THE BIG HOUSE

ZACK MARTIN LEADS THE IRISH INTO MICHIGAN STADIUM LOOKING TO TAKE DOWN THE WOLVERINES
The dress rehearsal went off without a hitch. Despite some bumps here, some early kinks to work out there. But Saturday night, the curtain will truly rise on the 2013 Irish. And if past trips to Ann Arbor are any indication, some theatrics will probably ensue.

The Big House will be packed, and the bright lights will be on once again. Two years ago, they were turned on in Michigan Stadium for the first time, and most of the Midwest turned out for the show.

Those lights will expose Brian Kelly’s squad, one way or another. They got the compulsory result against Temple, but the process could use some work. The offense showed its ability to hit holes and put its stable of running backs struggled at times to grind out yards. The defense is as deep as it has ever been but showed some rust at every level last week. And the kicking game has been on how to classify it. It has ever been but showed at times to grind out yards. It’s a blend of virtually all the schools throughout the country.

Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank spoke before Kelly’s news conference Tuesday and echoed the same sentiment. Frank said he doesn’t believe the rivalry is as important to head-to-head recruiting battles between Notre Dame and Michigan. "It’s been interesting when you talk about this game. I think before it was a lot more important in the grand scheme of things when you talk about recruiting and going head-to-head," said Frank, who runs the ESPN-affiliated Irish Sports Daily. "I don’t think Notre Dame and Michigan go head-to-head for a lot of players nearly as much as they used to. Why that is? I think Notre Dame has broadened their base a little bit and is recruiting a big group of players from all over the country."

While the rivalry may not be ramped-up within the region, Frank believes the performance of each team in prime-time can be helpful in the same national recruiting picture to which Kelly alluded.

"Where I do think [the rivalry] matters is you’ve got two big, traditional schools going head-to-head and both are extremely respected programs," Frank said. "And I think it matters a lot to people who are interested in maybe leaving home and looking at a school like Michigan or Notre Dame. If they see that Notre Dame can beat another big-time regional school, it kind of validates the choice to attend there."

"So I think even more than bringing rights, it has to do with how each school is perceived and the direction each program is headed."

Frank said he expects Saturday’s game to have a major impact on recruits in the class of 2014 as well as the class of 2015. The class of 2014 already has 16 commitments, but Frank said the game could impact seniors from across the nation, including those already interested in Notre Dame like California athlete Michiah Quick and Florida defensive tackle Anthony Moten, as well as those who have not expressed any interest.

"February is still a long ways away and, at this time last year, [freshman safety] Max Redfield and [former Irish commit] Eddie Vanderdoes weren’t on the radar," Frank said. "Opportunities open up with other teams. There may be other prospects that aren’t on the radar right now. I think these are the kinds of things that matter for 2014."

As for the class of 2015, Sunday was a big day in recruiting even though there were no commitments or decommitments to or from Notre Dame.

February is still a long ways away and, at this time last year, [freshman safety] Max Redfield and [former Irish commit] Eddie Vanderdoes weren’t on the radar," Frank said. "Opportunities open up with other teams. There may be other prospects that aren’t on the radar right now. I think these are the kinds of things that matter for 2014."

As for the class of 2015, Sunday was a big day in recruiting even though there were no commitments or decommitments to or from Notre Dame. With the calendar flipping to September, communication is now allowed with prospects in the class of 2015. Coaches may send personalized letters to recruits and are allowed to reply to and send e-mails to high school juniors.

As it stands now, Notre Dame has received just one commitment from the class of 2015. Offensive lineman Jesse Millard, a 6-foot-7, 312-pound tackle from Shreveport, La., pledged to the Irish on June 22nd. ESPN rates Millard as the 18th-best tackle and the 268th-best overall player in the nation.

Frank said Saturday’s contest with Michigan will go a long way toward sculpting the opinions of other prospects in the junior class.

