Bennett Jackson (Sr.)
36 Cole Luke (Fr.)

WR **7** TJ Jones (Sr.)
88 Corey Robinson (Fr.)

WR **10** DaVaris Daniels (Jr.)
87 Daniel Smith (Sr.)

RT **78** Ronnie Stanley (So.)
79 Steve Elmer (Fr.)

RG **74** Christian Lombard (Sr.)
65 Conor Hanratty (Jr.)

C **72** Nick Martin (Jr.)
77 Matt Hegarty(Jr.)

LG **66** Chris Watt (Gr.)
75 Mark Harrell (So.)

LT **70** Zack Martin (Gr.)
57 Hunter Bivin (Fr.)

TE **85** Troy Niklas (Jr.)
18 Ben Koyack (Jr.)

WR **2** Chris Brown (So.)
17 James Onwualu (Fr.)

KO **27** Kyle Brindza (Jr.)

KR **4** George Atkinson (Jr.)
33 Cam McDaniel (Jr.)

LS **61** Scott Daly (So.)

S **28** Austin Collinsworth (Sr.)
22 Elijah Shumate (So.)

ILB **48** Dan Fox (Gr.)
59 Jarrett Grace (Jr.)

ILB **44** Carlo Calabrese (Gr.)
8 Kendall Moore (Sr.)

S **41** Matthias Farley (Jr.)
4 Eliar Hardy (Jr.)

RB **4** George Atkinson (Jr.)
3 Amir Carlisle (Jr.)

QB **11** Tommy Rees (Sr.)
12 Andrew Hendrix (Sr.)

PK **40** Kyle Brindza (Jr.)
27 Nick Tausch (Gr.)

P **27** Kyle Brindza (Jr.)
98 Alex Wulfeck (Gr.)

PR **7** TJ Jones (Sr.)
3 Amir Carlisle (Jr.)

IRISH PASSING

It certainly hasn't looked perfect at times, but Notre Dame has put together an impressive passing offense so far this season. Tommy Rees has recorded three consecutive 300-yard games after reaching the mark only twice in his career before 2013. Senior tri-captain TJ Jones and junior DaVaris Daniels have both shown themselves capable of serving as the main targets this year, while freshman receiver Corey Robinson and junior tight end Troy Niklas bring much-needed size and power to the unit.

Meanwhile, Michigan State leads the nation in both total defense and pass efficiency defense, allowing 177.0 yards-per-game and attaining a 68.14 rating, respectively. The Spartans also rank fifth in the nation in pass defense, having surrendered only 126.7 yards-per-game. They have also shown big-play ability, totaling 83 return yards following four interceptions — two of which went the other way for touchdowns. Spartans sophomore defensive end Shilique Carter has one of those touchdown returns following an interception, and has added two more defensive touchdowns following fumble recoveries. Carter also anchors the Michigan State front, having recorded two sacks and eight quarterback hurries this year. Even if Notre Dame can keep Rees off his back, he will have to be careful to keep the ball out of the ready hands of Spartan defenders and count on Daniels and Jones to make plays down the field.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH RUSHING

Michigan State ranks fourth in the nation in rush defense, allowing only 50.3 yards per game on the ground. Notre Dame has not shown itself to be a significant threat running the ball yet this season, even with a backfield that goes five deep in theory. Irish junior running back Cam McDaniel brought a power dimension to the running game against Purdue that had been lacking, but Amir Carlisle turned in a dud following what seemed to be his breakout game against Michigan. Junior George Atkinson, still atop the Irish depth chart at the running back position, has struggled to find a groove so far this year. He has averaged 5.4 yards-per-carry, but has only carried the ball 18 times.

Against Purdue, the Irish backs often failed to regain the line of scrimmage, as the

Boilermakers repeatedly erupted through Notre Dame's offensive line and recorded six tackles-for-loss. That the Irish failed to eclipse 100 yards on the ground against the same Purdue team that allowed 221 yards rushing to Cincinnati in the opening week should be cause for concern for Notre Dame, even if the pieces are there. Michigan State senior linebackers Denicos Allen and Max Bullough — both of whom have generated buzz as highly-regarded NFL prospects — will make it tough sledding for the Irish backs

EDGE: MICHIGAN STATE

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Brian Kelly and Chuck Martin have their work cut out for them this week against a defense that has done about as well as it possibly could have through three games, regardless of the opponents. Michigan State defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi will serve as the assistant coach for the first time this year. Narduzzi has seven years of experience at the helm of the Spartans defense, a unit that has been the top defense in the Big Ten in each of the past two seasons.

