Irish need win to regain stability

There may not be a more important game in years in impacting the stability of the Notre Dame football program. What was once a promising season with realistic BCS goals was turned upside down last week with a crushing loss to Navy. And while the Irish have lost three games by a total of 13 points this year, many have already written it off as a failure. It’s been an ideal season to be sure — nine games in it’s still very early, tell if this team is good, bad, lucky or somewhere in between. Still, Saturday’s loss to Navy was 13 points from being undefeated, and also 17 points from being 2-7.

But Saturday, Notre Dame has found itself on the minority of the negativity built up by the loss to the Midshipmen. While losing to an unranked Navy team while ranked for the first time since 2002 was not expected, Saturday’s loss at Notre Dame will sting for a long time, it was Notre Dame’s armor and the team that it took to plunge it into the depths, not just against teams that finish the midseason. The early year momentum. The early year momentum has become experts least if this team collapsed, wouldn’t shock me in the future by maintaining he’s focused only on Pittsburgh. With a loss, the window on Weis and the Irish head coach Charlie Weis’ job status may have already come up short. The defense originally couldn’t stop the run, then the pass, and now it’s just up to whatever the opposition is most comfortable with.

Could they just reverse the trend again? I could easily see it happening, and I don’t see a team this talented limping to the finish line again. Despite this, the margin for error after last week has been effectively reduced to zero. The vultures that circled Charlie Weis throughout 2007 and reappeared after the Syracuse game last year are back, and growing in number with every loss.

Negative speculation surrounding Notre Dame’s future in the media only puts more pressure on the team, Weis and for Jack Swarbick to make a decision. And the media loves nothing more than to cover struggles at Notre Dame. The two ESPN reporters who covered Notre Dame’s press conference were no accident, and they’ll be back after another loss.

This game can go a long way towards reversing all that though. Not a complete 180, but at a lot can change with a win against Pitt at Heinz Field. The game would demonstrate that Weis and the Irish are still fighting upward and improving despite last week’s evidence to the contrary. It would go against many of the damning tendencies that have plagued the team and coach over the last five years. For example, 1-13 against ranked teams. Or 8-19 losses to ranked teams. Or 8-19 years. But that though. Not a complete turnaround that though. Not a complete turnaround.

Recycle the Observer

Michael Bryan
Associate Sports Editor

FOOTBALL RECRUITING
Flowers enjoys visit to Notre Dame

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

Despite the fact that Ricky Dobbs and Vince Murray, Navy’s proverbial big guns, blew holes in Notre Dame’s armor and plunged it into the depths, the Irish pulled off one victory last week. Marquis Flowers, a running back and safety from Goodyear, Ariz., came away from his official visit very impressed with the Irish program.

“I think that they did a really good job with him,” said Mike Frank, a Notre Dame recruiting analyst who runs the ESPN-affiliated web site irishsportsdaily.com “Obviously the game didn’t turn out like they’d hoped but Marquis really enjoyed his time at Notre Dame. I think it really opened his eyes.”

Flowers, at 6-foot-2 and 195 pounds, has rushed for 1,024 yards and 13 touchdowns on only 103 carries at Millennium High School in Goodyear. He also has 49 tackles, two interceptions and a blocked field goal on defense.

Flowers is also considering UNC, UCLA, Arizona and Arizona State. Frank said Notre Dame did three things successful-ly to impress Flowers: make him feel wanted, show he could fit in and make him feel comfortable. Still, Frank said. Flowers will take official visits to other schools before deciding. His father accompanied him on the trip.

“It’s just a game where all kinds of bad thing happen,” Frank said. “You fumble, you trade turnovers, false starts. It seems almost like an unrealistic.”

The fact that half the alumni already have visions of Urban Meyer, Jon Gruden or Brian Kelly dancing in their heads hinder-d the process. The rumors are that new Irish coach Charlie Weis’ job status may have already hurt the program’s recruiting. Frank said.

“If there weren’t all these uncertainties I think Notre Dame would have a lot of commits right now, big game players,” he said. Yet all is not lost.

“Obviously the game didn’t turn out like they’d hoped, but Marquis [Flowers] really enjoyed his time at Notre Dame.”

Contact Bill Brink at wbrick@nd.edu

Mike Frank
Irish recruiting analyst
By MATT GAMBER
Spoor Editor

On a Notre Dame defense, and particularly in a secondary, that has shuffled on an almost weekly basis in 2009, one piece of the puzzle has remained intact. And does it come as a surprise to anyone that that piece is free safety Kyle McCarthy?

