Irish coach Brian Kelly speaks with ESPN reporter Heather Cox after Notre Dame's 22-13 win over USC. Kelly guided Notre Dame to an undefeated regular season in his third season at the helm of the Irish program after going 8-5 his previous two seasons.

Swarbrick and Kelly carrying out a grand vision for Notre Dame

Allan Joseph

LOS ANGELES — As the final seconds ticked off the clock Saturday night, Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick made celebratory rounds on the Notre Dame sideline, embracing sweaty Irish players while wearing a sharp grey suit. As he moved from player to player, he wore an ear-to-ear grin, and with good reason: Swarbrick’s most prominent player had never looked like a better hire.

Before the season, Swarbrick said Irish coach Brian Kelly was on the “closest seat in America” after two consecutive five-loss campaigns. Many fans scoffed at Swarbrick’s seeming overconfidence — as much as the program had improved in two years, it also seemed to be in state of flux.

Chuck Martin, a safeties coach for two seasons, had risen the ranks to lead an inconsistent Irish offense. The quarterback position was mad-deningly unsettled, and after moving Theo Riddick to receiver right after they arrived, Kelly and Martin asked Riddick to receiver right after they arrived, Kelly and Martin seemed to have come to an agreement.

“Winning instinct” mattered above all else. Through it all, Kelly stuck with his quiet confidence. He brushed off concerns about his sideline demeanor and player management while insisting his program was on track. He deflected questions challenging his decisions with his usual polished ease, but there appeared to be an undercurrent to his answers.

“I’ve got this,” he seemed to want to say. “Just wait and see.”

Then, of course, came the 2012 season. The Irish should be seen coming.

By Kelly is John Chizik-style one-hit wonder. Perhaps the truly amazing part of this transformation is how much Notre Dame will improve in the next few years. Swarbrick will come a feared offensive weapon, the special teams have all the room in the world to improve and the incoming recruiting classes herald an era of unprecedented talent on the Notre Dame sideline. The Irish should be competing for BCS bowl berths for years to come.

Swarbrick’s weren’t the only eyes smiling Saturday night — Irish eyes around the country were smiling too. And they had every right to be: They had all just glimpsed the reason Kelly was hired in the first place: his vision has come together around the country were smiling too. And they had every right to be: They had all just glimpsed the reason Kelly was hired in the first place: his vision has come together...
Undefeated

Riddick’s rushing, late goal-line stand close out 12-0 regular season with win over USC

By ANDREW OWENS
Assistant Managing Editor

LOS ANGELES — After the final seconds of a perfect regular season vanished and the Irish celebrated at midfield, Brian Kelly put his arm around his daughter and paced toward the tunnel. On his way to the jubilant locker room, he looked toward the Notre Dame fan contingent on the south side of the Los Angeles Coliseum and lifted his index finger.

No. 1 Notre Dame had risen to the task for the 12th time this season, and now a championship berth in Miami awaits the undefeated Irish following a 22-13 defeat of archival USC (7-5).

“It was as you’d have expected,” Kelly said of the post-game scene in the locker room. “There was a lot of singing, dancing. It was what you would expect it to be for a team that’s this close and has won so many games in that fashion. It was fun to be in there.”

With the conquest of the Trojans, the Irish will play the winner of Saturday’s SEC championship game between No. 2 Alabama and No. 3 Georgia in Atlanta. A win would secure Notre Dame’s first national championship since 1988, with the current 24-year drought serving as the longest in program history since the Irish won their first in 1924.

Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick, who hired Kelly nearly 36 months ago, had one word for the feeling as he celebrated with players on the field. Phenomenal.”

They didn’t hold their opponent to fewer than 20 points for the 11th time this season, and the final instance might have been the most impressive. With USC quarterback Matt Barkley watching from the sidelines with a shoulder injury. Outside of a 53-yard reception by sophomore Marquise Lee, the Notre Dame secondary largely held the receiver and his talented teammates, Robert Woods, in check.

“I think Notre Dame showed me they have phenomenal se- nior leadership,” embattled USC coach Lane Kiffin said.

“You can see those guys under- stand the game and they re- ally care about each other. They’re really physical and pretty old school — that’s why they have so many close scores — but they don’t screw up. You have to play really well to beat them. They don’t hand you things.”

Leading by nine points with the USC quarterback in a Conservative fash- ion, I felt all week that you did right and be able to instill the con- fidence that you’re going to go out there and get that goal line back. We came in and make some bad decisions ev- er once in a while, but he’s not careless with the football.