EDGE: MICHIGAN STATE

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

TJ Jones will look for an opportunity to return a punt after calling for a fair catch at his own four-yard line against Purdue. Atkinson has perhaps been the most steady special teams performer for the Irish, averaging 29.4 yards on eight kickoff returns this year. Atkinson could find himself with an opportunity to recreate the magic he brought to Notre Dame Stadium two years ago, when he returned a kickoff 89 yards for a touchdown against the Spartans.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SCHEDULE (2-1)

Aug. 31	Temple	W	28-6
Sept. 7	@ Michigan	L	41-30
Sept. 14	@ Purdue	W	31-24
Sept. 21	Michigan State		
Sept. 26	Oklahoma		
Oct. 5	vs. Arizona State		
Oct. 19	USC		
Oct. 26	@ Air Force		
Nov. 2	Navy		
Nov. 9	@ Pittsburgh		
Nov. 23	BYU		
Nov. 30	@ Stanford		



Joseph Monardo
Associate Sports Editor

Michigan State will walk into Notre Dame Stadium with one of the nation's top defenses by most measures. How much of that is a credit to the Spartans' actual defensive abilities, and how much of it is a product of beating up on the likes of the Youngstown State Penguins, well, that remains to be seen.

Notre Dame will likely eclipse the 177.0 yards Michigan State's opponents have managed, on average, this year, but the Irish will find the going tough against what will prove to be an impressive (although not historic) defense. What the Irish can do on defense, meanwhile, is perhaps more important. Michigan State trots out an inexperienced quarterback to lead an offense that hasn't accomplished much so far. Special teams wins the day for the Irish.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 23, Michigan State 20



Jack Hefferon
Sports Writer

Last week, I picked the Irish by 45 points. Oops. It seems I've fallen into the same trap as most of campus: thinking that returning most of last year's team means this year will be the same. So now, all I'm looking to see is baby steps in improvement from this year's squad.

Can one (or more) of Notre Dame's running backs gain consistent yards in the face of one of the nation's best defenses? And after senior captain Bennett Jackson bailed them out with a pick-six last week, can the secondary start to hold down the back end of the defense?

If the Irish improve in either of those areas, they should move to 3-1. Otherwise the Spartans, who have been un-pantsed by the Irish in the two games since Little Giants, will take it to the Irish on Saturday.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 27, Michigan State 24

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Irish secondary aims to rebound vs. MSU

By **MATTHEW DeFRANKS**
Assistant Managing Editor

Last year, Notre Dame relied on three first-time starters in the secondary to anchor a defense that allowed less than 13 points per game.

This year, the No. 22 Irish returned all of those first-time starters in the secondary. The back end of the defense was supposed to be the rock of the unit that allowed defensive coordinator Bob Diaco to throw exotic blitzes at offenses.

But three games into the season, the Notre Dame secondary has allowed quarterbacks Connor Reilly (Temple), Devin Gardner (Michigan) and Rob Henry (Purdue) to average 260 yards per game in the air.

"I think the first three games, we haven't executed to the best of our ability," sophomore cornerback KeiVarae Russell said. "That's the biggest thing this week, is to focus on executing. When a play comes your way, just make a play."

This season, the Irish (2-1) have allowed seven passing touchdowns after surrendering just 11 scores in all of 2012.

All three Purdue touchdowns against the Irish were catch-and-runs, with Notre Dame missing tackles and allowing the Boilermakers to hit pay dirt.

"We'll be in great position and

something just wouldn't happen," Russell said. "At the end of the day, it's a 50-50 chance. You either do or you don't. Lately, we haven't been making plays we should be making."

The Irish also allowed Michigan receiver Jeremy Gallon to spin away from would-be tacklers and sprint in for a 61-yard touchdown.

"You're going to have plays where you blow a coverage or miss a tackle or something like that," Russell said. "That's what's going to happen, it's football. Secondary is probably the hardest position to play, other than quarterback, on the field ... You just have to learn to get better from your mistakes."

Diaco and Irish coach Brian Kelly have been dialing up more and more blitzes this season, but in doing so have put the secondary in a perilous situation.

"Obviously if you bring more pressure, you're giving up some zones," Kelly said. "So you either have to play some three under, three deep, which vacates some zones and you'd better get there or you have to play simply some more man coverage; and within that man coverage there's a lot more technique that goes in, because it's not simply you line up wide. It's bunched formations; it's picks; it's fighting through all those complexities of playing man-to-man coverage."