“It’s been very important [to have him back there],” Irish defensive backs coach Corwin Brown said. “I think what he’s done more than anything else is he able to keep the guys fairly settled, no matter who has been in there with him.”

Ironically — or appropriately — enough, the same could be said about McCarthy’s role in his off-campus home last year, when he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan. In an Oct. 19, 2008, Irish Insider cover story, McCarthy called himself “the dad” of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line.

It’s not a perfect analogy, no analogy is, but McCarthy’s role on the defense has been comparable this season.

He understands the bigger picture better, and he’s taken on more of a leadership role,” Brown said. “He’s the older guy back there, and he understands where he’s at.”

Old Reliable

Whenever the Irish have struggled and have been in need of a big play, it seems like McCarthy’s been there, with game-clinching interceptions in wins against Michigan State and Boston College contributing to his total of five picks for the year. On that last line of defense, McCarthy leads the Irish in solo (44) and total (72) tackles this season, and it isn’t close. Junior linebacker Brian Smith places second in both categories with 28 and 51, respectively.

And as the captain and unquestioned leader of the Notre Dame defense, it’s McCarthy who is often responsible for making defensive calls and arranging his teammates in accordance with offensive formations and audibles.

“He makes a lot of calls. He’s really football smart,” senior defensive back Darrin Walls said. “That’s one thing that we need out there. He directs people, tells them where to go and how to line up. When you have a guy like that who you can trust, that’s always good.”

McCarthy’s persistence in having to wait until 2008 to earn a full-time starting spot make him a good example for younger players to follow as well, Walls said.

“I think the whole process for him, coming here behind [former Irish standout and current Baltimore Ravens safety Tom Zbikowski] and then finally having the chance to play and making the best of it — that’s the kind of guy you want leading your team,” Walls said.

Family affair

Like any of his fellow fifth-year seniors, McCarthy has been around long enough to see just about everything, from back-to-back BCS berths to the worst two-year run in school history.

McCarthy has even been long around long enough to play two seasons with his younger brother, Dan, who as a sophomore has climbed the depth chart to become his older brother’s backup. Looking at their resumes coming out of Cardinal Mooney H.S. in Youngstown, Ohio, it’d be hard to tell the McCarthy brothers apart. Both were two-way standouts that won state titles as quarterbacks and also posted gaudy statistics at defensive back while gaining state and national recognition for their individual efforts.

After earning all-conferences honors as a junior wide receiver, Kyle became the team’s starting quarterback as a senior in 2004. McCarthy passed for 557 yards and five touchdowns and rushed for 1,273 yards and 14 touchdowns on just 135 carries to earn all-state recognition. As a defensive back, he recorded 70 tackles and made five interceptions, returning two for scores — including a record-setting 93-yard pick-six in the state title game to earn the game’s MVP award.

McCarthy also displayed his supreme athletic ability on the baseball diamond, where he set a school-record with 20 stolen bases as a senior and also posted seven wins and a sub-4.00 earned run average.

As for younger brother Dan? He was the Gatorade Player of the Year as a senior in 2007, and a finalist for the prestigious Mr. Football award in Ohio, earning second-team All America honors from USA Today, according to und.com. He rushed for over 3,000 yards and 36 touchdowns in two seasons at quarterback while posting 249 tackles and 16 sacks in his final two years on defense.

“It’s been great playing with him. He’s a real good player,” McCarthy said of his brother. “The guys on the team all think he’s their little brother, too. After all, the only brother Kyle sees on a daily basis at Notre Dame. After the craziness of his house last year, Kyle opted for a more quiet alternative this year, he said.

“I’m living with my older brother, who’s also a grad student,” Kyle said, referring to his brother Brian, 24, Notre Dame graduate. “It’s definitely been a lot more laid-back. It’s been great.”

Growing as a leader

Following in the footsteps of NFL-caliber safeties like Zbikowski and David Bruton, a Denver Broncos draft pick last season, McCarthy has improved not only as a player, but as the leader of the defense — a particularly important trait because of his role as a veteran and his position in the defensive backfield.

“He’s grown to be a great player and a great leader, and our players notice that,” Walls said. “He’s taken control in the weight room, in the locker room, and when you have a guy like that you can depend on, it really helps the team.”

Walls said McCarthy is more of a “lead-by-example” type but knows the right time to step up and address the team.