“We couldn’t win the game if we were going to control the game (in a conservative fash- ion). I felt all week that you can’t come in here hoping that USC doesn’t play well. You’ve got to come in here and take it from them. Our gameplan was to let [Golson] play.”

Sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza celebrates with teammates after one of his five field goals in Notre Dame’s 22-13 win over USC on Saturday. The Irish improved to 12-0 with the win and assured themselves of a berth in the BCS National Championship Game in Miami on Jan. 7.

Golson engineered scor- ing drives on Notre Dame’s first three possessions, as the Irish jumped out to a 13-7 lead midway through the second quarter. As has been the case dur- ing much of the season, Notre Dame stalled inside the red zone, one of the points Kelly said he needs to address dur- ing the six weeks and two days leading up to the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7.

“It means there’s things we still need to work on,” said Kelly of an offense that scored just one touchdown in six red-zone appearances. “We’re not a per- fect team. We know that. Here’s what we like: We know that’s going to get better as our quar- terback matures.”

But sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza converted five of six attempted field goals, the longest of which he booted from 52 yards out as the first half ex- pired, giving the Irish a 16-10 halftime lead.

“I know [Kelly] has confidence in me and it’s a great thing to have from a coach, rather than having a coach trying to rip your head off,” Brindza said.

“It’s a great guy and is able to get to everyone, even if they made a mistake and be able to talk to them about what you did wrong and what you did right and be able to instill the confi- dence that you’re going to go out there the next time and do the right thing.”

Brindza contributed with a key special teams tackle as well. Lee, a Heisman candidate, found a seam in the Irish kick- off coverage with the Irish up 22-13 with 5:58 remaining in the game, but it was the Notre Dame kicker who forced the speedster out of bounds at the Trojan 45.

“That was one of my night- mares all week,” said Brindza on being the last man between Lee and the end zone. “It was a nightmare and when Lee was running up, I was a deer in the headlights. It was like a night- mare coming back to me, but then I turned it off and real- ized I had to make the tackle and I was glad I was able to help my team.”

After the ensuing goal-line stand and the game’s con- clusion minutes later, senior linebacker Manti Te’o, who re- corded his seventh interception of the season in the third quar- ter, found his coach in the tun- nel and had a simple message for him.

“I said, ‘I love you.’ I love him,” Te’o said. “Our relation- ship was bumpy at first, but it’s great [now]. I’m happy to be part of this and have him as our coach. He’s the best coach in college football.”

Te’o said the Irish reached a goal with the 12-0 regular-sea- son finish, but that there’s one remaining chapter in the 2012 book yet to be written.

“We’ve brought a lot of pride back to Notre Dame,” he said. “I’m grateful to be a part of it.

“We’re the best team. We’re No. 1.”

Notre Dame will have the opportunity to finish as the best team and win 13 games for the first time in program history at the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7 against either No. 2 Alabama or No. 3 Georgia.

Contact Andrew Owens at aowens2@nd.edu

PLAYER OF THE GAME
THEO RIDDICK
NOTRE DAME RUNNING BACK

Riddick had a career game and spurred Notre Dame to an unde- feated season with 179 total yards. The converted wide receiver took 20 carries and fought for each of his 146 yards on the ground. His highlight reel spin move set up the game’s final score on a cru- cial drive in the fourth quarter.
Insider
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2012 | ndsmcobserver.com

Report Card

Quarterbacks
A-
Everett Golson continued a remarkable run of play dating back to the win over Oklahoma. The sophomore made plays with his arm and legs, and most importantly protected the ball on the road to ensure the win.

Running Backs
A
It has been a group effort at running back all season, but under the brightest lights senior Theo Riddick shined even brighter as Notre Dame’s offensive star. Riddick had 179 total yards and countless highlight-reel moves.

 Receivers
Another solid, if not spectacular, performance by the receivers. Robby Toma and Tyler Eifert showed remarkable concentration on bobbled balls down the field. Eifert finally had a defensive back knock a pass away from him on a jump ball in the end zone.

Offensive Line
A-
It was a great effort in run blocking by the offensive line, particularly the stalwarts on the left side — Zack Martin and Chris Watt. Riddick had room to run and make people miss thanks to the group’s work.

Defensive Line
B+
The duo of USC backs Silas Redd and Curtis McNeal got loose a few times, but the unit had a solid day. Louis Nix was a force in goal-line situations and Kapron Lewis-Moore recorded one-and-a-half sacks in his final regular-season effort.

Linebackers
A-
Manti Te’o returned to the stat sheet in the interception column with his incredible seventh pick on the year. Te’o and fellow inside linebacker Carlo Calabrese had a solid game tackling the shifty USC running backs and outside linebacker Prince Shembo recorded half a sack.

