

IRISH INSIDER

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THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Zach Llorens and Steph Wulz

COMMENTARY

Last year seems so far away



Joseph Monardo
Associate Sports Editor

There is a point when comparisons to Notre Dame's 2012 national championship runner-up team are unwarranted, unnecessary and even counterproductive. But that point is not here yet.

Nor should it be. Last season was a high point for one of the most storied and accomplished football programs in history. It was the greatest season for a Notre Dame team during the lives of any of the University's current students. It was a season that looked highly improbable against a strong schedule and played out in a fashion that made it seem even more unlikely, as though it would collapse with the slightest shift in the wind.

And, sure, it did collapse eventually in dramatic fashion, with the Irish on the wrong end of an embarrassing loss to Alabama in the BCS title game. Offseason drama emerged to taint the memories of the year. But the undefeated season of 2012 remains an historic feat.

So it is a little bit of bad luck that this year's team has to follow up a miracle season. In the program's recent past, a 6-2 start would likely have been cause for celebration. This year fans, and the national media, have greeted it with mild appreciation and minimal praise. It's not fair that the standards are as high for this team as they are, but that is what happens when the predecessor took down No. 10 Michigan State, No. 18 Michigan, No. 17 Stanford and No. 8 Oklahoma in its opening eight games.

The drop-off in defensive production from last year to this is the most obvious (and perhaps most significant) difference, but one of the more high-profile and controversial changes in the offseason came with the suspension of junior quarterback Everett Golson following an academic violation. The dual-threat quarterback recently confirmed in an interview with Sports Illustrated's Andy Staples that his infraction was cheating on a test. But the video interview likely had Irish fans wondering what could have been — a much bigger and stronger-looking Golson flings around perfectly-placed passes while blindfolded.

But has there really been a drop-off in production at the quarterback position? In his debut season last year, Golson completed 56.9 percent of his passes through his first eight contests. He threw four interceptions, eight touchdowns and accumulated 1,372 yards. Through eight games this year, senior quarterback Tommy Rees has a lower completion percentage (55.3 percent) and has tossed more interceptions (six), but has thrown for 1,944 yards and 20 touchdowns. His current efficiency rating of 143.3 exceeds Golson's

season-ending rating of 131.01.

Obviously, Golson and Rees are different quarterbacks. Rees' high-volume passing attack provides him with more opportunities to compile gaudy numbers than Golson had, the two are asked to do different things within the offense, etc. More to the point, it is impossible to simply substitute one player's passing statistics into another time and place as if they fit perfectly. For instance, Golson could very well have powered the Irish rushing attack to a level of production well above that of this year's unit.

There is no easy way to compare last year's Golson and this year's Rees, just as there is no surefire way to compare last year's Irish to the current version. That is, of course, excepting the respective records. Notre Dame forfeited 8-0 many weeks ago, but improving to 7-2 is not a bad way to move forward. If the Irish can do that, they move one step closer toward an accomplishment that can stand independent of last year's results.

But until that point comes, comparisons are not yet invalid. That could be good news for the Irish, albeit tense times for their fans. Last year, on the first weekend of November, Notre Dame escaped from a home matchup with underdog Pittsburgh in triple overtime with a 29-26 win. Maybe some of the luck that played a part in Pitt missing a would-be game-winning 33-yard field goal will descend upon this year's squad.

You know, for old time's sake.

Contact Joseph Monardo at jmonardo@nd.edu

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

RECRUITING

Irish await commitments after promising USC visits

By **MIKE MONACO**
Sports Editor

Two weeks removed from the USC game and the biggest recruiting weekend of the season for Notre Dame, the Irish still have yet to receive any commitments from the nearly 30 visitors who descended on campus for the game against the Trojans.

Nonetheless, Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank still hailed the landmark weekend as a major success for Notre Dame.

"I think it was a great opportunity to kind of sell their program to a lot of the elite guys left on their list right now and I think they did a wonderful job," said Frank, who runs the ESPN-affiliated Irish Sports Daily.

Frank said despite the lack of immediate returns, it was important for Notre Dame to get the recruits on campus so they could "remain in the game" by getting them on campus early and having the opportunity to sell the school and the program.

Twelve offer-holding prospects from the class of 2014, who aren't committed to the Irish, made the visit to South Bend.

"I don't know exactly how many commitments they're going to get out of this, but it wouldn't surprise me to see five, six, maybe even seven of these kids pull the trigger for Notre Dame," Frank said.

Frank said of those 12 recruits, he believes linebacker/safety Drue Tranquill and tight end Tyler Lutaia are the closest to pledging

to Notre Dame. Tranquill, who is committed to Purdue and hails from Fort Wayne, Ind., is expected to visit the Boilermakers this weekend. Lutaia, meanwhile, is the No. 1 H-type tight end in the nation, according to ESPN.

