THE EMERGENCE

Tarean Folston develops consistency in main role
Notre Dame’s season is on the line

Saturday’s matchup against Arizona State will be Notre Dame’s biggest and best opportunity to make a statement this season. However, it will be up to the Irish to determine which type of statement they make to future opponents, fans nationwide and, perhaps most importantly, the College Football Playoff selection committee.

Every team in America can say it doesn’t pay attention to the rankings, but those rankings still control whether a team makes it into the playoffs and has a chance to contend for a national championship, and Notre Dame is no exception.

That’s why this week is so important.

The Irish have won all the games they were supposed to win, outscoring opponents 256-142 in victories. The defense has posted more than one blowout, and Vegas has posted the fourth-best odds of winning the Heisman Trophy.

That’s not bad for a defense that lost seven starters, an offense that is heavily reliant on previously inexperienced sophomores and a quarterback who didn’t take a single snap last season.

Not many people gave Notre Dame a serious shot at beating Florida State, especially at the beginning of the season. The Irish, in Round 2, the Irish walked away with their first and only loss of the season thus far.

But anyone who watched, the game was as close as you could come to a victory without actually placing another tally in the win column. It was as quality a loss as any other team in contention for the playoff for the playoff for the season.

So why is Notre Dame ranked No. 10 in the country, behind seven other one-loss teams?

For starters, its strength of schedule isn’t as difficult as it seemed before. Unfortunately for the Irish, opponents who once seemed formidable — such as Stanford and Michigan — have faded into mediocrity.

The defense has given up a lot of points lately. Notre Dame didn’t surrender more than 17 points in any of its first five games, but since facing North Carolina in mid-October, the team has let opponents score at least 31 points in three consecutive games, including yields of 43 and 39 points.

On a similar note, the Irish have shown their tendency to play to the level and style of their opponents in those last three games, which has both helped and hurt them.

North Carolina was a shootout. Florida State was considered by some to be the best game of the college football season so far. Navy should not have been as close as it was, and as a result, the Irish fell down two spots in the AP poll to No. 8. and were jumped by Arizona State in the College Football Playoff rankings.

And now, at a most convenient time, Arizona State welcomes Notre Dame to Sun Devil Stadium. It’s the spark the Irish need to revive a dull patch in their season and rocket them closer to those coveted four spots in the rankings.

If the Irish play to the level of the Sun Devils, this top-10 matchup will be everything viewers could hope for, with two highly potent offenses led by dynamic quarterbacks and talented receivers facing one another.

A win would shoot Notre Dame closer to the top. It would un-doubtedly pass Arizona State and could leapfrog at least one other team, since the victory would be against the country’s No. 9 squad.

However, a loss would signal the end of any hopes Notre Dame has of making the playoff. Yes, Arizona State is a quality oppo-nent, so the loss would not be a complete blowout, but it is difficult to imagine a two-team loss under the SEC West playing for a championship, at least at this point in the season.

A win could make the season. A loss would break it. The Irish season is on the line, and their fate lies in their hands only. It’s time for them to show us if they’re championship material or not.

Contact Mary Green at mgreen@nd.edu.

The views in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.
By BRIAN HARTNETT  
Managing Editor

For sophomore running back Tarean Folston, a few more carrys went a long way. As a freshman last season, the Cocoa, Florida native, who was ranked as a four-star recruit by several services, including 247Sports, showed early flashes of his potential, including a 36-yard run in Notre Dame’s 35-21 loss to Oklahoma. But it wasn’t until the team’s ninth game of the season against Navy that Folston showed that he could be a featured running back.

That game, he ran for 140 yards and one touchdown on 18 carries, nearly equal to the 22 carries he had received in the team’s first eight games. Folston said playing extensively against Navy allowed him to validate what he had been working on in practice.

“I guess I got into a little rhythm,” he said. “But, you know, I work hard all the time, and if it showed up that game, and I try to continue to play at that ability.”

Folston kept up his high level of play throughout the remainder of the season, scoring a touchdown in his first career start against BYU and adding another score against Rutgers in the Pinstripe Bowl. Folston said the late-season success inspired him to work hard in the offseason.

“I just continued to work hard,” he said. “It’s just one of those things where you had a great moment, you can’t just let that go away. You’ve just got to work and try to have more moments like those.”

Folston entered this season competing for carries with senior captain Cam McDaniel and fellow sophomore Greg Bryant. He spent the first quarter of the season splitting carries in the backfield but struggling to find success — earning just 17 yards against Michigan, 22 against Purdue and 41 against Syracuse.

