

# IRISH INSIDER

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THE  
OBSERVER

## STANDING STRONG

Jonas Gray emerges in his  
senior year to power the  
Irish rushing attack.









# Leaving a legacy

Gray finally gets an opportunity during his senior campaign and makes the most out of it

By ALLAN JOSEPH  
Sports Editor

Entering the 2011 season, senior running back Jonas Gray had done everything right to get his final campaign off to a fast start. After three years of waiting, Gray had finally found his opportunity to be a featured back.

“He did all the things it takes to have a great year,” running backs coach Tim Hinton said. “He worked hard in the summer, in the weight room, in his conditioning. He worked hard in his summer two-a-days. He studied film, he’s learned his schemes and he understands the blocking in front of him.”

Notre Dame took the ball all the way to the South Florida 1-yard line on its opening drive, and Gray got the call to earn the final three feet and score the first touchdown of his collegiate career.

Moments later, South Florida cornerback Kayvon Webster had returned a Gray fumble 96 yards for a touchdown, and Gray’s dream start was in disarray.

“I was shocked that it happened,” Gray said. “I kept trying to remember in my head what happened. It happened kind of fast, and I was thinking, ‘Did the ref blow the whistle? Was I down by contact?’”

The fumble stood, and Gray found himself facing doubt yet again. But when he re-entered the game later, his own troubles were not foremost on his mind.

“I was a little worried, especially when I got back in and people started booing,” Gray

said. “I was worried about my mom in the stands and how she was doing. I know she was probably going crazy.”

Gray’s loyalty to his mother stems from his upbringing in Pontiac, Mich., and he carries the lessons his mother taught him to this day.

“We’re just a close-knit family. She’s a parent but at the same time she’s like my best friend,” Gray said. “We just always stuck together. That’s why I have that loyalty to my teammates, because she instilled that in me.”

That loyalty to his “football family” paid off for Gray when the Irish rallied around their senior tailback after his season-opening miscue.

“My teammates rallied around me, my coaches rallied around me, so I was okay,” Gray said.

Yet despite rebounding and hitting his midseason stride, Gray said not a day goes by when he does not think about that South Florida contest — but not because of the fumble.

“In a lot of ways — I know people are going to say it’s not true — I feel like [senior quarterback Dayne Crist] getting benched had a lot to do with me,” Gray said. “With him being one of my best friends, it was tough. It still is tough. That’s why I think about that game every day. You think about how fast it can be taken away from you.”

### Belief from the top

After the first game, Irish coach Brian Kelly did not berate Gray, nor did he bench him. Instead, Kelly simply issued a challenge.

“He talked to me about it,

and he just said, ‘How do you want to be remembered? It’s up to you. You’re the only person that can make it better or make it get worse,’” Gray said. “That was it. He said he believed in me.”

Hinton echoed Kelly’s sentiments and shored up Gray’s belief in himself when the senior back needed it most.

“After the game, [coach Hinton] pulled me in his office and he was upset with himself ... He said, ‘I should have played you more after it happened,’” Gray said. “That right there, it was refreshing — he and coach Kelly coming together and making sure that I didn’t get in the tank, and then realizing the talents that I had and the capabilities that I had when I didn’t even believe in myself.”

Hinton and Gray have developed a close relationship that has helped spur Gray to rebound and accept Kelly’s challenge in the best of ways — Gray has reeled off eight touchdown runs in the last five games.

“We are very close. He always talks about how he loves us as people,” Gray said. “It’s just trust between me and him and the rest of the running backs in the room. We’re like an intermediate family inside of a bigger family, and he’s the head of the house.”

“[This success] is just great coaching. That’s what it comes down to.”

From his role calling plays, Kelly has been able to watch the fruits of the relationship between Hinton and Gray turn into success on the field.

“Our job as coaches is to develop our players. It has to be a 50/50 relationship with them. We can only do so much,” Kelly said. “I think coach Hinton has done a great job with him. He’s finishing his runs. He’s playing like a 230-pound back. It’s fun to watch.”

“His focus has been on finishing runs, being physical



GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

**Irish senior running back Jonas Gray scores a touchdown against Navy on Oct. 29. Gray scored three touchdowns in the 56-14 win.**

and being that physical element in our running game. It’s really helped our offense.”