Frank also said he thinks the Irish made a particularly strong impression on safety Payton Hendrix and cornerback Nick Watkins, who share the same secondary at Bishop Dunne High School in Dallas.

According to Frank, Notre Dame also made an impact with defensive tackle Matt Elam, who is also strongly considering Kentucky and Alabama, receiver Allen Lazard, who is committed to Iowa State, linebacker Nyles Morgan, who at one point had Notre Dame outside his top-six schools and a trio of California prospects — Lutaia, offensive lineman Damien Mama and athlete John (Juju) Smith — who made the trek from the West Coast.

"So I think overall, I think everything went really well," Frank said.

Notre Dame did, in fact, receive a commitment from receiver Isaiah McKenzie the day before (Oct. 18) the USC game, per Irish Sports Daily. McKenzie, who had been scheduled to make a visit to Notre Dame for the game against the Trojans but did not, became the 17th commitment in the class of 2014.

Despite McKenzie's commitment, Frank said there is still work to be done before the Plantation, Fla., native is qualified for Notre Dame.

"Well, he's got to have both the qualifying test score and the grades to get into Notre Dame. ... I think he obviously wants to come to Notre Dame and I think Notre Dame would take him currently if he can qualify. But it just depends on how soon he can get qualified for Notre Dame."

Academics aside, Frank said the Irish are undoubtedly high on McKenzie's skill set.

"They think he's a tremendous talent and he's got excellent speed, Rocket Ismail-type speed, and the ability to make people miss, very big-time explosion," Frank said. "He's a home-run hitter. He's a guy that can play in space and make a lot of things happen. You want to grab that guy if you can."

In the wake of the massive recruiting efforts over USC weekend, Frank said there is not much activity this week.

"I think earlier in the year you wanted to get a lot of your 2015 kids in and they did bring in quite a few top 2015 kids," Frank said. "It's hard to get [2014 prospects] to come especially when they're seniors, hard to get them on campus, especially when they have to travel from so far away. I don't expect a lot of other visitors."

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.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu

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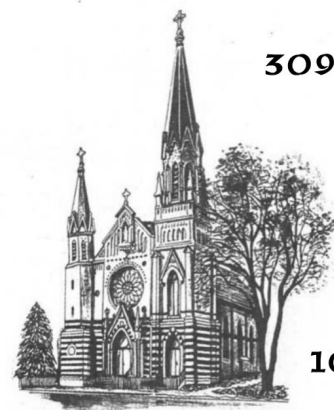
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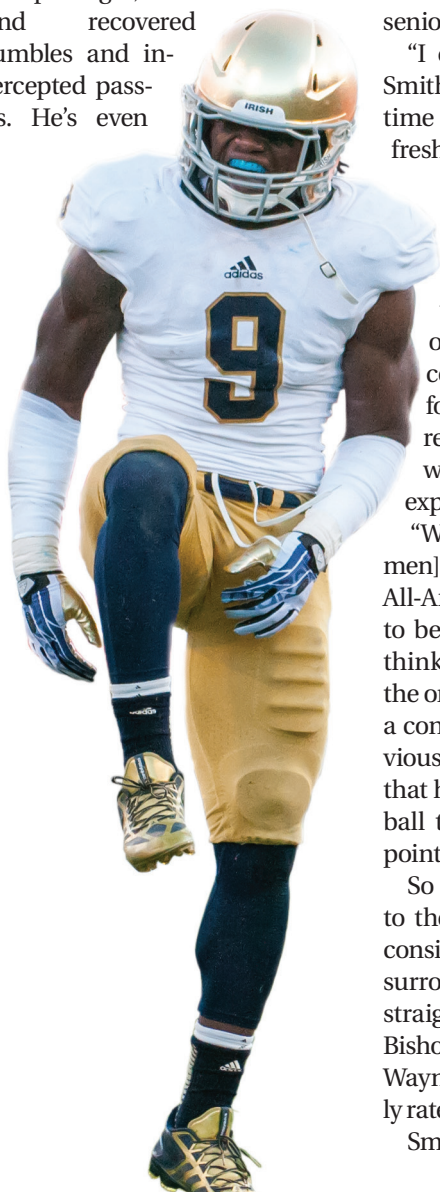
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Wednesday, Thursday & Friday 12:15 p.m.

MAKING A NAME

By **JACK HEFFERON**
Sports Writer

It can be hard to remember that Jaylon Smith is just a freshman.

He has come in as a rookie and made an immediate impact at outside linebacker, starting every game. He's picked up the schemes and packages, forced and recovered fumbles and intercepted passes. He's even



savvy in the media room, answering questions with the poise of a fifth-year senior.