But then, just like last season, Folston made the case to put the ball in his hands more often. And he hasn’t stopped proving his point since then, recording 98 rushing yards and three touchdowns against North Carolina, 120 yards against Florida State and 149 yards and two touchdowns last weekend versus Navy.

Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson said Folston’s newfound success has come from his development as a player.

“He’s definitely gaining that confidence — I think, just talking generally, that’s the biggest thing for a lot of these players,” Golson said. “… But I think Tarean definitely got that even from last year. This year, coming in, going out, playing good and things like that. I think he’s definitely matured in that aspect.”

But Folston said there was no single moment or realization that he was a featured back.

“I come out with the same mentality every week — just work hard, grind it out and come out with the ‘W’ at the end of the day,” he said. Similarly, Folston said his success hasn’t been built by the improved play of the revamped offensive line. Rather, he said it’s been a byproduct of the team’s development over the course of the season.

“At the beginning of the season, everyone starts off slow,” he said. “But we continue to work hard and be more of a complete team. That’s all it is, not better nor worse.”

Though he spends the majority of his time running between tackles or trying to get to the edge, Folston said his biggest strength is his ability to catch the ball in the backfield.

T h e 5’9’, 209-pounder has caught 12 passes for 166 yards this season. O t h e r s around the Notre Dame program, however, had different answers to that question.

“I think he more works with us as a running back, just reading our blocks and just helping us set up our own blocks, forcing the defender to come to us, where we want him,” Irish junior offensive lineman Ronnie Stanley said of Folston.

Irish head coach Brian Kelly praised Folston’s attention to detail in his Oct. 7 press conference.

“Folston does little things sometimes that don’t show up in the stat sheet that as coaches, we really appreciate,” Kelly said. “He really is an accomplished player, and he’s less about potential, and he’s more in that production, as well.”

If Folston wants to emphasize his receiving ability, he can be forgiven. Folston made receptions on both offense and defense throughout his time at Coca High School, recording eight receptions for 85 yards and four interceptions in his senior season. Folston, who played both cornerback and safety in the 2013 Under Armour All-America Game, said he picked up a defensive mentality from his father, James Folston, a former NFL linebacker who played for both the Oakland Raiders and Arizona Cardinals.

“My dad, he’s all for me and whatever I want to do, and as far as giving me knowledge, he gave me knowledge both defensively and offensively through high school,” Folston said. “… He did help me out with a lot of defensive things, taught me a lot of stuff, but on the flip side, he helped me out with offensive stuff also.”

Although he is firmly entrenched at running back, Folston hasn’t completely lost his desire to play defense or field kicks, which he did throughout high school.

“I wouldn’t have a problem with [playing defense],” he said. “I’m here to help the team in any way possible, so if they decide to put me on defense, I’d be happy to do whatever they ask me to do — kickoffs, kick returns, anything.”

For now, Folston has not completely rejected any notion that he is Notre Dame’s No. 1 running back, insisting that the offseason competition between he, McDaniel and Bryant has not yet come to a close.

“We all come out every day and just work hard,” Folston said. “… It’s always been a wide-open race, and it always will be.”

Folston said the so-called competition among the running backs has never been anything but friendly, as the three players involved spent much time together off the field.

“When we are (together), it’s a brotherhood,” he said. “We do everything together — we usually eat together, watch film together, stuff like that.”

This spirit of competitive friendliness extends to Folston’s relationship with Bryant, who hails from the same region of Florida as Folston.

“… We’ve been tight since the first summer when we were roommates,” Folston said. “We’ve always had that bond, not just because we’re both running backs but because we come from the same area. We know things, and we both just want to be successful.”

Folston and the Irish will try to build on this season’s success when they travel to face one-loss Arizona State on Saturday. For Folston, who was squarely in the midst of the recruiting cycle when Notre Dame reached the BCS National Championship Game in 2013, a win against the Sun Devils would be an opportunity for him to move one step closer to a goal he’s envisioned since starting Notre Dame.

“We’ve had the national championship in our mind the whole time,” he said. “… We’re stepping up to the occasion and playing big-time teams and big-time games and coming out with the ‘W’. We just want to continue to do that and make this run for the championship.”

And if the Irish are to make such a run, they’ll need to make sure the carriers for their top rusher go a long way.

