Senior Day slugfest

Notre Dame grinds out 16-14 victory over Boston College to earn eighth win of 2011

By CORY BERNARD
Sports Writer

On an emotional night for its seniors, Notre Dame gutted out a close 16-14 victory over determined underdog Boston College, utilizing staunch defense and three field goals from fifth-year kicker David Ruffer.

Head coach Brian Kelly said he was pleased to see his team emerge victorious in a hard-fought game. “It’s a pretty happy locker room,” he said. “The kids persevered and played hard for four quarters. We wanted them to play hard for four quarters and they did that tonight — just a satisfying win as a football coach to see your team battle. We’ve overcome a lot of adversity this season and it’s just a really nice victory for our football team tonight.”

Junior running back Cierre Wood led the Irish running attack with 98 yards on 26 carries, as Notre Dame (8-3) outrushed the Eagles with 161 rushing yards to Boston College’s 80. The Irish outgained the Eagles by a total count of 417 yards to 250. Wood’s total pushed his career rushing mark to 1,001 yards on the season, Notre Dame’s first 1,000-yard rusher since Darius Walker in 2006.

Senior receiver Michael Floyd said the significance of competing in his final home game was this: “The kids stepped up in adversity throughout the week, having to practice without several key players. He said despite the setbacks, the defense played well. “The defense played very well the last month.”

Notre Dame defenders tackle Boston College quarterback Josh Bordner during Notre Dame’s 16-14 win over Boston College on Saturday, the Irish limited the Eagles to just 250 yards of total offense.

“The defense played very, very good today and found a way to win.”

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Irish coach

Jonas Gray and I have been close a long time, and I just thanked him for everything he’s helped me with,” Rees said. “I don’t think the emotions will hit me right away, but I guarantee once you all the injuries ... My point is this: those kids stepped up in adversity throughout the week, having to practice without several key players. He said despite the setbacks, the defense played well. “The defense played very, very good today and found a way to win.”

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Notre Dame’s defense held the Eagles to just 250 total yards of offense, helping the Irish escape with a victory despite a low score.

“His perseverance, sticking with it,” Kelly said.

“[Freshman kicker] Kyle [Brindza] is the stat of the game Receiver Robby Toma’s onside kick recovery in the fourth quarter

The Eagles had a shot to come back until Toma snuffed it out by recovering the Boston College onside kick with 1:57 remaining.

“[Freshman kicker] Kyle [Brindza] is the quote of the game

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Irish sophomore quarterback

Kelly praised Ruffer’s ability to overcome an early-season slump and once again play well. “He’s a great young man, you know, it’s just — it’s emotional when you don’t know if you’re going to be able to play your last game. It’s still uncertain until he gets more pre-surgical information. There are a lot of emotions in that locker room.”

Sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees echoed Kelly’s sentiments.

Floyd said the significance of competing in his final home game had not yet registered.

“It feels great,” he said. “I don’t think the emotions will hit until you leave this place. I don’t really feel that emotional right now, but I guarantee once you leave this university it’s all going to hit you.”

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IRISH INSIDER

The Observer | ndsmcobserver.com
Notre Dame 16, Boston College 14

Monday, November 21, 2011

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Stanford is this season’s measuring stick

Andrew Owens
Associate Sports Editor

After surviving a light three-game stretch of ACC opponents in November, it all comes down to Saturday for Notre Dame. When the lights go out in Palo Alto, Calif., the regular season will be over and we will know if the Irish were able to salvage the 2011 season. The game is virtually meaningless for Notre Dame in terms of bowl slating — win or lose, the Champs Sports Bowl is the likely destination. But it means so much more than that when you look at the big picture.

If the Irish fall to No. 4 Stanford, no one will be surprised, but it will be a disappointing finish for a team unable to shake the thunderclouds that hovered above Notre Dame Stadium in the loss against South Florida. Currently standing at 8-3, it simply has been a disappointing season for Notre Dame. Irish coach Brian Kelly made it quite clear during fall practice that a Bowl Championship Series berth would be the indicator of a whether or not 2011 was successful.

With the exception of the 31-13 victory over Michigan State on Sept. 17, Notre Dame’s 11 games can be placed in three categories. The blowout wins in which the Irish did exactly what was expected of them (Purdue, Air Force, Navy and Maryland), games they gutted out a win against an inferior opponent (Pittsburgh, Wake Forest and Boston College) and flat-out disappointments (South Florida, Michigan and USC). “We’ve overcome a lot of things, and just a really nice victory for our football team today,” Kelly said after Notre Dame’s 16-14 win over Boston College, the eighth win in nine games and the 12th in 15 games for the Irish.

