October will show who Notre Dame really is

September may be filled with excitement over the new season, and November may hold the push for a BCS bowl, but for this year’s Irish, October may be the most important month of the season. Four weeks from now, when Halloween festivities are in full swing, we’ll know whether the Irish have been unmasked or whether the start of the season was the only time Notre Dame donned a costume.

In September, the Irish showed their best are their worst — and what they can do when they do get past the secondary for big gains. — and then would have hit the home run,” Frank said. “They’re looking at a guy like [California running back] Keith Marshall or [North Carolina running back] Cierre Wood-type running back.”

If he comes to Notre Dame, I wouldn’t be surprised. He’s a tremendous prospect. If he comes to Notre Dame, I would guess he would challenge immediately for playing time,” Frank said. “He brings something that nobody else on the squad or this class has. That’s no disrespect to the other guys … he’s just very elusive and very explosive. So this is your Rocket Ismail type of player.

Virginia safety C.J. Prosise will also take his official visit to campus this weekend, though he has already committed to Notre Dame. Frank said that while Prosise may not be nationally known, he is one of the hidden talents of the Notre Dame class.

“Prosise is a tremendous prospect. He’s a bigger kid, and he can really run,” Frank said. “He’s憧憬 to see his thoughts on Notre Dame.”

As the Irish return home for the first time in three weeks, they will host Florida Atlantic in an interconference clash that also needs to be an offensive showcase. Frank said, “It’s just another game, then it’ll be dressed as a BCS contender. By then, we’ll know if the Irish can close off those distractions and defeat the Trojans, it will have shown a level of maturity seldom seen recently in South Bend. Last year’s win over USC was a game between two struggling programs. This year, every eye in America will be focused on the prime-time broadcast. A win on that stage would be much-needed.

And then, of course, there’s Navy. Brian Kelly has tried to change the culture surrounding the Irish. There may never be a bigger test of that effort than whether the players truly expect to beat Navy — and then follow through. This program was not tagged recently because it couldn’t beat better teams. It’s struggled because it’s failed to defeat less-talented teams. If the Irish beat Navy like they should have recently, then Kelly might have succeeded in returning the Irish to a place where beating Navy is an expectation, never a question.

If Notre Dame can win the three games remaining in October, the implications will be much more far-reaching than a top-25 ranking and a shot at a BCS bowl. Winning the next three games means the Irish have really developed a superstar, Frank said. “If he comes to Notre Dame, I would guess he would challenge immediately for playing time,” Frank said. “He brings something that nobody else on the squad or this class has. That’s no disrespect to the other guys … he’s just very elusive and very explosive.

So when Notre Dame students arrive at its Halloween party, it’ll be dressed as a BCS contender. By then, we’ll know whether that’s a costume or not.

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

Despite unconventional journey to Notre Dame, senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore thrives with Irish

By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

The dream of donning the gold and blue, running out of the tunnel and playing in Notre Dame Stadium usually begins at a very early age. Legendary games like the 1993 contest against No. 1 Florida State or the 1988 "Catholics vs. Convicts" battle against Miami foster the desire for an aspiring football player to lace up for the Irish.

But in Texas, the Big 12 reigns supreme, and for Irish senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore, landing at Notre Dame was less of a dream-come-true story than a dream dashed.

“Being a Texas kid, your dream schools are Texas, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, [Texas] A&M — the Big 12. You kind of stay close to home,” Lewis-Moore said. “I was actually committed to Texas A&M my senior year in high school.”

A native of Weatherford, Texas, Lewis-Moore was recruited into the Aggie program by then-coach Dennis Franchione. But following Franchione’s resignation and subsequent hiatus from college football, Lewis-Moore’s college football career turned into the Aggie program as he recruited to Texas while in high school.

“After he resigned after [the Aggies] upset Texas that year, I was kind of in a fluster, didn’t know what I wanted to do,” he said. “I wanted to talk to my mom, who didn’t really have any idea how the recruiting process worked, so I de-committed from Texas A&M at the time, and that’s when I took some trips.”

Those trips included a recruiting visit to Colorado and, eventually, Notre Dame.

“I came up here, visited, loved the school, loved the people, even though it was like negative 10 [degrees] outside with the sun shining,” Lewis-Moore said. “I still had a lot of fun.”