“He doesn’t always speak much, but when he does speak, people listen to him,” Walls said. “They do what he tells them to do. He leads by example and everyone follows behind him.”

Brown said the type of person McCarthy is makes him a good leader.

“Kyle is a classy dude, and I think the best thing about Kyle is he’s not selfish,” Brown said. “He’s trying to help others out. I believe when you put others first, when it’s not always about you, everybody else appreciates that... That’s why he’s played the way he’s played this year.”

Bouncing back

After last week’s 23-21 loss to Navy, the second straight at home to the Midshipmen, the Irish season reaches a crossroads at Pittsburgh Saturday. And with big-picture questions about the future of the state of the Notre Dame program five years into the Charlie Weis era, one might think McCarthy and his fellow captains would have a tough time keeping their team focused on a talented Panthers team.

That’s not the case, McCarthy said.

“It has zero effect on how we go about doing things,” McCarthy said. “That’s all going outside the locker room. Inside the locker room, there’s no questions or anything like that. We just go out and prepare everyday with trust in the guys in this locker room and trust in the coaching staff, and we’re excited to play Pitt on Saturday.”

Weis declared after the Navy loss that the theme this week would be “accountability,” and McCarthy said Tuesday that early in the week, beginning Monday, when the players have the day off but it was reported a larger number than usual came in to work out and watch extra film, the returns were positive.

“As far as preparation and prepping for the game, our guys need to be accountable for the job at hand,” McCarthy said. “The coaches are going to put us in the position to make plays, but it’s up to the players to go out and execute and make plays. Last week we struggled a little bit, so we just need to maybe prepare a little harder, pay attention to detail, and hopefully get it corrected this Saturday.”

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu
Even though the rest of the team may have faltered in last week’s loss to Navy, junior quarterback Jimmy Clausen continued to put up impressive numbers. The loss of sophomore tight end Kyle Rudolph will undoubtedly hurt the passing game, but junior Mike Ragone showed last week that he should be able to fill in well enough. Sophomore wide receiver Michael Floyd should be even closer to full strength after another week of rest and recovery. Floyd appeared to shake the rust off quickly against Navy last weekend with 10 catches, and will be even more effective Saturday night.

The real test will be up front for the Irish, as Pittsburgh leads the country in sacks with 39. Notre Dame’s offensive line has improved this season, but still gave up two crucial sacks to an undersized Navy defensive line last weekend. Keeping Clausen clean will be essential if the Irish want to come out winners.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

The loss of Kyle Rudolph will affect the play calling, and new starter Mike Ragone will probably stay in and block more than Rudolph would.

Last week, Irish coach Charlie Weis showed the flaws that have plagued him his entire career. Goal line plays such as a toss to Robert Hughes and an end around playaction pass left fans scratching their heads. Weis needs to keep it simple this week with his job on the line.

EDGE: EVEN

Freshman kicker Nick Ttasch missed his first two field goals since the second game of the season last week, but there’s no reason to think that Taasch won’t return to form this week. Heinz Field is notorious for its difficulty, but it presents kickers, but the freshman’s body of work indicates that there should be nothing to worry about.

Eric Maust, who didn’t have to punt at all last week, will take over from freshman Ben Turk for the punting duties.

EDGE: EVEN

The Observer ◆ IRISH INSIDER

SPORTS EDITOR

Michael Bryan

ASSOCIATE

Sports Editor

stop in overtime and set the win.

FINAL SCORE: Pittsburgh 33, Notre Dame 30 (OT)

Johnny Allen’s return could be big both in the run and passing game. These are two very talented and physical players on both sides of the ball, and can pick up whether they want to run with Dion Lewis or pass with Bill Stull against the struggling Irish defense. Offensively, the Irish must run the ball to have a chance to win. Armando Allen could be big both in the run and passing game. These are two very talented players, but Pittsburgh’s strongest defensive lines in the country and held Navy, which gashed the Irish defense last week, to only 129 yards rushing.

It’s possible for the Irish to run the ball against Pittsburgh, but it will take a real commitment to the ground game that was absent against Navy.

