

# IRISH INSIDER

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## Senior Day slugfest

*Notre Dame grinds out 16-14 victory over Boston College to earn eighth win of 2011*

By CORY BERNARD  
Sports Writer

On an emotional night for its seniors, Notre Dame gutted out a close 16-14 victory over determined underdog Boston College, utilizing staunch defense and three field goals from fifth-year kicker David Ruffer.

Irish coach Brian Kelly said he was pleased to see his team emerge victorious in a hard-fought game.

"It's a pretty happy locker room, a great win for us," he said. "The kids persevered and played hard for four quarters. We asked them to play hard for four quarters and they did that tonight — just a satisfying win as a football coach to see your team battle. We've overcome a lot of things, and it's just a really nice victory for our football team today."

Junior running back Cierre Wood led the Irish rushing attack with 98 yards on 26 carries, as Notre Dame (8-3) outrushed the Eagles with 161 rushing yards to Boston College's 80. The Irish outgained the Eagles by a total count of 417 yards to 250.

Wood's total pushes his rushing mark to 1,001 yards on the season, Notre Dame's first 1000-yard rusher since Darius Walker in 2006. Senior receiver Michael Floyd snared 10 catches for 92 yards to pace the aerial assault and went over 1,000 yards receiving for the second straight season.

The Irish did not leave the contest unscathed, however. Senior running back Jonas Gray appeared to seriously injure his knee in the third quarter. Kelly confirmed Sunday the injury will likely end Gray's Notre Dame career.

"It's pretty apparent he's got a significant knee injury," Kelly said.

After the game, Kelly said the senior addressed his emotional teammates.

"He talked to the team after," Kelly said of Gray. "He's a great young man, you know, it's just — it's emotional when you don't know if you're going to be able to play your last game or not. It's still uncertain until he gets more medical information. There are a lot of emotions in that locker room."

Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees echoed Kelly's sentiment.



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

**Notre Dame defenders tackle Boston College quarterback Josh Bordner during Notre Dame's 16-14 win over Boston College on Saturday. The Irish limited the Eagles to just 250 yards of total offense.**

"[Jonas Gray] and I have been close a long time, and I just thanked him for everything he's helped me with," Rees said. "To be honest, I probably wouldn't be in a position I am in if it wasn't for him, so he helped me out a lot. I feel bad for a guy when he gets banged up like that, so my best toward him."

Gray scored Notre Dame's lone touchdown of the day with a 26-yard scamper that capped an eight-play, 80-yard drive to open the game. Kelly attributed his offense's struggles after the opening drive to a number of factors, adding that the close score didn't surprise him.

"Give credit to Boston College, now, they played well today," Kelly said. "Coming in 3-7, this was their ballgame and they played hard, and Coach Spaziani had his kids playing hard, but the field position was difficult to manage, and the weather. The weather conditions were hard and blustery, so we had to manage. We knew what kind of game this was going to end up being, and it certainly turned out that way."

After jumping to a 10-0 lead after their first two drives, the Irish offense stalled, resulting in three straight punts. With three minutes remaining in the half, Boston College finally scratched its way onto the scoreboard. Redshirt freshman quarterback Josh Bordner ran into the end zone from two yards out to cap a nine-play, 80-yard drive.

With the Eagles within three points, Notre Dame marched into Boston College territory on its last drive of the half. However, Rees tossed a pair of incompletions and Ruffer entered for his second field goal of the game, making the halftime score 13-7.

Kelly praised Ruffer's ability to overcome an early-season slump and once again play well. "His perseverance, sticking with it," Kelly said. "[Freshman kicker] Kyle [Brindza] is going through that same mental wall, if you will, of breaking through. David stuck with it, broke through it, and he's been obviously great the last month."

In the second half, Notre Dame's offense again struggled, leading to three punts and a turnover in the third quarter. The turnover, an interception by Boston College junior defensive end Max Holloway, put the Eagles in Irish territory with 5:25 left in the third quarter. However, Notre Dame's defense forced a three-and-out, one of six such drives for Boston College on the day.