"I guess what I was saying is that I



OE KENESEY | The Observer

Irish sophomore cornerback KeiVarae Russell, pictured here against Purdue on Saturday, will be tasked with defending a Michigan State offense led by sophomore quarterback Connor Cook, who has thrown for 276 yards.

still think we are not where we want to be defensively in terms of what that structure is going to be yet."

Last week, for the second straight game, Notre Dame cashed in on an interception to score a touchdown. After junior defensive end Stephon Tuitt scored against Michigan, senior Bennett Jackson took one to the house against the Boilermakers.

Jackson said he hasn't used the pick-six to give himself a confidence boost.

"It didn't really play too much of an effect on me," Jackson said. "I was just happy I could contribute to the team and put points up on the board. It definitely made me feel better about myself that I was able to go out there and perform and do

something for the team."

Michigan State (3-0) comes into Notre Dame Stadium with sophomore quarterback Connor Cook at the helm. On the year, he's passed for 276 yards and four touchdowns while only attempting 49 passes.

Contact Matthew DeFranks at mdefrank@nd.edu

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Physical rivalry to be won by 'last man standing'

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

After a miniature two-game road trip, the No. 22 Irish will return to Notre Dame Stadium this weekend to face an elite defense, a quarterback coming into his own and one of their peskiest rivals when they host Michigan State on Saturday.

The Spartans (3-0) will be the third consecutive Big Ten opponent Notre Dame (2-1) has faced, with the Irish splitting contests at Michigan and Purdue over the past two weeks.

Michigan State and Notre Dame have played historically tight games over the last 15 or so years, and Irish coach Brian Kelly's introduction to the rivalry three years ago was certainly one of them. Down three points in overtime, Spartans coach Mark Dantonio lined his players up for a game-tying field goal, only to fake it and claim a 34-31 victory.

The Irish took back the Megaphone Trophy the next year with a dominant 31-13 win and held on to it last season by going into Spartan Stadium and shutting down the home team in a 20-3 slugfest.

Kelly said he and his players know to expect a battle from the Spartans this weekend, especially

with the history between the teams.

"Dantonio's teams ... are physical and certainly well-prepared in all phases of the game," Kelly said. "It's the Michigan State teams that we've come to know and respect, and again, it's going to be one of those typical Big Ten games where [the] last man standing through four quarters comes out victorious."

This Michigan State squad is especially daunting, as it enters this week boasting the nation's best defense. Through three games, that unit has given up 12 points per game and limited opponents to 177 yards per game — the best mark of any team in the country.

Though those records come from games against Western Michigan, South Florida, and Youngstown State, Kelly sees a formidable challenge in the Spartan defense.

"Number of returning players on defense ... outstanding defensive schemes. They make it very difficult to run the football," Kelly said. "You have to find ways to manufacture runs. You've got to be able to protect your quarterback. Again, you've got to play tough, physical football for four quarters. You've got to take care of the football. All of the little things matter in matchups like this."

And while the Irish are aware of the Spartans' ability on that side of the ball, Irish senior quarterback Tommy Rees said Notre Dame is ensuring it stays more focused on its gameplan than on its opponent's gaudy statistics.

"Obviously you're cognizant of the success they've had, but for us it's all about what we're doing on offense," he said Wednesday. "It's about our execution, and our understanding of our gameplan. We can't focus too much on what they're ranked, we've just got to get their schemes down and understand what they're trying to do."

While Michigan State brings depth and experience on defense, a relatively new face runs the offense. The Spartans were unable to settle on a quarterback through their first two games but had a leader surface when sophomore Connor Cook emerged with a four-touchdown game last week.

Cook saw limited time off the bench last season but is still largely an unknown entity. One thing the Irish do know is that Cook is averaging nearly five yards per carry this year and should be another dual-threat presence they'll need to contain.

"We've faced a lot of mobility back there so that's something we'll be prepared for. I think we'll



Observer File Photo

Notre Dame and Michigan State, pictured here playing at Spartan Stadium in 2012, have split their last 10 meetings.

be ready for [Cook]," senior safety Austin Collinworth said. "But it definitely changes the game. You've got to stay on your guy in scrambling situations, because if you relax for a second, it's a big play waiting to happen."

The Spartans have impressed in three wins so far, but Saturday's trip to Notre Dame will be their first big test of the season. Dantonio — an Ohio native — appreciates the regional rivalry every time these teams square off.

"I think it's one of those games you take stock of," Dantonio said. "It is a game for a guy who grew up in the Midwest. Notre Dame. You grew up with a lot of traditions that were involved before you got here. So just very humbled to be part of the process and part of the tradition."

"I want our guys to have fun down there. I want us to compete."

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