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IRISH PASSING

Last weekend, senior quarterback Everett Golson became the first Irish quarterback to have three passing and three rushing touchdowns in the same game. Golson's name is still in the Heisman conversation and for good reason — he has thrown for at least 300 yards and three touchdowns in each of his last three games.

Golson has been complimented by the continued development of his receiving corps — three different receivers caught touchdown passes against Navy. And sophomore receiver Will Fuller has put his name among the nation’s most productive receivers, as he’s currently tied for fourth in the FBS with nine touchdown catches.

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But Golson will carry the Irish to a marquee victory, but ASU quarterback Taylor Kelly hasn’t looked like him self in the last two games since returning from a broken leg. He’s rushed for more than 150 yards in all but one game this season and for good reason — he has thrown for under 20 yards per kick return. Even the normally reliable senior kicker Kyle Brindza missed two field goals last weekend.

But the Irish have potential for big plays against Arizona State’s punt and kickoff return defenses, which rank among the worst in the nation. The Sun Devils have surrendered both kickoff and punt return touchdowns this season.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING

Senior running back Tarean Folston has received the lion’s share of carries for the Irish after strong performances in his last three games. He’s rushed for more than 120 yards in each of the past two games, becoming the first Irish running back to do so since Darius Walker did it in 2006. His emergence has relegated senior captain Cam McDaniel and fellow sophomore Greg Bryant to limited roles.

Folston and the Irish offensive line, which has also looked good the past three games, have to be excited to face Arizona State’s rushing defense. The Sun Devils have allowed more than 150 yards in all but one game this season and yield an average of more than 180 rushing yards per game, 88th nationally. Folston and Golson alike should be able to find running room this Saturday.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

With the recent production from Folston and the offensive line, Irish offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock now has several more options at his disposal. The Irish have played four consecutive close games, but with the exception of the Stanford game, generating offense hasn’t been an issue for the Irish.

Keith Patterson is in his first season as Sun Devils defensive coordinator, but he is familiar with Notre Dame — he was Tulsa’s defensive coordinator when it upset the Irish in 2010 and Pitt’s defensive coordinator during an ugly 15-12 Notre Dame win the following season. The Sun Devils have had some struggles replacing six starters from last season on defense but enter the game with some momentum, having held their last three Pac-12 opponents to a combined 40 points.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

After a strong start to the season, the Irish special teams have started to revert toward their usual mean. Notre Dame averages over seven yards per punt return and just under 20 yards per kick return.

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IRISH SCHEDULE (7-1)

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Sept. 6 Michigan (W 31-0)
Sept. 13 vs. Purdue (W 30-14)
Sept. 27 vs. Syracuse (W 31-15)
Oct. 4 Stanford (W 17-14)
Oct. 11 North Carolina (W 30-43)
Oct. 18 @ Florida State (L 31-27)
Nov. 1 @ Navy (W 49-39)
Nov. 8 @ Arizona State
Nov. 15 Northwestern
Nov. 22 Louisville
Nov. 29 @ USC

Temple looks perfectly primed for a Notre Dame slip-up. With Joe Schmidt lost for the season and an injured Arizona State defense, the Sun Devils could be favored at home in front a crowd looking to prove ESPN wrong for bypassing the spot for “College GameDay.”

But ASU quarterback Taylor Kelly hasn’t looked like himself in the last two games since returning from a broken foot while Everett Golson continues to roll. There will be offensive playmakers aplenty in the desert coupled with young, aggressive defenses.

It will be close, but just like last year.

But Golson will carry the Irish to a marquee victory, an 8-1 record and, most importantly, a rise in the College Football Playoff rankings.

One thing is for sure about this Saturday’s game — there will be a lot of points.

Both teams possess high-powered offenses led by dual-threat quarterbacks and quick receivers. And they both have aggressive defenses that at times have struggled to match such potent offenses.

Golstein and Folston are two of the best players the two teams look pretty close on paper, I have a slight edge to Notre Dame. Simply put, the Irish offense has been rolling the last few weeks, and the emergence of Tarean Folston is not what Arizona State’s sub-par rush defense would like to see.

The Irish do lose quite a bit with Joe Schmidt out, but With the recent production from Folston the offensive line, Irish offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock now has several more options at his disposal. The Irish have played four consecutive close games, but with the exception of the Stanford game, generating offense hasn’t been an issue for the Irish.

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The Irish do lose quite a bit with Joe Schmidt out, but Nyles Morgan should make up for his lack of experience with his athleticism.