Kelly said his team dealt with adversity throughout the week, having to practice without several key players. He said despite the setbacks, the defense played well.

"The defense played very, very stout today and found a way to win," Kelly said. "We had Harrison Smith in the infirmary last night, getting [intravenous fluids.] We had Zack Martin out. Stephon Tuitt couldn't play because of illness. R.J. Blanton didn't practice for two days because of illness, and I didn't give you all the injuries ... My point is this: those kids stepped up in November and with a lot of guys out, found a way to win."

Though they allowed a 72-yard touchdown drive in the fourth quarter to cut their lead to 16-14, the Irish easily covered the ensuing onside kick attempt with 1:57 remaining to all but eliminate the Eagles' chances.

Though still a sophomore, Rees said he can appreciate a senior-day victory. "It means everything," he said. "It's great. You can't give a senior anything better than a win. I'll be in that position one day, and I would want to go out on a win, and two years in a row now where we put together a win for them — you see the guys get emotional. It really shows how special Notre Dame is and how much it means to all of our guys."

Floyd said the significance of competing in his final home game had not yet registered. "It feels great," he said. "I don't think the emotions will hit until you leave this place. I don't really feel that emotional right now, but I guarantee once you leave this university it's all going to hit you."

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### player of the game

**Jamoris Slaughter**  
Notre Dame linebacker

*Slaughter, who often plays safety, lined up as a linebacker Saturday and spent all day harassing the Boston College offense.*

### stat of the game

**250 yards of offense**

*Notre Dame's defense held the Eagles to just 250 total yards of offense, helping the Irish escape with a victory despite a low score.*

### play of the game

**Receiver Robby Toma's onside kick recovery in the fourth quarter**

*The Eagles had a shot to come back until Toma snuffed it out by recovering the Boston College onside kick with 1:57 remaining.*

### quote of the game

*"You can't give a senior anything better than a win."*

**Tommy Rees**  
Irish sophomore quarterback



# report card

- C

quarterbacks:

Tommy Rees played worse than his stat line indicates, as his receivers bailed him out often. Rees' decisionmaking is still suspect, as shown on his third-quarter interception.
- B+

running backs:

Cierre Wood was especially effective in helping the Irish control the clock and prevent an Eagle comeback. Notre Dame will sorely miss Jonas Gray in the backfield.
- B-

receivers:

Robby Toma played well again, but the receivers struggled to get open for Rees. Even worse, effort was sometimes lacking, as rarely did receivers extend their routes.
- B+

offensive line:

Wood and Gray had room to run, but the Irish did occasionally have problems protecting Rees. Still, this unit has been a pleasant surprise during the 2011 season.
- B

defensive line:

Stephon Tuitt's absence hurt the Irish, who struggled to pressure Boston College. To be fair, Aaron Lynch's blocker held him on nearly every play and was never called for it.
- A-

linebackers:

Manti Te'o had a stellar 12-tackle performance, and Jamoris Slaughter played exceptionally well at linebacker. Notre Dame did struggle to cover outlet passes, however.
- B

defensive backs:

It was a fairly mediocre effort for the secondary. While the Eagles didn't complete a lot of passes, their second touchdown drive was all too easy at that point in the game.
- B

special teams:

David Ruffer and Ben Turk played really well, and this grade isn't fair to them. But the punt-return unit is simply terrible, and this grade is way too nice to them.
- B

coaching:

It wasn't pretty, and the offensive playcalling was highly suspect, but give Kelly and his staff credit for winning a game that would have been a loss just two years ago.

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overall:

It was close when it really shouldn't have been, but the defense stepped up all game long. The Irish are learning how to win, and that's important.

# adding up the numbers

- Brian Kelly has now won 14 straight games in November, dating back to his time at Cincinnati.

