COMMENTARY

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 odd season to be sure — nine games in it’s still very early to tell if this team is good, bad, lucky or somewhere in between. Stanford is 13 points from being unbeaten, and also 17 points from being 2-7. But Saturday, Notre Dame has a lot riding on it.

Half of the majority 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 1991 was president will sting for a long time, it’s also unlikely to change from 2006 to 2009 the way in which Notre Dame lost, 23-21, to Navy Saturday, its second loss at home to the Midshipmen in three years. But freshman linebacker Manti Te’o, who visited for last year’s loss to Syracuse on Senior Day, chose the Irish, so losing a recruit in after a loss remains dubious.

Weis deflected questions about the big picture and his job status may have already been written it off as a failure.

And it wouldn’t shock me for the Irish to take out Pittsburgh Saturday. It also wouldn’t shock me in the least if this team collapsed, as it did at the end of last year. This Notre Dame team, however, has become experts at changing direction and momentum. The early year was filled with fourth-quarter comebacks, but they’ve come up short. The defense originally couldn’t stop the run, then the pass, and now maybe it’s just up to whatever the opposition is most comfortable with.

Could they just reverse the trends 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 grow 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 Swarbrick to make a decision. And the media loves nothing more than to cover struggles at Notre Dame. The two ESPN reports in the past 24 hours 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 winning point 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 damaging tendencies that have plagued the team and coach over the last five years.

For example, 1-13 against ranked teams. Or 8-19 against teams that finish the season with winning records. Beating the Panthers won’t make those statistics any more acceptable to those who are calling for Weis’ head, but it will go a long way towards reversing the damage. It would go a long way towards beating Connecticut and Stanford. Which would be enough, giving the Irish the 9-3 record most reasonable fans expected this season.

Weis deflected questions about the big picture and his future by maintaining he’s focused on the game at Pittsburgh. While I think this is not humanly possible, Pittsburgh is his tipping point. With a team that has thrived on the momentum of close wins, I don’t think Notre Dame will lose again if they come away with the upset Saturday.

With a loss, the window on the Weis era could very well have closed. 9-3 may have changed from 2006 to 2009 to become good enough, 8-4 or 7-5 certainly have not.

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

Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Flowers Recruiting

Flowers enjoys visit to Notre Dame

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, is the second Notre Dame recruit from Arizona State.

While losing to the Midshipmen, while ranked for the first time since 1991 remains dubious.

“Obviously the most important thing is they let the recruit know that this is the future, and look at the talent they brought in the last two classes and look at what we have,” Frank said.

Obviously we’re probably a much better season. We just need a couple players to get us over the edge."

Mike Frank Irish recruiting analyst

Contact Bill Brink at wbrink@nd.edu

GO IRISH!

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Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

Contact Bill Brink at wbrink@nd.edu

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Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

For more on Notre Dame Recruiting, check out Mike Frank's irishsportsdaily.com. E-mail Mike at mikefrank18@sbcglobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

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Faculty of Arts and Science
Department of Irish Language & Literature
http://studyirishnd.edu
Last defense

Safety Kyle McCarthy becomes unquestioned leader of defense in fifth and final year

By MATT GAMBER
Sports 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 back 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,” Walls said.

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.”

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-conference 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.

“Kyle is great playing with him. He’s a real good player,” McCarthy said. “He’s their little brother, too. The guys on the team all think he’s their little brother, too.”

“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.

Definitely been a lot more laid-back. It’s been great.”

Growing as a leader

Following in the footsteps of NCL-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.

“Kyle’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 abounding about 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.”

