By ANDREW GASTELUM
Sports Writer

Last year, No. 15 Michigan State rode a fake field goal play called “Little Giants” to a thrilling overtime victory over Notre Dame. It turns out the sequel is no success, as Notre Dame rolled to a 31-13 win Saturday to avoid an 0-3 start.

“People were so excited to run that and obviously we were able to come up with a big play,” senior defensive end Ethan Johnson said. “It knocked the tight end back, the guard back, and because of that didn’t go. He could not get around. Had he gotten around, it looked like [Bell] would have walked in. So we just got started talking about it and just reminded our guys to be gap-conscious and do their jobs,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We just did our job on that and obviously were able to come up with a big play.”

Sophomore running back Cierre Wood led the Irish attack with two first-half rushing touchdowns. The Irish (1-2) set the tone early with an 89-yard kickoff return to start the game and never gave up the lead after Wood capped the drive with a 22-yard touchdown run.

Wood also scored on a 6-yard run with three minutes left in the first half to put the finishing touches on a 95-yard drive to start the game and never gave up the lead after Wood capped the drive with a 22-yard touchdown run. Wood scored on a 6-yard run with three minutes left in the first half to put the finishing touches on a 95-yard drive to start the game and never gave up the lead after Wood capped the drive with a 22-yard touchdown run.

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Notre Dame Weekend: A Look at Win Over Michigan State

Irish freshman defensive end Aaron Lynch recorded five tackles, three for a loss, including a sack of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins on Saturday. Lynch forced a fumble on the sack, one of two Spartan turnovers.

Andrew Owens
Associate Sports Editor

It wasn’t perfect, but a win is a win

It wasn’t perfect but a win is a win, and that’s exactly what Notre Dame needed to prevent a stunningly disappointing start from turning into a lost season.

“We just had to find a way to win,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said after his team’s 31-13 win over No. 15 Michigan State on Saturday. “By any means, just find a way to win the football game.”

Kelly’s words couldn’t be truer, as the Irish mixed-and-matched its way to a crucial victory with changes in personnel. Freshman running back George Atkinson scored in his first game handling the kickoff return duties and punched Michigan State in the stomach, a blow from which it never recovered.

Freshman linebacker Troy Niklas and senior linebacker Steve Filer replaced starting sophomore Prince Shembo, who was absent due to a family emergency. The two did well enough for a unit that pressured Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins all day. Junior punter Ben Turk pinned the Spartans deep in their territory a couple times after switching to the rugby-style punt midway through the game. His performance in the first two games put the defense in difficult positions and the team could not afford to continue to lose valuable field position.

Kelly said he was impressed with the performance of the six true freshmen who contributed Saturday, highlighted by Atkinson and defensive end Aaron Lynch’s sack and forced fumble in the first quarter.

Now that the Irish seem to have found some answers at a few puzzling positions and some playmakers have sparked the team at others, the team finds itself at 1-2 overall. The Irish must be relieved after a nightmarish start to September, but the team still has mistakes to correct before all is well at Notre Dame.

Adding up the numbers

Notre Dame gained 275 yards of total offense Saturday, its lowest total of the season.

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Notre Dame sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees has turned the ball over seven times in just 10 quarters.

7
Kirk Cousins attempted 53 passes Saturday, surpassing his previous career-high of 43.

53
The Spartans scored just one touchdown in five red zone appearances Saturday. They also added a field goal.

1
The Spartans converted a first down on only five of 17 third-down attempts.

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The Irish again committed multiple turnovers Saturday, giving them 13 on the season.

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Check out more coverage at ndsmobserver.com

The Observer IRISH INSIDER
Monday, September 19, 2011

Irish freshman defensive end Aaron Lynch recorded five tackles, three for a loss, including a sack of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins on Saturday. Lynch forced a fumble on the sack, one of two Spartan turnovers.

It wasn’t perfect, but a win is a win.

At this point in time, that can’t not happen. Notre Dame needs to take the next step forward and roll over the teams it should roll over. It cannot expect to retain the top-25 and truly belong there until it does so.

Kelly described Notre Dame’s play down the stretch Saturday as “outstanding.” For the team to continue to rehabilitate its 2011 campaign, it will require more mixing-and-matching and more sparks from the playmakers.

When a kickoff returner sparks the squad by bringing one back or a freshman defensive lineman forces a turnover in a key situation, it removes some of the pressure from an offensive unit lacking consistency.

Contrary to what many people believe, the 2011 squad will not be defined by the first two games. Sure, they will not be forgotten whatever their final record may be, but it is how the team responds to the 0-2 start that will determine how they are remembered.

If Notre Dame takes care of business, as it should, the next three weeks, it will enter the USC game with a 4-2 record, which, while not perfect, would mark a shift in the right direction for the program.

And that’s exactly what Notre Dame needs right now.

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

Contact Andrew Owens at owens2@nd.edu
Rushing duo dominates first half

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

After coming together for 200 yards rushing last week, the running back tandem of junior Cierre Wood and senior Jonas Gray combined for 188 yards on 18 carries and two touchdowns in the first half. The duo had five runs of at least ten yards before the break. However, the Irish managed only two rushing yards in the second half.

