By BRIAN HARTNETT
Sports Writer

In a matchup widely hailed as a "trap game," No. 5 Notre Dame survived a tough test from BYU on Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium, as the Irish utilized a strong second-half rushing attack to overpower the Cougars’ stout defense and rally for a 17-14 victory.

After sophomore running back George Atkinson put the Irish (7-0) ahead with a 2-yard touchdown run with 12:52 to go in the fourth quarter, BYU (4-4) marched down the field on a 13- play, 50-yard drive. But Cougars coach Bronco Mendenhall decided to punt from Notre Dame’s 34-yard line rather than attempt a game-tying field goal.

"Six minutes to go, thought we would have a great chance to make a stop," Mendenhall said. "It was work and longer than what I had hoped for, and with six minutes and 35, really believed we would stop and get the ball back with better field position than what we did." BYU was unable to make a stop, as the Irish iced the game with a 9-play, 48-yard drive consisting entirely of running plays.

"We expected to run the football and we had talked about it on our last drive, that this was — we were going to make them use their timeouts," Irish coach Brian Kelly said of the drive.

Notre Dame’s final offensive possession reflected the team’s second-half strategy, which was heavily run-based. The Irish attempted only three passes in the second half.

"It was pretty clear that we were going to be able to control both sides of the ball on the offensive line and defensive line," Kelly said. "And you know, really stuck with our game plan. Came in here wanting to run the football. Thought we controlled that quite well.

Notre Dame ran for 270 yards on the nation’s third-ranked rushing defense coming into the game. Senior running back Theo Riddick ran for a career-high 143 yards on 15 carries, while fellow senior Cierre Wood contributed 100 yards on 18 carries.

Atkinson, the other member in Notre Dame’s trio of running backs, had only five carries but took one of them in for the eventual winning touchdown.

"At the end of the day, it starts and ends with our offensive line," Wood said. "They were getting the push up front and it’s our job to play off of them and read off of them. We just got the job done as a unit."

Junior quarterback Tommy Rees started in place of injured sophomore quarterback Everett Golson for the Irish. Golson, who suffered a concussion against Stanford, had been cleared to practice Wednesday, but Kelly said there were no circumstances under which Golson would have played.

"[Golson] wanted to play," Kelly said. "He made his case. I just felt like where we were during and my evaluation of him cumulatively, I felt like this was the best thing to do... We feel like we’ve got a kid now that’s 100 percent ready to go for Oklahoma." Rees started the game by completing six of his first seven passes, four of them to senior tight end Tyler Eifert. The duo connected on a 4-yard touchdown pass with 1:36 left in the first quarter to put the Irish on the board.

"I think [Eifert] provides a mismatch out there on defense," Rees said. "He’s a great player, he can run, he’s got a lot of size, and I think he does a good job of getting open and finding a way to come down with the ball."

Notre Dame’s defense allowed its first touchdown in 17 quarters when BYU senior quarterback Riley Nelson found junior receiver Cody Hoffman wide-open in the back of the end zone with 8:25 to go in the second quarter.

The Irish defense then surrendered another touchdown less than three minutes later. After a Rees pass bounced off sophomore receiver DaVaris Daniels and into the hands of Cougars junior linebacker Kyle Van Noy, Nelson hit junior tight end Kaneakua Friel on a 2-yard touchdown pass, putting the Cougars up 14-7.

"We dug ourselves a little bit of a hole in the first half with some uncharacteristic mistakes," Kelly said. "But we told them at the half time, you know, this is about how we finish this football game. There wasn’t a panic. We stuck with what we were doing."

After BYU junior kicker Justin Sorensen missed a 46-yard attempt midway through the third quarter, the Irish engineered a 7-play, 65-yard drive culminating in a 24-yard field goal by Brindza with 2:25 left in the quarter. The highlight of the drive was a 55-yard run by Riddick, in which the senior was hit at the line of scrimmage but regained his balance to move the Irish downfield.

Notre Dame’s defense held BYU scoreless in the second half and limited the Cougars to 243 yards overall.