Nothing about Smith gives off the vibe that he's new at this, that is, until someone points out his sweatpants. The No. 11 on the thigh is a giveaway that they belong to junior linebacker Ishaq Williams, and his shirt belongs to senior linebacker Prince Shembo.

"I don't have much gear yet," Smith said, sheepish for the first time in the interview. "I am still a freshman."

The reminder is helpful.

Still, Smith is no ordinary freshman, as Irish coach Brian Kelly will be the first to tell you. Kelly expects all of his players to come in and compete in their first year, but for one to insert himself as a reliable starter and immediate weapon exceeded any of those expectations.

"We don't believe that [freshmen] are going to come in and be All-Americans, but they're going to be contributors," Kelly said. "I think if you look at the freshmen, the one guy that's been more than a contributor is Jaylon Smith, obviously ... if there's one freshman that has really impacted our football team, I think you'd have to point to Jaylon."

So far Smith's play has lived up to the hype, which is impressive considering just how much has surrounded him. Smith won four straight state championships at Bishop Luers High School in Fort Wayne, Ind., and was unanimously rated as a five-star recruit.

Smith didn't grow up watching

college football, and his only loyalties lied with Ohio State, where his older brother Rod is a junior running back. Still, Notre Dame was able to secure Smith's commitment at the end of his junior year, which was seen by many as one of Kelly's biggest recruiting hauls. After his commitment Smith immediately went to work for the Irish, reaching out through phone calls and Twitter to try to recruit other top members of his class to join what he coined the "Irish Mob."

"At that point, there was no other school I had interest in," Smith said. "So I committed, and started to rally the mob."

His zeal for the program continued when he reached campus this summer, receiving praise throughout the preseason as he earned reps over more experienced teammates. Smith said he wasn't surprised by any of the changes that came from the transition to college, and just tried to make up for his inexperience in any way he could.

"I just wanted to contribute anyway I could," he said. "You're a little behind, because you don't know the playbook as much, but you just have to go out and compete every day, and that's what I wanted to do."

The results were apparent to everyone around him, including junior safety Matthias Farley, who said Smith's transition to the college ranks has been one of the quickest he's seen.

"I don't think at any point he was playing like a freshman, but at the beginning of the year he might not

have reacted as fast even though he knew what to do, just because of hesitation," Farley said. "There's definitely none of that now. He sees it and he goes, and he's playing phenomenally well."

Smith started from the season opener, but his biggest test came in his sixth game, the Shamrock Series matchup with then-No. 24 Arizona State in AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. The Sun Devils chose to isolate the young freshman, betting on the matchup as one that they could win. Smith was thrown into the spotlight in front of a nationwide, primetime audience — and responded with a career-high and team-leading nine tackles to help Notre Dame secure the win.

"The Arizona State game, there were a lot of times where I had to just 'shoot my gun' and make the play," Smith said. "I really had to get out of my comfort zone, and just play football."

Since then, Smith's play has looked even more veteran. In a long-awaited matchup with archrival USC on Oct. 19, Smith stonewalled the Trojans only three plays into the second half by picking off a Trojan pass for his first career interception.

Smith was a linchpin for the Irish defense once again last week, as Notre Dame traveled up into the mountains to face Air Force and its triple option. The option's strength is forcing matchups and tough decisions, and Smith repeatedly had to choose between the quarterback and pitchman out in space. He struggled as the Falcons took an early lead, but

learned from his mistakes and adjusted almost immediately. Soon, Smith was running downhill and blowing up plays, and his eight tackles once again led the team in the victory.

"He was slow playing the quarterback, the pitch," Kelly said. "And the patience that he showed to buy time for the Mike [linebacker] to get over a block, or the safety to come from the backside hash, you just don't teach that. It's just instincts that he had that he could slow play the option. ... The kid just has those things that are hard to teach."

In the third quarter, Smith pulled what may have been his most veteran move yet. When a teammate forced the ball loose, he picked it up as whistles blew and ran all of 60 yards to the end zone, then turned to the officials and raised his arms to signal a touchdown, holding the pose for the better part of a minute. Eventually, his unsuccessful appeal netted him only a fumble recovery, not the touchdown.

"I thought the play was still alive, so I continued to run," he said. "... Unfortunately they didn't call it a touchdown, but hopefully I'll get another opportunity at that."

That opportunity may come this weekend against Navy, another triple-option team that will force Smith to get physical and fight in the trenches. In such times it helps to get mean, but Smith is naturally handicapped in that regard, recognized by many as one of the nicest kids on the team. Smith said he's still working on playing angry on game day, but doesn't let it boil over to affect his off-the-field kindness.