"Right now those prospects are forming their opinions on where they think Notre Dame is headed as far as the direction of the program," he said. "Was last year a one-season fluke or is this a legitimate top-10 program at this point? I think these types of games kind of validate people’s opinions on where Notre Dame is as a program."

Frank said Notre Dame simply has not extended offers to a great deal of 2015’s prospects yet. One player with an Irish offer, however, is Minnesota defensive end Jashon Cornell. ESPN rates Cornell, who hails from the same school (Cretin-Derham Hall High School) that produced former Irish receiver Michael Floyd and current freshman receiver James Onwualu, as the No. 1 overall player in the nation.

Though Cornell is expected to visit Michigan this weekend, Frank said the Irish still have a strong shot at landing the 6-foot-3, 245-pounder. Frank mentioned how Floyd and Irish freshman offensive lineman Steve Elmer took visits to Notre Dame opponents when they were being recruited by both schools, watched Notre Dame lose and ended up committing to the Irish anyway.

"Jashon Cornell is a tremendous prospect and Notre Dame has a really, really good shot with him but I think when you’re the No. 1 prospect, or certainly one of the top defensive ends in the country, you’re going to have a whole lot of teams coming after you," Frank said. "But you know he’ll be down for a Notre Dame game as well and we’ll just have to see how it plays out, but I think Notre Dame is in real good shape with him."

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s irishsportspulse.com. Email Mike at mikefrank@nd.edu and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu
By MIKE MONACO
Sports Editor

It’s a few minutes after 6 p.m. on Wednesday. Practice is wrapping up.

The sound system blasts B.o.B’s “Magic” and Joan Jett’s “Love Rock ‘n’ Roll.” Players begin to filter out from the LaBar Practice Complex.

After about five minutes, most of the players have filtered out and the music stops. The only sounds are those of a few scattered students, chatting away, as they walk around the east side of campus.

Fifteen minutes pass. There’s still a group of Irish players, including the offensive line, out practicing on the field in relative silence. The autograph hounds have passed. There’s no longer a need for the ushers directing traffic.

Around 6:25, the offensive linemen make their way off the field.

Graduate student offensive tackle Zack Martin leads them.

**Leading on the fly**

Martin can’t pinpoint exactly when he first captained a team or led a group in school. But he knows it happened in middle school. And it continued in high school.

Martin, now in his fifth season with the Irish and with 40 consecutive starts under his belt, is the 18th two-time captain in the history of Notre Dame football. Martin said he hasn’t had the time to fully sit back and think about the importance of being one of just 18 players with that distinction, but he feels honored.

“That was before the [season-opening] game so we just kind of got everything going, but after last year you get a chance to kind of sit back and find out how much of an honor it actually is when you meet some former guys who have been in that position,” Martin said. “To have the opportunity to do it a second time is even more of an honor, to have the opportunity to lead this team and hopefully to a successful season.”

But Martin said his leadership started long before these past two years.

“I’d say when I got here after a couple years of playing I was definitely more of an example guy, just try to go out there and do everything at 100 miles an hour and try to get the younger guys to see what it takes to be a starter, to be a good player,” Martin said. “Over time, you know, I’m still that same guy but I try to add the vocal part, especially being a captain.”

Fellow graduate student offensive lineman Chris Watt has literally been Martin’s right-hand man for the past two years. In 2011 and 2012, Watt started all 26 games at left guard, while Martin manned left tackle. Over those two seasons, Watt said he has seen a similar growth in Martin.

“He’s always been a leader. He’s been more of a quiet leader, leader by example in the previous years when he’s first starting out because it’s kind of hard to be that vocal guy when you’re starting out as a freshman or a sophomore. ‘I wonder if I could really developed these last two years becoming a bigger leader for the team vocally and also continue to do that on the field as well.”

Junior center Nick Martin joins his older brother on the offensive line. Nick, who is in his first season as a starter, said he saw Zack’s leadership from Day One.

