Balancing Act

Tyler Eifert develops into a prolific tight end while showing younger players the ropes.
It's not difficult to pinpoint the reasons for Notre Dame's 5-0 record. Late turnovers in the red zone, poor decision-making at the quarterback position and a tired defense that spends too much time on the field have all contributed to the two blemishes on the Irish record.

As such, Notre Dame has a slew of off-field issues to deal with. Before they return to gridiron against Purdue.

Nonetheless, Brian Kelly and his coaching staff have their work cut out for them off the field as well. The traditional problems lead to traditional solutions. Better decision-making late in games and better time-management are battles within the game Kelly can coach improvement in his players.

As for bringing Notre Dame back to the elite level, the program must instill a culture of winning. And it's working.

In this column are those of the Notre Dame fan, football as entertainment, Frank said the Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank said. "There are about 6-7 slots left, and I would think everybody filling those spots would be a four-star or higher. If that's what they end up with, they're going to climb into the top-five. I would guess. Right now, because the numbers are a little low compared to some others, I'd say they're probably a top-10 class."

"It doesn't matter what skill players you've got if you don't have good players up front," Frank said. "The big thing is, you've got to control the line of scrimmage. If you've got great offensive linemen and great defensive linemen, you're going to be a really good team."

"Perhaps the most important place where he needs to build it, and that's offensive line and defensive line," Frank said.

"The last thing they need more than anything, is an offensive tackle," Frank said. "I'll tell you, having a guy like Steve Elmer, the 2013 commit, he's going to be probably the top offensive tackle in the whole Midwest next year — having him commit early, doesn't make it quite as big a need to get an offensive tackle. If there's the opportunity to take one, they'll take one, because the guys that are considering Notre Dame right now are too good to pass up.

Elmer's commitment is a reminder that despite the focus on skill players in the 2012 class, Kelly is firmly committed to developing high-quality line players."

"Brian Kelly is building this team at the most important place where he needs to build it, and that's offensive line and defensive line," Frank said.

"The big thing is, you've got to control the line of scrimmage. If you've got great offensive line men and great defensive line men, you're going to be a really good team."

"It doesn't matter what skill players you've got if you don't have good players up front," Frank said. "The big thing is, you've got to control the line of scrimmage. If you've got great offensive linemen and great defensive linemen, you're going to be a really good team."

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Country boy
Junior tight end Tyler Eifert spreads his love of country music and football around the Irish

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

When junior tight end Tyler Eifert returned to campus following Notre Dame’s physically exhausting 15-12 win over Pittsburg on Saturday evening, the simple country boy did what he knows best — he went to a Toby Keith concert.

“[Country] is all I listen to,” Eifert said before rat-tling off a list of his favorite country artists. “I used to like rap, but that’s just because I liked the beat. I didn’t know what they’re saying and now I know what they’re saying it’s kind of ridiculous. [Country fits] my personality I guess and the lyrics mean a lot. I enjoy it.”

Although Eifert is a strong proponent of country music, he has not succeeded in spreading the love to all of his teammates. “No, I will never [listen to country music],” junior running back Cierre Wood said. “I tried, I honestly tried to listen to country music. Because I asked [my friends who listen to it]. Why do you guys like country music?”

“They were basically telling me it’s about having a good day, sitting outside with your friends, stuff like that. I was like, ‘I can dig that.’ But I tried listening to it, and it’s like a ruckus to my ears. I can’t, I just can’t. I tried it. I got some selections ... but it all sounds the same to me, really.”

Saturday marks a homecoming of sorts for Eifert — the country music aficionado and native of Fort Wayne, Ind., who played high school football at Bishop Dwenger, a mere 119 miles from Purdue’s Ross-Ade Stadium.

Growing up a Boilermaker buff, Eifert often traveled to games and said he has fond memories of watching current New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees in a Purdue uniform. Those experiences were not always positive, though.

“No Notre Dame usually won and that was annoying,” Eifert said.

As a freshman in 2009, Eifert did not participate in the 24-21 Irish victory Saturday will mark his first time playing in the stadium he knew so well as a child. “It will be cool,” he said. “It’s a place I’m familiar with. I’ve been there a lot. I just need to approach it as any other game. I’ve been there a million times but never played there, so I look forward to it.”

Eifert was widely recruited across the Midwest in high school, but ultimately he chose Notre Dame over Purdue and left behind the memories he had collected over 17 years.

“Being recruited and deciding where you’re going to go to school, it’s a tough decision and being so familiar with the place and growing up around it, yeah, it made it a tough decision,” he said.

When Eifert looks up at the lit-up stands Saturday night, he might see some familiar faces, but he said everything is about preparing to leave town with a victory.

“When it comes down to it, it’s just a football field like anywhere else and that’s how you have to approach it,” he said.

