Through It All

After enduring ups and downs, senior outside linebacker Darius Fleming serves as a solidifying force.
Commentary

Respect tradition, but respect character too

Everybody loves tradition. At Notre Dame, the ways of yesterday seem unparalleled to fanaticism.

But we all ignore one aspect of tradition: It doesn’t win football games.

Gold helmets, blue jerseys and a walk across South Quad do not win football games. Neither do disco-ball helmets, green jerseys or a walk by the Hesburgh Library.

Players win games, coaches win games, and, once in a decade or so, out-of-hand fans win games.

Yet, around the Carmel Valley here, those same fans bellyache about any slight change more than five-year-olds do Nov. 1 about eating too much candy.

“I think that’s some of the cheap public relations,” Notre Dame coach Brian Kelly said recently, according to Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank.

“Shamrocks on the helmets? Green facemask? Playing ACC schools? Why is Knute Rockne’s team being so foppish?”

Thus were the cries across the campus when Notre Dame and adidas revealed the helmet-uniform combination for this week’s trip to Washington, D.C.—to face the current kings of outlandish uniforms, Maryland. Thus were the complaints of alumni, young and old, and thus were the angry posts on subway alumni message boards.

Kelly attempted to counter these cries with an air of indifference toward them. Instead, he insisted only on the opinions of his players influence his decisions.

“The only people I care about relative to the uniforms are the 105 guys that were in this room when we showed it to them, and they were excited,” Kelly said Tuesday. “(But for) the rest of us, everybody else that has an opinion, I really don’t care about theirs. I care about what my players think, and our players love it.”

Even if Kelly were to care about those upset with the glitz and glam, these are the wrong grievances. Instead, students, alumni and fans alike could have shouted in unison, “Why don’t we win more games?”

Really, what else matters?

Why does a simple gold helmet matter? Why does it matter when the game ball is altered and a shamrock is added to it?

Isn’t the final score all that matters? Don’t we just want wins? Well, those and national championships?

No. That isn’t the correct mental-ity either. Rather, this week of all weeks, all should have shouted in unison, “It doesn’t really matter.”

Notre Dame’s traditions are indeed part of the fabric of the University, but jersey color and helmet style are not those traditions. Academics and quality of character, amid the football players, the student body as a whole and the rest of the University, are what Notre Dame is built upon, and the foundations of this University are obviously much larger and always pertinent piece than the Notre Dame football program and its long-held jersey designs.

As long as Notre Dame churns out products such as junior linebacker Nkosi 2015 and senior quarterback Dayne Crist, no one should care what color jerseys they wear. As long as the Irish sing the fight songs alongside the respective service academies, no one should equate gold helmets to a sense of class. As long as Notre Dame remains Notre Dame to its core, why claim the status of a scoreboard dictated such?

Know what happens when people get too attached to superficial traditions? Students riot when a football coach is fired on a Tuesday night. Whether or not the Board of Trustees at Penn State made the right decision by firing Joe Paterno, any logical person could understand their rationale in doing so. Yet, the obsession with football and tradition led to an embarrass- ing night in State College, Penn., amidst an increasingly em-barrassing week.

Let’s hope the biggest worries around here these days are about the design of the helmets and the color of the jerseys come each fall.

Let’s also forget why those are the biggest worries — the tradition here at Notre Dame. And let’s stand by those traditions.

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu

Football Recruiting

Program gains exposure to D.C.

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Editor

Moving one home game each year away from South Bend hurts the Irish in so many ways in recruiting, as Notre Dame faces restrictions on the contact it can have with any recruits. But according to Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank, playing the Shamrock Series “all over the country has a number of advantages, especially when it comes to improving Notre Dame’s ex- posure outside its traditional stronghold of the Midwest.”

“Anytime Notre Dame can showcase their program in front of players, it’s certainly a good thing,” said Frank, who runs the ESPN affiliate Irish Sports Daily. “It does help just playing in front of these programs.”