“My freshman year, I remember the first paddled practice of camp, [Zack] broke down the whole team,” Nick said. “He was only a red-shirt sophomore at the time. I was really surprised. He was an underclassman and he was breaking down the whole team. That’s when I really knew how good he was going to be.”

**Leading in the quiet**

It’s still remarkably quiet outside the Guglielmino Athletic Complex, where the rest of the squad has reached the locker room. Some players have left entirely. Others have already begun talking to the media.

Zack and the rest of the offensive line make their way toward the brick building, the spotlight completely off exponentially. So he’s made others around him better.”

In addition to making others better, Martin himself has constantly improved. In each of the past three seasons, the 6-foot-4, 308-pounder has won Notre Dame’s Offensive Lineman of the Year award. Following the 2012 campaign, Martin was named a second-team All-American by the Walter Camp Foundation.

“He’s in a very small percentage of players that play this game that has the ability to do what he does on a daily basis,” Hiestand said at media day. “And there are a lot of people that can lead from time to when it feels good or you’re having a good day, but Zack brings it every day and that’s what sets him apart and makes him such a unique and special player.”

“He’s the picture of what an All-American is. He’s an All-American football player and offensive lineman that has all the abilities and skills that you look for to say, ‘that’s the example of what we want to accomplish.’”

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Leading loudly

As perfect an example as Martin may be, and as quiet as it might be for Martin and the offensive line during the week, everything changes as the decibel levels increase on Saturdays. Martin himself said he invokes a completely different leadership style.

Leading by example is no longer enough.

“On Saturday, you’ve got a lot of things to worry about, so it’s more of a vocal leadership,” Martin said. “Obviously, you’re trying to do your job and people are looking at that, but definitely more of the vocal side on Saturdays.”

Martin said while the coaches handle the team-wide, pre-game speeches, he shares his own words with his fellow offensive linemen.

“It’s different each week,” Martin said. “But we always break down on ‘Together.’ Basically, the gist of it is being together and playing together today.”

After that speech on Saturday, Martin and the rest of the offensive line will head out of the tunnel to take the field at Michigan Stadium — the Big House — before a capacity crowd of 107,501 screaming fans.

For those next three-plus hours, it will be anything but quiet.
IRISH PASSING
Senior quarterback Tommy Rees was impressive in Notre Dame’s season opener, throwing for 346 yards, three touchdowns and — most importantly — zero interceptions. The Irish showed an ability to stretch the field for long gainers, with Rees lobbing throws down the sidelines to let his receivers make plays on the ball. Senior TJ Jones has been praised by Irish coach Brian Kelly as one of the best receivers in the college game, and he has showed early signs of being a potential go-to guy for Notre Dame on offense.

The Wolverines secondary is much younger after losing four-year starter Jordan Kovacs at safety, and senior safety and captain Courtney Avery is questionable for Saturday as he tries to return from knee surgery. Redshirt sophomore safety Blake Countess is also returning from a knee surgery that cost him all of last season, and will face his first real test on Saturday. Michigan’s corners average 5-foot-10 and 180 pounds, which could open opportunities for Rees to let Irish receivers Daniel Smith and Corey Robinson — both of whom are 6-foot-4 — win jump-ball battles outside.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING
Notre Dame has already trotted out five viable running backs this season, and a balanced workload has resulted in nearly 200 yards rushing last week against Temple. George Atkinson is a threat to break free on every play, and Amir Carlisle and Cam McDaniel showed they can take some of the workload as well. The most important man in the run game may be left tackle Zack Martin, who along with left guard and fellow senior Chris Watt can be expected to clear a path on nearly every play.

