Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco has to be calling 5-1-1. Without No. 5, this defense just looks lost.

There is not one person who stands out, yet at the same time there is not one person who has really fallen short either. Various media outlets are currently picking on KeiVarae Russell. Last week it was Stephon Tuitt. Next week it will probably be Jaylon Smith’s turn.

But the point remains: No one sticks out or stands out in any fashion. That is, at least, to the fans.

To opposing offenses, there are two gigantic, gargantuan standouts and their focus on these two is even greater. To opposing offenses, the only numbers this dynamic duo provides in comparison to last season when their numbers were bigger than they were. Nix only has eight tackles and zero sacks through the first three games. Meanwhile, Tuitt has four tackles and a little strange at times.

If there is one major comparison to make between last year’s and this year’s team, it’s that this defense is going to have to carry the load once again and lead Notre Dame to a BCS bowl.

It’s that this defense is going to bear the meal ticket once again, or not.

There was a question as to whether he was sold on the fact that they’re recruiting him as a linebacker.

Frank did say there is the possibility Notre Dame could view Tranquill as a safety after the news that broke in late August that former Notre Dame safety Chris Badger is transferring. Then there is the possibility that Tranquill could be a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit.

“The Irish are currently without a back in the class of 2014 after Elijah Hodges committed to Notre Dame on Aug. 28 and pledged to in-state North Carolina shortly after. Scarbrough, however, has been committed to the Crimson Tide for over a year. Frank said until the 6-foot-2, 215-pounder steps on campus at Notre Dame, the Irish can only be considered a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit. And there is the possibility that Tranquill could be a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit.

“I love the two wide receivers,” Frank said. “I mean Notre Dame has a lot of wide receivers right now but I think Corey Holmes and Justin Brent can easily compete with the vast amount of talent they have on campus right now.”

Holmes, from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is the 77th-best player in the nation, according to ESPN, Brent, who hails from Indianapolis and plays for Speedway Senior High School, has played running back for the Sparkplugs out of necessity. Frank said Brent could make the switch to running back at Notre Dame if the Irish feel thin in the backfield and well-stocked at receiver.

Frank said Tennessee offensive lineman Alex Bars is probably the closest to seeing early playing time at Notre Dame, whether he lines up at tackle or guard. Frank added that New Jersey offensive lineman Quentin Nelson has versatility on the line and a body that suggests a quick transition to the collegiate game.

Frank highlighted California defensive end Matt Dickerson and Missouri linebacker Jonathan Bonner as two underrated players, defensively, in addition to others.

Meanwhile, Frank said he is also high on Florida linebacker Richard Yeargin III, who Frank described as “relentless in his pursuit.”

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s irishsportsdaily.com Follow @Mikefrank18 and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu

Contact Andrew Gastelum at agastel1@nd.edu

The views in this column are those of the author and they’ve run out of vanilla cake.

With the loss of the two wide receivers, “I’m not sure he’s sold on the fact that they’re recruiting him as a linebacker. I think sometimes he thinks he’s a safety’s prospect,” Frank said. “So I’m not exactly sure which way that’s going to go. I think it all depends on how he fits in with all the players this weekend. … And then I also think it depends on what they talk to him about as far as his position and how he’ll adapt.”

Frank did say there is the possibility Notre Dame could view Tranquill as a safety after the news that broke in late August that former Notre Dame safety Chris Badger is transferring. Then there is the possibility that Tranquill could be a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit.

“My Irish assistant coach and recruiting coordinator Tony Alford is recruiting him and you can’t count Notre Dame out for anybody when [Alford] is recruiting them,” Frank said. “[Freshman running back] Greg Bryant was committed to Oklahoma for a while and then backed off and nobody thought Notre Dame had much of a shot at him. But Tony just keeps selling, selling and selling his vision for what Greg could be at Notre Dame and all it took was a trip and he bought into it and committed.”

Breaking down the 2014 commits Of Notre Dame’s 16 commitments in the class of 2014, Frank highlighted eight he considers to be particularly intriguing.