One of the most tangible ways in which off-site home games help the Irish is that players who may not have been able to af-ford an unofficial visit to experience a Notre Dame game can now witness the pageantry of an Irish home game closer to home.

“It’s good to get your pro- gram and what you stand for in front of these players because it’s expensive when you’re talk-ing about Mom and Dad and son trying to get on a flight to South Bend,” Frank said. “That really hurts Notre Dame and a lot of kids don’t really come and visit. If it’s a kid from Florida, they can get in the car and it’s a 100-mile drive to see Florida play, whereas a kid from Florida coming up here is much more expensive.”

“I think that’s some of the thinking that goes along with (playing the off-site game),” Frank also said the influx of

Irish fans into a major metrop-olis — whether Washington, D.C., New York or San Antonio — can have a positive impact on recruits’ impressions of Notre Dame.

“When a bunch of good people show up in town and they’re wearing Notre Dame gear and they’re representing Notre Dame fans and alumni and the fanbase and the school in a positive way, that’s just a very good thing,” Frank said. “How many times have you talked to countless fans that say ‘Don’t go to Ohio State, their fans are hor-rible?’ They just don’t say that about Notre Dame fans because they’re always respectful of the other team and conduct them-selves in a way that Notre Dame would want.”

Frank said the Irish also take advantage of their national schedule to help recruit players by showing them they will play close to home.

“Let’s be honest, Notre Dame is on national TV every week,” Frank said. “Most of the time, it’s national TV, so that certainly helps. But just getting them close to Mom and Dad so it’s not so expensive certainly helps.”

According to Frank, Notre Dame players also take great pride in returning to their home regions and playing well, as they can validate their commit-ments to Notre Dame.

“To go in there and play well and win — then they can go back home and be proud of Notre Dame,” Frank said. “A lot of times people say when a kid makes a decision to go far away from home, ‘Why would he go far away from home when he has State U here and they’re really good at football.’

“Until you can kind of let them experience the same thing you experience, it’s kind of hard for people to understand.”

The Irish unveiled special uniforms for this weekend’s game, and while public reaction has been largely negative, Irish coach Brian Kelly simply doesn’t care.

“All due respect to everybody else that has an opinion, I don’t really care about theirs. I care about what my players think, and our players love it,” Kelly said. “If our kids like it, then I can tell you I’m certain that the recruits like it as well.”

Frank said that while uni- forms rarely play a major role in recruits’ decisions, the new flex-i-bility may contribute to chang-ing common perceptions of the Irish program.

“I’m not sure it matters a tremendous amount, but in Notre Dame’s case it might be a unique thing,” Frank said. “I think the outward perception by some of these kids is that Notre Dame’s kind of a stuffy place — it’s not a very exciting, loose, fun place. To make changes like this, I think it presents a perception that we’re not as old-fashioned and stuffy as a lot of people think.

“I do think kids like to have new uniforms and different things. It’s like a shiny new toy. Everybody likes a new toy.”

Email Mike at mikefrank18@sleighlobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu

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ndsmcobserver.com
By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

During his time at Notre Dame, senior outside linebacker Darius Fleming has always been willing to adapt to new situations, whether it’s the change of a base defense or, off the field, learning to cook.

“I feel like Darius is a key element to the defense. He’s one of those guys that does everything right. He’s going to set that example and edge for the defense and do his responsibilities.”

Jamaris Slaughter
senior safety

Fleming said. “You just appreciate in different schemes,” Flem-
us as players being coached schemes, and [it] has helped different coaches and different mates, like [senior defensive
Slaughter, who hails from the same class as Fleming, said the senior linebacker has been an irreplaceable presence for the Irish defense.

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He’s good with the pass rush and he’s a great player.”

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Fleming is crucial to the suc-
cess of the defense because of his versatility and the several looks he puts on as a playmaker on the unit.