"A lot of us were anxious and excited and we weren’t playing our brand of football," Te’o said. "We came in at half time and settled down and the result is the whole team just playing our brand of football."

Te’o spurred the Irish defense, recording 10 tackles and one interception. Graduate student defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore and sophomore defensive end Stephan Tuitt pressured the Cougars offense throughout the game, as the pair combined for 10 tackles and 2.5 sacks.

"It was a hard-fought win," Lewis-Moore said. "We are a team that holds ourselves to a higher standard. We have to play at a higher standard. We got the win but a lot of guys were like ‘We could play a lot better.’"

Kelly echoed Lewis-Moore’s sentiments, noting the team’s subdued reaction to the victory.

“I think the thing that was concerning for me the most is when our guys came in, and I didn’t sense a great feeling after winning a tough, tough football game,” Kelly said. “And that’s a team that won ten games last year. That’s a bracket buster team in basketball parlance, that’s a darned good football team.”

Notre Dame will look to improve to 8-0 for the first time since 2002 when it travels to Norman, Okla., on Saturday to face No. 8 Oklahoma at 8 p.m.

Contact Brian Hartnett at bhartnett@nd.edu

PLAYER OF THE GAME

THEO RIDDICK
NOTRE DAME RUNNING BACK

Riddick rebounded from a 45-yard effort against Stanford to pile up a career-high 143 yards on 15 carries in the win over BYU. The senior ripped off a key 55-yard run on a third-and-1 in the third quarter after he appeared to be stopped at the line of scrimmage. Riddick’s 9.5 yards per carry helped the Irish control the second half.
On third down midway through the third quarter, Riddick took a handoff from Rees and appeared to be tripped up in the backfield. The senior was somehow able to maintain his balance and gained 55 yards before he was caught from behind at the 8-yard line.

PLAY OF THE GAME

RIDDICK BREAKS THROUGH FOR 55 YARDS ON THIRD DOWN

Notre Dame finds offensive identity in win

It was not pretty, flashy, sparkly or fancy — but it was who the Irish are. Without its starting quarterback, No. 5 Notre Dame was able to pull out a 17-14 win over BYU using what has now become this team’s offensive identity — rushing the football.

Just two weeks after Notre Dame dominated Miami to the tune of 376 rushing yards, the Irish powered through, around and over a run defense that came into the contest ranked third in the country. Senior running backs Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood racked up 143 and 114 yards, respectively, repeatedly grinding out tough yards between the tackles.

The effort on the ground was the third time the Irish ran for over 200 yards in a game this season alone. The previous two came against overmatched Navy and Miami but this one was different. This one came against a good defense. This one had big runs and clutch gainers. This one put the game away in the fourth quarter.
By CORY BERNARD
Sports Writer

Notre Dame's starting quarterback was sidelined. BYU's run defense was ranked third in the country, allowing only 68 yards per game. The odds seemed stacked against the Irish offense Saturday.

No one told senior running backs Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood.

Riddick rumbled for 143 physical yards — more than BYU had given up in a game all season — while his housemate Wood added 114 yards of his own.

The 5-foot-11, 200-pound Riddick shed would-be Cougar tacklers all day Saturday, most notably on a 55-yard scamper in the second half. Initially bottled-up at the line of scrimmage, he emerged upright from the scrum and dashed down the sidelines before being caught.

"I mean, [Riddick] has run really hard and physical for us," Irish coach Brian Kelly said.

"And then, that's who we are. We are becoming that kind of football team on offense. You talk about finding an identity; that's why we talk with it. Even if you're not running the football, it's why we talk with it," Kelly said.

Wood may have done serious damage to the BYU defense, but he didn't shy away from teasing his backfield partner after the game.

"You have to go north and south," he said. "Once you put your foot in the ground, you can't dance too much, that's when you allow the other defenders to catch up."

The Irish entered the locker room at halftime trailing 14-7, but emerged with a renewed focus. Notre Dame only threw the ball three times in the second half, instead opting to lean on its ground game. Wood said he and his offensive peers have always been confident in the rushing attack.