Baptism by fire

Last season, Eifert benefited from playing behind a preseason All-American tight end in Kyle Rudolph, but that security blanket was pulled away from under Eifert’s feet when Rudolph was hampered by a hamstring injury and eventually underwent season-ending surgery.

“I think he kind of got a baptism by fire a year ago with what happened to Kyle,” tight ends coach Mike Denbrock said. “He had to grow up fast. I don’t know how ready he was for it, but he continues to improve and come to practice everyday and work his tail off.

“What you see in practice you’re kind of confident in, but until you put them in a game situation and see what they do, you don’t really know what you have.”

Eifert responded by making a name for himself when he caught 27 passes for 352 yards and two touchdowns in Rudolph’s absence. The junior player an integral role in the season-ending four-game winning streak, sophomore quar- terback Tommy Rees said.

“I think we feel real comfortable with each other,” Rees said. “We both started playing at the same time last year. As far as the connection and chemistry, I think it’s real strong on the field and I think our off-field relations helps that.”

Big brother, little brother

Eifert’s rapid development is due in large part to Rudolph’s influence as the two have developed a close bond and continued to stay in touch even now that Rudolph is playing in the NFL.

“He texted me after the [Pittsburgh] game and we stay in contact,” Eifert said. “He’s taught me a lot of what I know about football and he really helped me along to playing at the college level. He’s been a huge part of my success.”

Rudolph said Eifert tried to flood him with information.

“I just tried to give him as many tips and tricks as possible, whether in his preparation that week or route combinations. Some things I found helpful in route running or being able to be a capable blocker as a tight end,” he said.

Eifert, now with the Minnesota Vikings. “I feel like Tyler has done everything in his power to set up the offense,” Denbrock said.

Rudolph was most impressed by Eifert’s growth since his freshman year.

“He’s definitely matured a lot since his first year there, especially watching the game at Pitt he just kind of took over at the end of the game,” Rudolph said. “A lot of big catches, especially on the last drive, when he got a big third down and a touchdown and the two-point conversion.”

Student-teacher

With senior Mike Ragone out for the season with an injury, Eifert is by far the most expe- rienced tight end on the squad, with junior Jake Golic, sophomore Alex Welch and freshman Ben Koyack behind him on the depth chart. He has now seen a 180-degree shift in his ap- proach, filling Rudolph’s shoes in terms of being a mentor for younger teammates.

“They’re very tight ends too and if there’s something they need help on or advice I can give them, I’m there to do it,” he said.

Although Eifert is now the leader of the position on the team, he said he is still learning and developing each week, par- ticularly as a blocker.

“I’d say small things to do with blocking [are aspects to de- velop],” he said. “There’s still some things I need to work on. Everybody knows that — just the small techniques about where to put my hand and little things of the blocking aspect.”

So what would be a successful homecoming for Eifert? A pro- ductive game and a Notre Dame victory, all capped off by listen- ing to some tunes by Toby Keith.

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Purdue is likely to employ some of the same tactics as Pittsburgh in order to minimize Michael Floyd’s production and slow the Irish offense. The secondary was held to four points and 27 yards against the Panthers. If the Boilermakers are successful in that regard, Notre Dame will need another player to step up, as tight end Tyler Eifert did last week.

The Purdue pass defense ranks 26th in the nation through three games, including holding Southeast Missouri State to one yard through the air in the 59-0 Boilermaker victory Sept. 24.

Much of Notre Dame’s problems on defense can be attributed to the opposition’s pass rush. When Rees is forced to throw on the run, he is much less accurate. The Boilermakers have recorded four sacks in the first three contests of 2011.

Notre Dame continues to struggle on special teams with a shaky return unit. David Ruffer missed a 39-yard field goal for the Irish, though three of four Ben Turk punts were downed inside the 20-yard line.

George Atkinson and Kyle Brindza are the bright spots in an otherwise struggling unit. Atkinson returned a kickoff 96 yards against Pittsburgh a week after returning a kickoff for a touchdown against Michigan State.

Kapron Lewis-Moore is a consistent threat on defense and has 15 tackles for loss.

The Irish are still looking for some consistency in the running game. Cierre Wood rushed for 94 yards on 23 carries and Brian Kelly said he was pleased with Wood’s improvement between games and has struggled at times to get a consistent flow to the Irish. As Irish coach Brian Kelly said Wednesday, “It’s their Super Bowl.” The Boilermakers have a habit of making night games difficult for the Irish.

What’s worse, Notre Dame has a habit of inconsistent play, as it is trying to get the Irish coming out and blowing Purdue off the field, but it’s even easier to see Notre Dame struggle to put away an inferior team. The Irish will win, but it will not be easy, nor will it be pretty. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Purdue’s opponents have averaged 109 yards per game on the ground through three games and have forced their opponents to be one-dimensional. Linebacker Joe Holland leads the unit with two sacks, and the defensive line paces the defense with four tackles for loss.