But really, Notre Dame has not needed to overcome many “things” — rather, it has needed to overcome itself, with 10 turnovers in the first two games, the second of which was a colossal fourth-quarter collapse at Michigan, and a mind-bogglingly flat performance against USC. The combined record of teams Notre Dame has beaten is 39-47. Take out Michigan State, and it’s 30-45. It’s hard to find any adversity that has not been self-induced.

But, as unpredictable as the 2011 Irish have been, the historical narrative of this season can still have a positive spin on it with a win at Stanford.

Thanks to the losses of Oklahoma State, Oregon and Oklahoma, the Cardinal once again have a path to the national championship game. If they beat the Irish on Saturday, the SEC West logjam could take care of itself and Stanford would make the championship game, which gives Notre Dame an incredible opportunity this weekend.

Beat Stanford, finish the regular season 9-3 with wins over two top-10 teams (Michigan State and Stanford), and suddenly it’s a potential 10-win season. Not bad at all, especially when you consider it is only year two of a completely new system. Kelly proved last season how critical end-of-year momentum is when it comes to recruiting. (Without a 4-0 finish, Aaron Lynch, Stephon Tuitt and Ishaq Williams might be at Florida State, Georgia Tech and Penn State, respectively.) The outlook would also be very bright heading into a 2012 season that features the most daunting schedule in recent memory.

The end of the 2011 volume of Notre Dame football is quickly approaching, but the final chapter has yet to play out.

Contact Andrew Owens at aowens@nd.edu

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

Check out more coverage at ndsmcobserver.com

Freshman linebacker Troy Niklas attempts to get past Boston College tackle John Wetzel. Niklas finished the day with four assisted tackles, including one for a loss of three yards.

KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

report card

quarterbacks: Tommy Rees played worse than his stat line indicates, as his receivers bailed him out often. Rees’ decisionmaking is still suspect, as shown on his third-quarter interception.

running backs: Cierre Wood was especially effective in helping the Irish control the clock and prevent an Eagle comeback. Notre Dame will sorely miss Jonas Gray in the backfield.

receivers: Robby Toma played well again, but the receivers struggled to get open for Rees. Even worse, effort was sometimes lacking, as rarely did receivers extend their routes.

offensive line: Wood and Gray had room to run, but the Irish did occasionally have problems protecting Rees. Still, this unit has been a pleasant surprise during the 2011 season.

defensive line: Stephon Tuitt’s absence hurt the Irish, who struggled to pressure Boston College. To be fair, Aaron Lynch’s blocker held him on nearly every play and was never called for it.

linebackers: Manti Te’o had a stellar his time at Cincinnati.

defensive backs: It was a fairly mediocre effort for the secondary. While the Eagles didn’t complete a lot of passes, their second touchdown drive was all too easy at that point in the game.

special teams: David Ruffer and Ben Turk played really well, and this grade isn’t fair to them. But the punt-return unit is simply terrible, and this grade is way too nice to them.

coaching: It wasn’t pretty, and the offensive playcalling was highly suspect, but give Kelly and his staff credit for winning a game that would have been a loss just two years ago.

overall: It was close when it really shouldn’t have been, but the Irish did hold up all game long. The Irish are learning how to win, and that’s important.

adding up the numbers

Brian Kelly has now won 14 straight games at Notre Dame, dating back to his time at Cincinnati.

Of the 24 teams that lost their first two games of 2011, only two (Notre Dame and Georgia) have winning records.

The Irish have not allowed a third-quarter point in each of their last four contests.

Notre Dame started seven drives inside its own 20-yard line, five of which started inside the 10-yard line.

Senior running back Jonas Gray scored a touchdown for the eighth straight game.

At one point in the second half, the Irish forced Boston College into 10 consecutive incomplete passes.
Poor field position doesn’t cost Irish

By MATTHEW DEFRANKS

Sports Writer

When Boston College senior punter Ryan Quigley pinned Notre Dame at its own five-yard line in the first quarter, it was an exceptional kick. When Quigley made the Irish start at their own three-yard line on his next punt, it was a trend. After Notre Dame started its fifth drive inside its own 10-yard line, it had started well.

‘The field position was difficult to manage, and the weather. The weather conditions were hard and blustery, so we had to manage,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “We knew what kind of game this was going to end up being, and it certainly turned out that way.”

Notre Dame, however, overcame the bad field position with strong defense in its 16-14 win over Boston College on Saturday.

