

# IRISH INSIDER

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2015



## QUIET NOISE

Will Fuller maintains his soft-spoken nature — everywhere but on the field

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Erin Rice and Zach Llorens





## COMMENTARY

# Irish must reestablish identity for playoff push



**Brian Plamondon**  
Sports Writer

On Nov. 3, the College Football Playoff selection committee will announce its first 2015 rankings. While that may seem like light years away, for a Notre Dame team that has a bye coming up, it is only two games from now.

Sure, the first rankings will probably look nothing like what the committee presents to the public after the conference championship games are played. Still, prior impressions are hard to overcome — especially with human beings doing the picking for the College Football Playoff rather than a computer system.

Now six weeks into its season, the knock on Notre Dame has been that the Irish are slow out of the gate and don't have a signature win. They struggled to put away Massachusetts and Navy until the second half while digging themselves into too big a hole to overcome against a strong Clemson team. Wins against Texas and Georgia Tech don't look nearly as good as they did on paper in August. Where does that leave the Irish?

In need of a decisive win against their biggest rival.

It should go without saying that a loss would spell the end of Notre Dame's playoff chances. On the other hand, simply winning isn't good enough for Notre Dame anymore. With a watered-down schedule, scraping by and finishing 11-1 won't cut it.

Instead, Notre Dame must come out like a top-10 team and win convincingly Saturday against USC. Coming off three slow starts in a row, that image is slowly becoming Notre Dame's identity this season. Whether it is the offense sputtering early like against Clemson or the defense getting knocked around during the first few drives against Navy's triple option, Notre Dame needs to put it together and play a full 60 minutes against USC.

The Trojans have had one of the more tumultuous weeks in all of college football, falling to Washington and losing their coach due to well-documented personal reasons and now don't present the same opportunity as they did just a few weeks ago.

"Certainly, if they're ranked 10th in the country, that's going to affect us a little bit differently than them not being ranked, but I still think, when you talk about beating USC, I think it still carries a lot of weight because people know the talent that they have on that football team," Irish coach Brian Kelly said.

Kelly had better hope so.

With USC struggling to a 3-2 record so far, it is all the more reason the Irish have to play sound football and show the committee they are even worthy of consideration.

Another slow start, or a close finish in a game in which Notre Dame now has clear favorite status, and the Irish are just feeding the idea that their identity this season is settled.

Starting tomorrow, the Irish need to establish a new identity for their 2015 season. Six games into the season, it's not too late for Notre Dame to change the course of its play on the field. Sporting a solid overall offense and defense, the Irish have faltered this season by taking possessions off here and there. To be a playoff-caliber team, that can't happen nearly as often.

Although USC doesn't present itself as the same type of powerhouse opponent it did a few short weeks ago, it does have enough talent for Notre Dame to see where it measures up. Quiet the Trojans with a convincing win and the Irish will be talked about as one of the best one-loss teams in the country, if not the best. Struggle with a downtrodden USC team and the Irish will move closer to an also-ran among playoff teams.

Although the first rankings aren't released until after three more games for most teams, the time is now for Notre Dame to assert itself and change its identity for the committee to see.

Contact Brian Plamondon at [bplamond@nd.edu](mailto:bplamond@nd.edu)

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



SARAH OLSON | The Observer

*Irish senior running back C.J. Prosise runs up the middle during Notre Dame's 41-24 win over Navy last week. The Irish currently sit No. 14 in the Associated Press poll at the midway point of their season.*

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# BUSINESS AS USUAL

By **MARY GREEN**  
Assistant Managing Editor

It's a Wednesday evening in the middle of midterms week for Notre Dame students, the time of year right before a much-needed fall break finally arrives, and Will Fuller has places to be.

The junior receiver just wrapped up practice days before his team's biggest rival comes to town, but he still has to take an exam the next day and finish up a 10-page paper due the day after that before he can even think about getting a win against USC and certainly before his mind can wander to his quick trip home to Philadelphia during the bye week.

And yet, he stops for a few seconds to sign a football for a fan's young grandson, whose favorite player is No. 7.

He patiently answers question after question from reporters — his responses are never too long, and his voice is barely louder than teammate KeiVarae Russell's is from across the room — before slipping out to pose for a quick photoshoot and heading off to complete his next task.

Fuller has things to do, the first of which is studying for that test in his "Black Chicago Politics" course.

But on Saturday, Fuller will just have one job, and that's finding the open field so a spiral from quarterback DeShone Kizer can find him.

At least that's how the Irish plan seems to go week after week.

"You know, it definitely keeps you a little bit more comfortable

to know that once you get the ball out to the guys, you expect a five- or 10-yard route with the speed and life after the catch they have, it's unreal," Kizer said Sept. 23 of Fuller and senior running back C.J. Prosise, who have combined to average 256.2 of Notre Dame's 502.7 yards per game.

"You can just put the ball out there and hope that something great is going to happen, and more times than not, it will."

For Kizer and the Irish offense, "something great" has been established as the standard so far this season. Fuller has made seven catches that have gained at least 30 yards for Notre Dame in 2015, and five of those ended with the receiver in the end zone. Arguably the biggest of those came with the 39-yard game-winner with less than a minute left against Virginia on Sept. 12.

