By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

STANFORD, Calif. — In 2009, it was Toby Gerhart’s three touchdown runs. In 2011, it was Andrew Luck’s four touchdown passes.

In two of the past three seasons, Notre Dame has walked off the field at Stanford Stadium in defeat at the hands of a Heisman Trophy hopeful. The Irish fell to the Cardinal 28-14 Saturday, marking the third consecutive loss to Stanford.

“(I’m) disappointed that we didn’t come here and get a victory,” Kelly said. “We didn’t come here to get second prize. We came here to get a win. Nobody in that locker room is happy with the outcome. We went into a slow start and battled against it, kept playing, kept competing. We fought. The team showed 28-14 and that’s not good enough, but I love the heart of our team.”

Entering the contest as the No. 6 ranked team in the nation, the Cardinal (11-1, 8-1 PAC-12) throttled then-No. 6 ranked team in the nation, the Cardinal 14 to 7 in the second half, but we just couldn’t recover. "We didn’t start how we wanted to," senior linebacker Darius Fleming said. "I think we all realized we couldn’t do that against a talented team like Stanford, and it hurt us. We picked it up a lot in the second half, but we just couldn’t recover.”

As Notre Dame prepares for a bowl game selection and its final contest of the season, Kelly said "anything is possible" regarding who will take the first snaps under center.

The Irish found the end zone on their next four drives, trading touchdowns with the Cardinal in the fourth quarter. Luck completed a 55-yard toss to tight end Coby Fleener to push the lead to 28-7 with just under six minutes remaining in the game. Two drives later, Hendrix responded with a touchdown drive of his own, rushing into the end zone on a two-yard run that took just 43 seconds off the clock.

Notre Dame failed to recover the ensuing onside kick, and Stanford ran out the clock to end the 2011 regular season.

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At Notre Dame prepares for a bowl game selection and its final contest of the season, Kelly said "anything is possible" regarding who will take the first snaps under center. "Coach Kelly called my number and I did everything I could to help this team win," Hendrix said Saturday. "Obviously the (Heisman) can run the ball a little bit," Kelly said. "It’s a change of pace in the sense that we haven’t seen that all year. That’s not Tommy’s strength. We needed to run. [But] running back a little bit, and he did some of that. We have a long way to go, and we’ll evaluate all those things at a later time. We’re just trying to win a football game.”

Notre Dame’s recurring quarterback woes were a contrast to the consistent performance of Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck, who finished Saturday’s contest with 233 yards on 20 for 30 passing and four touchdowns. The senior quarterback continued to build his case for the Heisman Trophy, eclipsing former Stanford quarterback and NFL Hall of Famer John Elway’s record of 77 career touchdowns and the 80th touchdown pass of his career. We were all excited as a secondary to face Luck,” Irish senior safety Harrison Smith said. "It’s always good to go against the best.”

Like the season-opening loss to South Florida, the season finale was a tale of two halves. Hendrix’ insertion sparked an Irish offense that outscored the Cardinal 14 to 7 in the second half on 234 yards to the Cardinal’s 142.

Notre Dame found the end zone on its second drive after the break. Hendrix connected with junior tight end Tyler Eifert on passes of 14 and 24 yards, moving the Irish to their own 44-yard line. The sophomore picked up 25 yards of his own on the ground before finding senior receiver Michael Floyd on a six-yard strike to pull the Irish within 14. Eifert finished with 79 yards on four catches, becoming the fifth tight end in Notre Dame history to eclipse 1,000 yards receiving in a single season. Floyd tallied 92 yards and the lone touchdown on eight catches, setting a new school record with 95 total receptions on the season and extending his career touchdowns receptions record to 36.

“I think we all realized we had to step it up,” Floyd said. “We knew our role behind, and we had to do something about it. Coach told us to step it up, and I think the guys had a lot of courage knowing that the game wasn’t over and that we still had to compete.”

But the Irish failed to score on their next four drives, trading touchdowns with the Cardinal in the fourth quarter. Luck completed a 55-yard toss to tight end Coby Fleener to push the lead to 28-7 with just under six minutes remaining in the game. Two drives later, Hendrix responded with a touchdown drive of his own, rushing into the end zone on a two-yard run that took just 43 seconds off the clock.

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At Notre Dame prepares for a bowl game selection and its final contest of the season, Kelly said "anything is possible" regarding who will take the first snaps under center. "Coach Kelly called my number and I did everything I could to help this team win," Hendrix said Saturday. "Obviously we came up a little short. I made some plays, I missed some plays. We’re just going to go back to the film room Monday and see what I did well and what I didn’t do so well.”

Despite falling for the fourth time this season, the combined winning percentage of Notre Dame’s opponents in those losses (South Florida, Michigan, USC and Stanford) is a staggering .766. Kelly said his team’s willingness to battle to the end will be the most important takeaway from Saturday’s loss.

"We got off to a slow start, didn’t put points on the board and then had to fight against it. That’s going to be the difference,” Kelly said. “When you finish this whole analysis, we got off to a bad start, battled our butts off, against a good football team that’s not good enough.

“I’m trying to build a program. Building programs, you want guys that compete. You want guys that love to play. You want all that competitiveness in your football team.”