Notre Dame remains at No. 10. Both teams have 7-1 records and, most importantly, a rise in the College Football Playoff rankings. Upon Saturday, both teams will be scrapping to keep their 7-1 records and, most importantly, a rise in the College Football Playoff rankings. Upon Saturday, both teams will be scrapping to keep their 7-1 records and, most importantly, a rise in the College Football Playoff rankings.
The Sun Devils passing game has been a major focal point for the defense. Quarterback Mike Bercovici has had a solid season, throwing for 17 touchdowns and only five interceptions. His receiving corps, led by Jaelen Strong, has been efficient, with multiple receivers surpassing 500 yards on the season. The Sun Devils have also been strong on special teams, with kicker Zane Gonzalez connecting on 14 of 17 field goals and 44 of 45 extra points.

**EDGE: Arizona State**

The matchup against Arizona State is the biggest game remaining for the Irish. It is their last opportunity to prove they should be put in the mix for the College Football Playoff, especially after the playoff committee selected ASU to jump Notre Dame as the No. 9 team.

Both defenses are aggressive and have forced turnovers all season. The Irish secondary has been targeted by Arizona State's passing game, but they have held up well in most instances. The Arizona State rushing defense has allowed only two players to rush for over 100 yards this season, and they have the talent to shut down Notre Dame's ground attack.

**SUN DEVILS OFFENSIVE COACHING**

Under offensive coordinator Mike Norvell, Arizona State ranked 10th nationally in scoring offense last season. The Sun Devils have dropped to 36th in that category this season, but they also were without their experienced starting quarterback for three games.

Despite some struggles in the past three games, the Irish defense under new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder has been fast and aggressive. Notre Dame will need VanGorder to prove his worth this week as it looks to replace senior linebacker Joe Schmidt, arguably the quarterback of the team's defense. How will the defensive calls change with the talented but raw freshman Nyles Morgan at middle linebacker?

**EDGE: Arizona State**

**SUN DEVILS SPECIAL TEAMS**

Field-goal kicking has been one of the few bright spots for Arizona State's special teams this season. Sophomore kicker Zane Gonzalez has connected on 14 of 17 field goals this season, and he averages nearly 10 points per game, putting him seventh among kickers and 14th nationally.

Arizona State's kickoff return unit ranks above average nationally, but its punt return team has been abysmal, ranking 122nd in the nation. Notre Dame's kickoff and punt coverage units are nowhere near as cringe-worthy as they were in the past few seasons, though the potential to give up long returns still exists.

**EDGE: EVEN**

**SUN DEVILS SCHEDULE (7-1)**

Aug. 28 Weber State (W 45-14)  
Sept. 6 @ New Mexico (W 58-23)  
Sept. 13 @ Colorado (W 38-24)  
Sept. 25 UCLA (L 62-27)  
Oct. 4 @ USC (W 38-34)  
Oct. 18 Stanford (W 26-10)  
Oct. 25 @ Washington (W 24-10)  
Nov. 1 Utah (W 19-16 (OT))  
Nov. 8 Notre Dame  
Nov. 15 @ Oregon State  
Nov. 22 Washington State  
Nov. 28 @ Arizona
Irish defense adjusts without LB Schmidt

By SAMANTHA ZUBA
Assistant Managing Editor

With sidelined senior Joe Schmidt moving from linebacker to “coach on the field,” as Irish coach Brian Kelly has called him, the Notre Dame defense will have to adjust Saturday against Arizona State.

Schmidt fractured and dislocated his ankle last Saturday in the third quarter of Notre Dame’s 39-33 win over Navy. Before the injury, Schmidt was the leading tackler for the Irish with 65 and also had two interceptions.

In comes freshman linebacker Nyles Morgan from Crete, Illinois. But it won’t be a one-man effort to fill the hole left by one of the defense’s amiable leaders.

“I think everybody will pick up the slack there for the loss of Joe,” Brian Kelly, Irish head coach.

49-39 win over Navy. Before the injury, Schmidt was the leading tackler for the Irish with 65 and also had two interceptions.

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“I think everybody will pick up the slack there for the loss of Joe, and I think that we’ll make it so Nyles doesn’t have to do too much, but he’s going to have to do something as well,” Irish head coach Brian Kelly said at his Tuesday press conference. “He’s been here — he’s got enough physical ability.”

Defensive players from various position groups have upped their leadership in practice, junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day said.

