Irish fall 23-20 to South Florida in season opener delayed twice by weather

By MATTHEW DEFRANKS
Sports Writer

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Notre Dame 20, South Florida 23

It was sunny at first, and then the rain came. And it came again. Then it got darker, and darker again, until everything was black.

Just as the weather ebbed and flowed, so did the Irish offense, as a misty vision of Notre Dame dropped its season opener to South Florida 23-20 Saturday.

The disappointing thing is that we thought going into a year where we had some experience that we wouldn’t have to go through this,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “But it looks like we’re going to have to make sure that our players are understanding what it takes to win football games.”

Highlighted by a couple of long passes from senior quarterback Dayne Crist, the Irish (0-1) marched 79 yards in just seven plays to the South Flori-

dia one-yard line in the game’s opening drive. But the Irish squandered their chance when senior running back Jonas Gray fumbled at the goal-line. Cornerback Kayvon Webster scooped the ball up and ran 96 yards to give South Florida (1-

0) an early 7-0 lead.

“You lose football games because you turn the ball over,” the first game committing a single one. The Irish, however, fin-
described a little bit of the day, especially when you look at this game logically.

Notre Dame had the ball and were driving the whole length of the field, and you look up and you see 0-7-0 and it’s like a 79 yard line — you get a good feeling at that point with where we are,” Bulls coach Skip Holtz said. “Kind of sym-
bolized a little bit of the day, especially when you look at this game logically.

Notre Dame racked up 508 yards of total offense while the Bulls were held to just 254 yards. The Irish, however, fin-
ished the game with five total turnovers while the Bulls played 60 minutes without committing a single one.

“People make mistakes in the first game all the time,” senior wide receiver Michael Floyd said. “Making mistakes is the way you lose football games.”

In addition to the five turnovers, the Irish com-
mitted eight penalties, in-
cluding four personal fouls that resulted in live South Florida first downs. You lose football games be-
cause you turn the ball over. You lose football games because you miss field goals. You

lose football games because

you have four personal fouls

penalties,” Kelly said. “The list is long.”

The Irish committed three first-half turnovers that re-
sulted in just South Florida points and a manageable 16-0 halftime deficit.

Crist, named the starter a
fter Rees’ entrance followed a 2 quar-
terback Tommy Rees

replaced him at the start of the second half.

“We didn’t feel like we produced the way we should have,” Kelly said. “It wasn’t a difficult de-
cision to make that. It was difficult because it threw us into an area where we weren’t thinking we had to go.”

Rees’ entrance followed a 2 hour, 10 minute weather delay due

lightening and heavy rain in the area. For the first time in Notre Dame history, weather forced the stoppage of play.

“The chaos was on the field for me,” Kelly said. “I think everyone that was involved in that should be commended. All those other things were left up to very capable people.”

On its first drive with Rees at
quarters before being intercepted by Bulls linebacker Michael Lanaris, ending a drive in similar fashion to the game’s

one-yard-line.

After a one-yard touchdown

by junior running back Cierre Wood and a failed two-point conversion cut the lead to 23-

13, the Irish defense forced a

sue Ruffer’s onside kick, but South Florida wide receiver Lindsey Lamar snatched the ball before it fell into Irish hands. South Florida took a knee to run out the
clock and hand Notre Dame its first loss of the season.

“We say this all the time. You can’t start winning until you stop losing, and the things that we did today out there obvi-
ously go to the heart of how you lose football games,” Kelly said. “There’s no quit in the group, but you can’t win playing like that.”

Contact Matthew DeFranks at
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Irish junior wide receiver Theo Riddick falls to come down with a pass during Notre Dame’s 23-20 loss to South Florida on Saturday. Riddick struggled, losing a fumble on a punt return and amassing only 32 receiving yards.