Michigan held Notre Dame to 94 yards on 31 carries last season, and allowed the Irish just one rush over 10 yards. Linebacker Jake Ryan was huge in that effort, and led the team in tackles last season, but will miss the first half of the 2013 season with an ACL tear. The Wolverines will attempt to make up for that loss with an improved front line that includes senior defensive tackle Johns Blount — whom Kelly tried to recruit at Cincinnati — and junior Frank Clark, a former safety — and junior Frank Clark, a former safety whom Kelly tried to recruit at Cincinnati that loss with an improved front line that in-}

No matter how prepared Michigan is for the Irish run game, Notre Dame’s ability to put in fresh legs in the fourth quarter (and thanks to their new pistol formation, have them run downhill more than ever) should be a huge advantage late in the game.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING
Last week, for the first time in his career, Brian Kelly did not call his offense’s plays. That task was delegated to offensive coordinator Chuck Martin and the transition was seamless, as the Irish gained over 350 yards in the first half alone. Notre Dame’s foray into the pistol offense looked to be an early success, as well.

However, Wolverines defensive coordinator Greg Mattison is a former coordinator of the Baltimore Ravens famed defense, and engineered a unit that allowed the Irish just 13 points after six Michigan turnovers last year.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS
The Irish entered the season with an open kicking competition between Nick Tausch and Kyle Brindza, only to have both placekickers miss their attempts last week. Kelly has yet to declare a winner, leaving doubt around the position that could decide Saturday’s game. Brindza has taken over punting duties as well this season, and has shown off his strong leg but not much control as of yet. George Atkinson is dangerous on every kickoff return, and TJ Jones has brought a previously unheard of spark to punt returns.

EDGE: MICHIGAN

IRISH SCHEDULE (1-0)
W28-6
Aug. 31
Temple
9 @ Michigan
7 Sept. 7
27 @ Michigan State
31 Sept. 21
14 Michigan
61 Sept. 26
3 Oklahoma vs. Arizona State
19 Oct. 5
10 USC
Oct. 26
27 Air Force
Nov. 2
21 Navy
Nov. 9
12 @ Pittsburgh
Nov. 23
35 BYU
Nov. 30
18 @ Stanford

This is a rivalry game, there shouldn’t be any doubt about it. To some of the coaches, maybe not (or maybe it’s just pure mind games), but to anyone who has come through Notre Dame or Michigan in the last 20 years there has hardly been a game that is as anticipated as this one.

There is no more Denard to terrorize Te’o. There is no more Te’o to terrorize Denard.

No more stars. Now it just comes down to fundamentals, strategy and who hates the other more. It’s going to be a tough defensive struggle and a battle between the defensive minds of defensive coordinators Bob Diaco and Greg Mattison.

It’s the last time at the Big House for a while, so I’m expecting a big finish.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 24, Michigan 23

Is this game going to be an offensive explosion? Is it going to be a defensive struggle? I have no idea, and neither do you. Devlin Gardner is a relative unknown as it relates to Notre Dame fans and the Irish faithful have no idea of what to expect.

The bad news is that Gardner is not at all like Robinson. The good news is that he is a better passer than Robinson could have ever dreamed of.

The Irish defense was not at their best last week despite allowing just a single touchdown to a dismal Temple offense. They need to be better against the Wolverines and I think they will be.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 27, Michigan 17

This isn’t 2012. And this isn’t 2011. Last year was a defensive struggle, and 2011 was a ... well, I think most Notre Dame students remember that.

The 2013 rendition of the “rivalry” will be somewhere in between. Neither team will score like 2011 and Michigan won’t throw another five interceptions this year.

But the game will again be close. At this point, the offenses are still a toss-up. The Irish offense — though it struggled to convert yards into points against Temple — still racked up 543 yards against the Owls, while Michigan put up 59 points and 463 yards on the board against Central Michigan.

On defense, Notre Dame brings back eight starters to Michigan’s five, and Bob Diaco will dial up the right calls to do enough to thwart Devin Gardner.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 21, Michigan 20
Both teams impressed against vastly inferior competition in week one, but now it is time to see how good the respective teams actually are. Based on what the Irish showed last week, the defense could struggle mightily against senior quarterback Devin Gardner should he manage to escape the pressure in the pocket and improvise with his feet.

