Flipping back to safety

Sergio Brown's athleticism made him a starter, and his personality has made him a team favorite.
Irish season now four games long

We’ve told 9-3 is not good enough. It’s 2-2.

Because that’s where the Irish could be. But it’s going to take the same kind of focus that dragged them back from fourth-quarter deficits earlier this season.

Because last season, if you’ll remember, Notre Dame had a 5-2 record, then dropped four of its last five and finished the regular season 6-6. That stretch included an overtime loss to Pittsburgh, a four-interception game against Boston College, a game that shall-not-be-spoken-of against Washington State and a team lost out behind the woodshed against USC.

True — the Irish can win some and lose some and be hole-eligible and go to a bowl at 4-5 and win with what this team has shown itself to be capable of, that would be an accomplishment.

It could also be a reality.

Look at who they face: Navy has had, um, success at Notre Dame Stadium recently. Pittsburgh proved last year how tough it plays (ignited, the Panthers lost LeSean McCoy to the Eagles). Connecticut presents the easiest potential win for the Irish but we’ve seen what overlooking a Big East team on senior day can do. Toby Gerhart has 994 yards rushing and 11 touchdowns for Stanford and Andrew Luck has passed well so far this season. On the road, that’s going to challenge the Irish.

But they’ve been challenged. Last season hadn’t necessarily been the be-all-end-all of the game, that in a blowout win, there were lessons the Irish needed to find out positive ones hereafter. They’ve clearly never claimed to be the smartest crayon in the box because this season has shown that winning supercedes everything. The Irish squeaked out five wins in the final minutes. It doesn’t matter that they had defensive lapses or poor offensive execution because they won.

No one, not the fans or the players or the coaches of the BCS, should care how the Irish got there. They’re 6-2. That’s the same kind of focus that dragged them back from fourth-quarter deficits earlier this season.

Because last season, I wrote that winning in the final minutes, in a blowout victory over Washington the Irish needed to find other positives execution because they won. True, 2007 was awful and 2008 failed to live up to expectations. But it’s 2009, the Irish are winning and they’re clearly not the same team as before.

It’s a chance to bloom this season.

It’s a chance the Irish could have a chance to play a number of different positions for the team, as said Mike Frank, a Notre Dame recruiting analyst who runs the ESPN-affiliated Web site irishsportsdaily.com. “He makes a ton of plays, has a lot of offers and it seems to really like Notre Dame. I think Notre Dame likes his potential a great deal and you just don’t see this caliber of athlete come along very often.”

Football Recruiting

Arizona and athlete Flowers visits

By MICHAEL BRYAN
Associate Sports Editor

Arizona quarterback Marquis Flowers is a tremendous talent, he could play a number of positions for Notre Dame.

Mike Frank
Irish recruiting analyst

After a blowout victory over Washington State in San Antonio that may have helped Notre Dame’s future recruiting in Texas, this weekend the Irish will welcome official visitor Marquis Flowers to South Bend to see the team take on Navy.

Flowers is an Arizona native that plays both safety and running back for his Millennium High School team. The high school senior piled up 87 tackles and three interceptions on defense in 2008 while rushing for 932 yards and eight touchdowns on offense.

“Marquis is a tremendous talent, he could play a number of different positions for Notre Dame,” said Mike Frank, a Notre Dame recruiting analyst who runs the ESPN-affiliated Web site irishsportsdaily.com. “He makes a ton of plays, has a lot of offers and it seems to really like Notre Dame. I think Notre Dame likes his potential a great deal and you just don’t see this caliber of athlete come along very often.”

Flowers is also considering Utah, Arizona State and UCLA.

“Seems to have a strong interest in Notre Dame,” Frank said. “He was scheduled to visit for the USC game and then rescheduled, and the fact that he’s willing to reschedule and come back means he’s pretty interested.”

While the Irish hope to impress Flowers Saturday, they appear to have already made strides towards future recruiting in Texas following their 40-14 rout of Washington State in San Antonio last week. Several high school juniors were in attendance and looking to learn more about Notre Dame and the football program.