“First of all, [Irish assistant coach and recruiting coordinator] Tony Alford is recruiting him and you can’t count Notre Dame out for anybody when [Alford] is recruiting them,” Frank said. “[Freshman running back] Greg Bryant was committed to Oklahoma for a while and then backed off and nobody thought Notre Dame had much of a shot at him. But Tony just keeps selling, selling and selling his vision for what Greg could be at Notre Dame and all it took was a trip and he bought into it and committed.”

“For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s irishsportsdaily.com Follow @Mikefrank18 and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu

Contact Andrew Gastelum at agastel1@nd.edu

The views in this column are those of the author and they’ve run out of vanilla cake.

With the loss of the two wide receivers, “I’m not sure he’s sold on the fact that they’re recruiting him as a linebacker. I think sometimes he thinks he’s a safety’s prospect,” Frank said. “So I’m not exactly sure which way that’s going to go. I think it all depends on how he fits in with all the players this weekend. … And then I also think it depends on what they talk to him about as far as his position and how he’ll adapt.”

Frank did say there is the possibility Notre Dame could view Tranquill as a safety after the news that broke in late August that former Notre Dame safety Chris Badger is transferring. Then there is the possibility that Tranquill could be a long shot, though that could begin to change with a visit.

“My Irish assistant coach and recruiting coordinator Tony Alford is recruiting him and you can’t count Notre Dame out for anybody when [Alford] is recruiting them,” Frank said. “[Freshman running back] Greg Bryant was committed to Oklahoma for a while and then backed off and nobody thought Notre Dame had much of a shot at him. But Tony just keeps selling, selling and selling his vision for what Greg could be at Notre Dame and all it took was a trip and he bought into it and committed.”

Breaking down the 2014 commits Of Notre Dame’s 16 commitments in the class of 2014, Frank highlighted eight he considers to be particularly intriguing.

“First of all, [Irish assistant coach and recruiting coordinator] Tony Alford is recruiting him and you can’t count Notre Dame out for anybody when [Alford] is recruiting them,” Frank said. “[Freshman running back] Greg Bryant was committed to Oklahoma for a while and then backed off and nobody thought Notre Dame had much of a shot at him. But Tony just keeps selling, selling and selling his vision for what Greg could be at Notre Dame and all it took was a trip and he bought into it and committed.”

Breaking down the 2014 commits Of Notre Dame’s 16 commitments in the class of 2014, Frank highlighted eight he considers to be particularly intriguing.
TJ Jones, Daniel's has become the ultimate X-factor for the Irish offense. His success thus far is a result of his development as a receiver. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy," he said. "And that's what it comes down to."

"Well, certainly it gives us an added dimension to our offense," Daniel's said. "We're better when we have Daniels that can certainly get vertical, for live viewing on football Saturdays. What the public is looking for is a quality game, and kind of gets to see the results that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.

Just a quarter of the way through Notre Dame's regular season, Daniels has already made 203 a breakout campaign for himself. Just 1:26 into Notre Dame's season-opening win over Temple, Daniels ran a post route and snatched a 32-yard pass from Rees on the sideline of a tie game, Daniels snagged the arrival at the finished product. "That's all practice. That's all day to day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go." He needs to be consistent and keep getting better. "Well, two quarters of the way. He needs to be four quarters of the way." Brian Kelly Irish coach

"I think I'm getting there," the Vernon Hills, Ill., native said. "I'm still working, I still gotta work every day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go."

"Well, certainly it gives us another big-play receiver," he said. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy, as well now you have Daniels that can certainly get down the field and make big plays. It definitely stretches the field for us. Certainly our ability now to vertically push the ball enhances the little things." Although an upperclassman, Daniels is still relatively young in terms of field experience. After not seeing game action as a freshman, Daniels caught 31 balls, racked up 490 reception yards and made three starts in 11 games in 2012. Although he did not find the end zone in his sophomore season, Daniels averaged a team-leading 15.8 yards per reception. After missing the final two games of the 2012 regular season with a broken collarbone, Daniels returned for Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the national championship, compiling 115 yards on six receptions.

"You know, having the game that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.