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

player of the game: Andrew Luck
Notre Dame quarterback

stat of the game
1.8 yards per rush
Quarterback Tommy Rees’ fumble in the first quarter

play of the game
The Stanford front seven dominated Notre Dame on the line of scrimmage, as the Irish averaged just 1.8 yards per carry.

quote of the game
“We didn’t come here to get second prize. We came here to get a win. Nobody in that locker room is happy with the outcome.”

Brian Kelly
Irish coach
report card

quarterbacks: It was an ugly day for the quarterbacks on the stat line, and the two interceptions really cost the Irish. However, Andrew Hendrix did show a glimpse of his potential.

running backs: Notre Dame really missed the physical presence of Jonas Gray, as Cierre Wood struggled to find space around the periphery. Theo Riddick was mediocre in spot duty.

receivers: Michael Floyd and Tyler Eifert had big days statistically, as did Riddick. Despite the receivers’ big-play ability, a number of dropped passes hurt Notre Dame often.

offensive line: The Cardinal defense blitzed the Irish early and often, and Notre Dame did not respond well. When a team averages just 1.8 yards per carry and gives up five sacks, it’s on the line.

defensive line: While Louis Nix and Aaron Lynch showed flashes of brilliance, Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck rarely faced pressure, and the Cardinal ran roughshod.

linebackers: Dan Fox played his best game of the season, but the linebackers struggled to contain Stanford’s stable of tight ends, especially senior Coby Fleener.

defensive backs: The normally-consistent Robert Blanton made a number of uncharacteristic mistakes, and while the secondary limited Luck to just 233 yards, it also gave up four touchdowns.

special teams: David Ruffer did not have a good night, missing an early field goal that could have helped the Irish. The punt return unit is still terrible, but Uden Turk punted well.

coaching: The move to Hendrix in the second half was clearly a good one, but it’s hard to understand why the Irish didn’t even come close when Stanford provided a huge opportunity.

overall: Though there were bright spots here and there, the Irish struggled to even keep it close. In a game where its best was needed, Notre Dame played far from it.

Saturday’s primetime contest marked the first touchdown pass and first touchdown run of his career Saturday. Crist and Rees battled for the starting position this summer.

Though there were bright spots here and there, the Irish didn’t even come close when Stanford provided a huge opportunity.

But not everyone was disappointed. When it comes to the gauntlet of Week 11, there was much else already would have gone wrong.

I told you so: quarterbacks don’t matter

Then and now, whoever takes the snap from center doesn’t matter.

Both Rees and Hendrix are immensely talented, and each has skills the other lacks, but neither is the key to this version of the Irish, be it in the bowl game or next season. If the success of next season comes down to whom Kelly names bowl game starter, next season is already doomed. Not because neither Rees nor Hendrix is up to the task, but because so much else already would have gone wrong.

Look at Bob Diaco’s defense.

Next year it will return seven starters, as well as current freshmen linemen Stephon Tuitt and Aaron Lynch — both of whom have excelled in extended playing time — as well as their classmates and linebackers Issaq Williams. With this defense, Kelly’s starter should not face an 80-yard field very often.

Look at the offensive weapons available.

With that corps, points will be plentiful for a reason. The Champs Sports Bowl exists solely to provide an enjoyable nightcap to this up-and-down season.

Furthermore, starting the bowl game will not give either Rees or Hendrix the added experience necessary to be a star next season.

The defense will be equally formidable, especially with Aaron Lynch showing flashes of brilliance.

Furthermore, starting the bowl game would accomplish little for the Irish in any sense aside from possibly adding another win to the season’s tally. When it comes to the gauntlet known as the 2012 schedule, however, don’t look to bowl game successes or failures as precursors.

Winter lifting, spring practice and summer workouts all exist for a reason. The Champs Sports Bowl exists solely to provide an enjoyable nightcap to this up-and-down season.

In the end, Notre Dame fans need not worry about the quarterback, whoever it may be. Their time is better spent biting their fingernails over Manti Te’o’s NFL Draft status.

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
Hendrix seizes rare opportunity extending his Notre Dame career in the third quarter, the 36th touchdown reception of Tate held the previous record season total to 95, a new Irish tight end to accomplish the feat. "It's a pretty easy package for me," Hendrix said as he tried to describe the moxie of plays on his personal wristband. "I have a large number of plays where if I were to come into the game, I would feel comfortable with. "Even when my number was called in the second half, it didn't get too much out of the package. There were a couple pass plays that he asked that I was comfortable with since I executed them in spring ball and summer practices." Amid the added pass plays and taking every snap, Hendrix still had time to realize he was Notre Dame's primary quarterback in Saturday's second half. Even the Cincinnati native was caught off guard. "I was a little surprised," he said. "I didn't expect to come in and play the entire half. I thought I was going to keep switching off."

By DOUGLAS FARMER

Stanford, Calif. — When Irish sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees looked a hit on Notre Dame's first play from scrimmage Saturday, Andrew Hendrix was standing nearby Irish coach Brian Kelly with his helmet in hand. Seconds later, Hendrix was taking a snap from senior center Mike Golie Jr., making him the fifth Irish tight end to accomplish the feat.