“I think a lot of local players enjoyed being able to check out Notre Dame,” Frank said. “It’s a nice way for Notre Dame to showcase their program, and tell recruits to check them out because they probably don’t know much about them.”

Navy has already heard good news last week shortly before arriving in Texas, receiving a verbal commitment from Lone Star state native Toney Hurd Jr. last Friday.

“We try to keep recruiting in Texas following our 40-14 rout of Washington State in San Antonio last week. Several high school juniors were in attendance and looking to learn more about Notre Dame and the football program.”

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s irishsportsdaily.com. E-mail Mike at mike-frank18@sbcglobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu
By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

His teammates and coaches call him Notre Dame's best athlete. But just how athletic is senior safety Sergio Brown?

He's been dunking alley-oop passes on the basketball court since early in high school. He says he's never lost a foot race in his hometown of Maywood, Ill. And he can do back flips — in full pads after playing a football game in front of 80,000-plus. Or in a Notre Dame polo shirt, baggy blue jeans and street shoes, as he did for The Observer Wednesday.

"Me and my brother were always just goofing around in the house. It really started after the movie '3 Ninjas' came out," Brown said. "We just started trying to flip and stuff outside with mattresses. My mom started getting scared, so she said if we're going to do all this flipping, we might as well learn how to do it so we won't hurt ourselves. I've just been flipping since.

Brown's back flips have now recently become a staple of the Irish postgame celebration. But position-wise, he's been flipping since he arrived at Notre Dame.

"Until now.

Path to safety

A four-star safety recruit out of Proviso East H.S., Brown made 97 special teams appearances in 11 games as a freshman in 2006, making four tackles in kickoff and punt coverage. The next season was much of the same, as he played in nine games and made seven tackles but saw limited action in the secondary.

Brown emerged as an impact player out of the nickel defense as a junior last season. He made his first career start in the 2008 season-opener against San Diego State and flashed much of the potential that had excited the Irish coaching staff in his first two seasons. Brown made six tackles (one for a loss), broke up two passes and blocked a punt against the Aztecs to set the tone for a solid junior season, high-lighted by 28 tackles, six pass breakups and a pair of blocked punts.

"I just had to be patient and wait for my time to play," Brown said. "A lot of special teams, and then my role got bigger last year playing some nickel. Now I'm on the field a lot, and I'm loving it right now.

His coaches are loving it, too, as Brown's play at safety the past two seasons has allowed the Irish to shuffle its personnel to produce Notre Dame's best consecutive defensive performances of the season the past two weeks.

Brown made his first start at safety for the Irish in their 28-16 win over Boston College, as Notre Dame bumped junior Harrison Smith back to the linebacker spot where he enjoyed success last season. After the Irish thumped Washington State 40-14 last weekend, Brown is slated to make his third straight start at safety — and seventh of the year overall — Saturday against Navy.

"I think he's earned his way into being a full-time player on defense," Irish coach Charlie Weis said. "So just the fact that it's taken some time for him to get there, but there he's now, he's playing on every down. I think that's where he's made the most significant progress."

Flip, Flop 'n Fly

There's never been a shortage of ability for Brown, who was a long jump state qualifier and, as a high school junior, returned five of his six interceptions for touchdowns. In fact, Brown was showcasing his athleticism long before he suited up at the high school level — and on a much different stage.

He performed with Mr. Ernie's Flip, Flop 'n Fly, a Maywood-based tumbling group, as a grade school student — times he couldn't help but laugh about as he looked back.

"We did parades and shows and all that other stuff," Brown said. "I'm serious when the time.

"Weird. We'd do our routine and then do our other one. And I think that he's not selfish. He wants to be around the falls, and he's just

one of those heart-and-soul type players that people like being around.

So he started to use his athletic ability in other ways.

"We race a lot in the neighborhood to see who's the fastest," Brown said. "I'm still undefeated.

That's not hard to believe, considering Scout.com listed his high school 40-yard dash time at a blazing 4.4 seconds, the kind of speed that can't be taught. He's come a long way from his tumbling days, but he can still flip and fly.