“He has the dual responsibility of putting his hand on the ground and rushing as a defensive end, as well as dropping off in coverage.”

Kelly said. “That individual position builds that uncertainty, in what you’re getting as a pre-snap look. If he’s only one-dimensional, in other words, if he can only rush the passer and not drop, everybody knows what you’re doing defensively.

“He now has taken that next step that he’s as good in cov-
erage as he is on the line of scrimmage, defending the run, rushing the quarterback. That was the dimension we needed from Darius. He’s taken that next step now in year two and can do those things for us. That’s where you build the un-certainty, what is he doing, rushing, dropping.”

When using a three-linemen look, it makes the role of the outside linebackers even more critical in pressuring the quar-
terback. Kelly said Fleming is exactly the kind of player the Irish need at the “cat” line-
backer position.

“I would say that we placed a high demand on him and we’re demanding that kind of play from him,” Kelly said. “Instead of just being a good player, we’re demanding him to be a great player. And he’s risen to that challenge. We’re challeng-
ing him every day. He’ll come to me on Sunday, two sacks one weekend. Are you a real player?

You need two more next week.

“So it’s always those jabs at him to keep pushing him to be the kind of player we think he can be. And then along the way, you’re gaining con-fidence as well.”

In Fleming’s senior season, he has continued to do what he has always done — adapt.

With several defensive players in-jured, includ-
ing both defensive ends, the management major has stepped up his game to another level as his team-
mates thrive on his presence.

“I just do my job, and I know the guys around me and who is out there will do their job,” Fleming said. “We have guys dinged up, but the guys stepping up are doing a great job and they’re helping the team get better every week.

A playmaker making plays In last week’s 24-17 victory at Wake Forest, Fleming made a critical play that snuffed out what proved to be the Dea-
cons’ final scoring opportunity. Backed against its own end zone, the Irish defense got ex-
lactically what it needed — a turn-
over, in the form of a forced fumble. While senior safety Harrison Smith was initially credited with jarring the ball 
loose, Fleming was the one who made the init-
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“It was a play much-needed at that time,” he said. “Me and Har-
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ing to share with Harrison, so I give myself half a caused fumble.”

The play ignited the defense the rest of the game, as the unit held the Deacons score-
less throughout the second half, good enough to capture the seven-point victory and im-
prove to 6-3 on the sea-
son. Fleming said the defense thrives on making big plays in big moments.

“Forcing turnovers is huge as a defense, especially when the offense is in scoring position, you have to have players out there that are going to make plays and get the offense back there on the field.”

Darius Fleming
senior linebacker

Irish senior linebacker Darius Fleming raises his arms to block a pass during Notre Dame’s 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.

"Forcing turnovers are huge as a defense, especially when the offense is in scoring position, you have to have players out there that are going to make plays and get the offense back there on the field."

Irish senior linebacker Darius Fleming lines up during Notre Dame’s 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24. Fleming recorded four tackles and two sacks in the victory.

By adapting to adversity, Fleming provides stabilizing presence on the field

Adapting on the field Fleming, who has the second most career sacks of any active player, behind Ethan Johnson, irreplaceable presence for the defense and he’s a great player.”

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Irish senior linebacker Darius Fleming raises his arms to block a pass during Notre Dame’s 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.
Notre Dame is wearing the new Shamrock Series uniform and is playing at the coliseum opposing rushing games. On the other side of the ball, Irish senior running back Jonas Gray is running the ball better than ever has, while junior running back Cierre Wood quietly puts together a big season. The Notre Dame defensive line has been stalwart.

Irish junior receiver Theo Riddick will be out for the game with an injury, but the key — as always — will be whether Rees can take care of the football. Maryland is very good at taking the ball away, but if Rees finds the Irish offense will have one of its best performances of the year.