For his part, Gray credits Hinton with his renewed commitment to winning physical battles.

“I love it. It’s exciting. It’s like coach Hinton always says: ‘Break your will with their toughness.’ That’s what it is,” the English and political science major said. “You’re out there running hard, you lower your shoulder and after a while they’re not going to take you head on.”

### Running into the record books

In response to Kelly’s challenge, Gray gave himself one task: building a legacy.

“My one thing I wanted to do was leave a legacy of a guy who dealt with all that adversity, continued to come back, continued to play at a high level and played through things,” he said. “I think I’ve done that, and I think there’s still a lot left to do.”

“I always say it’s been so much of a journey. It’s had its ups and downs, its negatives and positives, but I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Not only has Gray finished his career with its best play, but the presumed power runner has turned heads with his breakaway speed.

“He had to be a physical downhill presence ... and he’s done a great job,” Hinton said. “His explosiveness has been

a little surprise and a happy surprise.”

Gray has been so explosive, in fact, that he is on the verge of breaking a decades-old Notre Dame record. Gray is currently averaging 8.5 yards per carry on the season, surpassing both the modern record of 8.0 yards Reggie Brooks set in 1992 and the all-time school record of 8.1 yards per carry posted in 1920 by the famed George Gipp.

“It is crazy, especially thinking about where I came from, where I started,” Gray said. “To talk about breaking a record with a guy like that is — breaking any type of Notre Dame record from where I started — it’s pretty incredible.”

Though Gray knows his senior campaign may have put some in the NFL on notice, he has just one goal for the end of the season — a goal fittingly inspired by the season’s start.

“For these last four games, I’m trying to do everything I can to help the team win,” Gray said. “If I work hard, I’m going to help this team win and I’m going to help myself in the future.”

“I don’t think there’s a game really where I don’t think about that very first game. I think about going out there and paying attention to detail and helping my team win — going out there and playing my hardest.”

Contact Allan Joseph at [ajoseph2@nd.edu](mailto:ajoseph2@nd.edu)



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

**Irish senior running back Jonas Gray waits for the snap against Pittsburgh on Sept. 24. Gray scored a 79-yard touchdown in the 15-12 win, the longest rush for a Notre Dame running back in 11 years.**



IRISH PASSING

Wake Forest ranks 89th in the country in pass defense, allowing 244 passing yards per game to their opponents and allowing three 300-yard efforts this season. On the other side of the ball, sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees leads an Irish offense that has been inconsistent at times but ranks 32nd in the nation, averaging 267 yards through the air each game.

Rees has a plethora of targets to look to, from his receivers, including always-productive senior Michael Floyd, quick junior Theo Riddick and reliable junior tight end Tyler Eifert to his running backs, especially junior Cierre Wood, who can be dangerous in space.

Freshman cornerback Merrill Noel leads the Demon Deacon pass defense. Noel has 15 pass breakups and one interception this season, the most pass defenses in the country. Wake Forest will try to match Noel with Floyd all game long, but expect Irish coach Brian Kelly to move Floyd around. Rees will still be able to find lots of room against the rest of the secondary.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING

The Irish made an emphatic return to the ground game last week after struggling against USC two weeks ago. Notre Dame scored seven of its eight touchdowns on the ground, with senior running back Jonas Gray leading the way with three scores. Gray and junior running back Cierre Wood have been slashing through opposing defenses fairly regularly this year, and they will look to establish a tempo early on the road against an upset-minded Wake Forest squad.

The Demon Deacons have given up 134 yards per game on the ground, though they were able to limit Virginia Tech to just 59 rushing yards. Senior safety Cyhl Quarles is one of the Demon Deacons' top tacklers, which suggests running backs are consistently reaching the secondary.

If the Irish can establish a ground game early to force the tempo of the game, they will open up the passing game — and when the Irish are passing well, the draw play Wood runs so well is its most effective.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Wake Forest coach Jim Grobe and his staff have engineered a number of masterful defensive performances, most notably a five-takeaway performance against Florida State. Irish coach Brian Kelly and offensive coordinator Charley Molnar will have their tactics put to the test this weekend.