"He's one of the most athletic guys on our team," sophomore defensive linemanEthan Johnson said. "He can jump through the roof, and he's really fast. He can bring so much to the table at the next level, too. He's definitely a special player."

Goof ball hawk

Brown's teammates say he's a special person as well. His personality and his relationships with his teammates have made his success even more enjoyable for the entire Irish squad.

"He's a guy you can't help but root for," sophomore linebacker Steve Filer said. "He's a great guy. You can't help but just cheer for him and hope he does his best."

So far, so good for Brown, who has looked comfortable in his move back to safety alongside senior captain Kyle McCarthy. He's fifth on the team with 18 solo tackles for the season, but perhaps his greatest contributions have come with the emotional spark he has provided a defense that, at times earlier in the season, lacked the confident swagger and positive attitude he brings.

"You say he's emotional, but really, he's upbeat," Johnson said. "He's a good kind of emotional. It's infectious, and he really brings something else to our team that's going to be hard to replace next year.

It seems no one, not even Weis, can talk about Brown without a chuckle and a smile.

"He's a passionate kid," Weis said. "It's fun to be around. He's a good ball. But I really like being around him and do the silly things."

"Weird. We'd do our routine and then do our other one. And I think that he's not selfish. He wants to be around the falls, and he's just

one of those heart-and-soul type players that people like being around.

Fun with Splughe

Notre Dame students who have had a class with Brown might know him by something else, since he asks all his teachers to call him by the nickname he picked up from a rap song during his freshman year.

"One of my teachers, it's hilarious," Brown said. "I'm the only football player in there with threads, so every day he'll look around the class joking like, 'Is Splughe here today?'

The Nelly song by the same name may have faded from memory, but the nickname Splughe seems to have stuck — though some of Brown's teammates may have a new one for him.

"Fake Whopigi Goldberg!" Johnson yelled at Brown as he left Wednesday's media session, no doubt ragging on the safety's patented dreadlocks.

That's the kind of relationship Brown has with his teammates — and the fun goes both ways.

"One time we were in the training room and Jimmy (Clausen) was talking to (former Irish quarterback) Joe Theismann," Brown said. "I really didn't know it was Joe Theismann at the time. And I was just standing behind him, waving and making faces at Jimmy while they were talking, acting like a fool. Jimmy started to bust out laughing. We just all mess with each other.

But Brown's fun isn't limited to jokes with teammates. Last spring, he filmed a one-minute spot for insulinreddiefootball.com in which he and Jack Swarbrick, Notre Dame's director of athletics, mimicked the popular Geico commercials featuring celebrity spokesmen for "real people." The video idea stemmed from Brown's comedic performance as a presenter at the 2008 OSCARS (Outstanding Student-Athletes Celebrating Achievements and Recognition Showcase), held annually to highlight the achievements of Notre Dame's athletic teams.

Brown said Charmelle Green, senior assistant athletics director for student-athlete welfare and development, approached him with an idea for a video that would air at last spring's OSCARS.

"They asked if I wanted to do a little commercial," Brown said. "I'm sure, Brown said. "They wanted us to be like the Geico commercials, so we set it up and it was hilarious, a lot of fun."

In the video, Brown vells at the camera, dances with a Notre Dame blanket draped over his back and, of course, does a back flip — all while Swarbrick talks about Notre Dame's Monogram Club in a professional office setting.

"They had me do a back flip at least 12 times — way more than you all had me do one," Brown said.

Not that it was a problem for Brown, who will likely be in the north end zone, preparing himself for another back flip after Saturday's game as his teammates gather to sing the Alma Mater.

"I like to have a lot of fun," he said. "I'm serious when the time is called, but everything's always better when you're having fun."

And that includes the Irish defense, especially with Sergio Brown.

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu

Irish safety Sergio Brown runs off the field following a Nevada turnover during Notre Dame's 33-0 win over the Wolf Pack on Sept. 5. Brown recently moved from nickel back to starting at free safety.
As if the Notre Dame passing attack had not seen enough success, quarterback Jimmy Clausen and the Irish will get an additional boost Saturday with the return of star sophomore wideout Michael Floyd. With Floyd back on the field along with Golden Tate and Kyle Rudolph, Clausen should have a field day against the Midshipmen and for the rest of the season. There is no better passing attack in the country than Notre Dame’s with everyone healthy.