Walls declared after the Navy loss that the theme this week would be “accountability,” and McCarthy said Tuesday that earlier in the week, the 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
Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Record: 6-3
AP: NR Coaches: NR BCS: NR

Coach: Charlie Weis
5th season at Notre Dame
Career record: 35-24
On the road: 12-9
Against Pittsburgh: 3-1

WR MICHAEL FLOYD
65 rec., 1059 yds., 10 TD
WR GOLDEN TATE
104 rush, 514 yds., 3 TD
RB ARMANDO ALLEN
209-308, 2770 yds., 20 TD
QB JIMMY CLAUSEN

ND OFFENSE
T.O.P. for: 32:41 (9th)
Sacks Allowed: 19 (69th)
Interceptions: 4 (11th)
Fumbles lost: 5 (12th)
Turnovers against: 9 (7th)
Rushing: 138.11 (71st)
Total: 463.67 (6th)

PITT DEFENSE
T.O.P. against: 29:28 (45th)
Fumbles rec.: 7 (61st)
Turnovers for: 17 (47th)
Rushing: 106.78 ypg (26th)
Total: 310.89 ypg (29th)

2009 Schedule

Sept. 5 Nevada — W
Sept. 12 @ Michigan — L
Sept. 19 Michigan St. — W
Sept. 26 @ Purdue — W
Oct. 3 Washington — W
Oct. 17 Southern Cal — L
Oct. 24 Boston College — W
Oct. 31 Washington St. — W
Nov. 7 Navy — L
Nov. 14 @ Pittsburgh
Nov. 21 Connecticut
Nov. 28 @ Stanford

Head-to-Head
ND OFFENSE
Scoring: 30.31 ppg (36th)
Total: 391.33 ypg (46th)
Passing: 238.88 ypg (56th)
Rushing: 152.45 ypg (31st)
Interceptions: 2 (20th)
Fumbles lost: 4 (20th)
Turnovers against: 11 (15th)
T.O.P. for: 31:46 (27th)
T.O.P. against: 25:34 (50th)

PITT DEFENSE
Scoring: 17.11 ppg (11th)
Total: 310.89 ypg (29th)
Passing: 186.79 ypg (26th)
Rushing: 124.10 ypg (20th)
Interceptions: 10 (46th)
Fumbles lost: 7 (14th)
T.O.P. for: 25:35 (50th)
T.O.P. against: 29:28 (45th)

Irish Offensive vs. Panthers Defense

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

Freshman kicker Nick Tasch missed his first two field goals since the second game of the season last week, but there’s no reason to think that Tasch won’t return to form this week. Heinz Field is notorious for its difficulty 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 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

Irish Special Teams

The Irish can’t cover Jonathan Baldwin and the ball to have a chance to win. Armando Allen’s return could be big both in the run game that was absent against Navy last weekend with 10 catches, and will be even more effective the Midshipmen despite receiving limited rushing.

On the other side of the ball, Pittsburgh boasts one of the strongest

Irish Special Teams

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IRISH COACHING

COACHING

BILL BRINK
Managing Editor

MICHAE L BRYAN
Associate Sports Editor

JIMMY CLAUSEN said before the season that Charlie Weis wouldn’t get fired because of him. And while you certainly can’t fault Clausen for his play this season, he may have to save Weis’ job with a win at Heinz Field. The Panthers are extremely talented on both sides of the ball, and can pick 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’s return could be big both in the run and passing game. These are two very talented teams, but Pittsburgh’s stronger defense gives them the advantage to make a stop in overtime and get the win.

FINAL SCORE: Pittsburgh 33, Notre Dame 30 (OT)
Panthers Offense vs. Irish Defense

After what looked like weeks of improvement, the Irish run defense took a step back last weekend, giving up 348 rushing yards to Navy’s triple option attack. It’s possible that the Irish were simply foiled by Navy’s unique offense and will return to form against the Panthers’ more traditional style. For Pittsburgh, redshirt freshman Dion Lewis has exploded onto the scene.

Junior kicker Dan Hutchins has made 13 of 16 kicks on the season, and only missed one inside of 40 yards. As a punter, Hutchins is averaging 41.2 yards per kick, and has had 13 punts down inside the 20-yard line.

The Panthers are still searching for the answer returning kicks, as eight different players have at least one kick return on the year. Against the Irish, look for freshmen Ray Graham and Cameron Sadorf to line up deep.

