From the moment they ran through the tunnel to the singing of the alma mater, the Irish seniors shined, leading Notre Dame to a near-perfect 38-0 victory over Wake Forest and its first undefeated home season since 1998.

The win, coupled with losses by No. 1 Kansas State and No. 2 Oregon, pushed Notre Dame to No. 1 in the BCS standings for the first time in program history.

The Irish dominated all facets of the game from start to finish, maintaining an explosive offensive attack and an unwavering defense for all four quarters, Irish coach Brian Kelly said.

“We have a paradigm for winning,” Kelly said. “It’s something we talk about actually in our locker room. It’s called four quarters of winning.”

“I think that came together in this football game more than any game we’ve played this year.”

Saturday’s complete-game victory was particularly special for the Irish seniors as the 38-0 shutout victory over Wake Forest bookended the senior’s home careers that began with a 35-0 shutout win over Nevada in 2009.

“It’s just a relief for us to win in the fashion that we did, you know, just clicking on all cylinders and everybody is playing with a lot of enthusiasm and energy just on all sides of the ball and just getting after it,” senior linebacker Manti Te’o said.

“That’s a great way to end my career playing here in Notre Dame.”

Unlike many of their previous home games this season, the Irish controlled the game from the very beginning. After shaking its pre-game jitters, Notre Dame converted a third-down and 11 from its own right-yard line with a 24-yard strike from Irish sophomore quarterback Everett Golson to Irish senior tight end Tyler Eifert.

“Their defense all game, holding the Deacons to just nine first downs and 209 total yards,” Grobe said. “Deacon running back Theo Riddick, after the recovery by another Irish senior — safety Zeke Motta — Notre Dame drove to the two-yard line before Irish senior tight end Tyler Eifert took over. While Golson’s first attempt to Eifert was off the mark, Eifert rose above his lone defender on third down to pull down his fourth touchdown of the year and put Notre Dame up 14-0 just six minutes into the game.

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“Everett through it out there and trusted in his receivers and the offensive line gave him good blocking,” Goodman said. “It was just another one of those plays that you just have to go up and get the ball, because that’s what we are taught.”

With another touchdown pass to Irish junior receiver T.J. Jones in the second quarter, Golson had a career game against Wake Forest. Despite being pulled midway through the third quarter, the sophomore signal-caller finished the day with 346 yards passing, three touchdowns and only one interception.

Compared to the start of the season, his performance Saturday reflects the incredible progress Golson has made, Irish senior offensive lineman Zack Martin said.

“Everett has grown as much as anyone on the team,” Martin said. “He came into camp very strong performance for the young signal-caller.
Insider

REPORT CARD

QUARTERBACKS
Everest Golson may have had his best performance in an Irish uniform, throwing for 346 yards and three touchdowns on 20-for-30 passing in just two-and-a-half quarters of play. The only negative was an interception in the end zone.

RUNNING BACKS
Notre Dame got off to a quick start, mostly due to an effective running game. On the opening drive of the game, Cierre Wood ran for a career-high 68-yard touchdown and 150 rushing yards by day’s end. Notre Dame combined for 221 rushing yards total.

RECEIVERS
Eight different Irish receivers came away with a reception, with T.J. Jones leading the way with 97 yards on six receptions and a touchdown. Tyler Eifert also had six receptions and a touchdown along with 85 yards.

OFFENSIVE LINE
Notre Dame didn’t give up a sack in the entire game and Golson had plenty of time to throw the ball downfield effectively. The running game was on point from the get-go.

DEFENSIVE LINE
The defensive front only sacked Wake Forest quarter-back Tanner Price once, but it put constant pressure on the southpaw and forced some hurried throws.

LINEBACKERS
The Notre Dame defense only gave up 55 rushing yards in the entire game, mostly due to its solid linebacking play. The defense also didn’t allow the Deacons to cross the Notre Dame 37-yard line.

DEFENSIVE BACKS
The secondary held Wake Forest to 17.7 yards per reception, with T.J. Jones leading the way with 97 yards on six receptions in the last two games.

SPECIAL TEAMS
Kyle Brindza missed a 40-yard field goal attempt in the third quarter and only had one touchback. But the kickoff coverage unit held Wake Forest to 17.7 yards per kickoff return.

COACHING
Irish coach Brian Kelly had his team completely focused in the week before a rivalry game in Los Angeles and got off to a fast start.

NO. 1 RANKING LEAVES NO DOUBT AS IRISH HEAD WEST

Andrew Gastelum

No. 1 with that number, there is no need for an explanation. With that number, there is no need for a “What If?” With that number, Notre Dame is the best team in the country for the first time since 1993.