Defensive Backs
A-
He had to interfere with the best receiver in college football — USC sophomore Marqise Lee — on multiple occasions, but freshman KeiVarae Russell had an interception and contained the star Lee and Robert Woods.

Special Teams
B+
Kyle Brindza had a career day, making five field goals despite a miss at a crucial time. Though the punt return game was again quiet, George Atkinson put together a big kick return in the fourth quarter.

Coaching
A
Brian Kelly has completed his transformation of the Notre Dame program from mediocre to elite. If he can win the BCS National Championship Game, he will become a legend.

Overall GPA: 3.60

The Irish played in their 12th game as they had in the previous 11 — as a team. Riddick paced the offense, Te’o and Russell paced the defense and Brindza shined on special teams. Kelly spoke in his first two seasons of a “winning instinct” he hoped to instill. The Irish clearly listened — they are 12-0 and headed to Miami.

Play of the Game

Wittek’s Pass to Vainuku Dropped on Fourth Down
After stuffing three straight runs inside the 2-yard line in a valiant effort, the Irish defense completed yet another memorable goal-line stand as the fourth-down pass in the flat from USC quarterback Max Wittek to fullback Soma Vainuku was bobbled and dropped.

Brindza’s Big Day
Irish sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza had a career day Saturday with five made field goals. Brindza now has 23 converted field goals on the year — the highest single-season total in Notre Dame history. Brindza passed the mark of 21 set by long-time NFL kicker John Carney in 1986 with a 33-yard kick in the third quarter. Brindza’s 31 attempts on the season are also the most in Notre Dame history, besting Carney’s 28 in 1986. With his 52-yard field goal as time expired in the first half, Brindza tied ex-teammate David Ruffer for the second-longest field goal in school history. His kick was one yard short of the record of 53 yards set by Dave Reeve in 1976.

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Irish sophomore quarterback Everett Golson improved to 10-0 as a starter in Saturday’s win over USC. His 10 consecutive victories to start his career are the second-most in Notre Dame history, trailing only Bob Williams’ mark of 11 set from 1949-50. Golson attempted 26 passes without throwing an interception against the Trojans. He has not thrown an interception on the road since the season opener against Navy in Ireland, spanning games against Michigan State, Oklahoma, Boston College and USC.

By the Numbers

Brian Kelly—Irish Coach

Everett Golson (5)—QB

Kyle Brindza (27)—K

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Riddick leads the way
On the strength of senior running back Theo Riddick’s 146 yards on the ground, Notre Dame rushed for 222 yards in its regular-season finale, compared to just 95 for the Trojans. Notre Dame is 43-2 in its last 45 games in which it gains more yards rushing than its opponent, with the only losses in that run coming against Michigan and Florida State during the 2011 season. The Irish have now recorded 200 rushing yards or more seven times in 12 games this season.

Te’o records 100 tackles — again
Senior linebacker and Heisman Trophy candidate Manti Te’o upped his season total in tackles to 103 with five against the Trojans. Te’o is the first Notre Dame player since Bob Crable during the 1979-81 seasons to record three straight seasons of 100 tackles. Te’o also intercepted Trojan quarterback Max Wittek for his seventh interception of the season. The mark is the highest for a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) linebacker in 13 seasons. Te’o is second in FBS this season in interceptions, trailing only Fresno State safety Phillip Thomas.

By CHRIS ALLEN
Sports Editor

Lucky number 13
The Irish completed an undefeated regular season Saturday, defeating USC 22-13 to improve their record to 12-0. The undefeated run marks the 13th time in the 125 seasons of Notre Dame football that the Irish have finished the regular season unbeaten and untied. The last time Notre Dame went undefeated in the regular season was in 1988, posting an 11-0 mark under then-coach Lou Holtz. The Irish then followed that up with a 34-21 victory over West Virginia in the Fiesta Bowl to clinch the national championship.

Third time’s the charm
Irish coach Brian Kelly can become the latest in a growing list of Notre Dame coaches to win the national championship in their third season leading the Irish. Predecessors Frank Leahy, Ara Parseghian, Dan Devine and Lou Holtz all won a national championship in the third year of their respective tenures as coach. The undefeated regular season also continues a personal trend for Kelly, who led Cincinnati to a 12-0 season in 2009, his third year as head coach of the Bearcats. Kelly was hired at Notre Dame before Cincinnati competed in the Sugar Bowl to close that season.

Notre Dame finishes the regular season with an average of 10.3 points allowed per game, a mark second only to Alabama’s 9.3.