Those grabs have brought crowds to their feet — or hanging in despair over walls, in the case of the Charlottesville comeback — and have made Fuller the talk of the game more often than not over the past two seasons. But Fuller's own mind is always on the job he has to finish up.

"I'll make a big play, and I'll just get up and run to my side of the field, you know, just going to the next play," he said. "I try to stay level-headed until the game's over, just try to help my team as much as possible."

"You don't have to get hype until we win. I'm happy with the win."

Even after a win, the even-keeled junior doesn't switch up his lifestyle in celebration.

"I just go about my business," he said. "I don't really do too much outside football and school. My family's always here, so I'm with them most of the time after the game."

That family has witnessed one of their own climb the ranks into Notre Dame lore, with Fuller currently fourth all-time in touchdown catches at 23, behind recent standouts Michael Floyd (37), Jeff Samardzija (27) and Golden Tate (26).

Considering Fuller made just six catches and scored once his freshman year, that figure's a glimpse of the productivity the receiver has had over the last two seasons, especially in his breakout 2014 campaign.

So far this season, Fuller's seven touchdowns are tied for seventh-most in the nation, while his 571 receiving yards are 15th. He's averaged 16.4 yards per catch in his career at Notre Dame, ranking third among all active FBS receivers with at least 100 catches and 1,000 receiving yards.

Yet you wouldn't know that from his demeanor. He's soft-spoken, goes about his business and certainly isn't prone to linger around with reporters for longer than he needs to.

"I'm an introvert — not on the field, I'm probably more extroverted on the field — but off the field, in the classroom, at home, I'm still the same like I am around media," he said. "I don't change that much with my friends. I'm still a quiet dude."

Other players were quick to offer a similar analysis when asked about their teammate away from football.

"Will's a low-key, quiet guy,



EMMET FARNAN | The Observer

**Irish junior receiver Will Fuller hauls in a touchdown during Notre Dame's 30-22 win over Georgia Tech on Sept. 19.**

doesn't really need much in life to be happy and satisfied," graduate student receiver Amir Carlisle said. "He's a real good friend of mine, too, and off the field, he's quiet."

While Fuller said his extroversion on the field especially comes out in the way he communicates with teammates, he said he still prefers to let his play speak for itself — unless a defensive back has been running his mouth.

"That's definitely the way I've always been," he said. "If there's a cornerback that's talking a lot of trash, and I make a big play or something — like Kei [Russell], if I made a big play on Kei — I've gotta say something. It depends on how the cornerback is."

Carlisle said he sees Fuller's demeanor change on Saturdays to a certain degree.

"Before the game, obviously, his energy will pick up, as well as all of us will kind of get hype, chanting together, getting each other fired up, but he's a pretty even-keeled guy for the most part," Carlisle said.

Though he admitted he's bogged down with homework and football most days, Fuller said he likes to spend his free time participating in one of the more popular team activities: playing video games.

"My favorite thing to do is playing video games, probably, what I would do if I didn't have

any schoolwork," he said. "Like fall break, I'll probably play my video games a lot and just relax."

Fuller is a member of a large group of teammates who channel their competitiveness into playing 2K, Madden, Call of Duty or anything else that comes up.

"There's a lot of us. Probably a good 20, 25," he said, listing off Carlisle, Prosise, Ronnie Stanley, Torii Hunter Jr., Chris Brown, Jay Hayes and C.J. Sanders as his fellow gamers.

Graduate student center Nick Martin, who said Sept. 30 that Fuller once "literally beat me by about 100 points in Madden," was conspicuously absent from that list.

Carlisle said the junior's gaming skills are among the best on the team — Fuller declared himself "hands down the best in every game" — and that he used to be a nationally ranked player in Madden.

Despite that accomplishment, Fuller said his focus is still on the game on the field, not on the screen.

"I just play casually, just to get my mind off things. I mean, it's time-consuming, so it gets days passed really fast," he said.

After all, Fuller still has other places to be.

**Contact Mary Green at**  
**mgreen8@nd.edu**



CAITLYN JORDAN | The Observer

**Fuller scores the game-winning touchdown in the final minute of Notre Dame's 34-27, come-from-behind win at Virginia on Sept. 12 at Scott Stadium in Charlottesville, Virginia.**





CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer  
Irish senior safety Elijah Shumate celebrates after his interception in Notre Dame's 41-24 win over Navy on Saturday.

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the Rise of the Storied  
ND/USC Rivalry**

*John Heisler, Senior Associate Athletic Director,  
Executive Editor, Athletics Media Relations*

*Jim Lefebvre, Author, Speaker and Sports Historian*

2 - 3 PM | Eck Visitors Center Auditorium

CATCHING UP WITH...

**Tim Brown '88**

3:30 - 4 PM | ND Live Stage

CATCHING UP WITH...

**Marc Edwards '97**

4 - 4:30 PM | ND Live Stage



# Helton leads USC after Sarkisian's dismissal

By ALEX CARSON  
Associate Sports Editor

To say it's been a tumultuous week for USC may be an understatement.

Dropping a 17-12 home decision to unranked Washington on Oct. 8 and dropping out of the polls in the process would be enough to knock most teams off their game, but the termination of head coach Steve Sarkisian on Monday threw a program that started the year in the top 10 into further turmoil.