14
- 2

Of the 24 teams that lost their first two games of 2011, only two (Notre Dame and Georgia) have winning records.
- The Irish have not allowed a third-quarter point in each of their last four contests.

4
- 7

Notre Dame started seven drives inside its own 20-yard line, five of which started inside the 10-yard line.
- Senior running back Jonas Gray scored a touchdown for the eighth straight game.

8
- 10

At one point in the second half, the Irish forced Boston College into 10 consecutive incomplete passes.



Freshman linebacker Troy Niklas attempts to get past Boston College tackle John Wetzel. Niklas finished the day with four assisted tackles including one for a loss of three yards.

# Stanford is this season's measuring stick

After surviving a light three-game stretch of ACC opponents in November, it all comes down to Saturday for Notre Dame.

When the lights go out in Palo Alto, Calif., the regular season will be over and we will know if the Irish were able to salvage the 2011 season.

The game is virtually meaningless for Notre Dame in terms of bowl slotting — win or lose, the Champs Sports Bowl is the likely destination. But it means so much more than that when you look at the big picture.

If the Irish fall to No. 4 Stanford, no one will be surprised, but it will be a disappointing finish for a team unable to shake the thunderclouds that hovered above Notre Dame Stadium in the loss against South Florida.

Currently standing at 8-3, it simply has been a disappointing season for Notre Dame. Irish coach Brian Kelly made it quite clear during fall practice that a Bowl Championship Series berth would be the indicator of a whether or not 2011 was successful.



Andrew Owens  
Associate Sports Editor

With the exception of the 31-13 victory over Michigan State on Sept. 17, Notre Dame's 11 games can be placed in three categories. The blowout wins in which the Irish did exactly what was expected of them (Purdue, Air Force, Navy and Maryland), games they gutted out a win against an inferior opponent (Pittsburgh, Wake Forest and Boston College) and flat-out disappointments (South Florida, Michigan and USC).

"We've overcome a lot of things, and just a really nice victory for our football team today," Kelly said after Notre Dame's 16-14 win over Boston College, the eighth win in nine games and the 12th in 15 games for the Irish.

But really, Notre Dame has not needed to overcome many "things" — rather, it has needed to overcome itself, with 10 turnovers in the first two games, the second of which was a colossal fourth-quarter collapse at Michigan, and a mind-bogglingly flat performance against USC.

The combined record of teams Notre Dame has beaten is 39-47. Take out Michigan State, and it's 30-45. It's hard to find any adversity that has not been self-induced.

But, as unpredictable as the 2011 Irish have been, the historical narrative of this season can still have a positive spin on it with a win at Stanford.

Thanks to the losses of Oklahoma State, Oregon and Oklahoma, the Cardinal once again have a path to the national championship game. If they beat the Irish on Saturday, the SEC West logjam could take care of itself and Stanford would make the championship game, which gives Notre Dame an incredible opportunity this weekend.

Beat Stanford, finish the regular season 9-3 with wins over two top-10 teams (Michigan State and Stanford), and suddenly it's a potential 10-win season. Not bad at all, especially when you consider it is only year two of a completely new system. Kelly proved last season how critical end-of-year momentum is when it comes to recruiting. (Without a 4-0 finish, Aaron Lynch, Stephon Tuitt and Ishaq Williams might be at Florida State, Georgia Tech and Penn State, respectively.) The outlook would also be very bright heading into a 2012 season that features the most daunting schedule in recent memory.

The end of the 2011 volume of Notre Dame football is quickly approaching, but the final chapter has yet to play out.

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

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# Poor field position doesn't cost Irish



JAMES DOAN/The Observer

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By MATTHEW DEFRAKNS  
Sports Writer

When Boston College senior punter Ryan Quigley pinned Notre Dame at its own five-yard line in the first quarter, it was an exceptional kick. When Quigley made the Irish start at their own three-yard line on his next punt, it was a trend. After Notre Dame started its fifth drive inside its own 10-yard line, it had become standard.