"It's football. Playing on the defensive side, you have to have that nastiness," he said. "You don't have to make it a lifestyle, though."

It's been a whirlwind of a ride for Smith, and it can be hard for him to believe at times that one year ago he was still playing for the Knights, helping his teammates on the way to another state championship. Smith is just starting off his college career, but knows it can go just as fast. In the meantime, he's working his hardest to make every day count, and not let any distractions get in the way.

"It's a dream come true," he said. "It's a blessing, and you really have to cherish it, and not take a day of it for granted ... We're not looking forward at anything down the path, we're just looking forward to the next game and the next play."

Another veteran answer from the rookie.

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MIDSHIPMEN PASSING

This category may seem like an oxymoron, as Navy averages just over five completions per game. However, Midshipmen sophomore Keenan Reynolds is a legitimate dual-threat at quarterback, and can sling the ball around the field when given the chance. The Mids force opposing secondaries to think run first with their triple-option barrage, then are able to get big gains over the top when they pass. Navy has averaged 16.2 yards per completion this season, the sixth best mark in the country.

Less is more for the Midshipmen here, as going back to 2003 they are 18-1 when throwing five times or less, and have a losing record when they pass 10 times or more.

That paucity of passes will require vigilance from Notre Dame's corners who also factored heavily into the run defense last week. Senior captain Bennett Jackson and sophomore KeiVarae Russell will have their work cut out for them at cornerback, and will need to stay disciplined on every down. The duo was up to that challenge last week against Air Force's option attack though, shutting down the pass while recording 10 tackles.

If Notre Dame can stop the big momentum plays here, they'll control the air.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

MIDSHIPMEN RUSHING

Navy runs the triple option as well as any one in the country, and is able to make little adjustments to tweak the legendary scheme every week. Reynolds calls the shots under center, and so far has preferred to call his own number, as he has nearly twice as many rushes as any other back. The system has continued to be prolific though, as Navy grinds opponents down by averaging five yards per carry and 292 yards per game.

The Irish will benefit from good scheduling in this game, as they were able to get a primer in defending the triple option from Air Force last week. However, two consecutive weeks against the option can be especially punishing to the front seven, and senior defensive lineman Louis Nix is questionable to return. Much of the spotlight will fall on freshman outside linebacker Jaylon Smith, who was regularly put on an island to slow down the quarterback in space last week.

EDGE: NAVY

MIDSHIPMEN OFFENSIVE COACHING

Before Ken Niumatalolo arrived at the Naval Academy, the Mids had just one win against the Irish in their last 44 tries. Under Niumatalolo, they've won two out of five. In Niumatalolo's first meeting with Irish coach Brian Kelly in 2010, Navy sliced Notre Dame for 367 yards rushing and 35 points, but the Irish have held them to just 24 points in the two games since. Still, Navy has reached the end zone on 39 percent of their drives this season, the 12th best mark in the country.

Kelly talked this week about how difficult Navy's slight variations can be to defend, meaning defensive coordinator Bob Diaco will have his hands full in gameplanning. The Irish were able to work out the kinks after getting gashed by the option last week, adjusting on the fly to take some automatic checks out of their systems. The Irish will need to be similarly flexible this week, but two weeks with the option is still far less experience than Navy can respond with.

EDGE: EVEN

MIDSHIPMEN SPECIAL TEAMS

In addition to the grinding triple option game, the Midshipmen can control field position with the leg of junior punter Pablo Beltran. Beltran has averaged 43 yards per punt this season, but has downed 1/3 of his kicks inside the 20. That should further limit senior TJ Jones in punt returns, as Jones has just one return of more than five yards in his last six games.

Midshipmen sophomore kicker Nick Sloan has had an average year, with a long of 40 yards and and 5-8 kicking overall.

EDGE: NAVY

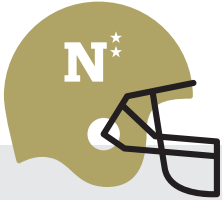
MIDSHIPMEN SCHEDULE (4-3)

Sept. 7	@ Indiana	W	41-35
Sept. 14	Delaware	W	51-7
Sept. 28	@ Western Kentucky	L	19-7
Oct. 5	Air Force	W	28-10
Oct. 12	@ Duke	L	35-7
Oct. 19	@ Toledo	L	45-44
Oct. 26	Pittsburgh	W	24-21
Nov. 2	@ Notre Dame		
Nov. 9	Hawaii		
Nov. 16	South Alabama		
Nov. 22	@ San Jose State		
Dec. 14	Army		