That wasn’t even born yet, Irish coach Brian Kelly was in his third season as a head coach at Grand Valley State and Grace Hall was still a men’s dorm.

But on Sunday night, a No. 1 shine brightly from the top of Grace Hall, signaling to the world of college football that Notre Dame was irrelevant no more.

For the first time ever, Notre Dame is No. 1 in the BCS standings.

For the first time in 23 years, Notre Dame is 11-0.

For the first time in 14 years, Notre Dame has gone undefeated at home, thanks to a 38-0 win over Wake Forest on Senior Day.

And it truly was a day for the seniors, by the seniors. Senior running back Cierre Wood rushed for a season-high 150 yards, including a career-high 68-yard touchdown run on Notre Dame’s opening drive. Senior tight end Tyler Eifert had his best output since Notre Dame’s home opener with a 85 yards on a touchdown on six receptions.

Senior wide receiver John Goodman caught his third touchdown of the year and second in as many weeks with another spectacular grab. And senior linebacker Carlo Calabrese led the Irish in tackles with seven.

Meanwhile, senior captains Manti T’eo and Kapron Lewis-Moore walked off the field to a standing ovation from 80,000-plus spectators, ending their careers at Notre Dame Stadium on the highest of high notes.

And now they head west, with it all on the line. One chance to complete an undefeated season and pack for the field to a standing ovation of high notes.

But to this team, there is no such thing as pressure. There is only a challenge, an opportunity to push past the improbable, and do the impossible.

“We started thinking about it as soon as the game was over,” Eifert said. “We know what’s at stake and how badly we want it, so we’re just going to go out there and lay it on the line like we have all year and make it happen.”

The challenge awaits against the two most talented receivers in college football in Marqise Lee and Robert Woods. In the Los Angeles Coliseum on Thanksgiving weekend, the Irish do not have to worry about who is ahead of them in the standings, style points or the computers. It’s as simple as win and end the regular season as the best team in the country with a chance at the crystal ball. But maybe in this case, it’s not simple at all.

“We have one game left on our schedule,” Kelly said. “Our guys know what’s at stake now. This is about an undefeated season. They cannot do anything else but beat USC.”

Notre Dame was supposed to head into Los Angeles with a chance to ruin the national title hopes of one of its fiercest rivals. And now, in a bizarre set of circumstances, the field is flipped. And USC would enjoy nothing more than to do just that.

“There is no next week. It’s USC. There is no game after that,” T’eo said. “The USC-Notre Dame game is always a battle. So we understand that, and we’re going to prepare the way we know how.”

This was supposed to be the down year, following the departure of Aaron Lynch, starting a first-year quarterback and facing the toughest schedule in college football.

And now, the Irish find themselves at the top of it all. One game awaits. One game, with a shot to prolong the dream.

Contact Andrew Gastelum at agastel1@nd.edu

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

PLAY OF THE GAME

WOOD KICKS OFF THE GAME WITH A 68-YARD TOUCHDOWN RUN

Immediately following a big third-down conversion on third-and-11, Wood rocketed through the Deacons’ defense off an option pitch with the longest Irish run of the season and the longest of his career to give the Irish the early 7-0 lead.
Notre Dame displays big-play ability on offense

By MIKE MONACO
Sports Writer

On a night when style points became a moot point, the No. 3 Irish rode an explosive offense that racked up yards and points in style in a 38-0 demolition of Wake Forest on Saturday.

Notre Dame (11-0) accumulated 221 yards of total offense in the first quarter and jumped out to a 21-0 lead by way of the big play. Senior running back Cierre Wood ripped off the longest Irish rush of the season — a 68-yard touchdown scamper — and graduate student receiver John Goodman hauled in a 50-yard touchdown reception from sophomore quarterback Everett Golson.

“We’re very explosive,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said of the offense. “We had nine explosive plays, Kelly said. “He has the ability to throw it, he can run the football. He is elusive, I think we’re seeing a guy that’s growing each and every week.”

Goodman said Golson’s growth has been a gradual progression that culminated with Saturday’s stellar performance.

“He played the best game of his life,” Goodman said. “It just shows how much he has grown as a person and a player.”

And as Golson has grown, so has the offense. After posting just 21 points against Boston College a week ago, the Irish offense exploded for 584 yards.

“I think just starting off last week the big thing we pressed was starting fast as an offense,” junior receiver T.J. Jones said. “And we were able to do that this week and I guess it just kind of all clicked. It clicked more. We’re learning as an offense. We’re growing together and every week we’re getting better.”