Just a quarter of the way through Notre Dame's regular season, Daniels has already made 203 a breakout campaign for himself. Just 1:26 into Notre Dame's season-opening win over Temple, Daniels ran a post route and snatched a 32-yard pass from Rees on the sideline of a tie game, Daniels snagged the arrival at the finished product. "That's all practice. That's all day to day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go." He needs to be consistent and keep getting better. "Well, two quarters of the way. He needs to be four quarters of the way." Brian Kelly Irish coach

there are no doubts about Da'Varis Daniels' ability. His speed, talent and power are a matter of the public record, on display across the web and, intermittently, for live viewing on football Saturdays. What the public is left to wonder, then, is when the player seen jumping off the screen in highlight videos will come to play every down.

The Irish junior receiver is coming off a career game, turning heads and dropping jaws, but also begging the question: Can he be as consistent as he is exciting?

“TJ Jones, Daniel’s has become the ultimate X-factor for the Irish offense. His success thus far is a result of his development as a receiver. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy," he said. "And that's what it comes down to."

"Well, certainly it gives us another big-play receiver," he said. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy, as well now you have Daniels that can certainly get down the field and make big plays. It definitely stretches the field for us. Certainly our ability now to vertically push the ball enhances the little things." Although an upperclassman, Daniels is still relatively young in terms of field experience. After not seeing game action as a freshman, Daniels caught 31 balls, racked up 490 reception yards and made three starts in 11 games in 2012. Although he did not find the end zone in his sophomore season, Daniels averaged a team-leading 15.8 yards per reception. After missing the final two games of the 2012 regular season with a broken collarbone, Daniels returned for Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the national championship, compiling 115 yards on six receptions.

"You know, having the game that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.

Just a quarter of the way through Notre Dame's regular season, Daniels has already made 203 a breakout campaign for himself. Just 1:26 into Notre Dame's season-opening win over Temple, Daniels ran a post route and snatched a 32-yard pass from Rees on the sideline of a tie game, Daniels snagged the arrival at the finished product. "That's all practice. That's all day to day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go."

"Well, certainly it gives us another big-play receiver," he said. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy, as well now you have Daniels that can certainly get down the field and make big plays. It definitely stretches the field for us. Certainly our ability now to vertically push the ball enhances the little things." Although an upperclassman, Daniels is still relatively young in terms of field experience. After not seeing game action as a freshman, Daniels caught 31 balls, racked up 490 reception yards and made three starts in 11 games in 2012. Although he did not find the end zone in his sophomore season, Daniels averaged a team-leading 15.8 yards per reception. After missing the final two games of the 2012 regular season with a broken collarbone, Daniels returned for Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the national championship, compiling 115 yards on six receptions.

"You know, having the game that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.

Just a quarter of the way through Notre Dame's regular season, Daniels has already made 203 a breakout campaign for himself. Just 1:26 into Notre Dame's season-opening win over Temple, Daniels ran a post route and snatched a 32-yard pass from Rees on the sideline of a tie game, Daniels snagged the arrival at the finished product. "That's all practice. That's all day to day. There's a lot of things I can improve on. You know, I came a long way, but I've still got a ways to go."

"Well, certainly it gives us another big-play receiver," he said. "I think TJ has shown his ability to be that guy, as well now you have Daniels that can certainly get down the field and make big plays. It definitely stretches the field for us. Certainly our ability now to vertically push the ball enhances the little things." Although an upperclassman, Daniels is still relatively young in terms of field experience. After not seeing game action as a freshman, Daniels caught 31 balls, racked up 490 reception yards and made three starts in 11 games in 2012. Although he did not find the end zone in his sophomore season, Daniels averaged a team-leading 15.8 yards per reception. After missing the final two games of the 2012 regular season with a broken collarbone, Daniels returned for Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the national championship, compiling 115 yards on six receptions.

"You know, having the game that he did against one of the top defenses in the nation on one of the biggest stages you can have it in college football, I think it definitely helped his confidence and gave him kind of that push leading into the offseason to work that much harder heading into this season," Jones said.
SPARTANS PASSING
Michigan State sophomore Connor Cook has thrown for 276 yards this year, 202 of which came last week against Youngstown State. He also threw four touchdowns against the Penguins in a blowout victory. As a whole, the Spartans have accumulated only 480 yards passing through the air in three games, when three different players have seen time under center. Senior Andrew Maxwell is 15-for-30 for 114 yards in two appearances and one start, while redshirt freshman Tyler O’Connor has entered two games, as well.