"After careful consideration of what is in the best interest of the university and our student-athletes, I have made the decision to terminate Steve Sarkisian, effective immediately," Trojans athletic director Pat Haden said in a press release Monday. "... Through all of this we remain concerned for Steve and hope that it will give him the opportunity to focus on his personal well-being."

Sarkisian, who had appeared at a university function in August under the influence of alcohol, was terminated after "not meeting USC expectations and standards," Haden said.

"He knew those expectations and failed to meet them, so we made a decision in the best interest of our student-athletes, and that was to terminate Steve."



Observer File Photo

*Former USC head coach Steve Sarkisian chats with a reporter following the Trojans' win over Notre Dame last year in Los Angeles. Sarkisian was fired Monday by USC athletic director Pat Haden.*

With Sarkisian out, interim head coach Clay Helton will lead the Trojans (3-2, 1-2 Pac-12) into the rivalry showdown against the Irish.

"I'm very confident in my ability to lead a football team and the opportunity ahead," Helton, who served as Sarkisian's offensive coordinator, said on the Pac-12 coaches' teleconference Tuesday. "Our kids are extremely excited about it."

For No. 14 Notre Dame (5-1), it means the Irish will face a fourth different USC coach in as many seasons: Lane Kiffin coached the Trojans in

2012, Ed Orgeron in 2013 following Kiffin's dismissal the previous week and Sarkisian last year.

Irish head coach Brian Kelly said he expects to see similar things from the Trojans this week as they've shown earlier in the season but noted Helton is likely to put his own stamp on USC's game plan.

"I'm certain that the system that's in place is one that we'll continue to see," Kelly said. "But play calling is such a combination of art and science. Now that he is clearly running the program, you tend to see a little bit more of

that finish come out, where maybe Steve had his thumb or stamp on it. I think certainly it would make sense that Clay would have a little bit of his. But I don't think you go too far from what they are and who they are as an offense."

And while there's been a lot of turmoil at the program, Kelly said he expects to see a USC team that comes out and puts its best foot forward — comparing it to Texas' performance last weekend against Oklahoma in a 24-17 upset win following a blowout loss at TCU.

"It's a rivalry game for them as well. It's a chance for them to respond," Kelly said. "I think you look at the way Texas responded this past weekend with a lot of media scrutiny. I expect USC to respond the same way, so we're going to have to play extremely well."

The situation the Trojans find themselves in this year is eerily similar to the one two years ago, when Kiffin was fired midseason, and Helton said he thinks his team can draw off that experience to come together.

"The biggest thing is a lot of these guys — fortunately or unfortunately — have been in this situation before," Helton said. "We were in it two years ago. I thought that staff that was together did exactly what we're doing right now; we bonded together as a Trojan family and a football team."

Helton said his team has a big opportunity this week at Notre Dame.

"[We have] the opportunity to play in one of the greatest rivalry games in the history of college football this Saturday," Helton said. "... What an unbelievable Saturday it will be, and what a great opportunity for us as Trojans."

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Observer File Photo

*Trojans graduate student quarterback Cody Kessler drops back to pass during the Trojans' 49-14 win over Notre Dame last season.*





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### Trojans Passing

After notching 15 touchdowns and throwing for nearly 1,300 yards in his first four games, USC quarterback Cody Kessler struggled last time out against Washington, going 16-for-29 for just 156 yards and two interceptions in a 17-12 loss. It was a head-scratcher of a performance from a player who started the year so well, extending his streak of consecutive games with three or more touchdown passes to six before the loss.

Notre Dame will, of course, remember Kessler’s performance in the game between the two teams last year, when he threw for six touchdowns and 372 yards in the Trojans’ 49-14 rout of a beat-up Irish team.

This year, the Irish haven’t been seriously tested much through the air. Texas was largely impotent, Clemson did not try much in the air during the downpour two weeks ago and Notre Dame has faced two triple-option attacks that largely kept the ball on the ground.

The Irish have had a tendency to give up big plays this year, and Kessler and his receiving corps are the kind of group that can pounce on those opportunities.

#### EDGE: USC

### Trojans Rushing

USC’s two feature backs, Tre Madden and Ronald Jones II, combined to average 7.4 yards per carry Oct. 8 against Washington, and the Trojans still managed to lose. With former head coach Steve Sarkisian dismissed and offensive coordinator Clay Helton taking the reins, it will be interesting to see if the play calling changes — but the Trojans will still have to find a way to turn their backfield talent into success. Madden has been limited in practice this week nursing a tender knee, but even if he’s not 100 percent, Jones and Justin Davis still give the Trojans options.

On the flip, Notre Dame’s defense has been fairly successful against the run this year: In four games against teams that don’t run an option scheme, the Irish have given up just 136.8 yards per game on the ground. If the front seven plays well for Notre Dame, they should be able to find success stopping USC’s rushing game.

#### EDGE: Notre Dame

### Trojans Offensive Coaching

In the aftermath of a coaching change, it’s always tough to say what an interim head coach will do. While the general schemes the Trojans are running should effectively stay the same, interim head coach Clay Helton is likely to put his own spin on proceedings. But even with the potential uncertainty, the distractions of the week may have an impact on the ability of USC’s scheme to work under the lights.