"We're just trying to win games. We're trying to find ways to move the ball." 

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

Hendrix, also a sophomore, "probably not as extensive of a knowledge of the passing game as Tommy has. You give a little, you get a little with me, " thanks to Hendrix's limited snaps thus far. Stanford had limited knowledge of his repertoire, making him in the lineup a learns-as-you-go experience for the defense. "We felt like getting the ball on the perimeter with some of their loaded-box looks might help us out," Kelly said. "Andrew did a pretty good job in some instances... It was his first real live situation, competitive." 

Hendrix's primary target echoed Kelly's praise. Hendrix connected with senior receiver Michael Floyd five times for 67 yards and a touchdown. "He stayed poised. Not having that down. " Floyd said. "He stayed poised. Not having that down."

"I was a little surprised," he said. "I didn't expect to come in and play the entire half. I thought I was going to keep switching off, but when I was called, there was no looking back."

By CHRISS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

Stanford senior quarterback Andrew Luck threw four touchdowns Saturday, pushing his three-year career total to 80 and eclipsing former Cardinal quarterback John Elway's four-year career mark of 77. Luck has thrown 35 touchdowns this season.

Halftime inspiration
Notre Dame continued its dominance in the third quarter, outscoring the Cardinal 7-0 and extending its season margin in the third quarter to 84-13. The defense has shut out the opposing offense in the third period in each of its last five contests and 11 times over the course of the season, yielding a lone touchdown to Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.

Penalty-ridden game
Notre Dame committed 10 penalties for 68 yards, including six penalties for 38 yards in the first half. The 10 penalties marked a season high, but the Irish proved to be more disciplined than the Cardinal, who committed a total of 11 penalties for 113 yards, including seven penalties for 63 yards in the second half alone.

1st 2nd 3rd 4th Total
ND 0 9 7 7 14
SU 7 14 0 7 28

First quarter
Stanford 7, Notre Dame 0
Levine Toilolo 3-yd pass from Andrew Luck (Jordan Williamson kick) with 9:16 remaining
Drive: 7 plays, 58 yards, 3:31 elapsed

Second quarter
Stanford 14, Notre Dame 0
Coby Fleener 28-yd pass from Andrew Luck (Jordan Williamson kick) with 4:45 remaining
Drive: 10 plays, 80 yards, 5:14 elapsed

Stanford 21, Notre Dame 0
Ty Montgomery 11-yd pass from Andrew Luck (Jordan Williamson kick) with 0:10 remaining
Drive: 10 plays, 64 yards, 1:28 elapsed

Third quarter
Stanford 28, Notre Dame 7
Michael Floyd 6-yd pass from Andrew Hendrix (David Ruffer kick) with 6:21 remaining
Drive: 5 plays, 80 yards, 2:31 elapsed

Fourth quarter
Stanford 35, Notre Dame 7
Coby Fleener 55-yd pass from Andrew Luck (Jordan Williamson kick) with 5:40 remaining
Drive: 6 plays, 80 yards, 2:21 elapsed

Stanford 28, Notre Dame 14
Andrew Hendrix 2-yd run (David Ruffer kick) with 0:23 remaining
Drive: 4 plays, 87 yards, 0:39 elapsed

Andrew Hendrix
Notre Dame quarterback Andrew Hendrix runs with the ball during Notre Dame's 28-14 loss to Stanford on Saturday. Hendrix threw for 392 yards and accounted for two touchdowns.

By DOUGLAS FARMER

Editor-in-Chief

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Andrew Hendrix and Michael Floyd exchange wristbands with 4:28 remaining in the second half Saturday. The Irish scored six touchdowns in the third quarter, including one from Andrew Hendrix.

By CHRISS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

Stanford, Calif. — Junior tight end Tyler Eifert eclipsed the 1,000-yard receiving mark on a 23-yard catch in the first quarter, making him the fifth Irish tight end to accomplish the feat. Senior receiver Michael Floyd caught eight passes, pushing his season total to 95, a new Irish record. Former receiver Golden Tate held the previous record with 93 catches. Floyd also caught the 36th touchdown reception of his career in the third quarter, extending his Notre Dame career touchdown receptions record.

Hendrix, also a sophomore, "probably not as extensive of a knowledge of the passing game as Tommy has. You give a little, you get a little with me, " thanks to Hendrix's limited snaps thus far. Stanford had limited knowledge of his repertoire, making him in the lineup a learns-as-you-go experience for the defense. "We felt like getting the ball on the perimeter with some of their loaded-box looks might help us out," Kelly said. "Andrew did a pretty good job in some instances... It was his first real live situation, competitive." 

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Facing their final chance to make a regular-season statement, the Irish had no answer for Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck, who bolstered his case for the Heisman Trophy with a four-touchdown performance. Needing its best performance to take down the one-loss Cardinal, Notre Dame instead turned in a gaffe-ridden effort that left the Irish with no chance of pulling off the upset. Sophomore quarterback Andrew Hendrix sparked Notre Dame in the second half, but his effort was too little, too late, as the Irish finished the regular season with a middling 8-4 record.