The Irish have looked anything but penetrable on the backline thus far, but Michigan State hasn’t proven it is anything to fear through the air, either. Spartans sophomore Aaron Burbridge earned recognition on the Biletnikoff Award Preseason Watch List and has 80 yards on eight catches this season. Sophomore Macarrett Kings, Jr., leads Michigan State with 99 yards and one touchdown on eight grabs in 2013.

Notre Dame has the edge in talent, and if the Irish secondary can tighten things up, it could be very difficult for Michigan State. Irish senior tri-captain cornerback Bennett Jackson’s pick-six in the Purdue game could serve as a wake-up call for the rest of his unit. While far from a sure thing, the talent and experience on the back end of the defense will be crucial.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

SPARTANS RUSHING
Junior running back Jeremy Langford and Nick Hill lead the more accomplished dimension of Michigan State’s offense. The Spartans have rushed for 209.7 yards-per-game this year. On 44 attempts, the 6-foot-2, 206-pound Langford has 200 yards on the season and has scored four touchdowns, while the smaller Hill has added 179 yards and one score on 7.2 yards-per-attempt. Redshirt freshman running back Riley Bullough adds a power dimension to the Spartan running game. The 230-pounder has 82 yards on 21 carries in 2013.

Although Notre Dame’s defense has struggled mightily in comparison with last year’s unit, the Irish still rank 26th in the nation in rush defense. Notre Dame has only surrendered 112.7 yards-per-game, although last week’s dominant effort against the Boilermakers, in which the Irish held Purdue to only 38 rushing yards, stands in stark contrast to the games against Temple and Michigan, who accumulated 134 and 166 yards rushing, respectively. If Notre Dame can approximate its performance from last week it should be more than enough.

EDGE: EVEN

SPARTANS OFFENSIVE COACHING
Recently hired co-offensive coordinator Jim Bollman brings 36 years of experience, including 11 seasons as the offensive coordinator at Ohio State (2001-2011). Bollman will split the offensive coordinator duties with Dave Warner, who has served as the quarterback coach for the Spartans during the past six seasons. Bollman, Warner and the rest of the decision-makers at Michigan State have presided over a quarterback situation in flux, although Cook presumably secured the job for the time being by throwing four touchdowns last week. Field-goal formations might make Irish fans flinch as long as Dantonio still roams the sideline, and Notre Dame is still figuring things out on defense, but Diaco gets the edge here.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

SPARTANS SPECIAL TEAMS
Senior kicker Kevin Muma handles both the kickoff and placekicking duties for Michigan State, and he has handled them well this season. Spartans junior punter Mike Sadler has sent his punts 41.2 yards on average. The Spartans’ punt returners have averaged 9.6 yards-per-return, most of which has come on 44 attempts, as well.

As a whole, the Spartans have accumulated 404 yards on special teams through the first three games, when three different players have seen time under center.

The troubles start here for the Irish, and 2-2 looks pretty scary considering where they were last year at this point, coming off a major win over Michigan in week four.

FINAL SCORE: Michigan State 27, Notre Dame 24

In the next four weeks, Notre Dame will play the No. 1 defense in the country, the player who scored the first rushing touchdown on them in 2012, a defensive line that rivals their own and USC. And it all starts with a date against Michigan State this weekend.

The Spartans have had their troubles with the Irish in the past two years, losing by an average of 17.5 points per game and scoring just eight points per game. But if these past two games have taught us anything about Notre Dame, it’s that they are not the same on defense and are mysteriously improved on offense, putting up nearly 60 points per game.

The Irish defense should return to form (somewhat) against a very questionable Spartan offense but Tommy Rees has another solid performance to lead the Irish to 3-1.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 29, Michigan State 10

Notre Dame-Michigan State is always a battle. A game-winning score late in the fourth quarter or in overtime has decided eight of the last 13 meetings. Saturday will be no different. Brian Kelly said the winner will be whichever team is still standing when time expires.

Michigan State has a statistically dominant defense, but they’ve played a cupcake, a directional school and South Florida. Still, Sparty figures to match up fairly well with the Irish offense, which struggled mightily to run the ball against Purdue, averaging 2.3 yards per carry.