HEAD T

3:30 P.M.
NOTRE DAME STADIUM

NAVY



(Sr.) **Matt Aiken** ⁸⁵ **WR**
(Sr.) Shawn Lynch 87

(Jr.) **Geoffrey Whiteside** ²⁹ **SB**
(So.) DeBrandon Sanders 21

(Jr.) **Bradyn Heap** ⁶² **LT**
(Sr.) Matthew Van Halanger 79

(So.) **E.K. Binns** ⁵⁷ **LG**
(Sr.) Thomas Stone 71

(So.) **Keenan Reynolds** ¹⁹ **QB**
(Fr.) Tago Smith 18

(Jr.) **Tanner Fleming** ⁷⁵ **C**
(So.) Blaze Ryder 63

(Jr.) **Noah Copeland** ³⁴ **FB**
(So.) Chris Swain 37

(Jr.) **Jake Zuzek** ⁶⁴ **RG**
(Sr.) Thomas Stone 71

(So.) **Brandon Greene** ⁶¹ **RT**
(Sr.) Matthew Van Halanger 79

(Sr.) **Darius Staten** ²⁰ **SB**
(Sr.) Marcus Thomas 26

(Sr.) **Casey Bolena** ⁸⁸ **WR**
(Jr.) Brendan Dudeck 81

(So.) **Kwazel Bertrand** ¹⁷ **CB**
(So.) Quincy Adams 5

(Jr.) **Jordan Drake** ¹³ **OLB**
(Jr.) Obi Uzoma 44

(Jr.) **Chris Ferguson** ²³ **S**
(Sr.) Wave Ryder 8

(Jr.) **Paul Quessenberry** ⁴⁵ **DE**
(Jr.) Aaron Davis 91

(Sr.) **Cody Peterson** ⁵³ **ILB**
(Jr.) James Britton 51

(So.) **Bernard Sarra** ⁷⁷ **NG**
(Sr.) Travis Bridges 72

(Sr.) **DJ Sargenti** ⁵² **ILB**
(So.) Don Pearson 50

(Sr.) **Evan Palelei** ⁵⁸ **DE**
(So.) Will Anthony 90

(Jr.) **Parrish Gaines** ² **S**
(Jr.) Lonnie Richardson 3

(Jr.) **Chris Johnson** ⁴⁶ **OLB**
(Fr.) William Tuiider 38

(Fr.) **Brendon Clements** ¹ **CB**
(So.) Quincy Adams 5

(So.) **Nick Sloan** ⁶ **PK**
(So.) Austin Grebe 43

(So.) **Austin Grebe** ⁴³ **KO**
(So.) Gavin Jernigan 16

(Jr.) **Pablo Beltran** ¹¹ **P**
(So.) Gavin Jernigan 16

(Sr.) **Marcus Thomas** ²⁶ **KR**
(Jr.) Geoffrey Whiteside 29

(Sr.) **Shawn Lynch** ⁸⁷ **PR**
(Sr.) Matt Aiken 85

(Jr.) **Joe Cardona** ⁹³ **LS**
(Fr.) Josh Antol 94



Andrew Gastelum
Editor-in-Chief



Matthew DeFranks
Assistant Managing Editor



Mike Monaco
Sports Editor

Almost everyone is talking about Stanford and the game that will determine a BCS bowl. But if the Irish aren't careful, they won't even make it that far. With some key injuries throughout the defense, a better triple-option attack this week at home could be just the sneak attack to send the Irish spiraling.

But somehow the Irish defense has only gotten stronger in recent weeks while Tommy Rees has been impeccable in his last two games (which has been roughly five quarters).

Don't write this matchup off as just another blowout win, but the Irish should have enough firepower to continue rolling on its path to Palo Alto and potentially New Orleans.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 31, Navy 23

This Notre Dame team is finally starting to resemble the one it was a season ago. But then again, maybe it's just the teams they are playing. After squeaking by a USC team in transition, the Irish pummelled Air Force by five touchdowns this past weekend. The defense has been dominant and the offense has been sharp (under Tommy Rees).

How much of that is a mirage, though? It could be a lot but we will not find that out this weekend against Navy. The Irish are bigger and better than the Midshipmen and should win this game comfortably. Brian Kelly and the coaching staff adjusted quickly to the option a week ago and I expect them to do the same as Notre Dame rolls to an easy win over another academy.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 45, Navy 10

I'm not sleeping on Navy, but I'm not wide awake either. Call it sleeping with one eye open.

This isn't quite the same as another Air Force cake-walk. In fact, the Midshipmen defeated the Falcons, 28-10, four weeks back. Navy has scored a touchdown on roughly 39 percent of its drives this year, the 12th-best percentage in the country. With sophomore Keenan Reynolds at quarterback, that percentage jumps to 43.