"Basically, if we had to play the whole game without throwing a pass we would still win," Wood said. "That's what I think; that's what all of us think as a core, as a unit. Run the ball, simple as that."

Despite trailing in the second half, Kelly noted the importance of continuing to pursue a strong rushing attack.

"Well, we just felt like that we matched up well; that they play a lot of different coverages, and you know, if they are going to play a lot of two deep zone, we always philosophically like to go in thinking about running the football first," Kelly said.

"And then, that's who we are. We are becoming that kind of football team on offense. You talk about finding an identity; that's why we talk with it. Even when we were down, we kept running the football."

Wood may have done serious damage to the BYU defense, but he didn't shy away from teasing his backfield partner after the game.

"I was disappointed. I got gassed a little bit but, hey, we won, right?" Riddick responded.

"Thanks to the running game, yes, the Irish won."

Contact Cory Bernard at cbernard@nd.edu

Touchdown streak ends

By CORY BERNARD
Sports Writer

The Irish had not allowed an offensive touchdown in 17 quarters prior to surrendering two on consecutive drives to BYU in the second quarter. Notre Dame had not accomplished such a feat since Dan Devine’s final season in 1980, when the Irish defense set a school record by preventing an offensive touchdown for 23 consecutive quarters.

Notre Dame has allowed two or fewer offensive touchdowns in 19 of its past 24 games. In 11 of 19, Irish opponents score either one touchdown or no touchdowns. Despite allowing BYU to score twice Saturday, Notre Dame is still the only team in the Football Bowl Subdivision that has yet to yield a rushing touchdown. The Irish have given up nine rushing touchdowns over their past 25 games. Only Alabama has allowed fewer rushing touchdowns over that span.

"We’re leading the way again," Senior linebacker Manti Te’o intercepted his fourth pass of the season to go along with his team-leading 10 tackles Saturday. The takeaway marked the Irish defense’s 16th interception of the season. Junior linebacker Danny Spond receded the team’s 17th takeaway with an interception on BYU’s final possession.

Notre Dame forced 14 turnovers during the entire 2011 season. Te’o’s interception also marked a personal milestone. He now sits one pick shy of tying the school record for most interceptions by a linebacker in a season. John Puine intercepted five passes in 1986, and Lyron Cobbins equaled that total in 1995.

Contact Cory Bernard at cbernard@nd.edu

STATISTICS

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By CORY BERNARD

Senior running back Cierre Wood looks for running room during Notre Dame’s 17-14 win over BYU on Saturday. Wood racked up 114 yards and helped the Irish gain 270 yards on the ground.

Touchdown streak ends

By CORY BERNARD

The Irish had not allowed an offensive touchdown in 17 quarters prior to surrendering two on consecutive drives to BYU in the second quarter. Notre Dame had not accomplished such a feat since Dan Devine’s final season in 1980, when the Irish defense set a school record by preventing an offensive touchdown for 23 consecutive quarters.

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Sophomore running back George Atkinson dives into the endzone for a 2-yard touchdown run early in the fourth quarter. The score was Atkinson's team-leading fourth of the season and ended up being the decisive score in Notre Dame's 17-14 win over BYU on Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium.

The Irish rushed for 270 yards, nearly four times the amount BYU gave up per game, and pushed the Cougars around on their way to a 17-14 victory. Notre Dame overcame early mistakes and penalties to come from behind in the second half for the second game in a row. The Irish now carry an undefeated record and top-five ranking into a game at No. 8 Oklahoma on Saturday.

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FINDING A WAY TO WIN

Junior quarterback Andrew Hendrix gains 14 yards on his first carry since the season opener against Navy.

Sophomore tight end Troy Niklas is upended by a BYU defender during the 17-14 win.

Senior tight end Tyler Eifert leaps for a catch in the first quarter of Notre Dame's win Saturday. Eifert finished the game with four catches for 73 yards and a touchdown.

Junior linebacker Danny Spond celebrates his fourth-quarter interception that sealed Notre Dame's victory Saturday. It was Spond's first career interception.