“Everybody’s stepped up their communication a lot, especially coming from me and [freshman linebacker] Jaylon [Smith] and then the safeties,” Day said.

“Everybody’s making sure we understand what’s going on, the communication and making sure everybody’s on the same page,” Day described how his own position on the defensive line gives him more opportunities to guide the rest of the defense in defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder’s scheme.

“Coach VanGorder’s big thing is always start off with viewing the field,” Day said. “So being a defensive lineman, I can view the field and then get in my stance and kind of see what things can be and where the defense needs to line up, so I wouldn’t say it’s a greater role, but I definitely have to communicate more.”

Overall, despite the loss of Schmidt, Notre Dame’s defense won’t change too much, at least in terms of its scheme. In terms of position-by-position roles, not much will change, sophomore defensive lineman Isaac Rochell said.

“We have a next-man-in mentality, so it’s not like we’re changing our defense because Joe is hurt,” Rochell said. “I mean, obviously he was an integral part of our defense, but at the same time, we have to keep going.”

Even Schmidt’s middle linebacker position might not feel that different overall with Morgan receiving his first career start, Kelly said, although he and Schmidt play the position with a different style.

“I think [Morgan’s] physical ability is probably his biggest strength,” Kelly said. “He’s fast. He’s athletic, strong. … Joe was able to put himself in the right position and maybe does not have quickly as Nyles can get there because Nyles has got the physical ability.”

And since stepping into his new role, Morgan has started to add a vocal command of the defense to his skill set at practice, Rochell said.

“He’s definitely more vocal,” Rochell said. “Because when you go out with the twos, it’s a different feel than when you go out with the ones, and we kind of always looked to Joe, and so now we’re looking to Nyles. Even though he’s young, we don’t look at it like that.”

As for Schmidt, Kelly said he’s confident the senior will be an active presence.

“He’ll absolutely be working with us as soon as we get him out of surgery and get him up and around,” Kelly said. “He’ll be a coach on the field for us, there’s no question. He’ll be an asset for us and helping us and utilizing his great knowledge of the position to help Nyles.”

Interested in writing about Notre Dame and Saint Mary’s sports for The Observer?

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Kelly, Strong power Sun Devils offense

By ISAAC LORTON
Assistant Managing Editor

Even with their starting quarterback sidelined for three games, the Sun Devils offense has produced.

Junior receiver Jaelen Strong had 30 catches for 323 yards and four touchdowns in Arizona State’s games against UCLA, USC and Stanford, three of which came in the last-minute 38-34 comeback win over USC (6-3, 5-2 Pac-12) on Oct. 4. Meanwhile, senior quarterback Taylor Kelly was sidelined with a broken foot.

The two had established themselves last year as one of the most dangerous duos in the Pac-12 and some may argue college football. Kelly threw for 3,635 yards and 28 touchdowns while rushing for 852 yards and nine touchdowns. Strong was Kelly’s top target with 75 receptions for 1,122 yards and seven touchdowns.

This season began well for the pair as Strong had 19 catches for 266 yards and 2 touchdowns through the first three games before Kelly’s injury.

While Kelly was hurt, however, Strong’s production continued with junior quarterback Mike Bercovici stepping in. Since Kelly returned Oct. 25th against Washington, Strong and Kelly have not had huge games. Strong has amassed only eight catches for 132 yards and two touchdowns, but Irish head coach Brian Kelly said he is worried about Kelly returning for Arizona State (7-1, 5-1 Pac-12).

“Taylor Kelly back in the lineup really changes things [for ASU’s offense],” Kelly said. “In terms of his ability to run the football as well,” Brian Kelly said.

“(Taylor Kelly) is extremely elusive and looks for Jaelen Strong, who is as good as any wide receiver in the country.”

Brian Kelly praised Strong’s ability, comparing him to former Irish receiver Michael Floyd.

“(Strong) is athletic, fast, reminds me of Michael Floyd,” Kelly said. “Big, athletic, strong hands, goes up and gets the football — just very dynamic.”

Sun Devils head coach Todd Graham said both Taylor Kelly and Bercovici could run Arizona State’s offense, but Kelly wins games and will continue as the starter.

“You know, [the corners] are going to have to fight,” Kelly said. “They’re going to have to fight for every possession against [Strong]. I think it’s more about timing. If they have time to get the ball to him, it’s going to be a battle every single time, there’s no question. He’s that good.”

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