“The field position was difficult to manage, and the weather. The weather conditions were hard and blustery, so we had to manage,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We knew what kind of game this was going to end up being, and it certainly turned out that way.”

Notre Dame, however, overcame the bad field position with strong defense in its 16-14 win over Boston College on Saturday.

In Notre Dame’s first 13 drives, not counting the last drive after Boston College’s onside kick, its average starting field position was at the 19-yard line. The three final Irish drives each set new game-high marks for starting field position — first at the 35-yard line, next at the 39-yard line and then, after the onside kick, at the Eagle 48-yard line.

“It was a battle all day,” senior linebacker Darius Fleming said. “Those are the games you like to play in. You like to play when you have to stay on your toes. You can’t go out there and slack off at all because it can cost you the game.”

Conversely, the Eagles started just two drives inside their own 20-yard line. On average, Boston College (3-8, 2-5 ACC) started at its 30-yard line.

“Those are situations we practice for every day,” Fleming said of the field position. “Those are things the defense is aware of and we’re prepared for those kinds of situations.”

The defense responded in a big way, holding the Eagles to 250 total yards of offense, with just 80 yards coming on the ground.

“Everybody was getting to the ball,” junior linebacker Manti Te’o said. “Everybody was trying to make a big play. Everybody was doing their assignment. That’s what makes good defense. Everybody is one-eleventh of the defense.”

Notre Dame (8-3) held Boston College sophomore quarterback Chase Rettig without a completion for 10 straight attempts during the second half.

“We missed a couple, they put some pressure on us and the combination of those, we got ourselves off rhythm,” Eagles coach Frank Spaziani said.

The Irish allowed two touch-down drives longer than 70 yards, but also forced the Eagles into six three-and-out series.

“We did a good job playing assignment football, stopping the run, keeping big plays off the stat sheet,” graduate student safety Harrison Smith said. “There were definitely plays we wanted back, especially on those two drives.

Overall, we did a good job.” Despite forcing nine Boston College punts, Notre Dame was unable to muster any punt return yards, registering six fair catches on the day.

Although the Irish racked up an impressive 417 total yards, they did not have a drive longer than 55 yards after opening the game with an 80-yard scoring drive.

“You can’t get frustrated, because we didn’t get ourselves out of that position,” sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees said. “If we would have moved the ball down the field then, you don’t leave it where they are punting and have a chance to put you inside the ten. Obviously it’s not the most ideal situation, but we could have done some things to help ourselves out.”

Notre Dame punted eight times on the day, including five in their seven second-half possessions.

Junior punter Ben Turk averaged 44 yards per punt, including a long of 55 yards.

“I think he did really well,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said of Turk. “As you know, the kind of game it was, I think he had eight punts, they had nine. College football has all these things, and it’s not always about up and down the field. Sometimes you got to block and tackle and grind it out and find a way to win. I just like the way our guys now understand how to win games.”

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# RB Wood earns 1,000-yard season

By MATTHEW DEFRAKNS  
Sports Writer

Irish junior running back Cierre Wood eclipsed the 1,000-yard mark for rushing with a two-yard plunge late in the fourth quarter Saturday. Wood became Notre Dame’s 16th back to achieve the feat and the first since Darius Walker in 2006.

Wood and senior running back Jonas Gray were trying to become the first duo in Notre Dame history to each rush for 1,000 yards. Gray left the game with a serious knee injury 209 yards short of the mark.

“We won’t have the MRI results, but it’s pretty apparent that he has a significant knee injury,” Irish coach

Brian Kelly said Sunday. “The MRI would probably confirm what we know as to be, as I mentioned, a significant knee injury.”

### Ruffer on hot streak

After starting the season 2-for-6, Irish graduate student kicker David Ruffer has hit on eight straight kicks. Ruffer nailed three attempts Saturday, including the eventual game-winning 27-yarder with 8:08 left in the fourth quarter. Ruffer also had to deal with a 20 mile per hour wind.