However, this is still (at least in part) the Irish defense that kept opponents out of the end zone as if the glory of Mary depended on it last year and last week held Temple to only six points even in a vastly imperfect performance. Touchdowns will be hard to come by for both teams, but Rees and TJ Jones will continue to take care of the football to keep the Irish in it.

That Notre Dame secondary comes in with another year under its collective belt, and has transitioned from a liability to a weapon. The Irish did a good job of keeping receivers in front of them in their opener, and should be well equipped to deal with veteran Wolverine receivers Jeremy Gallon and Drew Dileo. Dynamic sophomore tight end Devin Funchess could present some issues as well, and will test Notre Dame’s range outside linebackers.

![Notre Dame 20, Michigan 16](image)

Wolverines offensive coordinator Al Borges has averaged nearly 400 yards per game in his two years at Michigan, and is in the process of retooling his offense around a more traditional quarterback.

His counterpart on Saturday will be Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco, who battled the Wolverines and held them to just six points last season. Diaco’s defense was exposed by Temple, and now he’ll have a week to figure out the issues and deliver the message. After watching Notre Dame’s historic defense dominate last year under his schemes, it’d be hard to imagine the Irish being beaten in the same fashion in consecutive weeks.

![Notre Dame 29, Michigan 26 (OT)](image)

WOLVERINES PASSING
Denard is gone. But Devin is in. Irish fans may be rejoicing that Denard Robinson, their scrambling, shoelaceless nemesis for so many years, has finally moved on to torment someone else. Redshirt junior Devin Gardner isn’t the same runner Robinson was — few in the history of the game ever have been. But the former wide receiver can move just fine, and has an arm to go with it, as well. Notre Dame was able to solve the Robinson dilemma last fall, but Michigan is moving to the pro-style offense under Gardner, which will pose a whole new slate of problems to the Irish secondary.

That Notre Dame secondary comes in with another year under its collective belt, and has transitioned from a liability to a weapon. The Irish did a good job of keeping receivers in front of them in their opener, and should be well equipped to deal with veteran Wolverine receivers Jeremy Gallon and Drew Dileo. Dynamic sophomore tight end Devin Funchess could present some issues as well, and will test Notre Dame’s range outside linebackers.

![Notre Dame 29, Michigan 26 (OT)](image)

WOLVERINES RUSHING
Once again, this would seem to be an area where Michigan will miss Robinson. But Gardner’s arm should keep the Irish from stacking the box like they did against Denard, which will allow Gardner to pick his spots and break it big. That seems especially likely after watching Notre Dame defend against Temple’s pro-style offense last week. Owls quarterback Connor Reilly is nowhere near as athletic as Gardner, but still ran for 77 yards on 12 carries. Add in sturdy fifth-year running back Darnell一般是 running back back Fitzgerald Toussaint and future first-round pick Taylor Lewan at left guard, and the Irish will have their hands full in gameplanning for Saturday.

If there’s anyone that can get the job done, it’s the dynamite front seven of Notre Dame, featuring names like Nix, Tutt, and Shembo. But just like when they faced off with Shoelaces, stopping Michigan’s run game may just be a case of limiting the damage.

![Notre Dame 29, Michigan 26 (OT)](image)

WOLVERINES OFFENSIVE COACHING
Wolverines offensive coordinator Al Borges has averaged nearly 400 yards per game in his two years at Michigan, and is in the process of retooling his offense around a more traditional quarterback.

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![Notre Dame 29, Michigan 26 (OT)](image)

WOLVERINES SPECIAL TEAMS
At 5-foot-7, Wolverines sophomore return man Dennis Norfleet can get lost in a crowd extremely easily — and show up again 50 yards downhill. Fifth-year senior Brendan Gibbons made his last 13 kicks last season, and is still perfect on 13 kicks early on in the 2014 campaign.