The Irish are still looking for their first complete game when it comes to running the football. Wood and Gray have the ability to control the pace of the game behind the talented Irish offensive line, and a balanced attack would go a long way toward a Notre Dame win on the road.
Purdue Defense

Purdue Offensive

PURDUE OFFENSIVE COACHING
Danny Hope leads the Boilermakers in his third season as coach and is still looking for his first victory over Notre Dame. Hope and his assistants will try to pressure Rees throughout the game and keep a dormant Irish offense from consistently putting points on the board.

Purdue rushing
The Boilermakers have accounted for nine rushing touchdowns in three games this season, and the running game has anchored the offense.

Rees and the offense will struggle, it will not be enough to let an abysmal Boilermaker squad defeat its ability to make Ralph Bolden a non-factor.

While Marve is immobile as a quarterback, TerBush has the ability to pick up key first downs with his legs. His longest carry of the season is a 29-yarder.

The Irish rushing defense is the backbone of the unit, holding Michigan State to just 29 yards and explosive running back Ray Graham to 89 yards in Notre Dame’s last two games, respectively.

Manti Te’o has 41 tackles this season to lead the Irish, 16 more than the next closest defender, Harrison Smith. Three of Te’o’s stops have come for a loss.

Purdue will need a strong start from its running game if it is going to move the ball against a talented Irish defense. If the Boilermakers can force Notre Dame to put eight men in the box, TerBush and Marve will benefit from play-action passes and opportunities to get the ball to their receivers in space.

PURDUE PASSING
Quarterbacks Caleb TerBush and Robert Marve were a combined 23-of-53 passing for 234 yards and a touchdown in a 59-0 blowout of Southeast Missouri State on Sep. 17, a week before the team’s bye.

Purdue coach Danny Hope announced this week that the Boilermakers will once again employ a two-quarterback system when Notre Dame travels to Ross-Ade Stadium.

TerBush is listed as No. 1 on the depth chart, but Marve will get considerable playing time. Justin Siller is the most dynamic playmaker on the Boiler offense, as the senior has snatched 14 passes in three games for a total of 338 yards.

Crosby Wright is a dangerous playmaking threat at tight end, as the junior has hauled in six receptions for 80 yards and a touchdown this season.

While Marve is immobile as a quarterback, TerBush has the ability to pressure Rees throughout the game and pressure Rees.

If they run the ball effectively and pressure Rees, Purdue may be vanilla for so long. The Irish begin a seven-game stretch of winnable games, and it starts with a state-

Andrew Owens
Associate Sports Editor

Is this the week Notre Dame finally corrects its mistakes and plays to its potential? No.

Right now, sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees is way too skittish in the pocket and is not showing the accuracy and game-management skills that allowed him to finish 4-0 as a starter last season and led Irish coach Brian Kelly to pull the plug on senior quarterback Dayne Crist so early against South Florida.

The defense will allow a couple big plays, but overall will suffocate the Purdue offense primarily because of its ability to make Ralph Bolden a non-factor.

While Rees and the offense will struggle, it will not be enough to let an abysmal Boilermaker squad defeat the Irish under the lights.

Purdue Special Teams

Carson Wiggs is 5-of-7 on field goal attempts during the 2011 campaign, with misses of 31 and 38 yards and a long of 50 yards.

Cody Webster has locked down the punting position after battling with Wiggs for the starting job. Webster is averaging 49.8 yards per punt, with seven of 10 boots longer than 50 yards and five that have been downed inside the 20-yard line.

The Boilermakers have 19 tackles for loss and 12 sacks on the season.

The Irish rushing defense is strong and slowed down the Pittsburgh aerial attack in the 15-12 Irish win, and sustaining pressure Saturday will be key to a Notre Dame victory.

Robert Blanton led the Irish secondary in September and is still looking for his first victory over Notre Dame.

Hope knows the best chance Purdue has to win is putting points on the board.

Brian Kelly’s offense can only try to pressure Rees throughout the game and pressure Rees.

If they run the ball effectively and pressure Rees, Purdue may be vanilla for so long. The Irish begin a seven-game stretch of winnable games, and it starts with a state-

Kyle Rudolph, former ND tight end

“I think Notre Dame will win 28-3 because they have the advantage in two key matchups, they’ve turned it around and won straight, and the defense is playing really well right now.”
Running game adds new dimension to Notre Dame offense

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Editor

In 2010, Notre Dame’s offense was often one-dimensional, relying almost exclusively on the passing game for much of the season. This year, however, junior running back Cierre Wood and senior running back Jonas Gray have provided a tandem ground attack that has completely erased any memories of a poor rushing offense last year.

“Last year I really wasn’t a threat,” Wood said. “I got in the classroom with Coach Hinton learning the Xs and Os because that’s a vital part when it comes to the game.”

