

Irish Looking For 'Head' Of A Champion

Written by Sean Stires

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NOTRE DAME, Ind. – Every time the Notre Dame football team takes the field they touch it as they walk down the stairs on their way from the locker room and onto the playing field. 'It' is the sign that reads "Play Like A Champion Today" (apparently Oklahoma players do something similar, but that's another story).

The sign does not distinguish different parts of the champion's anatomy, it simply commands the best from each Fighting Irish player as he prepares to butt heads with the opponent of the day. Head coach Brian Kelly made a new distinction this week as to what kind of champion lies inside his 9-0 team after last week's nail biter of a win over Pittsburgh.

"I told the football team that they had the heart of a champion in the way that they battled through triple overtime," Kelly said this week. "But now that we understand that we will fight to the end of the battle, we've got to have the head of a champion too. The head of a champion to understand that each and every week you're going to get the opposition's very best."

That was Kelly's message after watching his team narrowly escape what would have been the biggest upset of the college football season to date had his then 8-0 squad lost to a Pittsburgh team that was just 4-4 prior to the meeting.

"This is a new experience for guys on the team," captain Zack Martin said of the uncharted territory he and the Irish are in at this point in the season. "In college at least we've never been

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in this situation before. We have to go out there and play to win and not play not to lose. That's a big point of emphasis this week."

The mantra of Kelly's "process" got the Irish through the doldrums of the BYU game that came between nationally ranked Stanford and Oklahoma matchups, but somehow the message got lost somewhere between the LaBar Practice Facility and Notre Dame Stadium when it came time to play Pitt last weekend.

By Martin's own account, the Irish looked at times like a team that was playing not to lose. Kelly did not quite put it in those terms in his media address this week, but he clearly knows he did not see his team's best mental state of mind last week.

"This group has not been 9-0," he commented. "So they have learned about how difficult it gets as you get down to just a few games left in the season. Everybody can make their season beating Notre Dame."

"This is new territory for them and they're learning. I sensed and felt in talking to our guys that they clearly understand that they can't play the game any less than their very best if they want to win."

Linebacker Dan Fox is in step with Kelly's sentiment coming out of the triple overtime win over Pittsburgh.

"Every game's gonna be a battle no matter what," Fox said of what he takes from the narrow victory. "They're gonna see Notre Dame on their schedule and they're gonna think this is it, we're gonna beat them. It's a game that (while) we've moved on it was something that showed me that every single game's a battle."

Now it is time for the lesson learned on the playing field and in the aftermath of the narrow escape and apply it and put it to use. Playing with the 'head' of a champion makes for a good sound bite on Tuesdays, but what does it mean to Fighting Irish players as they prepare throughout the week?

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“(It means) just taking our game to the next step as far as in the film room and the little things,” Fox said of his own interpretation. “(Such as) paying attention to the small details that can really take us to the next level.”

That is Fox’s take on the new catch phrase, but each player has his own spin.

“Personally for me it’s just understanding that one - every day is important,” Manti Te’o said. “Every day you get a chance to get better and that’s important. Two – you understand that everybody is going to give you their best shot, just because not only are you Notre Dame, but you’re Notre Dame with a 9-0 record.”

“You’re going to get everybody’s best shot and you’ve gotta prepare for that. That’s something that I think we’re used to, but I don’t think we’re used to it being 9-0, but we’re learning and last week was a great learning experience for us of coming out and taking care of business early.”

Being Notre Dame already brings out the best in opponents, but those nine wins and no losses puts the Irish in elite company. The Irish are in the running with Oregon, Kansas State and defending national champion Alabama to play for this year’s championship. Louis Nix knows that makes playing with the ‘head’ of a champion that much more challenging.

“I think it’s like what we’re doing now,” Nix said. “In order to be a champion you know every team is going to come after you. Like Alabama, they’re the national champion from last year (and) every team wants to beat them. That’s how we have to have our mindset – every team wants to beat us. In order to be the best you’ve got to beat everybody else. We’ve gotta come out strong and win all of our games and play hard.”

Senior receiver Robby Toma has his own take on what having that ‘head’ of a champion means, and it has nothing to do with the highlights in his hair.

“I think the biggest thing for us is not forgetting how the success came,” Toma said. “We’ve

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worked so hard, especially us seniors, for the last four years. We've seen it all. Just don't forget the past, because we've been through the downs and we know what it's like to lose and being undefeated has been such a blessing for this team. When he says the head of a champion I think he means don't get infected with success."

Technically, Notre Dame already has the 'head' of a champion. The Irish are number one in the nation in the latest Graduation Success Rate (GSR) released just a couple weeks ago by the NCAA. It's a point of pride for Kelly to be the only school in the nation to currently be near the top of the heap in both gridiron brawns and brains.

"I think if you have the football program that has the highest graduation rates and is also a team that is competing for a national championship – I would qualify that as good for NCAA football," Kelly remarked this week. "You have something working towards excellence."