Theo Riddick (6)—RB
Manti Te’o (5)—LB

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<th>STATISTICS</th>
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<tr>
<td>RUSHING YARDS</td>
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<td>PASSING YARDS</td>
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| Passing: 25:22 | Time of Possession |
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| Rushing: 34:38 | Time of Possession |
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<th>Kyle Brindza 27-yard field goal</th>
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<td>Williams 8</td>
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By ALLAN JOSEPH

LOS ANGELES — Yet again, the game was on the line. Yet again, the opponents were at the goal line. Yet again, the Irish were defending a perfect season. And yet again, the Notre Dame defense came through.

“This was another clear indication of how we got to 12-0,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “Our guys have an incredible resolve regardless of the circumstances of coming up and finding ways to win. That’s all we talk about.”

No. 1 Notre Dame (12-0) had entered Saturday’s showdown at the Los Angeles Coliseum preparing for a pair of explosive receivers in USC’s Marqise Lee and Robert Woods. Yet through 54 minutes, the Irish had contained the USC passing attack, holding redshirt freshman quarterback Max Wittek to just 124 yards on 12-of-18 passing with two interceptions.

But facing a 22-13 deficit with 5:50 left at their own 45-yard line, the Trojans (7-5) came to life. Wittek found Lee down the left side of the field for a 53-yard completion to the 2-yard line, bringing the flow of USC fans leaving the stands to a loud and immediate halt.

With its back in the shadow of a flaming Olympic torch on the stadium’s east end, the Notre Dame defense dug in and refused to yield a game-changing touchdown.

“To be honest with you, with us, as long as you put the ball down and there’s time on the clock, we’re going to battle,” graduate student defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore said. “We played hard, we got some pressure and we had 11 guys on the field believe.”

The Trojans immediately backed up five yards on a false-start penalty before running back Curtis McNeal pushed USC to the 4-yard line on first down. On second down, Wittek lofted a pass toward Lee in the corner of the end zone, but freshman cornerback KeiVarae Russell committed pass interference and gave the sophomore receiver no chance at catching the ball — and then did the same thing on the same play call on the very next snap.

The penalties brought the Trojans to first and goal from the 1-yard line with 4:07 to go. With just three seconds separating the Trojans from a two-point game, the situation was reminiscent of Notre Dame’s overtime win over Stanford six weeks ago — and the Irish defense knew it.

“It gives you confidence that we have done it before, that it can be achieved, that it’s possible,” Lewis-Moore said. “Yeah, we’ve been here before, so that should give us a little more energy. We’ve done this before, so what’s the difference between then and now?”

There wasn’t much of one, as it turned out. Wittek plunged for yard twice in an attempt to get the yards himself, but the Notre Dame defensive line held firm, anchored by junior nose tackle Louis Nix.

“He’s a hell of a player,” Lewis-Moore said. “He’s a big guy and he’s really active in the backfield.”

With precious seconds bleeding off the clock after two consecutive failed rushing plays, USC coach Lane Kiffin burned a timeout — and came out of it with a running play for McNeal. Irish safeties Matthias Farley and Zeke Motta crashed in from the edges and Nix blew through blockers in the middle to stuff McNeal yet again, bringing up 4th-and-goal.

“Whenever the ball is that close to the goal-line, we have to tighten up and that’s what we did,” senior linebacker Manti Te’o said.

On fourth down, Wittek found Soma Vainuku, but the fullback couldn’t hold on to the low pass and the ball bounced to the ground, giving the Irish another goal-line stand in a season full of memorable moments.

“We did it,” Lewis-Moore said.

“We did it, it’s crazy, you know? No. 1 and keeping that No. 1 and being 12-0 and playing for a national championship, it’s something spectacular.”

“It’s awesome. You just put the ball down and if there’s time on the clock we’re going to battle. We’re not going to give up. This team and this defense, we’ve got a lot of character. We’ve got a lot of guys that play hard, and they play with heart. As long as you put the ball down and they’re not in the end zone we’re going to fight.”

— Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu

Irish safety Matthias Farley and junior nose guard Louis Nix combine to stop USC running back Curtis McNeal at the goal-line.

Riddick earns tough yards to lead offense

By ALLAN JOSEPH

LOS ANGELES — Yet again, the Irish offense was the difference, scoring Notre Dame’s only touchdown of the game in the first quarter.

Irish senior running back Theo Riddick makes a move in the open field after taking a handoff. Riddick paced the Irish offense with 179 total yards and scored Notre Dame’s only touchdown of the game in the first quarter.