EDGE: EVEN

Head-to-head

Notre Dame Offense

WR	7	TJ Jones	So.
	16	DaVaris Daniels	Fr.
WR	6	Theo Riddick	Jr.
	9	Robby Toma	Jr.
LT	70	Zack Martin	Jr.
	72	Nick Martin	Fr.
LG	66	Chris Watt	Jr.
	76	Andrew Nuss	Sr.
C	52	Braxston Cave	Sr.
	57	Mike Golic Jr.	Sr.
RG	78	Trevor Robinson	Sr.
	65	Conor Hanratty	Fr.
RT	75	Taylor Dever	Sr.
	74	Christian Lombard	So.
TE	80	Tyler Eifert	Jr.
	18	Ben Koyack	Fr.
WR	3	Michael Floyd	Sr.
	81	John Goodman	Sr.

Notre Dame Defense

CB	12	Robert Blanton	Sr.
	23	Lo Wood	So.
OLB	45	Darius Fleming	Sr.
	46	Steve Filer	Sr.
DE	90	Ethan Johnson	Sr.
	19	Aaron Lynch	Fr.
NG	9	Louis Nix	So.
	98	Sean Cwynar	Sr.
DE	7	Stephon Tuitt	Fr.
	50	Chase Hounshell	Fr.
OLB	55	Prince Shembo	So.
	56	Troy Niklas	Fr.
CB	4	Gary Gray	Sr.
	2	Bennett Jackson	So.

IRISH SCHEDULE

Sept. 3	South Florida
	(L, 23-20)
Sept. 10	@ Michigan
	(L, 35-31)
Sept. 17	Michigan St.
	(W, 31-13)
Sept. 24	@ Pittsburgh
	(W, 15-12)
Oct. 1	@ Purdue
	(W, 38-10)
Oct. 8	Air Force
	(W, 59-33)
Oct. 22	USC
	(L, 31-17)
Oct. 29	Navy
	(W, 56-14)
Nov. 5	@ Wake Forest
Nov. 12	Maryland
Nov. 19	Boston College
Nov. 26	@ Stanford

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

After a rough start to the season, the Irish special-teams units have begun to get it in gear. The punt-block and punt-return unit still struggles, but at least it isn't turning the ball over anymore. Freshman returner George Atkinson has made opposing teams pay, using timely blocking to earn good field position when he's not scoring touchdowns.

Wake Forest has been able to block two punts this season, but the real test of its special teams will be whether they can contain Atkinson. The Demon Deacons currently allow an average of 20 yards per return.

EDGE: EVEN

Notre Dame Specialists

PK	97	David Ruffer	Sr.	S	22	Harrison Smith	Sr.
					15	Dan McCarthy	Sr.
P	35	Ben Turk	Jr.	ILB	48	Dan Fox	Jr.
					44	Carlo Calabrese	Jr.
LS	50	Ryan Kavanagh	Sr.	ILB	5	Manti Te'o	Jr.
	60	Jordan Cowart	Jr.		54	Anthony McDonald	Sr.
PR	81	John Goodman	Sr.	S	26	Jamoris Slaughter	Sr.
	3	Michael Floyd	Sr.		17	Zeke Motta	Jr.
KR	34	George Atkinson	Fr.				
	28	Austin Collinsworth	So.				
KO	27	Kyle Brindza	Fr.				

Predictions

Allan Joseph

Sports Editor



ACC country, you say? Well, at least for this weekend, I'm going to focus on the game at hand. While speculation may run rampant about conference realignment and Notre Dame's role in it, there's very little speculation about which team is the better one this weekend.

Notre Dame is far more talented than the upstart Demon Deacons.

While Wake Forest was able to take down an athletic Florida State squad, there's no way it has the defense to even slow down Michael Floyd, Cierre Wood, Jonas Gray and company. The only worry is that the Irish secondary may struggle to contain quarterback Tanner Price, who has the capability to make Notre Dame pay if it misses a coverage. But I don't have much doubt about this one. I wish I could say the same about conference realignment.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 42, Wake Forest 28

Douglas Farmer

Editor-in-Chief



Allow me to forgo my weekly Pandora rift and instead channel my inner Golden Tate, circa last year's matchup against Western Michigan.