Irish defense smothers the run

Michigan State entered the contest with a rushing average of 175 yards per game, but Notre Dame’s defense held the Spartans to just 29 yards rushing on 23 carries. The defense held the Spartans to just two rushing yards in the second half, including a 13-yard carry by Michigan State running back Le’Veon Bell, but those drives ended with the Irish defense stopping Michigan State on downs.

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“[Blanton] is always a guy who steps up in the big plays,” senior safety and captains Harrison Smith said. “So he’s just a gamer and he has a true feel for the game.”

Blanton said. “I was coached that allowed me to make plays, whether it’s a ball in the air, making a tackle or making that big tackle on that reverse wildcat play they were doing,” senior safety and captains Harrison Smith said. “So he’s just a gamer and he has a true feel for the game.”

“[Blanton] is extremely active,” Kelly said. “He’s got great instincts. The ball is in the air, he’s got to get it. I feel confident no matter who goes against him that when the ball is in the air he’s going to make a great play on the ball.”

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Rushing duo dominates first half

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After a week of criticism, questions and scrutiny following last week’s loss at Michigan, Notre Dame’s secondary raised questions that needed answering, and senior cornerback Robert Blanton did just that in a 31-13 Irish victory Saturday. Notre Dame defense smothers the run, following two offensive plays and a penalty, they came to big plays, as he sealed the victory. For Blanton and the secondary, it was just another day’s work.

“We were pretty busy because they threw the ball a lot, but that’s fun. You love that as a [defensive back],” Blanton said. “You don’t want to give up the big play, especially when you’re on the field lead. We just wanted to make sure we didn’t do anything as [defensive backs] back there to cost us the game.”

Blanton swung the momentum of the game with a big play of his own. As the first half drew to a close, Cousins dove the Spartans into the red zone. On first-and-goal from the 12, Blanton knocked down a pass in the end zone intended for senior wide receiver B.J. Cunningham.

On the next play, Blanton batted away a pass intended for senior wide receiver Keith Nichol, and suddenly it was third-and-long. Michigan State was unable to score on the next play, and its drive ended with a failed fake field-goal attempt that gave Notre Dame all the momentum for the second half.

“The coaches make me work on playing the ball every day at the high point and squeezing the receiver,” Blanton said. “So it was just doing what I was coached to do. I was allowed to make those plays.”

Blanton was not finished when it came to big plays, as he sealed the victory with a fourth-quarter turnover when Michigan State was attempting to cut it to a one-score deficit. The Spartans had increased the Notre Dame advantage from 18 to 15, and after a muffled punt, two offensive plays and a penalty, they faced a first-and-goal from the 3-yard line. Cousins looked right and threw to wards running back Le’Veon Bell, but the ball never arrived. Blanton had delected the pass and picked it out of the air before running it back 82 yards to the Spartan 12-yard line.

“Coach [Bob] Diaco and the coaching staff made a great call and put me in a great position,” Blanton said. “Cousins threw the ball and I was able to get to the lead. Then I made a play on it. I had my teammates out there blocking for me, and the ball safety Amadi Slaughter kept yelling for me to pitch it to him. It was a great play.”

Drives continued, and the defensive backs chipped in with some crucial contributions as well. Blanton alone had six tackles, three for a loss, including a 13-yard carry by Michigan State running back Le’Veon Bell, but those drives ended with the Irish defense stopping Michigan State on downs.

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The play was similar to Blanton’s interception with 4:23 remaining in the fourth quarter at Michigan that appeared to put the game out of the Wolverines’ reach. On this occasion, Blanton picked up the game on its own.

“I was coached that allowed me to make plays, whether it’s a ball in the air, making a tackle or making that big tackle on that reverse wildcat play they were doing,” senior safety and captains Harrison Smith said. “So he’s just a gamer and he has a true feel for the game.”

Blanton is always a guy who steps up in the big plays, as he sealed the victory. For Blanton and the secondary, it was just another instance of Blanton leading the defense.

“Blanton is extremely active,” Kelly said. “He’s got great instincts. The ball is in the air, he’s got to get it. I feel confident no matter who goes against him that when the ball is in the air he’s going to make a great play on the ball.”

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Michigan State entered the contest with a rushing average of 175 yards per game, but Notre Dame’s defense held the Spartans to just 29 yards rushing on 23 carries. The 29 yards is the lowest running total by Michigan State against the Irish since 1987, when the Spartans ran for 21 yards in a 31-8 loss. The Spartans were only able to gain one first down on the ground in the first half, as their longest rushing play of the game was just eight yards.

Irish respond after turnovers

The Irish committed three turnovers, bringing its season total to 13. However, the defense allowed just three points from those three Michigan State possessions, despite all three occurring on Notre Dame’s half of the field. Two of those drives ended with the Irish generating turnovers of their own, as Aaron Lynch forced a fumble of quarterback Kirk Cousins on a sack and Robert Blanton recorded a key fourth-quarter interception.
Notre Dame jumped ahead 14-3 in the first quarter and never looked back in a 31-13 victory over Michigan State. Freshman George Atkinson recorded an 89-yard kickoff return touchdown and running backs Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray combined for 113 first-half rushing yards. Cornerback Robert Blanton made several key plays for the Irish secondary, including the game-sealing interception of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins’ pass in the fourth quarter. The Spartans totaled only 29 rushing yards in the game. The win was Notre Dame’s first, as the Irish improved to 1-2 on the season.