Facing the prospects of harsh winters and a life away from home, Lewis-Moore’s path took another 180 when he re-committed to Texas A&M. But after conversations with close family and friends, the recruit decided to take a leap of faith.

“My mom — she was happy for me — but at the same time challenged me to do something different with my life. She challenged me to get out of my comfort zone, and my mom being a schoolteacher, she had a real positive impact in my life. Academics was always first and I feel like Notre Dame’s one of the best academic institutions in the country.”

It seems Mom knows best, as in his fourth year as a member of the Irish, Lewis-Moore has emerged as a pivotal player on a defense that has bolstered the Irish following a disappointing 0-2 start.

In addition to his contribution on the field, Lewis-Moore has accepted his mother’s challenge both in the classroom and in the locker room. Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco hails the senior as one of the key members of the entire football organization.

“I would say that [Kapron] understands his place on the team as a leader and a starter,” Diaco said. “He doesn’t have any feeling of being threatened by anyone else. He understands how important he is to the organization and how much value he has in the organization.”

When he changed his number, that’s when we really started to develop a great bond,” Lewis-Moore said.

Lewis-Moore’s roomate and close friend, senior linebacker Darius Fleming said the senior is well-equipped to handle the load Saturday.

“Kap’s been a leader all year, he’s been doing an awesome job,” he said. “Kap will be fine in that role picking up for Ethan and just carrying that D-line. That’s one of my best friends. He’s a character. He’s funny. He’s a tough kid. No one dislikes Kap.”

That includes a talented duo of Irish freshmen in Aaron Lynch and Stephon Tuitt, who have slowly worked their way into the Irish rotation. Lewis-Moore has embraced the additional role of mentor for the rookies, whose development can be attributed in part to the unofficial coaching of the senior defensive end.

“He understands that these guys are going to help us be successful, so he’s doing everything that he can to help them with film study, with things on the field, off the field — just being that mentor for them,” Fleming said. “He’s not letting the fact that they’re battling for his position get in his head. He’s just being the leader that he is. At times, I look up to him.”

Lewis-Moore credits the freshmen for adapting quickly to the intensity of the college game, allowing him to take a leads hands-on approach and letting the freshmen develop into their own style.

“They came in and they responded well,” he said. “It’s not so much teaching. You can explain running down the tunnel, being at Notre Dame — how awesome it is. You’re always under the microscope, always on the big stage … Playing in big games, I think they kind of feel for themselves that this is a great institution.”

But the mentor admits he still has room for improvement before his final year of eligibility in 2012. Diaco said he expects Lewis-Moore’s continued progression to pay dividends this season and into the future.

“Tangibly, he’s going to get bigger, faster, stronger Cardio-vascularly, he’s going to be able to play harder longer. He can play a lot harder longer than he could a year ago, and it’s only going to continue to improve. Mentally, he’ll continue to take his mental game to that next level of understanding.”

A marketing major, Lewis-Moore hopes to put his degree to good use upon graduation. In the meantime, the senior looks to bolster the defense and propel Notre Dame into a 10-win season.

“I feel like we’re a great team, and starting off 0-2 is kind of frustrating,” Lewis-Moore said. “We’re so much better than what we’ve shown, but I think the last couple of weeks we’ve shown that we are a great team and we’ve got to take one game at a time.”

Despite the flip-flop regarding his decision to enroll at Notre Dame, Lewis-Moore said he never regretted his decision, nor his mother’s advice, to suit up for the Irish.

“If I would have gone anywhere else — there’s no place like Notre Dame to me. There’s no place that you can have such a great institution with great people … I’m blessed, I’m lucky and I’m very privileged to be playing football for this great institution.”

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Friday, October 7, 2011
The Observer  IRISH INSIDER ndsmcobserver.com | page 3
IRISH PASSING

In last week’s 38-10 win over Purdue, sophomore quatreback Tommy Rees played his best game of the season. Though not flawless, he completed 24-of-40 passes for 287 yards, three touchdowns and, for the first time, did not turn the ball over.

Senior receiver Michael Floyd also played well as Floyd and the rest of the Irish offense cranked up the passing attack from last week. Floyd found more much space against the Boilermakers than he did the previous week against Pittsburgh. If Air Force plays a rush-heavy style as had been hinted, another target will need to step up to ensure the Irish’s success, a role junior tight end Tyler Eifert has filled in the past.