EDGE: PITTSBURGH

SPORTS EDITOR

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Sports Editor

Bill Brink

Managing Editor

For more matchups and pregames
at ndsmobserver.com

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 37, Pittsburgh 34 (OT)

Remember that last touchdown drive against Navy? That showed heart, intensity and execution. That showed who Notre Dame can be if it chooses. It’s just gotta be good, and it didn’t, for the most part, against Navy. Losing twice in three years at home to Navy and hearing rumors your coach is done is tough to do it. The Irish can’t cover Jonathan Baldwin and they can’t stop Dion Lewis. But they can win this game. Clausen and Tate have some experience with close victories, and Mr. Floyd should pick up the idea quite nicely. I’m usually the pessimist of the group, and it’s tough to ignore the logical and statistical reasons why the Irish will lose, but to lap into coachspeak, this game is about “want to” and right now Notre Dame wants.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 37, Pittsburgh 34 (OT)
Pittsburgh Panthers

Record: 8-1, 5-0 Big East
AP: #8 Coaches: #9 BCS: #12

5th season at Pittsburgh
career record: 33-24
at home: 22-10
against ND: 1-1

2009 Schedule

Sept. 5 Youngstown St. — W
Sept. 12 @ Buffalo — W
Sept. 19 Navy — W
Sept. 26 @ N.C. State — L
Oct. 2 @ Louisiana — W
Oct. 10 Connecticut — W
Oct. 16 @ Rutgers — W
Oct. 24 South Florida — W
Nov. 7 Syracuse — W
Nov. 14 Notre Dame — L
Nov. 27 @ West Virginia — L
Dec. 5 Cincinnati — W

Head-to-Head

Pittsburgh Panthers vs. Notre Dame

Four seasons ago, Dave Wannstedt went against Charlie Weis in both coaches’ collegiate debut. Both have come under some fire during their tenures at their respective alma maters, but Wannstedt seems to have bounced back and has led the Panthers to their first top ten appearance since 1982. The Panthers run a balanced offensive attack, and Wannstedt has shown over the course of the season that he knows what it takes to win.

EDGE: PITTSBURGH

Statistical Leaders

Pitt Stat Leaders

Senior tight end Dorin Dickerson was a do-it-all receiver for Pittsburgh last season, running 203 times for 1,139 yards and 12 touchdowns. Lewis is seventh in the country in terms of rushing yards, and leads the Big East. The Irish have certainly slowed down good running backs this season. Nevada’s Va’i Taua, USC’s Joe McKnight and Boston College’s Montel Harris all rank in the top forty rushing nationally. Freshman linebacker Manti Te’o has improved against the run, and should continue to rack up the tackles this week. However, if most of the leading Irish tacklers are defensive backs, as is often the case, Notre Dame could be in trouble. As that means Lewis was able to break through the Irish front line often.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

Notre Dame Stat Leaders

I can see two very different things happening in this game. I can imagine the Irish coming out with that dive in the headlights look we saw last season at USC after a disheartening loss to Syracuse that raised the same questions about the program’s future that are circulating now. We all know how that turned out. But I can also picture the Irish coming out angry, motivated and prepared to play their best game against arguably the best team on their schedule. As a lifelong sports fan, I’ve seen these kinds of stories end both ways. But as a Notre Dame fan, in recent years it seems like Door No. 1 has been the one most likely to be opened. I’ve been wrong plenty of times about this team. I hope it happens again.

FINAL SCORE: Pittsburgh 31, Notre Dame 20

Panthers Offense vs. Irish Defense

On the receiving end, sophomore wide receiver Jonathan Baldwin stepped up after a promising freshman season. At 6-foot-5, Baldwin has the ability to outjump opposing cornerbacks and come down with difficult catches. Senior tight end Biron Dickerson leads the team with 39 catches and 10 touchdown grabs. A game against run-happy Navy made Notre Dame’s pass defense statistics look a little bit better, but it’s no secret that the Irish secondary has struggled this season. They’ve shown flashes of talent in the past, but will need to turn in their best game of the season if the Irish want to win this game.

EDGE: PITTSBURGH

I would make absolutely no sense for Notre Dame to win this game. Of course, over the past three seasons, Notre Dame football hasn’t exactly made a ton of sense. Expect the Irish to come out with an “us against the world” mentality, fighting for their season, as well as their head coach’s job. Even though last week’s loss to Navy was bad, it was still the same team that took USC down to the wire. Pittsburgh is good, for sure, but their biggest win so far this season was over an inconsistent South Florida team. Michael Floyd should be closer to 100 percent after an extra week of practice and recovery, and Charlie Weis will finally get his first win over a top ten team. Unfortunately for Weis, it may be too little, too late.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 31, Pittsburgh 27
Do you have a favorite singer or band?
I would have to say probably Springsteen.

Q: What's your prediction for the Ohio State High School playoffs and your alma mater, St. Ignatius? I have to say [we will win], but it will be a good game. We are playing well.