Riddick quickly spun away from the pursuing defenders and broke through a hole, driving through cornerback Nickell Robey downfield for a 15-yard gain into the red zone. The run set up a chip-shot field goal for sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza that proved to be the game’s final score.

“Will my will is the same throughout every game. I mean I never try to go down easy,” Riddick said. “I keep on fighting, I was lucky to get out of some tackles today.”

On a night Notre Dame fans will not soon forget, Riddick completed his season-long return from receiver to running back by taking 20 handoffs and running right into Notre Dame lore. For Riddick, it was the final regular-season game of a career played at multiple positions with his teammates in mind.

“What can I say? I play for my teammates. During those transitions, I didn’t really have a problem with it,” Riddick said. “Coach Kelly wanted me to play wide receiver, I played it. Getting back in the backfield, I did that too. I do it for my teammates … I’m a team guy. I have been my whole career. I’ll do anything for my teammates.”

— Contact Chris Allen at callen10@nd.edu

Irish senior running back Theo Riddick makes a move in the open field after taking a handoff. Riddick paced the Irish offense with 179 total yards and scored Notre Dame’s only touchdown of the game in the first quarter.

Though the 5-foot-11, 200-pound back has gained a reputation for playing like a much larger back due to his bruiser style, Riddick said his ability to run after contact is just his natural instinct.

“I was just running hard. That’s what I’m supposed to do,” he said of his performance. “The offensive line did a great job today. I was able to explore holes and make people miss.”

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“It’s awesome. You just put the ball down and if there’s time on the clock we’re going to battle. We’re not going to give up. This team and this defense, we’ve got a lot of character. We’ve got a lot of guys that play hard, and they play with heart. As long as you put the ball down and they’re not in the end zone we’re going to fight.”

— Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu

We did it. It’s crazy, you know? No. 1 and keeping that No. 1 and being 12-0 and playing for a national championship, it’s something spectacular.”

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THE ROAD TO 12–0

WIN NUMBER 1
SEPT. 1
NOTRE DAME 50, NAVY 10

WIN NUMBER 2
SEPT. 8
NOTRE DAME 20, PURDUE 17

WIN NUMBER 3
SEPT. 15
NOTRE DAME 20, MICHIGAN STATE 3

WIN NUMBER 4
SEPT. 22
NOTRE DAME 13, MICHIGAN 6

WIN NUMBER 5
OCT. 6
NOTRE DAME 41, MIAMI 3

WIN NUMBER 6
OCT. 13
NOTRE DAME 20, STANFORD 13 (OT)

WIN NUMBER 7
OCT. 20
NOTRE DAME 17, BYU 14

WIN NUMBER 8
OCT. 27
NOTRE DAME 30, OKLAHOMA 13

WIN NUMBER 9
NOV. 3
NOTRE DAME 29, PITTSBURGH 26 (3OT)

WIN NUMBER 10
NOV. 10
NOTRE DAME 21, BOSTON COLLEGE 6

WIN NUMBER 11
NOV. 17
NOTRE DAME 38, WAKE FOREST 0

WIN NUMBER 12
NOV. 24
NOTRE DAME 22, USC 13
Senior running back Theo Riddick crosses the goal line to score Notre Dame’s only touchdown of the game in its 22-13 win over USC. Sophomore kicker Kyle Brindza added five field goals as Notre Dame took the victory to go 12-0. Riddick rushed for 146 yards and added 33 yards receiving in the most productive game of his career.

The Irish completed a regular season for the ages under the lights in Los Angeles, defeating USC 22-13 to go 12-0. Senior running back Theo Riddick ran for a career-high 146 yards on 20 carries and senior linebacker Manti Te’o intercepted his seventh pass of the season. Notre Dame is likely to play either Alabama or Georgia in the BCS National Championship Game on Jan. 7.

Sophomore quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to senior running back Cierre Wood. Wood added 20 yards rushing as Notre Dame rushed for 222 yards as a team.

Senior tight end Tyler Eifert juggles the ball before making a catch near the sidelines. Eifert led the Irish in receiving yards.

Junior nose guard Louis Nix stuffs a USC ballcarrier. USC rushed for only 95 yards on the night.

Sophomore quarterback Everett Golson dives to complete a run. Golson rushed for 47 yards on the day.

Sophomore kick returner George Atkinson catches a USC kickoff before a return. Atkinson’s 39-yard kickoff return in the fourth quarter set up a late score for Notre Dame.

Sophomore quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to senior running back Cierre Wood. Wood added 20 yards rushing as Notre Dame rushed for 222 yards as a team.