Navy’s defense has been solid against the pass but has not been able to take advantage of the way the Midshipmen’s secondary lines up. The Irish have nine interceptions on the season but have not generated a consistent pass rush with just 14 sacks all season. Sophomore guard Trevor Robinson will miss the game because of a high ankle sprain, but the Notre Dame offensive line should not have any issues. Clausen should have time to throw and continue to put up Heisman-worthy numbers.

**EDGE: NOTRE DAME**

**Irish Offense vs. Midshipmen Defense**

Junior running back Armando Allen is “day-to-day” because of nagging injuries, but it may not make much of a difference with the way classmate Robert Hughes has played. Hughes rolled up 131 yards and a touchdown on the ground in the rout of Washington State in San Antonio, and showed off some pass-catching ability as well with four receptions for 51 yards. The Navy defense will first be looking to defend the pass.

**EDGE: NOTRE DAME**

Nick Tausch set a Notre Dame record against the Cougars last week by making two more field goals, giving him 14 in a row. Clausen should have a few more opportunities against a Midshipmen defense that will first be looking to defend the pass. The return of Michael Floyd is absolutely huge for this Irish team. With Floyd, Notre Dame can hang with almost every team in the country just on the strength of their passing attack. Even if he does not play considerable time against Navy, the Irish kick return game has been consistent but unspectacular, and Weis balances the creativity he displayed in using the Wildcat moving Golden Tate around the Notre Dame defense and letting Clausen run the pro-style offense with Floyd, Tate, and Rudolph. The offensive line should dominate and it will be hard to call a bad play against Navy.

**EDGE: NOTRE DAME**

**Final Score:** Notre Dame 37, Navy 17
Midshipmen Offense vs. Irish Defense

The nature of the triple option offense makes the Navy passing game rare, but quarterback Ricky Dobbs is one of the better passers to come through the school. Dobbs has completed 50 percent of his passes this season for 618 yards and three touchdowns on the season. Still, if the Midshipmen are passing the ball often, it does not bode well for their chances to upset the Irish. This season for 618 yards and three touchdowns on the season.

Navy’s triple option rushing attack is one of the most difficult to defend in college football. It requires discipline and patience on the part of the defense, and the Midshipmen have numerous formations, options and runners to use against opposing defenses. Navy has seven players on its roster with more than 100 yards rushing on the season, led by the quarterback Dobbs. Despite missing some time due to injury Dobbs has 15 touchdowns already on the year. Fullback Vince Murray also has 638 yards to lead the Midshipmen in that category. The Irish rush defense has improved dramatically over the past several games. Defensive lineman Karon Lewis-Moore, Ethan Johnson and Ian Williams have all stepped up in recent games to stifle opposing running backs. Linebackers Manti Te’o and Darius Fleming should provide speed and athleticism off the edge to keep the Navy rushing attack somewhat in check.

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EDGE: EVEN

The triple option is one of the most complicated schemes in football, and the Notre Dame coaching staff does an excellent job showing different looks and personnel packages. Jon Tenuta and the Irish defense will have to be careful not to be overly aggressive and give up a big play on the ground to the Midshipmen. The Notre Dame coaching staff must emphasize discipline and staying in their lanes against an attack that relies on misdirection.

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EDGE: NAVY

Matt Gamber
Sports Editor

Navy lost to Temple last week, but that was without its best player, quarterback Ricky Dobbs. Dobbs should be back running the Midshipmen’s classic option attack, which the Irish defense shut down for most of last year’s matchup. The same should happen again, as the maligned secondary should get a bit of respite because of Navy’s run, run, run style of play. The offense will need to play mistake-free football as it has all year to maximize its limited possession, and Charlie Weis said he’d be sure to involve all his weapons, including the newly returned Michael Floyd. As always, Notre Dame is a much bigger, faster, more talented team than Navy, and this year, the Irish will just be too much for the Midshipmen. This one won’t be close.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 27, Navy 7