Notre Dame’s kick coverage teams have been very strong of late, and will hope to keep Michigan from getting a big momentum play on returns. But at the end of the game, Michigan can turn to an all-senior battery of snapper, holder, and kicker — which might just be the difference in front of another record crowd.

![Notre Dame 29, Michigan 26 (OT)](image)

WOLVERINES SCHEDULE (1-0)
Aug. 31 Central Michigan W 59-9
Sept. 7 Notre Dame Sept. 14 Akron
Sept. 21 Connecticut Oct. 5 Minnesota
Oct. 12 @ Penn State Oct. 19 Indiana
Nov. 2 @ Michigan State Nov. 9 Nebraska
Nov. 16 @ Northwestern Nov. 23 @ Iowa
Nov. 30 Ohio State

![YouTube](image)

Hear about Zack Martin’s romantic side in the new “Lightning Round” video series at

[YouTube](https://youtube.com/NDSMOBSERVER)
Cherished rivalry says goodbye to Big House

By ANDREW GASTELUM
Editor-in-Chief

It all started with a sealed letter handed off from one NCAA powerhouse to the next prior to just another installment of the famed Notre Dame-Michigan series on Sept. 22, 2012. In just the last two seasons, the two programs have fielded a perennial ESPN Classic re-run, two Heisman candidates and two BCS bowl appearances to renew fervor for the glory days of old.

But with that letter, it turned out, Notre Dame Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick thought the Irish should see other people starting in 2015.

Now the uproar has shifted from ending a rivalry to arguing if it is even a rivalry at all.

“It is for us,” Michigan coach Brady Hoke said at his Monday press conference. “Everybody looks at things differently.”

Those comments came a day after the issue was put into question, when Irish coach Brian Kelly dubbed the series a “big regional game.”

“I really haven’t seen it as one of those historic, traditional Notre Dame rivalries,” Kelly said Sunday. “I’ve seen it as just one of those great football games that Notre Dame has played.”

Kelly seemed to backtrack on Tuesday, although he appeared miffed at how the amount of attention and backlash he received.

“It’s a great and historic rivalry that we’ll be playing this Saturday, so let’s get that out of the way right away so we don’t have to answer any more questions about this rivalry,” he said.

Rivalry or not, the matchup features the two programs with the highest all-time winning percentages in the NCAA. And Saturday will be the 41st matchup of the series, with Michigan leading 23-16-1.

But it could also be the last meeting at Michigan Stadium for quite some time, as Michigan Director of Intercollegiate Athletics Dave Brandon told The Detroit News on Wednesday there are no current discussions with Notre Dame.

“Our schedule is booked going out into the early [2020s] and my understanding is theirs is, as well,” Brandon said. “So my view is the only way we’re going to play Notre Dame after next year would be if we run into them in a bowl game or if our schedules allowed us to have some kind of a neutral site one-off game somewhere along the way.”

The Irish have lost six of the last seven games at The Big House, with their last win coming in upset fashion in 2005. Of course, the last loss in Ann Arbor may sting a bit more than the others, as the Wolverines took a 35-31 lead with two seconds remaining to seemingly renew the matchup’s rivalry status.

“It’s a huge national rivalry to be around that team and play that team,” Michigan All-American tackle Taylor Lewan said. “The idea of a rivalry and being there on Saturday, it’s a phenomenal feeling. … It’s unfortunate [that it’s ending], but I’m going to get over it.”

On Saturday, ESPN’s ‘College GameDay’ will feature the series for the sixth time. The Notre Dame-Michigan matchup is now tied with Miami-Florida State as the third-most visited matchup by ‘College GameDay.’

“The average margin of victory in the entire history of the series is 4.1 points, which only heightens the anticipation for an historic matchup that will soon meet its indefinite hiatus.”