Notre Dame defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder should have everything he needs to put together a solid game plan after last year’s disaster in Los Angeles. It’ll be up to the defense to make sure it ends up being a successful one.

#### EDGE: Notre Dame

### Trojans Special Teams

The focus of the special teams unit at the Coliseum boils down to one thing this year — Adoree’ Jackson. His two kickoff returns as a freshman last year earned him notoriety, and despite teams kicking away from him, he’s racked up more than 10 yards per punt return this year, breaking a long of 45 yards on the season. The veteran kick and punt coverage teams for the Irish should have their hands full containing Jackson.

The kicking game for USC is largely an unknown, even after five games — kicker Alex Wood is just 4-for-5 this year, with his miss an important 46-yarder in last week’s loss to Washington, but punter Kris Albarado has been good, downing six of 23 punts inside the 20-yard line and racking up five 50-plus-yard punts this year.

#### EDGE: USC

### Trojans Schedule (3-2)

Sept. 5 **Arkansas State (W 55-6)**  
Sept. 12 **Idaho (W 59-9)**  
Sept. 19 **Stanford (L 41-31)**  
Sept. 26 **@ Arizona State (W 42-14)**  
Oct. 8 **Washington (L 17-12)**  
Oct. 17 **@ Notre Dame**  
Oct. 24 **Utah**  
Oct. 31 **@ California**  
Nov. 7 **Arizona**  
Nov. 13 **@ Colorado**  
Nov. 21 **@ Oregon**  
Nov. 28 **UCLA**

# HEAD T

NOTRE DAME STADIUM



(So.) **Ju-Ju Smith Schuster** **9** WR  
(Jr.) De’Quan Hampton 89

(r-Jr.) **Taylor McNamara** **48** TE  
(Fr.) Tyler Petite 82

(r-Jr.) **Chad Wheeler** **72** LT  
(So.) Toa Lobendahn 50

(r-Sr.) **Tre Madden** **23** RB  
(Fr.) Ronald Jones II 25

(r-Sr.) **Cody Kessler** **6** QB  
(r-Sr.) Max Browne 4

(So.) **Damien Mama** **51** LG  
(r-Fr.) Chris Brown 77

(So.) **Toa Lobendahn** **50** C  
(r-Sr.) Khaliel Rodgers 62

(So.) **Viane Talamaivao** **60** RG  
(So.) Toa Lobendahn 50

(r-Jr.) **Zach Banner** **73** RT  
(Fr.) Chuma Edoga 70

(r-Sr.) **Steven Mitchell Jr.** **7** WR  
(r-Fr.) Jalen Greene 10

(Jr.) **Darreus Rogers** **1** WR  
(r-Jr.) Isaac Whitney 15

(Sr.) **Kevon Seymour** **13** LCB  
(Fr.) Ifhan Marshall 8

(Jr.) **Su’a Cravens** **21** OLB  
(So.) Uchenna Nwosu 42

(r-Sr.) **Delvon Simmons** **52** DT  
(Fr.) Noah Jefferson 91

(Fr.) **Cameron Smith** **35** ILB  
(r-Sr.) Lamar Dawson 55

(r-Sr.) **Antwaun Woods** **99** NT  
(r-Sr.) Cody Temple 98

(r-Sr.) **Anthony Sarao** **56** ILB  
(Fr.) Osa Masina 58

(r-Sr.) **Greg Townsend Jr.** **93** DE  
(Fr.) Claude Pelon 90

(So.) **John Plattenburg** **24** S  
(Fr.) Marvel Tell III 7

(r-Jr.) **Scott Felix** **47** OLB  
(Fr.) Porter Gustin 45

(So.) **Adoree’ Jackson** **2** RCB  
(So.) Jonathan Lockett 23

(r-Jr.) **Alex Wood** **39** PK  
(r-Sr.) Matt Boormeester 36

(r-Jr.) **Conner Sullivan** **19** H  
(r-Sr.) Cody Kessler 6

(r-Sr.) **Kris Albarado** **17** P  
(r-Fr.) Reid Budrovich 46

(So.) **Adoree’ Jackson** **2** KR  
(So.) JuJu Smith-Schuster 9

(So.) **Adoree’ Jackson** **2** PR  
(r-Sr.) Steven Mitchell Jr. 7

(Jr.) **Zach Smith** **92** LS  
(r-Jr.) Nick Schlossberg 57



**Greg Hadley**  
Editor-in-Chief



**Mary Green**  
Assistant Managing Editor



**Zach Klonsinski**  
Sports Editor

With the recent turmoil surrounding the Trojans off the field, there seems to be a growing sentiment in certain circles that perhaps USC will come out angry and play inspired against the Irish, free from the uncertainty and controversy that plagued them under Steve Sarkisian. Maybe USC might even push Notre Dame to the limit. After all, the Trojans have plenty of talent. But this school of thought flies in the face of common sense. Even if the Trojans are better off without Sarkisian, their preparations this week had to be hindered by the uncertainty and turnover. Meanwhile, the Irish are coming off a solid win over Navy and have revenge on their mind after last season’s rout. Under the lights, with plenty of pressure to not just beat USC but rout it, Notre Dame will start slow, as always, but power away in the second half.

On paper, it might appear Notre Dame should have this one in the bag: USC is led by a new coach, at least for the interim, and its starting center is out for the year, adding another wrench to the season.