Notre Dame senior kicker David Ruffer has not seen a lot of action recently, but he has improved on his rough start to the season. Freshman kicker Kyle Brindza has been solid on kickoffs and continues to improve his consistency, while junior punter Ben Turk has found his groove after a tough, opening stretch to the season.

Freshmen twins George and Josh Atkinson have been sparks for the Irish. Expect Irish coach Brian Kelly to play-calls, either.

Notre Dame Offense

IRISH PASSING

While sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees did not have his best performance last week against Wake Forest, throwing two interceptions and earning just 165 yards through the air, Rees has generally found success through the air this season, especially when finding senior receiver Michael Floyd.

Maryland ranks 49th in the country in overall defense, allowing 214 passing yards per game, good enough for 38th in the country. The Terrapins’ pass rush will not be much of a factor for Rees, as the Maryland front seven has been injury-plagued all season, while the Notre Dame offensive line has been stalwart.

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Notre Dame Special Teams

It’s a “home” game for the Irish, but Maryland’s football complex is less than 15 miles from FedEx Field. And that’s the only advantage the Terrapins will have. First-year coach Randy Edsall will eventually turn this program around, but right now, he just isn’t a good team right now. Notre Dame isn’t great, but this one shouldn’t even be close.

The Terrapins won’t be able to move the ball against the Irish defense, and the Notre Dame offense will have one of its best performances of the year.

Notre Dame Defense

The outlook on the Notre Dame football program fluctuates week to week. After a poor performance — even a poor performance that results in a win — fans and the media alike tend to jump ship.

But the team seems to react differently. After a terrible loss to South Florida, the Irish came out strong against Michigan (even though they ended up losing the game). Then after Michigan, they dominated a good Michigan State team. Notre Dame came out strong after both a subpar win over Pittsburgh and a poor performance against USC, allowing 214 passing yards per game, good enough for 38th in the country in overall pass defense, and offensive coordinator Charley Molnar to attack the young Terrapins right where they are weakest all game long. Don’t be too surprised by a couple trick plays, either.

Notre Dame Schedule

Sept. 3 South Florida (L, 28-20)
Sept. 10 @ Michigan (L, 35-31)
Sept. 17 Pittsburgh (W, 33-13)
Sept. 24 @ Louisville (W, 45-27)
Oct. 1 @ Purdue (W, 20-10)
Oct. 8 Air Force (W, 50-33)
Oct. 22 USC (L, 31-17)
Oct. 29 Navy (W, 56-14)
Nov. 5 @ Wake Forest (W, 33-17)
Nov. 12 Maryland
Nov. 19 Boston College
Nov. 26 South Florida

Notre Dame Offensive Line

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

Notre Dame junior receiver Theo Riddick and senior receiver Michael Floyd.

IRISH RUSHING

Maryland’s defense has not had the same starting lineup in more than one game this year, due largely to injuries. Every starting linebacker and defensive lineman has missed at least one game due an injury, which has led to a number of freshmen seeing playing time. While this could pay dividends in the future as the Terrapins build defensive depth, it is a liability now, as Maryland cannot outsmart a powerhouse opposing rushing games.

On the other side of the ball, Irish senior running back Jonas Gray is running the ball better than ever has, while junior running back Cierre Wood quietly puts together a big season as well. The Notre Dame offensive line has rebounded from its poor performance against USC, and while senior center Braxton Cavelle will be sorely missed, senior Mike Golic, Jr., will be up to the task of filling in for Cave.

The Irish should have no problem setting the tempo of the game with a powerful running attack. Gray and Wood will have plenty of running room all night long.

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

Notre Dame senior kicker David Ruffer has not seen a lot of action recently, but he has improved on his rough start to the season. Freshman kicker Kyle Brindza has been solid on kickoffs and continues to improve his consistency, while junior punter Ben Turk has found his groove after a tough, opening stretch to the season.

Freshmen twins George and Josh Atkinson have been sparks for the Irish. Expect Irish coach Brian Kelly to attack the young Terrapins right where they are weakest all game long. Don’t be too surprised by a couple trick plays, either.