What is your favorite place on campus? Probably Alumni Hall or the Grotto.

Do you have any favorite movies? Disney Channel original movies.

Any favorite songs? “Party in the USA” by Miley Cyrus.

Kanye West or Taylor Swift? Taylor Swift.

Do you have any pet peeves? Guys who wear K-Swiss shoes.
By SAM WERNER
Associate Sport Editor

Saturday night’s game against No. 8 Pittsburgh is undoubtedly a big game for every member of the Irish squad, but for senior cornerback Darrin Walls, the game will mean just a little bit more.

Walls, a Pittsburgh native, will be playing in his home-town for the first time in his collegiate career. Inured with ticket requests throughout the week, Walls said he was trying to figure out exactly how many friends and family members would be in attendance Saturday.

“I’m not sure as of now,” Walls as well. “I’m estimating around 25.”

For a good number of those friends, it is said of Lewis’ first time they see Walls play.

“It’s real exciting going for conference Tuesday. “He has good balance. He catches the ball out of the back field. He’s got quickness. He can make you miss,” Irish coach Charlie Weis said in his press conference Tuesday. “He has good balance. He catches the ball out of the back field. He’s been very impressive.”

Despite Lewis’ youth, he’s made an impression on his teammates as well as his opponents.

“Dion, just look at him, he’s one of the leading rushers in the country,” Panthers senior tight end Dorin Dickerson said. “I like to pat him on his back whenever he gets those runs because he really deserves it. He runs hard.”

Lewis called the last four games of the season “crucial. That’s especially true because the Panthers are fighting for a BCS birth with No. 5 Cincinnati, which leads the Big East at 5-0 (9-0 overall). At the same time, Saturday’s game brings a new level of importance, especially since the last time Charlie Weis brought Notre Dame to Pittsburgh the Irish dismantled the Panthers 42-21 on Sept. 3, 2005 and especially since the two teams played each other so close in last year’s game, a 36-33 overtime.

“Everybody is excited about Notre Dame,” Lewis said. “Everybody’s going to be ready and fired up for this game.”

“I think that this is going to be an exciting game for Darrin,” Weis said. “And I think more than any game than he’s played this year, I think that this is going to be one of those ones where I feel pretty confident that whatever his best is, we’re going to get it.”

In addition to being in familiar territory, Walls said that he is friendly with several players on the Pittsburgh roster. He named senior tight end Dorin Dickerson, sophomore wide receiver Aaron Smith and junior offensive lineman Jason Pinkston as Panther players that he knew.

“We hung out a lot and did crafts and stuff,” Walls said.

Walls also said that this is his first time playing in Heinz Field since a high school playoff game his senior year.

What makes this week’s trip even sweeter for Walls is the fact that he missed all of last season for personal reasons.

“His mom’s going to be in the stands, and she hasn’t been out here before,” Weis said. “So that will be a big opportunity for him.”

I kept in touch with him all the time, kept him up to date on the funny stuff going on in the meeting rooms,” McNeil said. “We’re always clashing in the meeting room, so he definitely missed some classic moments, but he was always talking about how he couldn’t wait to get back.”

Even though it may have taken Walls some time to get back in the swing of things, McNeil said he thought the year off ultimately helped his friend.

“Him missing a year kind of brought things into perspective for him,” McNeil said.

As exciting as the trip, home may be, Weis said that Walls is still aware of how important this game was for the team.

“I think that Darrin’s going to be very excited to play this game,” Weis said. “And I think that that’s a good thing because he’s going to get challenged in this game as well.”

Walls, too said that he was mostly focused on getting a big win this weekend.

“I mean, the coaches, they expect everyone to play well this weekend,” Walls said. “We expect to play well. It’s just another motivational factor that we’re playing against the No. 8 team in the country.”

Contact Sam Werner at swerner@nd.edu

By BILL BRINK
Sports Wire

It’s a little guy, but he runs scary big.

Even scarier, he’s a freshman.

The 5-foot-8 Dion Lewis has shown no mercy to opposing defenses this season. The No. 8 Panthers’ (8-1) leading rusher has 1139 yards, seventh in Division I FBS, and 12 touchdowns.

Lewis’ last four games have been one of the leading rushers in the country.

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Penn State running back Dion Lewis runs upfield during a game earlier this season. Lewis currently leads the Big East in rushing.

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LEGENDS PRESENTS

Fri Nov 13

RYAN CABRERA

AT TEN PM

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