The Falcons are rated 21st in the nation in pass defense, though they have not played an offense as talented as Notre Dame’s to this point. Five Air Force players have interceptions this season, and the defense will look to add to its 10-sack total and pressure Rees into making poor decisions.

IRISH RUSHING

Junior Cierre Wood and senior Jonas Gray make a dangerous combination at running back and they are getting more confident and productive as the season progresses. Last week, the Irish rushed for 287 yards, the most in eight years. Wood finished with 191 yards and a touchdown and Gray picked up 94 yards and a score. The Notre Dame offensive line is getting a good push and creating large holes for the speedy backs to find.

Air Force allowed 334 rushing yards against an excellent Navy ground attack in its 35-24 win Saturday. While the Notre Dame rushing style is much different than the Midshipmen’s, the Falcons should nonetheless have difficulty stopping Wood and Gray. Offensive success for the Irish depends on asserting a strong running game.

With the Air Force offense attempting to control the clock through its rushing game, Notre Dame needs to sustain long drives or the Irish defense will find itself up against a strong running game.

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Irish coach Brian Kelly and offensive coordinator Charley Molnar realize the Irish will need a consistent rushing attack throughout the game to beat Air Force. The coaches are likely to involve more playmakers in the passing game. Junior receiver Theo Riddick did not have a catch at Purdue, and his season has been a disappointment after much preseason hype.

You know what’s scary? Air Force might be the best offensive team Notre Dame will face all season — it’s definitely the most difficult to stop. The Falcons execute the triple option just as well as Navy or Georgia Tech, but they throw the ball more effectively than either of those teams. It’ll be pretty clear after about two offensive series if the Irish are up to the task of stopping that juggernaut.

Normally, I’d say Notre Dame fans should crow in fear from this matchup. But this year is different. For one, the defense is the best unit on the team. There’s enough athleticism and experience in the defensive front seven to contain the option. If the defense can just slow the Falcons down, the offense can put up enough points to win. It might look scary, but there’s no reason for fear.

I’ve got nothing. Even my Pando-Ra has failed to deliver inspiration this week. Perhaps that should be expected when going up against an offense unlike any other. Air Force presents many challenges to Bob Diaco’s defense. If the triple-option runs by Navy present difficulties last year, then Air Force’s seemingly endless variety of options could render the Irish defense as effective as a flock of chickens with all their heads cut off.

Let’s hope it doesn’t get that bad. In fact, it shouldn’t. Primarily because Brian Kelly should rely on his own running game to keep the ball out of the Falcons’ hands until Notre Dame has a comfortable cushion. If Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray can combine for 100 yards or so in the first quarter, the Falcons won’t stand a chance.

Notre Dame Defense

Notre Dame Offense
Saturday, but it will be Notre Dame who finishes on top.

Talented teams. Both running games will have big days.

Air Force Defense

FALCONS REACH BIG TEN

COACHING

AIR FORCE PASSING

The Falcons do not like to throw the ball, as indicated by the amount of throws senior quarterback Tim Jefferson has attempted through four games this season — only two receivers have gained over 100 yards in the passing game in season totals.

AIR FORCE SPECIAL TEAMS

Parker Harrison has converted three of his four attempted field goals in 2011, with a long of 45 yards. The Falcons have an excellent punter in David Baska, who is averaging 47.3 yards per attempt and has kicked three inside the opponent’s 20-yard line.

IRISH INSIDER

Kristen Rasmussen, a senior, brings valuable experience to Air Force. Johnson is a productive run-stopper and, as a senior, brings valuable experience in playing assignment football.

EYE ON THE BALL

Brian Kelly won’t let his squad look past the Falcons, but still expect a close match between two talented teams. Both running games will have big days Saturday, but it will be Notre Dame who finishes on top by a field goal.

ANDREW OWENS

Associate Sports Editor

FALCONS REACH BIG TEN

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Defensive won’t change against triple option

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Editor

Recent history at Notre Dame has made “triple option” the equivalent of a four-letter word. Navy has employed it to perfection far too often for Irish fans, and defense after Notre Dame defense has failed to be disciplined enough to effectively defend the scheme. Hand-wringing abounds over what new wrinkle, if any, defensive coordinator Bob Diaco will install to stop Air Force’s option attack. Amid the public worries, the coaching staff has made one thing clear.