Notre Dame Defensive Line

My predictions have taken on a more negative outlook lately. I’ve given up on cheesy song lyrics, and the optimism they brought has all but completely dissipated.

Yet even I think Notre Dame should still win this one. Even if the Terrapins play smart and blitz up the middle on center Mike Golic, Jr., nearly every play, the Irish should be just fine. Jonas Gray or Cierre Wood can simply stay in the backfield and help with the blocking in those situations, and Irish quarterback Tommy Rees can take his time finding an open receiver.

And there should be plenty of open receivers against Maryland. There should also be plenty of big plays by the Notre Dame defense. Wow, even the pessimist is optimistic this week.
Head-to-Head

Maryland Defense

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| RB     | 43 | Nick Ferrara                         | Jr. |

Maryland Special Teams

Maryland Defense

Maryland Offense

Andrew Owens
Associate Sports Editor

Notre Dame survived its trip to Wake Forest last weekend, and now it’s week two against ACC opponents, and a much worse opponent at that.

Even if the Irish play poorly, they should still have no problem cruising to a win Saturday.

The Terrapins substitute quarterbacks almost as much as they change uniform combinations, but it should not be too much of a concern for the Irish defense as it tries to build upon last week’s second-half shutout of Wake Forest.

Essentially, Notre Dame gets two scrimmages before a season-opening showdown with undefeated Stanford. It can be a valuable opportunity to implement some new looks and provide some playing time for Andrew Hendrix.

Friday, November 11, 2011
The Shamrock Series has seen the Irish host "home" games in such unfamiliar locales as San Antonio's Alamodome and Yankee Stadium in New York and includes games in Chicago and Dallas in the future. But perhaps no off-site contest will feel more like an away game than this weekend's matchup against Maryland at FedEx Field in Landover, Md.

"We're back on the road with Maryland this week, and I know it's technically a home game, but we're in Washington, D.C., and that's Maryland's backyard," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "We are mentally preparing ourselves to go in to play on the road again and all that goes with that."

While the Irish (6-3) will be wearing their green jerseys and special Shamrock Series helmets, the Terrapins (2-7) will don their "Maryland Pride" uniform set for the second time this season — and with FedEx Field less than half an hour from College Park, why not?

"We play an away game this weekend, but we are treating it like a home game," Maryland coach Randy Edsall said. "We are looking forward to playing on Saturday night."

Edsall is currently in his first year at the Terrapins' helm, having left Connecticut to take over the Maryland program after previous coach Ralph Friedgen was fired in an acrimonious end to the Terrapins' 2010 season. While Friedgen's final year saw Maryland win 10 games, including a bowl game victory, the Terrapins have struggled this year under Edsall.

Despite the struggles, Edsall believes his program is on the right track.

"All anyone looks at from the outside is how many we win and how many we lose. That is the business we are in," he said. "I look at the big picture though. When we are installing a program, there is more than just wins and losses. I feel that it is the total program that we are installing that needs to develop.

"We are improving in a lot of areas. We just aren't winning on the field right now. That will happen. I am confident of that."

As Edsall finishes up his first year as coach and begins looking towards his second year, he said he believes next year will be easier than the first.

"There is no question it will (be easier)! Everyone has a philosophy and a plan of action, and you are going to install that plan of action," Edsall said. "The press and the fans only see what happens on Saturday and they judge us on that, and I understand that, but it is more than just that. It's a big part of it, but there is a lot of progress being made."

Sophomore quarterback C.J. Brown may be the most tangible evidence of that progress. Brown replaced fellow sophomore gunslinger Danny O'Brien as the starter in Maryland's 56-45 loss to Clemson on Oct. 15 and turned in an eye-opening performance, rushing for 162 yards and adding 177 passing yards and three passing touchdowns. Brown and O'Brien continue to split time under center, posing a challenge for the Irish.