Irish wide receiver Jerre
Young South Florida safety

Young came up with seven tackles and an interception, but it was his strip of Jonas Gray that set the tone for the game.

stat of the game

Kayvon Webster’s 96-yard fumble return for a touchdown in the first quarter.

play of the game

While the Irish opened the game

effectively moving the ball, the turnover near the goal line gave the Bulls a quick upper hand.

quote of the game

“You can’t start winning until you stop losing, and the things we did out there obviously go to the heart of how you lose football games.”

Brian Kelly
Irish coach
Irish Insiders

Sports Editor
Allan Joseph

Cierre Wood racked up 90 of his 104 rushing yards in the first half before the Irish took to the air to try to catch up.

Ben Turk averaged only 27.4 net yards per punt, which hurt the Irish in the field position game.

The game was delayed for 2 hours, 10 minutes due to inclement weather at halftime.

Notre Dame trailed South Florida by 16 points at halftime, its largest halftime deficit since 2008 against USC.

The Irish had nine scoreless possessions before they finally broke through to get on the scoreboard.

Fool fundamentals are concerning

Saturday's game was, to say the least, unusual. From the first weather delay in Notre Dame history, to how quickly Dayne Crist got benched, to the second weather delay in Notre Dame history, everything about the 2011 season opener was bizarre. But despite all of the distractions, one surprise stood out more than most, and it's the most worrisome — the Irish fundamentals were quite frankly, terrible.

Missed blocks. Dropped punts. Personal fouls. Miscommunication. Shanked field goals. Turnovers, turnovers and turnovers. Dumb penalties. An interception off a receiver's helmet because he wasn't looking for the ball. The list grows from stupid oversights to infuriating mistakes all the way to so-ridiculous-you'd-be-laughing if you weren't crying mishaps.

And yes, it's a season opener. I understand that the first game of a season is always sloppy — in fact, I mentioned that in my pregame prediction. But there's no reason it should have been anything like this.

First-game jitters are no excuse for a dropped pass, much less a late-hit penalty in the fourth quarter by an experienced player like Gary Gray.

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The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily The Observer.
Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu
Quarterback switch adds drama

Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees replaced senior quarterback Dayne Crist at the beginning of the second half. Rees completed 24 of his 34 attempts for 246 yards. Rees also threw two touchdowns and two interceptions.

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

The quarterback controversy that has been brewing in South Bend since the beginning of last year’s spring practice took a turn Saturday, leaving fans, players and even coaches apparently befuddled.

Less than two weeks after Kelly named sophomore Tommy Rees as the backup quarterback behind senior Dayne Crist, Rees was called on to lead the Irish in the second half of their 23-20 victory over South Florida.

“Well, you know, we didn’t expect to have to make this move, obviously, so I didn’t have a chance to really evaluate the quarterback situation and make another decision,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “This was a step back for us as it relates to where we thought we were going.

In the first half under Crist, the Irish offense was ineffective, as two early drives ended in red-zone turnovers. Crist unleashed an errant third-down throw and was hurt by dropped balls, as the Irish were forced to punt three times in the second quarter. Heading into the half down 16-0, the coaching staff decided to make the switch to Rees.

“We didn’t feel like we produced the way we should have,” Kelly said. “It wasn’t a difficult decision to make that it was difficult because it threw us into an area where we weren’t thinking we had to go to.”

The decision came early in the 130th Notre Dame game, which was protracted due to severe weather.

“They told us when the coaches came over, and they pulled Dayne and I aside and just let us know,” Rees said. “We just went from there. You guys know how Dayne is. He’s been supportive of me since day one. He was there on the sideline, he was here in the locker room walking me through stuff.”

Most of the Irish players were not aware that a change was made until Rees took command of the huddle early in the second half, but Bulls coach Skip Holtz said he wasn’t surprised to see Rees take the field.

“Was I surprised or shocked?” Holtz said. “No. You’re down 16-0. I certainly understand that mindset to say, ‘Hey, we’ve got to do something, we’ve got to do something to get a charge out of our football team.’”