But I remember last year in Dublin, when Notre Dame dropped an easy 50 points on the Mids and rushed for 293 yards. This year, I think Navy gears up to defend Notre Dame's recently explosive passing attack, only to be gashed on the ground by the likes of Cam McDaniel and Tarean Folston.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 31, Navy 14

0 HEAD

ON NBC

NO. 25 NOTRE DAME



MICHAEL KRAMM | The Observer



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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.)
20 C.J. Proisie (So.)

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

RG **79 Steve Elmer** (Fr.)
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.)
41 Matthias Farley(Jr.)

ILB **48 Dan Fox** (Gr.)
38 Joe Schmidt (Jr.)

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

S **22 Elijah Shumate** (So.)
10 Max Redfield (Fr.)

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

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

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

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

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

IRISH PASSING

Senior quarterback Tommy Rees had a career day against Air Force last week, spreading the love to hit five different receivers for touchdowns.

Senior captain TJ Jones has been an elite receiver for the Irish this year, and freshmen receivers Will Fuller and Corey Robinson have emerged to give the unit even more depth below its veterans. The Irish offensive line will be without senior Christian Lombard for the rest of the year, and graduate student Chris Watt is recovering from an injury that sidelined him last week. Even with instability on the line last week, the pass blocking was still good enough to keep Rees off the ground most of the day, and freshman Steve Elmer has showed early composure as a new starter.

The Midshipmen will have their work cut out for them in trying to slow the Irish down, as Notre Dame has put up 106 points in their last two meetings. Still, Navy has held opponents to 204 yards passing per game, and their most experienced starter is junior safety Parrish Gaines, who has started 25 straight games. Junior outside linebacker Chris Johnson missed his first two seasons with the team due to redshirt-ing and tearing his ACL, but has busted out to lead the Mids with three interceptions this season, as well as 48 tackles. Navy's corners are both in their first year as full time starters, however, and may have issues covering Notre Dame's multitude of weapons on the outside.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING

The Irish rushing attack has reached at least 134 yards in four straight games, but the efficiency has not been there. Against Air Force, Notre Dame needed 37 rushes to accumulate 135 yards. The yards-per-rush is probably lower than Brian Kelly would like, but Saturday offers a chance for the running backs to improve on its 4.1 yards-per-attempt average. Navy has allowed 4.7 yards-per-rush to its opponents this season.

Who will carry the load for the Irish from week to week is still a toss up. Despite George Atkinson receiving a bulk of the chances early on, in recent weeks it has been Cam McDaniel and freshman Tarean

Folston to emerge by game's end. Notre Dame will spread the ball around to the many horses in its stable, and the Irish offensive line should make use of its size advantage to guarentee success on the ground.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

It's hard to argue with what Brian Kelly, Chuck Martin and the rest of the Irish staff have done in the past few weeks. Notre Dame only managed 300 yards against USC two weeks ago, in large part due to Rees' exit due to injury, but on either side of the offensive dud the Irish put up 424 yards against Arizona State and 466 yards against Air Force. With the luxury of opening things up by allowing Rees to spread the ball around and pounding it on the ground, Notre Dame's coaching staff could cause major headaches for the Midshipmen.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

George Atkinson still looks ready to explode for a kickoff-return touchdown. He's worked his way up to a 27.3-yard return average by taking a few kicks to the threshold of the opponent's territory. Kyle Brindza's punting has been servicable, but his performance on the field-goal unit has been notably better. He has converted nine of 13 attempts on the year but hasn't missed a crucial kick yet. TJ Jones has looked considerably more comfortable at punt retun than he had earlier in the year, making tough fair catches when necessary and putting together a few nice returns.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SCHEDULE (6-2)

Aug. 31	Temple	W	28-6
Sept. 7	@ Michigan	L	41-30
Sept. 14	@ Purdue	W	31-24
Sept. 21	Michigan State	W	17-13
Sept. 26	Oklahoma	L	35-21
Oct. 5	vs. Arizona State	W	37-34
Oct. 19	USC	W	14-10
Oct. 26	@ Air Force	W	45-10
Nov. 2	Navy		
Nov. 9	@ Pittsburgh		
Nov. 23	BYU		
Nov. 30	@ Stanford		



Joseph Monardo
Associate Sports Editor

For 86 straight years Notre Dame and Navy have faced off, and Saturday will bring the latest entry in what has become a cherished tradition for both sides.