Wood has finally come into his own as the primary back in the Irish offense. As the featured back, Wood’s most important attribute, however, may have been with him all along.

“It takes great confidence to play this game — not cockiness, but confidence,” Hinton said. “I don’t know that there’s ever lacked confidence.”

Wood’s backfield stablemate, Jonas Gray, had a rocky start to the season when he fumbled just outside the end zone in Notre Dame’s season-opening loss to South Florida and gave up a touchdown that would set the Irish back early. While frustrated at the time, Hinton knew he had to give Gray an opportunity to redeem himself.

“The one thing you tell every player right off the bat is that not one play’s ever going to win the game, not one play’s ever going to lose the game,” Hinton said. “We need him to go so, we had to put confidence back in him. Sometimes you’ve got to live with those mistakes. It has happened to everyone, what you’ve got to do is overcome any increased attention.

However, Hinton said he believes his focus on the fundamentals will allow his backs to overcome any lack of ability.

“You’ve got to go out every day and work on the little things that take you through game 12 and hopefully into game 13 and the things that you want to accomplish,” he said. “We’re every day trying to work on the fundamental things that will make us better.”

Wood and Gray have seen a significant amount of offensive production this season, as the Irish enter the meat of their schedule. Hinton expects opponents will begin to focus on Wood and Gray.

“The more they have success, the more they have a bulls-eye on their chest, and the more they’ve got to raise their game,” Hinton said.

While Wood and Gray have been tight, Hinton said, “As a coach, you know the mistakes freshmen normally make early on, and you just don’t want to accept those in games as tight as ours. They both would do an outstanding job if asked to go in a game.”

As the Irish enter the meat of their schedule, Hinton expects opponents will begin to focus on Wood and Gray. While Wood and Gray have seen a significant amount of offensive production this season, as the Irish enter the meat of their schedule. Hinton expects opponents will begin to focus on Wood and Gray.

“I was juiced up to make a crucial back. The touchdown scamper allowed Gray to display a speed belied by his power-back mentality. He was juiced up to make it happen,” Hinton said.

“He made it happen. He’s kind of struggled on making one miss, and he did a great job this time on making one miss.”

While Wood and Gray have seen a significant amount of offensive production this season, as the Irish enter the meat of their schedule. Hinton expects opponents will begin to focus on Wood and Gray.

“The more they have success, the more they have a bulls-eye on their chest, and the more they’ve got to raise their game.”

Center: Cierre Wood has averaged 20.75 carries and 98.2 yards per game through Notre Dame’s first four games.

SARAH O’CONNOR/The Observer

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Boilermakers use bye to prepare for ‘Super Bowl’

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Editor-in-Chief

Two weeks separated from a 59-0 drubbing of Southeast Missouri State, Purdue has had plenty of time to let its momentum prepare for Notre Dame.

The Boilermakers (2-1) used the first week of their two-week window for some old-fashioned rest and relaxation. "The bye week went very well for us," Boilermakers coach Danny Hope said Tuesday. "I think we got done what we wanted to get done. We wanted to get some rest first. After the Southeast Missouri game, [the team] had Sunday afternoon off, all of Monday, all of Tuesday, all of Wednesday. That gave them a chance to heal up a little bit, freshen up a little bit."

When the players returned to the practice field, Hope had a Notre Dame-specific game plan waiting for them. "It gave us a chance to put together a game plan and take it on the practice field and test it some, over and over again," he said. "I feel like we are a lot more settled with our defensive package now, the fronts, the coverages, the pressures we’ll call."

We’ve improved from the Rice game to the Southeast Missouri State game, and I think we showed a lot of improvement in practice from the Southeast Missouri game-heading into the Notre Dame game."

While the defense struggles to handle a spread offense, Hope enjoys relative constancy on the offensive side of the ball. Quarterbacks Caleb TerBush and Robert Marve split the time under the center, with Hope insisting TerBush is the number one quarterback.

"Last year and the beginning of this season we had five or six starting quarterbacks in about 14 games, so to have some continuity at the quarterback position is very good for our football team," Hope said. "We don’t have to make a switch. We have two quarterbacks who are ready to go and to help our team."

With the Boilermaker defense preparing for the Tommy Rees-led spread offense, and TerBush/Marve ready to lead an offensive attack, Irish coach Brian Kelly knows Notre Dame cannot afford to play as poorly as it did in its 15-12 victory over Pittsburgh. "This is their Super Bowl," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "This is the biggest game on their schedule by far."

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu

Purdue quarterback Robert Marve dives into the end zone during Notre Dame’s 23-12 victory over Purdue in 2010. Marve is splitting time with Caleb TerBush at quarterback this year.

Information Meeting
Monday, October 3 5:30 p.m.
102 DeBartolo Hall

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