But Brian Kelly said, if anything, that could be a unifying factor for a Trojans team with a lot of pride, so the Irish will still have to put up a good fight to keep the playing of “Fight On” at bay.

That shouldn’t be too big a problem for Notre Dame, unless the transition from a triple-option offense to a more conventional one is more difficult than expected, which has been the case a few times the last few seasons.

However, the Irish will pull away for a relatively worry-free win to cruise into the bye week.

Notre Dame has gotten into a recent slump of slow starts, and that should scare Irish fans. USC, despite all the turmoil that took place out west this week, still has an elite crop of talent, and if you give them some momentum, the Trojans will be able to capitalize on it.

That said, the Irish have every reason to buck that recent trend and come out fired up this week. It’s a must-win game if they want to keep their hopes alive for the College Football Playoff, campus will be full of energy, it’s a night game, and you better believe the coaching staff has posted “49-14” on every possible open space all week.

Look for the Irish to make a statement under the lights Saturday night.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 38, USC 21

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 34, USC 17

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 41, USC 24



# NO. 14 HEAD

7:30 P.M. ON NBC

## NO. 14 NOTRE DAME



SARAH OLSON | The Observer



AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer



**RCB** **6** **KeiVarae Russell** (Sr.)

12 Devin Butler (Jr.)

**WLB** **9** **Jaylon Smith** (Jr.)

4 Te'von Coney (Fr.)

**DE** **45** **Romeo Okwara** (Sr.)

98 Andrew Trumbetti (So.)

**S** **22** **Elijah Shumate** (Sr.)

29 Nicky Baratti (Sr.)

**DT** **91** **Sheldon Day** (Sr.)

93 Jay Hayes (So.)

**MLB** **38** **Joe Schmidt** (Gr.)

59 Jarrett Grace (Gr.)

**DT** **75** **Daniel Cage** (So.)

99 Jerry Tillery (Fr.)

**DE** **90** **Isaac Rochell** (Jr.)

55 Jonathan Bonner (So.)

**S** **41** **Matthias Farley** (Gr.)

10 Max Redfield (So.)

**SLB** **17** **James Onwualu** (Jr.)

48 Greer Martini (So.)

**LCB** **36** **Cole Luke** (Jr.)

24 Nick Coleman (Fr.)

**WR** **7** **Will Fuller** (Jr.)

86 Equanimeous St. Brown (Fr.)

**TE** **13** **Tyler Luatua** (So.)

82 Nic Weishar (So.)

**RT** **68** **Mike McGlinchey** (Jr.)

75 Mark Harrell (Sr.)

**RG** **79** **Steve Elmer** (Jr.)

62 Colin McGovern (Jr.)

**RB** **20** **C.J. Prosise** (Sr.)

33 Josh Adams (Fr.)

**C** **72** **Nick Martin** (Gr.)

53 Sam Mustipher (So.)

**QB** **14** **DeShone Kizer** (So.)

12 Brandon Wimbush (Fr.)

**LG** **71** **Alex Bars** (So.)

56 Quenton Nelson (So.)

**LT** **78** **Ronnie Stanley** (Sr.)

70 Hunter Bivin (Jr.)

**WR** **2** **Chris Brown** (Sr.)

88 Corey Robinson (Jr.)

**WR** **3** **Amir Carlisle** (Gr.)

16 Torii Hunter Jr. (Jr.)

**H** **14** **DeShone Kizer** (So.)

4 Montgomery VanGorder (So.)

**KR** **9** **C.J. Sanders** (Fr.)

3 Amir Carlisle (Gr.)

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

99 Hunter Smith (Sr.)

**PK** **19** **Justin Yoon** (Fr.)

43 John Chereson (Jr.)

**P** **85** **Tyler Newsome** (So.)

42 Jeff Riney (Fr.)

**PR** **9** **C.J. Sanders** (Fr.)

7 Will Fuller (Jr.)



### IRISH PASSING

Once more, DeShone Kizer managed the game against Navy, putting the Irish in a good position to have success. He's topped 200 yards through the air in each of his four starts this season and used a pass-heavy second drive of the game to get the Irish on the board last week.

After a tough contest at Clemson, the receiving corps responded well to the challenge against Navy but may have to take another step up against USC. Chris Brown has continued to be a reliable second option for the Irish, making it harder for teams to defend such that Will Fuller is taken out of the game. With the slew of options Notre Dame has at receiver, it's reasonable to think the pass game will continue to have success.

USC's pass defense is nothing to write home about — despite surrendering fewer than 20 points in four of its five outings, the Trojans defense is giving up more than 200 yards per game to opposing teams through the air. It's surrendered just four touchdowns, but Saturday's contest should give Kizer an opportunity to grow in confidence once more.

### EDGE: NOTRE DAME

### IRISH RUSHING

If there were questions about C.J. Prosise and the Irish run game after a rough outing at Clemson, some of them were surely answered after last week's performance against Navy, when Prosise racked up three touchdowns for the second time this season. Alex Bars coming in for the injured Quenton Nelson did little to harm the ground game, as a combination of jet sweeps and runs up the gut allowed Notre Dame to roll once more.