“We made it a game plan to aim down the middle and smoke it,” Ruffer said. “You start playing games with the wind and you’re usually going to lose.”

### Kuechly sets record

Boston College junior linebacker Luke Kuechly entered Saturday’s game needing just seven tackles to claim the ACC’s all-time tackles record.

Kuechly earned the mark when he tackled senior receiver Michael Floyd early in the second quarter.

“I think he’s the best football player in the country,” Eagles coach Frank Spaziani said. “Week in, week out, play in, play out, he shows up. I know he’s up for a lot of awards, and I think he’s deserving of all of them. I think he should get them.”

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# scoring summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
ND	10	3	0	3	16
BC	0	7	0	7	14

### First quarter

Notre Dame 7, Boston College 0  
Jonas Gray 26-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 12:38 remaining  
Drive: 8 plays, 80 yards, 2:22 elapsed

Notre Dame 10, Boston College 0  
David Ruffer 40-yd field goal with 8:15 remaining  
Drive: 9 plays, 46 yards, 2:51 elapsed

### Second quarter

Notre Dame 10, Boston College 7  
Josh Bordner 2-yard run (Nate Freese kick) with 3:04 remaining  
Drive: 9 plays, 80 yards, 4:08 elapsed

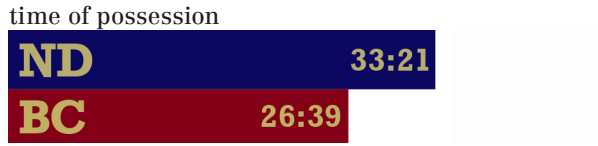
Notre Dame 13, Boston College 7  
David Ruffer 41-yd field goal with 1:19 remaining  
Drive: 7 plays, 46 yards, 1:45 remaining

### Fourth quarter

Notre Dame 16, Boston College 7  
David Ruffer 27-yd field goal with 8:08 remaining  
Drive: 9 plays, 55 yards, 3:50 remaining

Notre Dame 16, Boston College 14  
Bobby Swigert 7-yd pass from Chase Rettig (Nate Freese kick) with 1:57 remaining  
Drive: 7 plays, 72 yards, 1:43 remaining

# statistics



passing				
Rees	24-39-256	Rettig	18-38-170	
rushing				
Wood	26-94	Kimble	10-42	
Gray	11-62	Finch	6-33	
receiving				
Floyd	10-92	Pantale	5-60	
Toma	5-65	Swigert	5-39	
Jones	5-42	Larmond	3-30	
Eifert	2-45	Finch	1-17	
tackles				
Te'o	12	Kuechly	14	
Smith	7	Asprilla	10	
Motta	6	Appiah	8	
Gray	5	Divitto	8	
Nix	5	Pierre-Louis	7	
Fleming	4	Hughes	7	
Cwynar	4	Holloway	6	
Niklas	4	Fletcher	6	
Slaughter	3	Sylvia	5	
Blanton	3	Quinn	5	





JAMES DOAN/The Observer



KIRBY McKENNA/The Observer

# Grounding the Eagles

After introducing 38 seniors and their families at Notre Dame Stadium as part of Senior Day festivities, the Irish got off to a hot start, scoring a touchdown on their opening possession. From that point forward, however, it was up to the defense to carry Notre Dame past Boston College, who regularly put the Irish in terrible field position and held the offense to field goals instead of touchdowns. Despite a shaky offensive performance and a late comeback attempt by the Eagles, Notre Dame pulled out a victory in the seniors' last home game. The Irish travel to face No. 6 Stanford in the regular season finale Saturday.



JAMES DOAN/The Observer



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

Clockwise from top: Irish running back Cierre Wood takes a handoff from quarterback Tommy Rees; running back Jonas Gray stiff arms a Boston College defender; linebacker Manti Te'o awaits a play; Rees looks for an open receiver; receiver Michael Floyd runs downfield after a reception.