Sam Werner
Associate Sports Editor

A break after last week in San Antonio, Jimmy Clausen will likely have to play the whole game against the Midshipmen. Notre Dame is more talented than Navy, to be sure, but the option defense should have a hard time keeping the game closer than it probably should be. The Irish won’t be able to control the clock for nearly 40 minutes like they did against the Cougars, and Navy always comes to South Bend fired up and ready to play. That being said, though, the Midshipmen (or anyone else in the country, for that matter) will have trouble stopping a Notre Dame offense with both Golden Tate and Michael Floyd in the lineup. Robert Hughes could also have another big day against an undersized, if opportunistic, Navy defense.

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The analysis, check out the Irish Insider podcast

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THE OBSERVER • IRISH INSIDER

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What is your favorite class? Probably poetry class because I liked that I could write what was on my mind.

What’s your favorite movie? Con-Air

What’s your favorite 80s song? What’s that song that goes (sings quietly) … AC/DC, “Hells Bells.”

What’s in your burrito at Chipotle? Chicken, rice and pinto beans. None of that hot corn stuff.

What’s your favorite crayon? Blue.

What’s your favorite saying? Keep sleeping — it comes from my old teammates because I hit so hard, they said you’d better watch out, keep sleeping.
Floyd returns for battle against Navy

By MICHAEL BRYAN
Associate Sport Editor

Sophomore wide receiver Michael Floyd races down the sidelines for a touchdown in the season-opening win against Nevada. Floyd will return to play Saturday after breaking his clavicle against Michigan State.

The doctors said he was healed. Irish coach Charlie Weis gave the go-ahead for star sophomore receiver Michael Floyd to play against Navy. Floyd felt confident and ready to go.

But there was still one more person whose approval Floyd sought before returning to the field. “Coach Weis gave his vote, and I gave my vote too,” Floyd said. “And then he asked me to ask my mom if it was OK, and she went down the line asking me all the questions if I was 100 percent and ready to go.”

After Floyd assured her he was indeed healed from his broken clavicle, the wide receiver was given the green light to play Saturday against the Midshipmen. Weis, Floyd and a certain quarterback were all thrilled at the prospects of the wideout’s return.

“It wasn’t too much longer when I was already getting texts from number seven,” Weis said, referencing quarter-back Jimmy Clausen. “As happy as number three was, I think number seven might have been just as happy.”

Floyd had dominated the first two and half games he had played in this season before breaking his clavicle in the second quarter against Michigan State.

In the season opener against Nevada, Floyd was tackled only once and ran wild for 189 yards and three touchdowns on four receptions. In Ann Arbor Floyd’s success continued, bringing in seven receptions for 131 yards and a score in the close Notre Dame loss to Michigan.

Floyd’s return should give opposing defenses nightmares as they try to defend against two of the best wide receivers in the nation as well as an elite tight end.

“I’m very happy to be able to go into those meetings yesterday and say, ‘OK, we’ve got Floyd back, what do we want to do?’” Weis said. “Your game-planning on Monday becomes a whole different element when you’re adding in a top-flight player like Michael to the mix.”

With Floyd out, junior receiver Golden Tate picked up the slack despite being the focus of numerous double-teams by opposing defenses. During the time of Floyd’s absence, Tate piled up 743 yards receiving and 147 rushing and nine total scores.

“It will certainly take a lot of pressure off of Golden,” said Weis. “Not only will take pressure off of Jimmy, it will take it off of Golden.”

Charlie Weis
Irish coach

Next: against Wake Forest the next week. Floyd didn’t throw a single pass against the Demon Deacons.

Against Temple on Oct. 31, the impact of Dobbs’ injury was felt in full. Even though Dobbs played in limited action against the Owls, he wasn’t at full strength and Navy lost 27-24 to drop its record to 6-3 on the season.

“Not only will it take pressure off of Jimmy, it will take it off of Kyle,” said Dobbs and Weis.