A few weeks ago, Stanford's ground game ran wild over the USC defense, going for 195 yards and three touchdowns in the Cardinal's 41-31 win in Los Angeles. It's not hard to imagine the Irish rushing attack doing a similar thing this week against the Trojans, especially given the tumultuous week USC has had.

### EDGE: NOTRE DAME

### IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

While Notre Dame went three-and-out on its opening possession last week, the offense responded well with another banner day. When the Irish were offered short fields, the proper play calls gave Notre Dame six points within seconds. The Irish staff had the right mix of passes and sweeps to C.J. Prosise to exploit the Midshipmen defense early, and they killed off the game very well in the second half.

The only team that's stopped the Irish so far this year has been Clemson — and even then, the game plan was good enough to produce points had drops not harmed the effort. Oh, and the Trojans gave up 41 points in their only other game against a top-25 foe.

### EDGE: NOTRE DAME

### IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

Justin Yoon had a crucial 52-yard field goal at the end of the half against Navy, the third-longest in school history, while Tyler Newsome had a punt downed inside the five that eventually turned into a Navy turnover and seven points for the Irish. A forced fumble on the opening kickoff of the second half gave Notre Dame's offense with more easy points in a marked difference from the Clemson loss, where special teams hurt the Irish.

The kick coverage team, however, did give up one big return, and with Adoree' Jackson back deep for punts and kicks, that could be a concern. Consistency is still a worry, but another good performance could quiet those fears.

### EDGE: EVEN

### IRISH SCHEDULE (5-1)

Sept. 5 **Texas (W 38-3)**  
Sept. 12 **@ Virginia (W 34-27)**  
Sept. 19 **Georgia Tech (W 30-22)**  
Sept. 26 **Massachusetts (W 62-27)**  
Oct. 3 **@ Clemson (L 24-22)**  
Oct. 10 **Navy (W 41-24)**  
Oct. 17 **USC**  
Oct. 31 **@ Temple**  
Nov. 7 **@ Pittsburgh**  
Nov. 14 **Wake Forest**  
Nov. 21 **vs. Boston College**  
Nov. 28 **@ Stanford**



**Alex Carson**

Associate Sports Editor



**Brian Plamondon**

Sports Writer

Realistically, this game should go one of two ways. Playing on a cold, Midwestern night at the end of a tumultuous, emotionally-challenging week, USC doesn't come close to putting its best foot forward. That's the first.

The other scenario is the opposite. With a rivalry game after a week of intense media attention, the Trojans come in and play their best football of the year, showcasing the talent that earned them a preseason No. 6 ranking.

I think it'll be the latter, and with the issues Notre Dame has had the week after Navy under Brian Kelly, this game has the makings of one that will go down to the wire.

Like he did at Virginia, DeShone Kizer will have to step up to win this game late for Notre Dame. And like he did at Virginia, he'll deliver.

**FINAL SCORE:** Notre Dame 24, USC 21

Notre Dame doesn't have a very good track record post-Navy: In the past eight years, the Irish are 2-6. It's not just Notre Dame, however, as last season, teams that had a game the week after Navy went a combined 1-7.

With the Steve Sarkisian and Max Tuerk news hitting USC this week, Notre Dame couldn't have caught the Trojans at a better time.

Look for Sheldon Day to wreak havoc up the middle, putting pressure on USC's Cody Kessler and giving the Irish secondary a chance against a talented crop of receivers.

On offense, the friendly confines of Notre Dame Stadium will be huge for DeShone Kizer in a big rivalry game. Forget fancy stats, my gut says the Irish should take care of business and enact revenge from last year.

**FINAL SCORE:** Notre Dame 38, USC 24

For in-game updates and stats from the press box Saturday, follow us on Twitter at **@ObserverSports**





# Irish secondary works through growing pains

By GREG HADLEY  
Editor-in-Chief

If last season was the only guide, USC graduate student quarterback Cody Kessler would be glad to see the Notre Dame secondary when he takes his first snap Saturday night.

In the Trojans' 49-14 victory in 2014, Kessler torched the Irish defensive backs for six touchdowns, 372 yards and an 80 percent completion percentage.

But things have changed since then, and the Notre Dame secondary that will take the field this weekend will look far different from the one that was dominated a year ago.

Just ask KeiVarae Russell.

"They're going to be going against a lot of different guys," the senior cornerback said. "It's a totally different team."

Russell missed last year's game while he was suspended, and junior safety Max Redfield left in the second quarter due to injury. Meanwhile, junior cornerback Devin Butler had to step up in just the second start of his career, and junior Cole Luke was expected to lead the cornerbacks in his first season as a starter.

"Obviously going into last year's game against SC we were real banged up, a lot of guys were out," graduate cornerback Matthias Farley said. "We had a lot of true freshmen

playing that had never played in that environment, never played in that game before."

This season, the Irish secondary is much more settled. Russell is back on the field and third on the team in tackles, and Luke has two interceptions to lead the team and a whole year of experience under his belt. Redfield and Farley have split time at safety, and senior safety Elijah Shumate has three tackles for loss, one interception and 31 tackles.

And perhaps most importantly, the unit has gone from a relative dearth of leaders to a surplus of them. Farley is a captain, Russell is considered a future NFL draft pick, and Shumate has grown to become more vocal and assertive as a leader.