"They have a real one-two punch at quarterback," Notre Dame defensive coordinator Bob Diaco said. "[Brown] is a real runner, a fast not flashy runner, but he can really gas it. [O'Brien] is an excellent passer."

In addition, Diaco said the rest of the offense is better than the Terrapins' record may indicate.

"Maryland has talented wide receivers, talented backs, a talented tight end, a big physical offensive line … I try to bring the evaluation honestly each week. This is an outstanding offensive line," Diaco said. "It's going to be a huge challenge for our defense."

While Brown, O'Brien and the rest of the Maryland offense pose a threat to the Irish defense, Kelly said he expects Edsall to provide a stiff challenge, especially after Edsall's experience leading Connecticut to an upset victory at Notre Dame Stadium in 2009.

"I know Randy Edsall," Kelly said. "He's a darned good football coach, and he'll have the memories of coming in here to Notre Dame and beating Notre Dame and playing physical. That's what his teams will do, so we have to be prepared and worry about ourselves."
By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

Notre Dame suffered its second major blow on the injury front in as many weeks Saturday, losing senior center Braxton Cave for the season due to a torn foot ligament sustained during the team’s 24-17 victory over Wake Forest. The senior had season-ending surgery Thursday to repair the ligament, but Irish coach Brian Kelly said he expects the Granger, Ind., native to return next season in his final year of eligibility.

“Braxton Cave will be back, and that’s the good news,” Kelly said. “I think when you look at the center position, there’s always a great concern because that guy is put in a very difficult situation — shotgun snaps, changing up the cadence, calling out some of the defensive fronts and structures. But Mike has done a nice job, and we have a great deal of confidence.”

Kelly added that senior Andrew Nuss will move from the left guard position to a role as the backup center. Sophomore Bruce Heggie will take Nuss’ former position.

Although Notre Dame has suffered from multiple fumbles snaps this season, Kelly maintains confidence in Golic’s ability to feed the football to sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees.

“You’ve got to shotgun snap that ball to Tommy Rees, the quarterback, in a consistent fashion.” If the ball is off a little bit, it messes up the timing,” he said. “One of the traits that we’ve liked about Mike from the first day on is his ability to snap the ball. The other things have come. He’s gotten stronger, he’s more physical. He’s certainly not as strong as Braxton, but he is physically able to move his feet, get out and do the things.”

Although Rees has become accustomed to receiving the ball from Cave, Rees said he has an excellent feel of where Golic positions the football thanks to multiple reps and center rotations in practice.

“It’s a lot more than just making the snaps and making sure there is chemistry there,” he said.

“There is a lot of communication going on with the quarterback and the center. I’ve worked with a Mike a lot in the past. I don’t anticipate there to be much of an issue there.”

Golic entered Saturday’s contest in the second quarter and bolstered the Irish defense’s confidence in Golic’s ability to replace Cave for the remainder of the season.

“I talked to him after the first drive he was in, and said, ‘We believe in you. We don’t have any doubts,’ just to make sure that he was kind of calm and he was playing,” Rees said. “He really didn’t have to think too much — it was just to rally behind all the guys.”

Although Golic has been thrust into a starting role, Kelly credits his significant development from last year as the potential catalyst behind his success moving forward.

“The center position — those guys have to stay on their feet,” Kelly said. “Mike is getting better at that. He’s getting stronger. But he’s a BCS football player, so he’s athletic enough that he can do those things. He has to continue to develop his strength, and he has. He is so far ahead of where he was last year, and now he’s a starter for us.”

Contact Chris Masoud at cmaso@nd.edu

Irish senior center Braxton Cave blocks an Air Force defender Oct. 8. Cave sustained a foot injury during Saturday’s win over Wake Forest and will miss the remainder of the season.

Irish senior center Mike Golic Jr., steps into starting role with Cave injured

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COURTESY ECKERLE/The Observer

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