In Notre Dame’s first 13 drives, not counting the last drive after Boston College’s onside kick, its average starting field position was at the 39-yard line. The three final Irish drives each set new game-high marks for starting field position — first at the 35-yard line, next at the 39-yard line and then, after the onside kick, at the Eagle 48.

“It was a battle all day,” senior linebacker Darius Fleming said. “Those are the games you like to play in. You like to play when you have to stay on your toes. You can’t go out there and slack off at all because it can cost you the game.”

Conversely, the Eagles started just two drives inside their own 20-yard line. On average, Boston College (3-8, 2-5 ACC) started at its 36.7-yard line.

‘Those are situations we practice for every day,’ Fleming said of the field position. “Those are things the defense is aware of and we’re prepared for those kinds of situations.”

The defense responded in a big way, holding the Eagles to 250 total yards of offense, with just 80 yards coming on the ground.

“Everybody was getting to the ball,” junior linebacker Manti Te’o said. “Everybody was trying to make a big play. Everybody was doing their assignment. That’s what makes good defense. Everybody is one-eleventh of the defense.”

Notre Dame (8-3) held Boston College sophomore quarterback Chace Rettig without a completion for 10 straight attempts during the second half.

“We missed a couple, they put some pressure on us and the combination of those, we got ourselves off rhythm,” Eagles coach Frank Spaziani said.

The Irish allowed two touchdown drives longer than 70 yards, but also forced the Eagles into six three-and-out series.

“We did a good job playing assignment football, stopping the run, keeping big plays off the stat sheet,” graduate student safety Harrison Smith said. “There were definitely plays we wanted back, especially on those two drives.

Overall, we did a good job.”

Despite forcing nine Boston College punts, Notre Dame was unable to muster any punt return yards, registering six fair catches on the day.

“Don’t get frustrated, because we didn’t get ourselves out of that position,” sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees said. “If we would have moved the ball down the field then, you don’t leave it where they are punting and have a chance to put you inside the ten. Obviously it’s not the most ideal situation, but we could have done some things to help ourselves out.”

Notre Dame punted eight times on the day, including five in their seven second-half possessions.

Junior punter Ben Turk averaged 44 yards per punt, including a long of 55 yards.

“I think he did really well,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said of Turk. “As you know, the kind of game it was, I think he had eight punts, they had nine. College football has all these things, and it’s not always about up and down the field. Sometimes you get to block and tackle and grind it out and find a way to win. I just like the way our guys now understand how to win games.”

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RB Wood earns 1,000-yard season

By MATTHEW DEFRANKS

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Irish junior running back Cierre Wood eclipsed the 1,000-yard mark for rushing with a two-yard plunge late in the fourth quarter Saturday. Wood became Notre Dame’s 16th back to achieve the feat and the first since Darius Walker in 2006.

Wood and senior running back Jonas Gray were trying to become the first duo in Notre Dame history to each rush for 1,000 yards. Gray left the game with a serious knee injury 209 yards short of the mark.

We won’t have the MRI results, but it’s pretty apparent that he has a significant knee injury,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said Sunday. “The MRI would probably confirm what we know as to be, as I mentioned, a significant knee injury.”

Ruffer on hot streak

After starting the season 2-for-6, Irish graduate student kicker David Ruffer has hit on eight straight kicks.

“Everybody has their struggles sometimes,” Kelly said of Turk. “We missed a couple, they put some pressure on us and the combination of those, we got ourselves off rhythm.”

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scoring summary

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First quarter
Notre Dame 7, Boston College 0
Jonas Gray 26-yard run (David Ruffer kick) with 12:38 remaining
Drive: 8 plays, 80 yards, 2:22 elapsed

Notre Dame 10, Boston College 0
David Ruffer 40-yard field goal with 8:15 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 46 yards, 2:51 elapsed

Second quarter
Notre Dame 16, Boston College 7
Josh Bordner 2-yard run (Nate Freese kick) with 3:04 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 80 yards, 4:08 elapsed

Notre Dame 13, Boston College 7
David Ruffer 41-yard field goal with 1:19 remaining
Drive: 7 plays, 46 yards, 1:45 remaining

Fourth quarter
Notre Dame 16, Boston College 7
David Ruffer 27-yard field goal with 8:08 remaining
Drive: 9 plays, 55 yards, 3:50 remaining

Notre Dame 16, Boston College 14
Bobby Swigert 7-yard pass from Chase Rettig (Nate Freese kick) with 1:27 remaining
Drive: 7 plays, 72 yards, 1:43 remaining

Rushing yards

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Statistics

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Grounding the Eagles

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