Wake Forest? They don't even belong on the same field as us.

Harsh, but true. Even I, the ever-pessimist, believe this. Yes, Notre Dame tends to play down to its opponent. Yes, the Demon Deacons topped Florida State. So yes, perhaps there is reason to worry.

But the drama of the last two weeks has created a focused Irish team, offense and defense. Look for a Purdue-esque blowout down in Winston-Salem. Look for a fast start by Rees and Floyd, and look for Notre Dame to never again play in such a small stadium as BB&T Stadium, holding only 31,000-plus.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 38, Wake Forest 10

Eric Prister

Senior Sports Writer



It's amazing how much can change in a week. After the USC game, the Irish were in strife. Their defense had been dismantled, their quarterback sidelined, and their coach started pointing fingers.

A week later, Notre Dame was back to beating teams it's supposed to beat and doing it in decisive fashion.

Wake Forest is another one of those teams that Notre Dame is supposed to beat. Its defense is mediocre, its running game is suspect and its home field advantage is nearly non-existent in the smallest stadium among BCS conference teams.

The familiar names will be there — Floyd, Eifert, Te'o. Wake Forest simply does not have the athletes to keep up. The Irish will win another game they are supposed to win.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 42, Wake Forest 31



# o-Head

## Wake Forest Defense

CB	7	Merrill Noel	R-Fr.
	14	Jason Green	R-So.
OLB	40	Joey Ehrmann	R-Jr.
	49	Derricus Ellis	R-Jr.
DE	55	Tristan Dorty	R-Sr.
	54	Kris Redding	R-So.
NG	50	Nikita Whitlock	R-So.
	93	Frank Souza	R-So.
DE	40	Joey Ehrmann	R-Jr.
	57	Gelo Orange	R-Sr.
OLB	40	Kyle Wilber	R-Sr.
	35	Zachary Allen	R-So.

FS	4	Josh Bush	R-Sr.
	23	Daniel Mack	R-So.

ILB	32	Scott Betros	R-Jr.
	41	Mike Olson	R-So.

ILB	45	Riley Haynes	R-Jr.
	39	Justin Jackson	R-So.

SS	5	Cyhl Quarles	R-Sr.
	34	Duran Lowe	R-So.

CB	6	Kenny Okoro	R-Jr.
	17	A.J. Marshall	So.

## Wake Forest Offense

WR	2	Chris Givens	R-Jr.
	81	Terence Davis	R-Jr.
TE	83	Cameron Ford	R-Sr.
	80	Andrew Parker	Sr.
RT	62	Doug Weaver	R-Sr.
	76	Daniel Blitch	R-Fr.
RG	75	Michael Hoag	R-Sr.
	68	Colin Summers	R-Fr.
C	66	Chance Raines	Sr.
	74	Garrick Williams	R-Jr.
LG	78	Joe Looney	Sr.
	59	Antonio Ford	R-Fr.
LT	69	Dennis Godfrey	R-Sr.
	73	Steven Chase	R-So.

WR	2	Danny Dembry	R-Sr.
	3	Michael Campanaro	R-So.

### WAKE FOREST OFFENSIVE COACHING

Notre Dame defensive coordinator Bob Diaco has his defense playing physical and smart, but Wake Forest coach Jim Grobe has developed quarterback Tanner Price quickly. After last week's performance against Navy, though, it's hard to doubt Diaco.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

### WAKE FOREST RUSHING

The Demon Deacons' offensive focus is on the passing game, as Wake Forest averages just 104 rushing yards per game, good for merely 106th in the nation. Sophomore running back back Josh Harris and senior running back Brandon Pendergrass spearhead the Demon Deacon ground attack. Harris averages 70 yards per game on 4.5 yards per carry, but he has just two touchdowns on the season. Sophomore quarterback Tanner Price generally stays in the pocket rather than scrambling for yards.