“We have a plan for what we’re going to do with Michael. He won’t play every play,” Weis said. “The biggest thing that he’s going have to have happen is get tackled once. He’ll get hit in practice some, but I doubt that we’re going to try it out in practice and see how that shoulder feels get tackled once.”

Even if it isn’t for every down, the Irish are excited to have one of the best players in the nation back.

“It’s great to have one of the best receivers in the nation back to help you out,” Tate said. “I’m excited for him, I’m excited to have him back, and I know he’s been waiting patiently to get back on the field. I’m expecting him to make plays.”

Floyd said he agreed his return would help open up opposing defenses for Tate.

“I love Golden, he makes spectacular plays, it just takes stress off of him. I think he’s probably just going to keep doing his own thing, making big plays,” Floyd said. “I think we get a little leeway off of each other. Both it’s one on one or double-team and the other guy is free. We’re both excited and when they try to double-team us, it leaves inside and wide receivers open.”

Weis said that while Floyd is completely healed, he will not receive a full workload against Navy.

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By SAM WERNER
Associate Sport Editor

With the triple option offensive system that Navy runs, the quarterback position is slightly different than at other schools.

While Notre Dame quarterback Jimmy Clausen has attempted 257 passes so far this season, the man under center for the Midshipmen, junior Ricky Dobbs, has thrown only 66. Dobbs has, however, rushed for 595 yards and an eye-popping 16 touchdowns on the season.

“Since as much as I would love to pass the ball on every play, do I know the school that I came to features the option,” Dobbs said at Navy’s pre-season media day. “We worked really hard on our own this summer getting the option down so we can continue the tradition of winning the rushing title.”

Last season, Dobbs played in eight of Navy’s 11 games, rushing for 492 yards and eight touchdowns on only 106 carries, good for a 4.7 yards per carry average.

With the graduation of Jarod Bryant and Kalpoi-Nou Kahaaku-Enhada, Dobbs entered this season as the unquestioned starter.

“If I could put Ricky in a bubble I would do it. We are not as deep at that position as we have been in the past.”

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Dobbs leads potent triple option attack for Midshipmen

Gabriel Hernandez/The Observer

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“It’s great to have one of the best receivers in the nation back to help you out,” Tate said. “I’m excited for him, I’m excited to have him back, and I know he’s been waiting patiently to get back on the field. I’m expecting him to make plays.”

Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

Dobbs leads potent triple option attack for Midshipmen

Gabriel Hernandez/The Observer

With the triple option offensive system that Navy runs, the quarterback position is slightly different than at other schools.

While Notre Dame quarterback Jimmy Clausen has attempted 257 passes so far this season, the man under center for the Midshipmen, junior Ricky Dobbs, has thrown only 66. Dobbs has, however, rushed for 595 yards and an eye-popping 16 touchdowns on the season.

“Since as much as I would love to pass the ball on every play, do I know the school that I came to features the option,” Dobbs said at Navy’s pre-season media day. “We worked really hard on our own this summer getting the option down so we can continue the tradition of winning the rushing title.”

Last season, Dobbs played in eight of Navy’s 11 games, rushing for 492 yards and eight touchdowns on only 106 carries, good for a 4.7 yards per carry average.

With the graduation of Jarod Bryant and Kalpoi-Nou Kahaaku-Enhada, Dobbs entered this season as the unquestioned starter.

“If I could put Ricky in a bubble I would do it. We are not as deep at that position as we have been in the past.”

Ken Numatolalo
Navy coach

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Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu
The Saturday Scholar Series invites you to experience discussions with Notre Dame’s most engaging faculty on some of the most pressing and fascinating issues of our times. Each lecture and Q&A is free and open to the public.

"Going Global: Medical Ethics in the Age of AIDS"

Maura Ryan
John Cardinal O’Hara
Associate Professor of Christian Ethics
Department of Theology

12 Noon
Saturday, November 7, 2009
Annenberg Auditorium
Snite Museum of Art

Since it was first recognized in 1981, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has contributed to the deaths of more than 25 million people. Of those infected with HIV/AIDS in 2007, 68 percent lived in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this lecture, Ryan explores what AIDS has taught us about health and illness, poverty and vulnerability, hope and solidarity.