I give the slight edge in this contest to the Notre Dame defense, which — rough as it has looked in the first three games — will be better against a quarterback in Connor Cook playing in his second game as the definitive starter. The Irish finally show up defensively and down the Spartans.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 24, Michigan State 17
IRISH PASSING
It certainly hasn’t looked perfect at times, but Notre Dame has put together an impressive passing offense so far this season. Tommy Rees has recorded three consecutive 300-yard games after reaching the mark only twice in his career before 2013. Senior tri-cap-
tain TJ Jones and junior DaVaris Daniels have both shown themselves capable of serving as the main targets this year, while freshman receiver Corey Robinson and junior tight end Troy Niklas bring much-needed size and power to the unit.

Meanwhile, Michigan State leads the ra-
tion in both total defense and pass efficien-
cy defense, allowing 177.8 yards-per-game and attaining a 68.14 rating, respectively. The Spartans also rank fifth in the nation in pass defense, having surrendered only 126.7 yards-per-game. They have also shown big-
play ability, totaling 83 return yards following four interceptions — two of which went the other way for touchdowns. Spartans sopho-
more defensive end Shilique Carter has one of those touchdown returns following an inter-
ception, and has added two more defensive touchowns following fumble recoveries. Carter also anchors the Michigan State front, having recorded two sacks and eight quar-
terback hurries this year. Even if Notre Dame can keep Rees off his back, he will have to be careful to keep the ball out of the ready hands of Spartans defenders and could Daniels and Jones to make plays down the field.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH RUSHING
Michigan State ranks fourth in the nation in rush defense, allowing only 50.3 yards per game on the ground. Notre Dame has not shown itself to be a significant threat running the ball yet this season, even with a backfield that goes five deep in theory. Irish junior run-
ning back Cam McDaniel brought a power di-
mension to the running game against Purdue that had been lacking, but Amir Carlisle turned in a dud following what seemed to be his breakout game against Michigan. Junior George Atkinson, still atop the Irish depth chart at the running back position, has strug-
gled to find a groove so far this year. He has averaged 5.4 yards-per-carry, but has only carried the ball 18 times.

Against Purdue, the Irish backs often failed to regain the line of scrimmage, as the Boilermakers repeatedly erupted through Notre Dame’s offensive line and recorded six tackles-for-loss. That the Irish failed to eclipse 100 yards on the ground against the same Purdue team that allowed 221 yards rushing to Connecticut in the opening week should be cause for concern for Notre Dame, even if the pieces are there. Michigan State senior linebackers Denicos Allen and Max Bullough — both of whom have generated buzz as highly-regarded NFL prospects — will make it tough sledding for the Irish backs.

EDGE: MICHIGAN STATE

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING
Brian Kelly and Chuck Martin have their work cut out for them this week against a de-
fense that has done as well as it possibly could have through three games, regardless of the opponents. Michigan State defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi will serve as the assistant coach for the first time this year. Narduzzi has seven years of experience at the helm of the Spartans defense, a unit that has been the top defense in the Big Ten in each of the past two seasons.

EDGE: MICHIGAN STATE

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS
TJ Jones will look for an opportunity to re-
turn a punt after failing for a fair catch at his own four-yard line against Purdue. Atkinson has perhaps been the most steady special teams performer for the Irish, averaging 29.4 yards on eight kickoff returns this year. Atkinson could find himself with an oppor-
tunity to recreate the magic he brought to Notre Dame Stadium two years ago, when he returned a kickoff 89 yards for a touchdown against the Spartans.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SCHEDULE (2-1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Temple</td>
<td>W 28-6</td>
<td>Sept. 7</td>
<td>Sept. 14</td>
<td>Sept. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Purdue</td>
<td>W 31-24</td>
<td>Oct. 26</td>
<td>Oct. 23</td>
<td>Nov. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>W 22-14</td>
<td>Nov. 2</td>
<td>Nov. 16</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>USC</td>
<td>W 44-7</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>W 22-14</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>W 44-7</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>W 44-7</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>BYU</td>
<td>W 44-7</td>
<td>Nov. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Michigan State will walk into Notre Dame Stadium with one of the nation’s top defenses by most mea-
sures. How much of that is a credit to the Spartans’ actual defensive abilities, and how much of it is a product of beating up on the likes of the Youngstown State Penguins, well, that remains to be seen.