The Notre Dame defense turned a lot of heads last week when it shut down the Navy triple option missing both senior defensive ends. While Kapron Lewis-Moore is out for the season, Ethan Johnson continues to work back towards health — but the Irish are holding up just fine without him. Both the linebackers and young defensive linemen are shedding blocks and filling gaps with tenacity. Running backs are finding little running room against the Notre Dame front seven, and that will not change this weekend.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

### WAKE FOREST PASSING

Sophomore quarterback Tanner Price has had a breakout season for the Demon Deacons, slinging 14 touchdowns and just six interceptions at a healthy clip of 246 yards per game. Price is coming off two subpar performances but has a deep and talented receiving corps to look to.

Senior receiver Chris Givens has had the best eight-game season-opening stretch in Wake Forest history and is on pace to blow by the school record for receiving yards. Senior Danny Dembry, junior Terrence Davis and sophomore Michael Campanaro have also had career-best seasons in a prolific Wake Forest aerial attack.

While senior cornerback Robert Blanton has played well all season long, the rest of the secondary has struggled at times against high-powered passing attacks. Senior cornerback Gary Gray has been inconsistent, but the true key to this matchup is the Notre Dame nickel package, which will see a lot of field time this weekend to try and slow down the passing game.

EDGE: WAKE FOREST

### WAKE FOREST SCHEDULE

- Sept. 1 @ Syracuse (L, 36-29, OT)
- Sept. 10 North Carolina State (W, 34-27)
- Sept. 17 Gardner-Webb (W, 48-5)
- Oct. 1 @ Boston College (W, 27-19)
- Oct. 8 Florida State (W, 35-30)
- Oct. 15 Virginia Tech (L, 38-17)
- Oct. 22 @ Duke (W, 24-23)
- Oct. 29 @ North Carolina (L, 29-24)
- Nov. 5 Notre Dame
- Nov. 12 @ Clemson
- Nov. 19 Maryland
- Nov. 26 Vanderbilt

### WAKE FOREST SPECIAL TEAMS

The Demon Deacons average 19.7 yards per kick return and 5.4 yards per punt return, putting them near the bottom of the nation in return yards. Notre Dame's coverage units have not been spectacular, but they have been playing solidly with good kickoffs from Kyle Brindza and punts from Ben Turk.

Wake Forest junior kicker Jimmy Newman has hit 14 of his 15 field goal attempts on the season and has hit 13 consecutive kicks. However, Newman's long is just 40 yards, so his accuracy beyond that is hard to gauge.

EDGE: EVEN

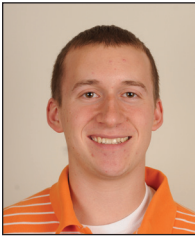
## Wake Forest Specialists

FB	42	Tommy Bohanon	Jr.
	44	Ben Emert	R-Fr.
QB	10	Tanner Price	So.
	13	Ted Stachitas	R-Jr.
RB	22	Brandon Pendergrass	R-Sr.
	25	Josh Harris	R-So.

PK	82	Jimmy Newman	Jr.
P	24	Alex Wulfreck	R-So.
LS	52	Logan Feimster	R-Fr.
PR	20	Lovell Jackson	R-Jr.
KR	20	Lovell Jackson	R-Jr.
KO	82	Jimmy Newman	Jr.

### Andrew Owens

Associate Sports Editor



With a stadium that holds only 31,500 fans and a national audience even smaller than that because it goes up against the LSU-Alabama showdown, this game will demand little national attention.

A 5-3 Notre Dame team almost certainly locked into a Champs Sports Bowl bid goes up against a 5-3 Wake Forest squad that is still

holding onto ACC Championship hopes in a very mediocre conference. Not that exciting.

But that's fine. After a tense weeklong stretch that started with a disappointing loss to USC, continued with "Twitttergate" and culminated with a 56-14 blowout of Navy, Brian Kelly and the players must be enjoying the calmness of the past week. It will show Saturday night as the Irish continue Kelly's November unbeaten streak.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 38, Wake Forest 13

### Chris Masoud

Assistant Managing Editor



Taking the road for the first time in a month, the Irish will play in front of the smallest crowd of the season when they take on a Wake Forest team still fighting for the ACC title. BB&T Field, home of the Demon Deacons, seats 31,500. The Big House seated 114,804 — an NCAA attendance record — for Notre Dame's matchup under the lights.