Notre Dame averaged 16.5 yards per completion and 24 yards per rush, including Wood’s 13.6 yards per carry average out of the backfield. The senior running back piled up 156 yards on just 11 rushes.

“Obviously, he’s a guy that makes explosive plays,” Kelly said. “He has the ability to throw it, he can run the football. He is elusive, I think we’re seeing a guy that’s growing each and every week.”

Golson led Notre Dame’s potent offensive attack against Wake Forest with three touchdown passes.

Irish sophomore quarterback Everett Golson fakes a handoff to senior running back Cierre Wood.

Irish finish 6-0 at home

By MIKE MONACO
Sports Writer

With Saturday’s victory, Notre Dame finished the season with an undefeated home record for the first time since 1998. The Irish went 6-0 at Notre Dame Stadium and have won eight straight home games dating back to last season.

“We played very well today,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said after Saturday’s victory. “We saved our best for our last home game. The goal for all of us was to be undefeated this year at home. We were able to achieve that goal, so our guys are pretty excited about that. We feel really good about the accomplishment.”

Eifert breaks record

With a third-quarter reception, senior tight end Tyler Eifert passed Ken MacAfee for the most career receptions by a Notre Dame tight end with his 129th grab.

“I was really happy to have it, and just happy I don’t have to think about it anymore,” Eifert said. “Coach Kelly said to me, ‘if you drop this, we’re not throwing it to you for the rest of the game,’ so I made sure I caught it.”

“Coming back to get his degree says so much about the Notre Dame football player and how important it is to have their degree, but to also play at the level that he has played, to break the kind of records with the great right ends that have been here at Notre Dame is an amazing feat,” Kelly said.

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SCORING SUMMARY

1 2 3 4 TOTAL
Notre Dame 7, Wake Forest 0
Cierre Wood 68-yard run (Brindza kick) 13:15 remaining
Drive: Four plays, 91 yards, 1:45 elapsed

Notre Dame 14, Wake Forest 0
Tyler Eifert two-yard pass from Golson (Brindza kick) 6:17 remaining
Drive: Six plays, 75 yards, 2:52 elapsed

Notre Dame 21, Wake Forest 0
John Goodman 50-yard pass from Golson (Brindza kick) 4:28 remaining
Drive: Six plays, 78 yards, 2:24 elapsed

Notre Dame 28, Wake Forest 0
TJ Jones 34-yard pass from Golson (Brindza kick) 1:34 remaining
Drive: Six plays, 51 yards, 1:13 elapsed

Notre Dame 38, Wake Forest 0
George Atkinson nine-yard run (Brindza kick) 5:30 remaining
Drive: Seven plays, 80 yards, 3:44 elapsed

STATISTICS

RUSHING YARDS
Wood 364, 11-150
Atkinson 134, 7-34
Riddick 133, 6-20
Goodman 132, 2-57
Toma 111, 2-37
Koyack 97, 1-11
Smith 79, 1-10
Brown 58, 1-6

PASSING YARDS
Golson 20-30-346
Price 22-33-153
Rees 2-5-17
Thompson 1-1

Time of Possession
29:29
30:31

PASSING TOUCHDOWNS
Golson 0
Price 0
Rees 0
Thompson 0

EIFERT BREAKS RECORD
• With a third-quarter reception, senior tight end Tyler Eifert passed Ken MacAfee for the most career receptions by a Notre Dame tight end with his 129th grab.

“Coming back to get his degree says so much about the Notre Dame football player and how important it is to have their degree, but to also play at the level that he has played, to break the kind of records with the great right ends that have been here at Notre Dame is an amazing feat,” Kelly said.

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TACKLES
Calabrese 7
Nix 4
Te’o 4
Day 2
Councell 1
Fattey 1
Motta 1
McDaniel 1

KICKOFF RETURNS
McDaniel 1

SACKS
Tuitu 1

at Notre Dame 7, Wake Forest 0
Cierre Wood 68-yard run (Brindza kick)
Sophomore running back George Atkinson carries the ball during Notre Dame’s 38-0 victory over Wake Forest on Saturday. Atkinson rushed for 34 yards and a touchdown in the victory. The win, which propelled the Irish to No.1 in the BCS standings, was the first Notre Dame home shutout since a 35-0 victory over Nevada in 2009.

Notre Dame honored a class of 29 seniors with a pregame ceremony, and the festivities carried over into a 38-0 romp over Wake Forest. The Irish clicked on all cylinders, as sophomore quarterback Everett Golson threw for 346 yards and three touchdowns while the defense kept the Deacons off the scoreboard. Many senior walk-ons saw playing time in the waning minutes.