Notre Dame will likely eclipse the 1770 yards Michigan State’s opponents have managed, on aver-
age, this year, but the Irish will find the going tough against what will prove to be an impressive (al-
though not historic) defense. What the Irish can do on defense, meanwhile, is perhaps more important.

Michigan State trots out an inexperienced quarter-
back to lead an offense that hasn’t accomplished much so far. Special teams wins the day for the Irish.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 23, Michigan State 20
Irish secondary aims to rebound vs. MSU

By MATTHEW DeFRANKS
Assistant Managing Editor

Last year, Notre Dame relied on three first-time starters in the secondary to anchor a defense that allowed less than 13 points per game.

This year, the No. 22 Irish returned all of those first-time starters in the secondary. The back end of the defense was supposed to be the rock of the unit that allowed defensive coordinator Bob Diaco to throw exotic blitzes at offenses.

But three games into the season, the Notre Dame secondary has allowed quarterbacks Connor Reilly (Temple), Devin Gardner (Michigan) and Rob Henry (Purdue) to average 260 yards per game in the air.

“I think the first three games, we haven’t executed to the best of our ability,” sophomore cornerback KeiVarae Russell said. “That’s the biggest thing this week, is to focus on executing. When a play comes your way, just make a play.”

This season, the Irish (2-1) have allowed seven passing touchdowns after surrendering just 11 scores in all of 2012.

All three Purdue touchdowns against the Irish were catch-and-runs, with Notre Dame missing tackles and allowing the Boilermakers to hit pay dirt.

“We’ll be in great position and something just wouldn’t happen,” Russell said. “At the end of the day, it’s a 50-50 chance. You either do or you don’t. Lately, we haven’t been making plays we should be making.”

The Irish also allowed Michigan receiver Jeremy Gallon to spin away from would-be tacklers and sprint in for a 63-yard touchdown.

“You’re going to have plays where you blow a coverage or miss a tackle or something like that,” Russell said. “That’s what’s going to happen, it’s football. Secondary is probably the hardest position to play; other than quarterback, on the field … You just have to learn to get better from your mistakes.”

Diaco and Irish coach Brian Kelly have been dialing up more and more blitzes this season, but in doing so have put the secondary in a perilous situation.

“Obviously if you bring more pressure, you’re giving up some zones,” Kelly said. “So you either have to play some three under, three deep, which vacates some zones and you’d better get there or you have to play simply some more man coverage; and within that man coverage there’s a lot more technique that goes in, because it’s not simply you line up wide. It’s bunched formations; it’s onequeeze; it’s fighting through all those complexities of playing man-to-man coverage. “I guess what I was saying is that I still think we are not where we want to be defensively in terms of what that structure is going to be yet.”

Last week, for the second straight game, Notre Dame cashed in on an interception to score a touchdown. After junior defensive end Stephon Tuitt scored against Michigan, senior Bennett Jackson took one to the house against the Boilermakers.

Jackson said he hasn’t used the pick-six to give himself a confidence boost.

“It didn’t really play too much of an effect on me,” Jackson said. “I was just happy I could contribute to the team and put points up on the board. It definitely made me feel better about myself that I was able to go out there and perform and do something for the team.”

Michigan State (3-0) comes into Notre Dame Stadium with sophomore quarterback Connor Cook at the helm. On the year, he’s passed for 276 yards and four touchdowns while only attempting 49 passes.

Contact Matthew DeFranks at mdefrank@nd.edu
Physical rivalry to be won by ‘last man standing’

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

Aafter a miniature two-game road trip, the No. 22 Irish will return to Notre Dame Stadium this weekend to face an elite defense, a quarterback coming into his own and one of their peskiest rivals when they host Michigan State on Saturday.

The Spartans (3-0) will be the third consecutive Big Ten opponent Notre Dame (2-1) has faced, with the Irish splitting contests at Michigan and Purdue over the past two weeks.