"[It's] skyrocketed," head coach Brian Kelly said of Shumate's leadership. "I wish I had another couple of years with him. He's really come into his own. Some guys, it just takes a little longer to get to that point. He's just one of those guys who's really ascending for us."

Last season, Shumate had a career-high 13 tackles against USC. It was, however, part of an up-and-down season in which he was benched twice and struggled to earn the approval of Kelly and new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder.

But a second year in



AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer

**Graduate student cornerback Matthias Farley, 41, and senior safety Elijah Shumate, 22, get in on a tackle during Notre Dame's 41-24 win over Navy last Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium.**

VanGorder's system has paid dividends for Shumate and the secondary.

"I think he understands the game a lot more and his defense really, really well, so I think it obviously helps to speak up when you know you're 100 percent right, you're not second-guessing yourself," Farley said of Shumate. "I think also he's just been playing really well, so that gives him more confidence."

So far this season, Notre Dame ranks 12th in the nation in passing yards allowed — though two of its six games have come against triple-option

offenses that rarely pass the ball — but have allowed seven touchdowns through the air, 43rd in the NCAA.

And Kelly is far from satisfied with the unit.

"I think where we'd like to see continued growth is probably just being a little more aggressive," he said. "Most astute football coaches would say that it starts on the back end, right?"

It's an assessment Farley agrees with, but he sees this weekend's matchup with Kessler and USC as a chance to showcase the aggressiveness and consistency Kelly is

looking for.

"I think that each week is an opportunity to play more consistently as a secondary, and what better way to do it than go against some incredible competition in USC or whoever it may be?" Farley said. "But it really is just becoming more consistent week in and week out no matter who we're playing and trusting each other that you're going to do your job because everything does fit when everyone is doing the right thing in the secondary."

**Contact Greg Hadley at [ghadley@nd.edu](mailto:ghadley@nd.edu)**



AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer

**Irish junior cornerback Devin Butler grapples with a Navy player during Notre Dame's 41-24 win over the Midshipmen last week.**

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Photo courtesy of Blue and Gold Illustrated, Rivals.com

Linebacker Daelin Hayes, who decommitted from USC earlier this week, is among 15 official visitors on campus for Saturday's game.



Photo courtesy of Blue and Gold Illustrated, Rivals.com

Defensive end Khalid Kareem backed away from his Alabama pledge Wednesday and is an official visitor this weekend for the USC game.

## RECRUITING

# Hayes headlines slew of visitors for rivalry game

By ZACH KLONSINSKI  
Sports Editor

Usually winning or losing a game during a recruit's official visit doesn't factor too much into his decision to eventually attend the school.

That's not the case for Notre Dame this weekend when it welcomes USC to Notre Dame Stadium, according to Irish recruiting analyst Andrew Ivins.

With the Trojan program reeling over the events of the past week, Ivins, who covers Notre Dame recruiting for Rivals.com's Blue and Gold Illustrated, said in order to really make an impression on recruits, Notre Dame must beat its rival.

And not just a tooth-and-nail victory like 2013's 14-10 escape: Ivins said the Irish need to make a statement to the visitors on campus this weekend.

"I've never been one who goes, 'They've got to win or they've got to lose,' because you can spin that both ways to recruits," Ivins said. "But given the circumstances, USC couldn't be in a lower place right now, and you have so many high-profile kids coming from the West Coast. ... I think Notre Dame has to win this game, and I think it would say a lot to do it in commanding fashion. Just given

the circumstances that you're going up against a team that has an interim head coach and this is a rivalry game.

"I normally wouldn't say that, but this weekend I feel like they have to win if they want to get some momentum on the recruiting trail."

The Irish have a season-high 15 official visitors — and the potential for a couple more to be added in the final hours before the game — and even more on unofficial visits. It will not only be easily the busiest, but also arguably the most important weekend for Notre Dame all season on the recruiting front.

Among the prospects officially visiting campus, five-star linebacker Daelin Hayes announced his decommitment from USC on Twitter on Sunday after being pledged to the Trojans for over a year. Ivins said the Ann Arbor, Michigan, native's decision had basically whittled down to USC and Notre Dame, but now that he has reopened his recruitment, he has already scheduled visits to Ohio State and Oklahoma, per his recruit page on Rivals.com.

Despite these new visits, Ivins said Notre Dame is still in good shape with the 13th-ranked prospect.

"He's always had an interest in Notre Dame," Ivins said. "Then obviously what happened last Los Angeles this past weekend [the firing of USC head coach Steve Sarkisian] reopened things up and he decided to separate himself from the Trojans.

"... I think Notre Dame is in the perfect position to land Hayes. He's going to take the official visit, [his] mom's coming. They've always had an interest in Notre Dame. But I don't think that a commitment is imminent this weekend simply because he wants to look at his other options."

Four-star linebacker Jeffrey McCulloch, the No. 5 linebacker prospect in the country, per Rivals, will join Hayes at Notre Dame this weekend. It will be the Houston, Texas, native's first official visit to any school, and Ivins said the fact he chose Notre Dame first bodes well for the Irish.

"He's got a list of 15 schools that are in the picture, but Notre Dame is the first that will get an official visit," Ivins said. "That's because Notre Dame has put in the work and continued to try and get him on campus.