Rees seemed to have provided that immediate spark, but interceptions killed the momentum once again for the Irish, one coming on the South Florida four-yard line and another coming in the fourth quarter with Notre Dame trying to pull out the miracle victory. Rees finished the game completing 24 of 34 passes for 296 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions. Crist, on the other hand, completed only seven of his 15 attempts in the first half, gaining 95 yards and throwing an interception in the end zone.

Moving forward, the Irish have reiterated the realm of uncertainty regarding the quarterback position, and nobody seems to have the answer. Kelly didn’t announce a starter Sunday, and so Crist and Rees will begin the week of practice just like the weeks leading up to this first game.

“Nothing really changes,” Rees said. “It’s here and I hold myself like we are going to be the guy, so not much changes for me. It’s up to the coaches, and I’ll be ready. I’ll prepare like I’m going to play and we’ll see what happens.”

As the rest of the season unfolds, the entire team looks to actively prevent the quarterback battle from interfering with the team’s focus. That process begins, of course, with the two men fighting for the starting job.

“We have no choice,” Rees said. “As the quarterback, you are the leader and you can’t have a distraction take over the team. It’s a long season and we can’t let that get ahead of us.”

Referring to the quarterback play in Saturday’s game, specifically the turnovers in the red zone, Kelly pinned most of the blame on himself.

“Poor coaching,” he said. “Didn’t do a good job with our quarterbacks, obviously. That’s my responsibility.”

Notre Dame did not employ either sophomore Andrew Hendrix or freshman Everett Golson at quarterback, whom many Irish fans expected to see in special packages or to provide a change of pace.

Whoever will be under center for Notre Dame’s upcoming game against Michigan, Irish fans hope he will be able to right the ship and lead the team to a rebound victory. As for the rest of the players, they are ready to follow either quarterback in search of a win.

“We don’t care [who starts at quarterback],” senior wide receiver Michael Floyd said. “They’re great quarterback’s, obviously. That’s my responsibility.”

Kelly is expected to announce the starting quarterback Tuesday during his weekly press conference.

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Floyd sets new receiving records

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

Senior wide receiver Michael Floyd began his final season in an Irish uniform with perhaps the best performance of his career, as he caught a career-high 12 catches for 154 yards and two touchdowns.

The effort was enough to move him up the ranks in several categories in the Notre Dame record book.

With his ninth reception of the game, Floyd moved past Jeff Samardzija for the most receptions in Notre Dame history. Floyd finished the game with 183 career receptions, four ahead of Samardzija.

Floyd also recorded the 14th 100-yard receiving game of his career, moving him into second behind only Golden Tate, who had 15 such games.

Floyd jumped into second place in career receiving yards with 2,693, only 14 yards behind former walk-on had converted 20 field goals to begin last season, the 2009 and 18 straight made field goals in 2010.

Floyd set new career receiving records: 124 catches, 2,693 yards, 31 touchdowns. He moved into second place in career receiving with 2,693 yards, only 14 yards behind former walk-on had converted 20 field goals to begin last season, the 2009 and 18 straight made field goals in 2010.

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Samardzija.

Samardzija. career receptions, four ahead of receipts in Notre Dame history.

Jeff Samardzija for the most receptions in Notre Dame history.

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Notre Dame’s 2011 season got off to a whirlwind start Saturday when the Irish dropped a 23-20 decision to South Florida.

The game was marked by the first two weather delays in Notre Dame football history, a two-quarter term as starter for quarterback Dayne Crist and five turnovers for the Irish. South Florida turned an early 96-yard fumble recovery into a touchdown, then built up a 16-0 halftime lead before the first delay. While the Irish mounted a comeback in the second half, South Florida iced the game with a touchdown midway through the fourth quarter just before the second weather delay.

Clockwise from top: Fans file into Notre Dame Stadium as the Irish warm up after the first weather delay, which stretched halftime past two hours; Notre Dame quarterback Dayne Crist looks for a receiver; running back Cierre Wood evades South Florida defenders; wide receiver Michael Floyd drops a pass.