“IT’S OUR RIVAL. I MEAN, IT’S MICHIGAN,” Irish defensive end Stephon Tuitt said. “EVERYBODY WANTS TO GO HOME WITH THAT WIN, GO HOME WITH THAT CHIP ON THEIR BACK SAYING THEY BEAT SOMEBODY. SO [WE] DEFINITELY WANT TO GO OUT HARD.”

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Irish senior quarterback Tommy Rees looks for a receiver during Notre Dame’s 13-6 win over Michigan last season at Notre Dame Stadium. Rees and the Irish will make their final visit to Michigan Stadium on Saturday night for the foreseeable future. The Notre Dame-Michigan series is set to go on a hiatus after next year’s matchup at Notre Dame.
Dual-threat Gardner steps in at quarterback

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Associate Sports Editor

As the starting quarterback at Michigan, Denard Robinson terrorized the Irish defense, capturing two wins in three attempts. Shoelace has graduated, but No. 14 Notre Dame will have to try to keep another Wolverines quarterback tied up Saturday in the Big House.

Senior quarterback Devin Gardner has completed the shift from receiver to signal caller, and he brought a dynamic set of skills with him.

“He reminds me [former NFL quarterback] Randall Cunningham back there,” Irish coach Brian Kelly said. “He can throw it, he’s tall, he’s athletic, runs the ball very well.”

Robinson, who garnered buzz as a Heisman contender throughout his career, put up gaudy stats in his first two career starts against the Irish — both Michigan victories.

In 2010 and 2011, Robinson totaled 366 yards rushing and 582 yards through the air while accounting for eight touchdowns.

However, Robinson also threw three interceptions in 2011 before adding four more in 2012 while accumulating only 228 total yards in Michigan’s 13-6 loss in Notre Dame Stadium. Robinson possessed skills Gardner can’t duplicate, Kelly said, although he acknowledged Gardner is more of a threat with his arm than his predecessor was.

“Well, certainly from a running standpoint, I don’t know that we’ve ever played a guy like Robinson, I mean, his just electric speed that he could immediately go 80 yards,” he said.

“Having said that, you know, throwing the football, Gardner throws the football with much more accuracy. He pushes the ball down the field very easily. And he certainly scrambles very well, keeps his eyes downfield and is not afraid to run.”

Although he was not the starting quarterback, Gardner did play a minor role in last year’s meeting with Notre Dame, as he compiled 40 yards on three catches as a receiver. The Detroit native started eight games out wide for the Wolverines in 2012, totaling 266 yards on 16 catches before supplanting Robinson as the starting quarterback for the final five contests of the season. Gardner scored at least two touchdowns in each of his starts while earning Big Ten Offensive Player of the Week honors twice. The converted receiver earned three consecutive wins before losing to Ohio State in Columbus and to South Carolina in the Outback Bowl. At the time, the Buckeyes and Gamecocks held rankings of fourth and 11th, respectively.

“Gardner, he’s a pretty good passer and very mobile,” Irish junior defensive lineman Stephon Tuitt said. “He can get out of the pocket and throw the ball very far, so we have to make sure we keep everything right and make sure everything goes good with him.”

In his first action of 2013, Gardner got the No. 17 Wolverines underway last week with a 59-9 romping over Central Michigan, rushing for 52 yards on seven attempts and throwing for 162 yards on 10-for-15 passing. It was not, however, an elite season debut for the quarterback, Michigan coach Brady Hoke said, as Gardner also threw two interceptions in the opener.

“I think sometimes guys who have that kind of ability, sometimes it’s ... a blessing and a curse,” Hoke said. “And he can make a lot of plays and as long as he keeps learning ... punting the ball on fourth down is not a bad decision.”

The matchup with the Irish provides a very public stage on which Gardner can prove he belongs as a big-time quarterback, an opportunity not lost on the senior.

“I’m really excited,” he said. "It’s a big game on the biggest stage in college football ... It’s what every quarterback dreams of — being on the big stage and being able to perform like this.”

Contact Joseph Monardo at jmonardo@nd.edu

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