"Right now I think he's as wide-open as you can get. He's not going to make a decision until January, but this is a pretty-telling sign ... that [Notre Dame is] going to be in it until the end."

Ivins said having both high-profile linebacker recruits on campus at the same time shouldn't be a problem for the Irish.

"If you're Notre Dame right now,

you're pointing to [McCulloch] and saying, 'We're only going to have six scholarship linebackers coming back next year, and only three of them have played snaps, so there's definitely going to be room for playing time,'" Ivins said.

Hayes will not be the only recruit on campus who recently decommitted from another high-profile program. Four-star defensive end Khalid Kareem of Farmington Hills, Michigan, backed away from his June verbal pledge to Alabama on Wednesday and will be in South Bend over the weekend.

"The family really likes the academic side of things," Ivins said. "Obviously, if you stack Notre Dame up with Alabama, it's not really on the same playing field.

"Is he a guy who is going to commit right away? I don't know. I give him a higher chance than Hayes because defensive end is an obvious need."

Two of Notre Dame's biggest targets on offense will also be in the stands Saturday. Four-star receiver Javon McKinley will be making his official visit to Notre Dame, while the Irish will also be getting a head start on their 2017 recruiting class by welcoming five-star offensive tackle Jedrick Wills to campus for an unofficial visit.

"When you talk with people inside the Gug, they feel in a way they've already won over Javon McKinley's mother, and they think that is going to be a deciding factor down the line," Ivins said. "This is his third visit — mom came the first time, he came alone the second time — so I think what Notre Dame needs to show him is ... he can be a dynamic receiver and Notre Dame can put guys at the next level."

"This will be [Wills'] second unofficial, surprisingly," Ivins said. "It's pretty much a Notre Dame-Kentucky battle right now. ... Notre Dame really likes him, and when [Irish offensive line coach] Harry Hiestand identifies a lineman he likes, he generally doesn't miss."

Ivins said if he had to guess where the Irish would pick up a commitment this weekend, he highlighted Notre Dame's two three-star safety recruits, Devin Studstill and Ikenna Okeke.

"As I was told today, spots are closing fast, so it'll be interesting to see if either one of those guys pulls the trigger, if they get pressure to pull the trigger," Ivins said.

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out [BlueAndGold.com](http://BlueAndGold.com). Email Andrew Owens at [aowens@blueandgold.com](mailto:aowens@blueandgold.com) and tell him *The Observer* sent you.

Contact Zach Klonsinski at [zklonsin@nd.edu](mailto:zklonsin@nd.edu)

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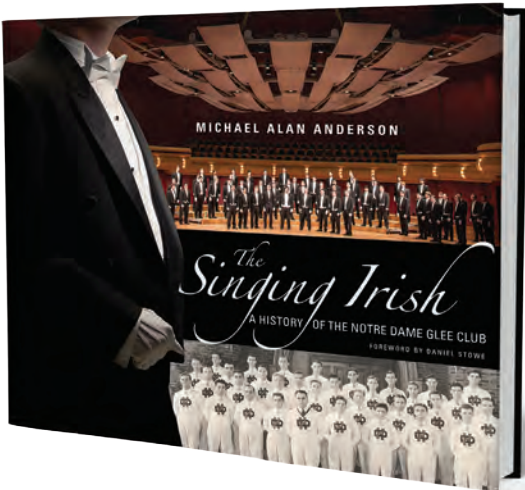
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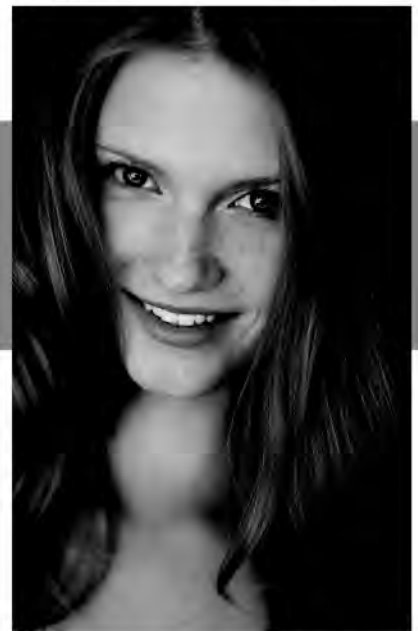
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Observer File Photo

*Trojans junior running back Justin Davis runs upfield during USC's 49-14 win over Notre Dame last season at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Graduate student quarterback Cody Kessler, 6, threw for six touchdowns in the win as the Trojans scored their most points against Notre Dame since a 55-24 win in 1974.*



SARAH OLSON | The Observer



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

*Irish senior captain and defensive lineman Sheldon Day flattens Navy senior quarterback Keenan Reynolds during Notre Dame's 41-24 win last weekend at Notre Dame Stadium.*



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

*Graduate student cornerback Matthias Farley prepares for a snap against Navy last Saturday.*



AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer

*Freshman receiver C.J. Sanders returns a punt during last week's 41-24 win over Navy.*



AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer

*Irish senior running back C.J. Prosise tries to outrun a slew of Navy defenders during Notre Dame's 41-24 win last Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium. Prosise ran for three touchdowns in the victory.*



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

*Graduate student receiver Amir Carlisle evades a tackler in Notre Dame's win over Navy. Carlisle has caught 16 receptions this season.*