Michigan State and Notre Dame have played historically tight games over the last 15 or so years, and Irish coach Brian Kelly’s introduction to the rivalry three years ago was certainly one of them. Down three points in overtime, Spartans coach Mark Dantonio lined his players up for a game-tying field goal, only to hold on to it last season by going down three points in overtime, spartans coach mark Dantonio — an ohio native — appreciated the regional rivalry even more.

The Irish took back the Megaphone Trophy the next year with a dominant 31-13 win and Kelly said he and his players know to expect a battle from the Spartans this weekend, especially with the history between the teams.

“Dantonio’s teams … are physical and certainly well-prepared in all phases of the game,” Kelly said. “It’s the Michigan State teams that we’ve come to know and respect, and again, it’s going to be one of those typical Big Ten games where [the] last man standing through four quarters comes out victorious.”

This Michigan State squad is especially daunting, as it enters this week boasting the nation’s best defense. Through three games, that unit has given up 12 points per game and limited opponents to 177 yards per game — the best mark of any team in the country.

Though those records come from games against Western Michigan, South Florida, and Youngstown State, Kelly sees a formidable challenge in the Spartan defense.

“Number of returning players on defense … outstanding defensive schemes. They make it very difficult to run the football,” Kelly said. “You have to find ways to manufacture runs. You’ve got to be able to protect your quarterback. Again, you’ve got to play physical football for four quarters. You’ve got to take care of the football. All of the little things matter in matchups like this.”

And while the Irish are aware of the Spartans’ ability on that side of the ball, Irish senior quarterback Tommy Rees said Notre Dame is ensuring it stays more focused on its gameplan than on its opponent’s generally statistics.

“Our obviously you’re cognizant of the success they’ve had, but for us it’s all about what we’re doing on offense,” he said Wednesday. “It’s about our execution, and our understanding of our gameplan. We can’t focus too much on what they’re ranked, we’ve just got to get their schemes down and understand what they’re trying to do.”

While Michigan State brings depth and experience on defense, a relatively new face runs the offense. The Spartans were unable to settle on a quarterback through their first two games but had a leader surface when sophomore Connor Cook emerged with a four-touchdown game last week.

Cook saw limited time off the bench last season but is still large enough an unknown entity. One thing the Irish do know is that Cook is averaging nearly five yards per carry this year and should be another dual-threat presence they’ll need to contain.

“We’ve faced a lot of mobility back there so that’s something we’ll be prepared for. I think we’ll be ready for [Cook],” senior safety Austin Collinsworth said. “But it definitely changes the game. You’ve got to stay on your guy in scrambling situations, because if you relax for a second, it’s a big play waiting to happen.”

The Spartans have impressed in three wins so far, but Saturday’s trip to Notre Dame will be their first big test of the season. Dantonio — an Ohio native — appreciates the regional rivalry every time these teams square off.

“I think it’s one of those games you take stock of,” Dantonio said. “It’s a game for a guy who grew up in the Midwest. Notre Dame. You grew up with a lot of traditions that were involved before you got here. So just very humbled to be part of the process and part of the tradition. I want our guys to have fun down there. I want us to compete.”

Contact Jack Hefferon at wheffero@nd.edu
NOTRE DAME STADIUM BAG POLICY

As part of its ongoing commitment to safety and security on game days, Notre Dame has changed its policy regarding bags allowed in the football stadium.

- The University urges fans not to bring bags to the stadium.
- No backpacks, duffel bags, or other large totes will be allowed in the stadium.
- Smaller bags and other approved carry-in items are subject to inspection.

The University appreciates your cooperation in helping to make Notre Dame Stadium a safe environment.

IT’S GAME WEEKEND

PEP RALLY

Library Quad in front of the Hesburgh Library
Rally begins at 6:00 PM

PLAYER WALK

Begins at the GUG, ends at the Stadium Tunnel
Find the Route on GameDay.ND.EDU
Walk begins at 1:15 PM

ND vs MSU

Here come the Irish
The Fighting Irish take on the Spartans at 3:30 PM

gameday.nd.edu

WE WANT TO SEE GAME DAY THROUGH YOUR EYES.
SHOW US ON INSTAGRAM.
#NDGAMEDAY