The Irish enter this one on the heels of a successful out-ing against another academy relying on the triple-option attack, in what may prove to have been a valuable tune-up. Navy is not Air Force, however, and has scored a couple of respectable wins against Indiana and Pittsburgh. On the other hand, Notre Dame is not Indiana or Pitt. With a shiny new ranking next to their name, the Irish have gotten their season back on track and won't slip up here against a Navy team that is 1-3 on the road this year. Even though Notre Dame Stadium may be a welcoming, respecting venue for the Midshipmen, the Irish rushing game will make sure the home team wins out.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 41, Navy 20



Jack Hefferon
Sports Writer

Over the last 60 years, Notre Dame losing to Navy has been almost unimaginable. But over the last six, this matchup has been a coinflip.

This has all the makings of a trap game for the Irish, as the talk surrounding the team has improbably shifted to the BCS once again. Navy is a better team than Air Force, and has outpunched several respectable teams this year.

Notre Dame's saving grace though will be their trip to Colorado last week. The Falcons jumped on the Irish with the triple option and grabbed early momentum, but the Irish had time to work out the kinks in their option defense. Against the Midshipmen, a start like that may have been fatal (See: The Meadowlands, 2010). But the dress rehearsal has the Irish ready to handle the option, and they'll sing both Alma Maters after a comfortable win.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 34, Navy 17

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Elmer fills all roles

By **MATTHEW DeFRANKS**
Assistant Managing Editor

Steve Elmer was not always an offensive lineman.

For one 60-yard drive in eighth grade, Elmer transformed from lineman to a 6-foot-3, 230-pound wrecking ball at fullback. Elmer carried the ball on every play of the touchdown-scoring drive.

"It was awesome," Elmer said.

Nowadays, Elmer is paving the way for touchdowns instead of scoring them.

The freshman from Midland, Mich. has been inserted at nearly every position on the line and helped the Irish of-fense post 45 points against Air Force last week in his first career start.

The now 6-foot-5.5, 317-pounder said he saw a lot of areas for improvement when reviewing his first full game.

"I saw a lot of things that I need to clean up," Elmer said. "I definitely feel pretty good about it. There's lots of things I need to work on. I think I handled it pretty well."

One of those things may be apparent to Irish fans. At the end of No. 25 Notre Dame's first drive at Air Force, the Irish faced a fourth-and-two from the Falcons 24-yard line. But that's when Elmer was whistled for a false start and the Irish were forced to attempt a 46-yard field goal.

"It happens," Elmer said. "Obviously, I wasn't happy I jumped. It happens to everybody but I didn't let it get to me."

Graduate student left tackle Zack Martin said Elmer responded well to

the early error.

"Steve knows we have a lot of confidence in him," Martin said. "He's been here since the spring and we've been kind of light on the O-Line since then, too ... He's a very bright kid and very talented."

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Elmer's intelligence was just one thing that makes the freshman stand out.

"The other plus is he's long," Kelly said. "I mean, he's a long, athletic kid. He can make up for some deficiencies in terms of some of his techniques, because of his athleticism. Got to get stronger, physically stronger. ... But all-in-all, if you're asking about a true freshman playing, the pluses definitely outweigh the minuses."

Elmer has been the first man off the bench for much of the season, before starting against the Falcons following a season-ending back injury to senior offensive lineman Christian Lombard. However, Elmer said he had never played guard before coming to Notre Dame.

"I think I was a little bit more stressed about it than I really should have been," Elmer said. "I wasn't that stressed but it wasn't a huge adjustment, it's still offensive line. Sets are a little bit different, assignments are a little different but it's still doing the same sort of things."

Elmer will look to build off his strong first start this weekend when the Irish (6-2) take on Navy in Notre Dame Stadium.

Contact Matthew DeFranks at mdefrank@nd.edu

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QB Reynolds propels top triple-option attack

By **MIKE MONACO**
Sports Editor

Tahj Boyd. Teddy Bridgewater. Johnny Manziel. Marcus Mariota. AJ McCarron. Braxton Miller.