Seating capacity is my biggest concern going into Saturday night's contest. It's really a shame so few will be on hand to see Notre Dame's first complete performance of the season. I'm calling it right now — no turnovers and at least 400 yards of offense against a porous Wake defense. Look for a secondary led by North Carolina native Robert Blanton to force a turnover and at least one coverage sack.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 42, Wake Forest 6

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# Price makes strides for Wake



Wake Forest sophomore quarterback Tanner Price hands the ball off to redshirt senior running back Brandon Pendergrass earlier this season. Price has thrown for 1,967 yards and 14 touchdowns in 2011.

By ANDREW OWENS  
Associate Sports Editor

Just as Tommy Rees went from high school quarterback to starting college signal caller in less than a year, Tanner Price was thrown to the wolves in his rookie 2010 campaign, and continues to progress at the position for the Demon Deacons. Wake Forest's sophomore quarterback has improved upon last year's totals of seven touchdowns and eight interceptions, as he has recorded 14 touchdowns to just six interceptions in 2011.

Demon Deacons coach Jim Grobe said one of the key components to Price's success this year is the improved play of his teammates.

"He's got a little better help, I think," Grobe said. "Last year I tried to tell everybody I thought Tanner was potentially going to be a good quarterback for us, but we need to give him more help. I think he's getting a little more support out of the guys around him than he did last year, but also he's just making better decisions. He's taking better care of the football."

Grobe said the maturation of Price has helped Wake Forest improve from its 3-9 record last year to a 5-3 start this season. The Demon Deacons control their own destiny for an ACC Championship with two conference games remaining, despite a 49-24 shellacking at the hands of

North Carolina on Saturday. "Last year, I think there were some situations where he tried to force throws, and he's trying not to do that [this year]," Grobe said. "So far he's taking care of the ball pretty good. He just has a better understanding of our offense right now. I think he has a pretty good feel for what we're trying to do offensively, and what we're asking him to do."

"It's just about what you would expect out of a kid that's got a year of experience under his belt."

Irish coach Brian Kelly said he noticed some similarities between his signal caller and Price midway through their sophomore campaigns.

"I think ... they're both learning," Kelly said after quipping that Price is a lefty and taller than Rees. "They're both experiencing. They're both young in the process, but they're both the starting quarterbacks. Both teams are having some success. We want more; they want more."

"But I think that's the nature of a quarterback that's gaining experience. So I think there are some similarities there."

Price credits his teammates and coaching staff

with accelerating his development and helping him to succeed this season.

"I feel pretty confident right now," Price said. "A lot of that confidence comes from my teammates. The offensive line is doing an unbelievable job for me and the receivers are making great catches. It's a team effort and I think as a team we're feeling very confident right now."

The coaching staff has done a wonderful job ... preparing us for each week. They come up with a great game plan and scheme. They've also done a good job of keeping us motivated and focused."

Price's favorite target has been redshirt junior receiver Chris Givens, as the two have found a groove and connected 52 times for 928 yards and eight touchdowns in eight games. Givens said he does not expect the blow-out loss the Tar Heels to affect the young quarterback's mindset as the team prepares for one of the biggest home games in school history against Notre Dame.

"We're really just putting Saturday behind us," Givens said. "We had a lot of mistakes on Saturday and we fixed them [Tuesday] in practice. We're going to continue to build him up by playing hard, running routes hard and doing the best things that we can for him."

*"I feel pretty confident right now. A lot of that confidence comes from my teammates. The offensive line is doing an unbelievable job for me and the receivers are making great catches."*

**Tanner Price**  
sophomore quarterback

*"Last year, I think there were some situations where he tried to force throws, and he's not trying to do that [this year]. So he's taking care of the ball pretty good."*

**Jim Grobe**  
Demon Deacons coach

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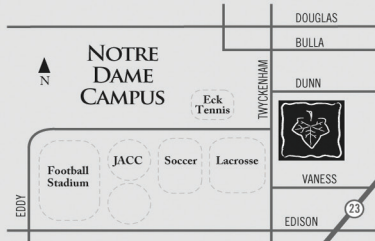
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# Irish special teams play improves after rough start



Senior safety Chris Salvi reacts after a special teams play in a 56-14 Irish victory against Navy on Oct. 29. The walk-on has recorded six tackles in eight games and was named gameday captain by Irish coach Brian Kelly against the Midshipmen. He made two tackles against Navy.