EDGE: PITTBURGH

Final Score: Pittsburgh 27, Notre Dame 20

The Panthers have certainly slowed down since 1982.

I can see two very different things happening in this game. I can imagine the Irish coming out with that deer in the headlights look we saw last season at USC after a disheartening loss to the Trojans. That’s exactly what happened.

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 Borin 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: PITTBURGH

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, this is still the same team that took USC down to the wire. Pittsburgh is good, 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 Big Ten team. Unfortunately for Weis, it may be too little, too late.

FINAL SCORE: Pittsburgh 27, Notre Dame 20

Irish Insider

The analysis, check out the Irish Insider podcast
**How ND’s Opponents Fared**

- (6-3) W 62-7 San Jose St. @ Fresno St.
- (5-5) L 38-36 Purdue @ Wisconsin
- (5-5) W 49-14 W. Michigan @ Purdue
- (4-6) W 38-36 Michigan Michigan St
- (3-6) L 24-23 UCLA @ Oregon St.
- (7-2) W 14-9 Arizona Stanford
- (6-3) Bye @ VA
- (1-8) L 48-7 Arizona UCLA
- (7-3) W 23-21 ND Delaware
- (8-1) 37-10 Syracuse ND
- (4-5) L 47-45 Cincinnati Bye
- (6-3) W 51-42 Oregon @ USC

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**The Observer Classified**

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.

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Pittsburgh game a homecoming for Walls

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 corner- back 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. Infatuated 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,” Wason as well. “I’m estimating around 25.”

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

“It’s real exciting going conference’s Tuesday. “He has good balance. He catches the ball out of the back field. He’s been very impressive,” Panthers senior offensive the 5-foot-8 Dion Lewis has shown mercy to opposing defenses this season. The No. 8 Panthers’ (8-1) leading rusher has 1139 yards, seventh in Division I FBS, and 12 touch- downs so far this season. “Our offensive line does a great job, those guys work hard all the time,” Lewis said after Pittsburgh’s 37-10 win over Syracuse on Nov. 7. “They deserve all the credit. They just keep pounding and blocking those guys, clearing the way. I’m just sticking to what I’ve been doing, letting the game come to me.”

His body of work rests on 203 rushing attempts for 56 yards per carry. In comparison, former Pittsburgh running back LeSean McCoy, whom the Philadelphia Eagles drafted in the second round of the 2009 NFL Draft, averaged 4.9 yards per carry last season, when he rushed for 1403 yards.

Lewis rushed 18 times for 110 yards and a touchdown against the Orange. His worst rushing game of the season came against Navy, when he carried the ball 23 times for 71 yards and a touchdown. In Pittsburgh’s only loss, a 38-31 defeat from N.C. State on Sept. 26, he still managed 98 yards and two scores.

“We’ve scored a lot of good backs,” Syracuse coach Doug Marrone said after Saturday’s game. “I think from an overall scheme, [Lewis] is one of the best backs we’ve faced all sea- son.”

How’s this for proof of how consistently spectacular Lewis has been this season: All Pittsburgh coach Dave Wannstedt said of Lewis’ per- formance after the Syracuse game was. “Dion Lewis did a great job. He had his runs.”

Ho-hum.

Lewis represents the latest in a long line of strong Notre Dame running backs, notably the No. 8 team in the coun- try,” Panthers senior tight end Dorin Dickerson said after the Syracuse game. “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 impor- tance, 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 over- time Pittsburgh win in Notre Dame Stadium.

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

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 clowning 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 Division I college football, McNeil said he thought the year off ultimately helped his friend.

“Him missing a year of brought things into perspec-

tive 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, 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 fac- tor that we’re playing against the No. 8 team in the coun-

try.”

Contact Sam Werner at swerner@nd.edu

Pittsburgh running back Dion Lewis turns upfield during a game earlier this season. Lewis currently leads the Big East in rushing.

Freshman Lewis breaks into starting role for Panthers

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

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