“I think we keep doing what we’ve been doing,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said.

“It’s no different than any other week,” safeties coach Chuck Martin said.

“Really, what do we have to do? Nothing different than we do every week,” Diaco said.

While the focus on stopping Air Force’s option may seem head-scratching, Kelly said it was more important for his team to continue to win the battle at the line of scrimmage.

“We cannot become so out of character in stopping the option that we forget about the things that we teach every day,” Kelly said. “That is playing physical, flying to the football and great tackling. We’ve got to be who we are, and that is being physical on both sides of the ball.

“If you’re afraid of that, you’re not going to play. We have to be who we are.”

The Falcons employ a triple-option attack as their base offense and do so to great effect, ranking third in the nation with 364.5 yards on the ground per game. But in contrast to other triple-option teams like Navy, Air Force has an equally dangerous aerial attack.

“These guys are very proficient passers and receivers,” Diaco said. “It’s unique. That’s why they’re one of the best offensive teams in the country.”

The Falcons’ multifaceted attack begins with and revolves around senior quarterback Tim Jefferson, whose 188.8 quarterback efficiency rating is fourth in the country.

“He can do all the option jobs, but he’s also proficient passing,” Diaco said. “He can make that big field throw to a comeback...”
Players, coaches strive to improve special teams play

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

A special teams unit can be a forgotten yet crucial aspect of any team. It can provide a game-changing momentum swing when an opponent least expects it. As Notre Dame is finding out in 2011, it can also be crippling.

Through the first five games of this season, the Irish have sputtered in virtually every aspect of special teams play.

“Special teams are an emphasis,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We’re working hard at it. We know it’s an area that has to get better; has to improve. But like anything else, we’re up late. We’re looking at everything. We’re examining everything that’s being done, every person out there, every player, every scheme.”

“There’s no hurt feelings here when it comes to special teams. This is raw in a sense that everything has to be examined because we’ve got to get better there.”

Junior receiver Theo Riddick kicked off the season as the starting punt returner but, after two muffed punt returns against South Florida, one of which gave the Bulls three critical points in their 23-20 victory, was replaced by senior receiver John Goodman.

Riddick dropped ball inside Notre Dame’s 20-yard line when the Irish offense was stymied in virtually every aspect of special teams play.

“We’ve got to make better decisions catching the ball,” Irish special teams coach Mike Elston said. “We’ve got to do a better job of holding on. We got to get guys out so they can run a little bit better and hold up.”

In Notre Dame’s 38-10 win at Purdue Saturday, Goodman made the decision to let a punt drop and watched as it rolled an extra 15 yards, putting the Irish offense against its own end zone.

“Purdue had good skill and we didn’t really match up well, but we match up better this week with guys we can get out there, so we just got to put better guys on their fast players and try and do a better job of holding up,” Elston said.

In a sign that Notre Dame is pulling all tricks out of the bag to improve special teams play, junior punt returner Ben Turk has even punted rugby-style at some points during a slow start to 2011.

The blame for the perplexing 2011 season, he has started 23 of 25 kickoff attempts and field goals during the 2010 season, he has started 17 of 18 attempts in week three. He made a splash taking on the role of kick returner, but Turk has not found anything but field goals.

In Notre Dame’s 38-10 win over Purdue last Saturday, Goodman has struggled with punt returns this season.

Notre Dame senior receiver John Goodman prepares to return a punt during Notre Dame’s 38-10 win over Purdue last Saturday. Goodman has struggled with punt returns this season.

“We got to coach better, and everyone wants to put it on Mike. But for me, I’ve taken on the role of kick returner in week three. He made a splash as the first Notre Dame freshman kick returner to score since Raghib Ismail in 1988.

Overall, Kelly said he continues to evaluate the entire unit and search for a cure to Notre Dame’s woes.

“What I really try to do is examine all phases of the game and find out whether it’s personnel, whether it’s teaching, or simply is it scheme,” he said. “I try to break it down in that area. (While) I believe we spend the appropriate time on special teams, we would be a whole lot better if we got better play. That doesn’t exonerate the coaches. We’re part of that as well. But we need better play.”

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