By CHRIS MASOUD  
Assistant Managing Editor

The last time Notre Dame took to the road, a 38-10 victory at Purdue, the Irish lost three yards on two punt returns, the front line allowed a field goal to be blocked and senior kicker David Ruffer shanked a field goal attempt. Two wins, a loss and a bye week later, the special teams unit has shored up its former flaws and looks to provide much-needed consistency across the board.

"I think that the improvement has come from better execution from the specialists and better execution from the guys blocking — guys playing harder, more consistent," special teams coordinator Mike Elston said. "Our specialists are playing a lot better, from snapper to punter to kicker to returner. I think they've settled down a little bit and built some confidence, and it has allowed the cover teams to do their jobs."

Ruffer has settled into a groove after converting his last three attempts, as he looks to return to his 2010 from when he tallied 23 straight field goals. Junior punter Ben Turk has slowly improved his average to 38.2 yards per attempt, and Elston attributes his recent success to improved snapping.

"David has proven that he can do it, but Ben has yet to prove that he can consistently do it in the game. It's just about building confidence and getting out there," Elston said.

Although freshman kicker Kyle Brindza has shown flashes of brilliance, Elston said he still needs to develop the reliability to deliver a kickoff to the opponent's goal line.

"[Brindza] just needs to relax and stop trying to over kick the ball. I don't care if it's a touchback. It doesn't need to go in the end zone, but it needs to get down to the goal line at the angle at which

we say to put it."

But perhaps the most striking difference on special teams has been the emergence of freshman running back George Atkinson on the kickoff return team. After returning touchdowns against Michigan State and USC, the freshman ranks third for the Irish with 672 all-purpose yards and has emerged as a threat on every kick.

Outside of kicking specialists, recruiting coordinator Chuck Martin said special teams roles are filled by skill players rather than traditional recruiting methods.

"You really don't spend a ton of time saying, 'Hey, we're going to take this kid because he'd be great at special teams.' You hope you recruit enough skill guys and defensive guys that they'll just do it," recruiting coordinator Chuck Martin said. "As much as coach Elston would love to say, 'Hey, let's take three or four gunners,' usually you just get your [defensive backs] and your wide outs, and they do a good enough job."

Elston, who also serves as the lead recruiter of North Carolina, said the Tar Heel state has been a great source of talent for Notre Dame in the past, including senior cornerback Robert Blanton.

"We've had success in the Charlotte area and the Raleigh area," he said. "The location is nice because with those big cities, there're flights into South Bend. There's a draw because Notre Dame is visible."

A transfer from Butler, senior safety Chris Salvi is not a product of recruiting meth-

ods of any kind, but the walk-on has filled a number of key roles for the Irish on special teams. After shuffling in and out of the lineup earlier in the season, Salvi has emerged as a mainstay on special teams and was named a gameday captain prior to Notre Dame's victory over Navy last Saturday.

"It meant a lot to me because this program is important to me," Salvi said. "One of the best parts of when they announced it [was] the support from all the other players. Being able to see how much we care about one another and how much we support one another — it's awesome."

Martin attributes Salvi's success to his toughness and willingness to "run through a wall" if asked.

"He gets the most out of what God gave him," Martin said. "He's not the most-gifted kid as far as physical tools, but he's probably as mentally tough and physically tough as any kid we have in our program. He just kind of bided his time, and coach Elston had a lot of confidence in him."

Although the Irish have yet to prove they can carry their recent consistency on special teams on the road, Elston said the message and execution in practice has been the same.

"There's no difference for us when we go on the road," he said. "We just have to continue to grow and continue to improve. We can't take a step back this week."

Contact Chris Masoud at [cmasoud@nd.edu](mailto:cmasoud@nd.edu)

*"It meant a lot to me because this program is important to me. One of the best parts of when they announced it [was] the support from all the other players"*

Chris Salvi  
senior safety



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