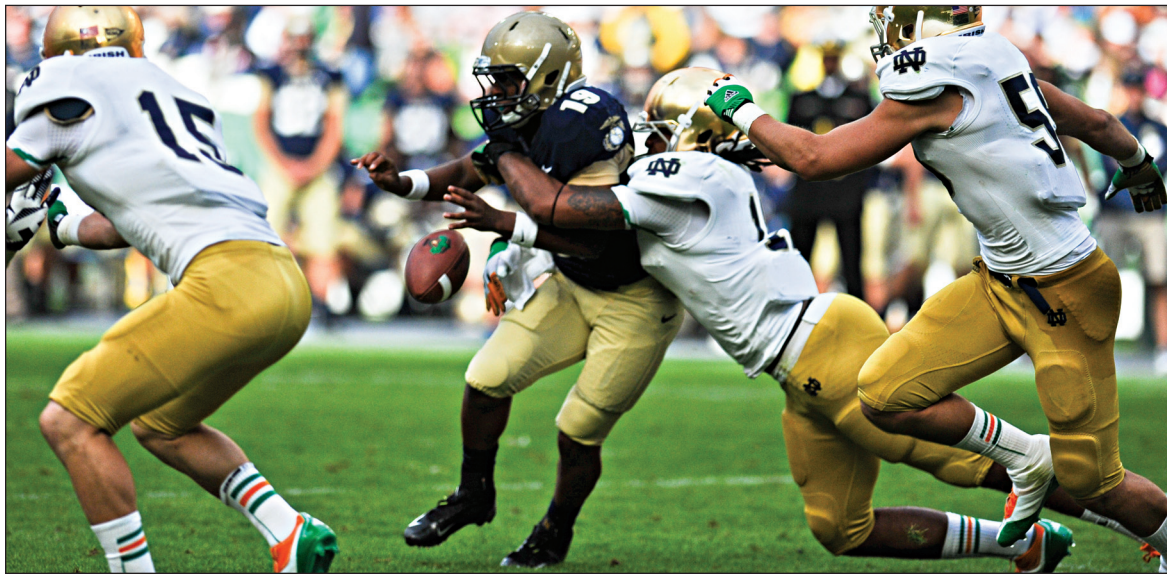
These six star quarterbacks and 28 of the other best quarterbacks in the nation were named to the 2013 Davey O'Brien Award Watch List in July. But the watch list for the O'Brien Award, presented annually to the nation's best college quarterback, featured just one true sophomore: Keenan Reynolds.

Navy's sophomore quarterback earned the preseason recognition beside the likes of the aforementioned Heisman candidates. Since then, Reynolds has powered the Midshipmen offensively, racking up 546 rushing yards and 11 touchdowns on the ground in addition to throwing for 667 yards and four scores.

"They're led offensively by Reynolds, outstanding quarterback who has really been the catalyst for their offense," Irish coach Brian Kelly said Tuesday.

Navy's triple-option attack has averaged 292.1 rushing yards per game this season, good for 10th in the nation. Reynolds is tied for ninth in the country and first among quarterbacks in rushing touchdowns with 11. The 5-foot-11, 185-pounder is fourth among quarterbacks in rushing yards per game at 78.0, ahead of Miller, Mariota and Manziel.

In Navy's 24-21 come-from-behind win over Pittsburgh on Saturday, Reynolds scampered for 93 yards, including a 2-yard rumble to tie the game at 21 with less than four minutes remaining in the fourth quarter. On the Midshipmen's next drive, Reynolds churned out another 18 yards to set up the game-winning



Observer File Photo

Navy sophomore quarterback Keenan Reynolds fumbles the ball during last year's matchup with Notre Dame in Dublin. Reynolds has 11 rushing touchdowns on the year and averages 78 rush yards per game.

field goal. As a team, Navy (4-3) rushed for 220 yards against the Panthers.

"Navy runs the triple option better than anybody in the

country," Kelly said. "I mean, it's what they do. And they have so many variations off of it, just little variations that make a huge difference, splits, the preciseness of

how they run it may not to the untrained eye look like much but it's a real big difference."

Kelly said having just faced another triple-option team in Air Force is beneficial in the attempt to stymie the Midshipmen. The Irish (6-2) did surrender 290 total rushing yards to the Falcons, but Air Force ran 12 times for 101 yards (8.4 per carry) in the first quarter and 53 times for just 189 yards (3.6 per carry) in the final three quarters.

"Certainly from our standpoint, the most important thing for us is to be disciplined again defensively," Kelly said. "In one respect having gone against Air Force and having the principles of option already repped out is an advantage. But certainly [Navy has] seen us and how we defend the option as well. So that gives them a week to do some things as well."

Aside from defending the option, Reynolds presents a passing threat Navy hasn't possessed since former star quarterback Ricky Dobbs was under center. Since 2003, Navy is 18-1 when throwing 0-5 times in a game and 61-14 when throwing 10 or fewer passes. In that same timeframe, the Midshipmen are 26-34 when they throw it 11 times or more and 6-13 when they reach at least 16 pass attempts.

But against the Panthers on Saturday, Reynolds attempted 18 throws (completing eight for 105 yards, a touchdown and an interception) and Navy earned a crucial victory to jump back over the .500 mark.

With Reynolds as the starting quarterback, The Midshipmen are 6-5 when throwing at least 11 times.

"You know he can throw the ball extremely well," Kelly said. "And so he gives you that option, no pun intended, that he can, if you're just sitting on playing the triple option, he can throw the ball effectively."

Reynolds is 10-5 in his career as the starting quarterback, and Saturday's victory — during which Navy was trailing entering the final quarter — was already the fourth fourth-quarter comeback win of the sophomore's career.

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