

Preview: ND-USC

Written by LTD

Saturday, 24 November 2012 08:28



The number one ranked Fighting Irish of the University of Notre Dame fly to California to face the unranked University of Southern California Trojans in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. This game is the 84th renewal of the greatest intersectional rivalry in college football. The battle for the jeweled Shillelagh will be fought before 90,000 plus with kickoff at approximately 8:07 EST. The game will be televised by ABC and be called by the Brent Musburger-Kirk Herbstreit duo. The weather forecast is for a game-time temperature of 68 degrees dropping to the low 60s throughout the game, a 0-10 percent chance of rain, and winds from 1-2 miles per hour.

The Irish lead the series 43-35-5 in a rivalry that has only been interrupted in the war years of 1943-1945 since the 1926 beginning. The away games of this home and contest stand in Southern California's favor at 18-21-4. The Irish lead in South Bend 23-14-1. There have been two games in Soldier Field and Notre Dame won both. No team has beaten the Notre Dame more than Southern California and no team has beaten Southern California more than Notre Dame.

Unlike last year's game where neither team was ranked this contest has the highest combined ranking since 2005 when the Irish were ninth and USC was number one. Last year USC came into the game off a bye week. This year they enter the game having played in seven consecutive games since their bye week. The Irish have also played seven straight since their bye week.

USC is led by Lane Kiffin in his second year as the Trojan head coach. Kiffin, a Fresno State alum (98), began coaching as a student assistant at Fresno State, went on to be an assistant at

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Colorado State, quality control on defense for the Jacksonville Jaguars under Tom Coughlin, then an assistant under Pete Carroll, and finally offensive coordinator under Carroll. He went on to an abbreviated two year stint as the head coach of the Oakland raider before being fired after four games into his second season. He spent one year as head coach at the University of Tennessee before jumping to the Trojans as their 23rd head coach. Kiffin is 25-11 at USC, 32-17 as a college head coach, and 1-1 against Notre Dame and Brian Kelly.

Southern California is 7-4 overall and 5-4 in the PAC 12. USC has wins over Hawai'i 49-10, Syracuse 42-29, California 27-9, Utah 38-28, Washington 24-14, Colorado 50-6, and Arizona State 38-17. Their four losses came at the hands of Stanford 14-21, Arizona 36-39, Oregon 51-62, and UCLA 28-38. USC's opponents have a combined record of 63-58 which includes 10-1 Oregon along with Stanford and UCLA both at 9-2.

USC could arguably have won every one of the four games that they have lost. The loss to Stanford can be traced to 3 turnovers and starting a rookie at center which led to more pressure on Matt Barkley as he had to assume much of the call responsibilities of the center. The other three losses came, in a large part, at the hands of 11 turnovers. Even given the porous defense in those three losses the Trojans could have conceivably outscored their opponents if not for turnovers.

Southern California Offense

Southern California runs a pro-style offense that has great pass routes and a solid running game. The USC passing game will go deep at any time, on any down and distance. They have 37 touchdown passes alone, only two short of Notre Dame's season total of 39 touchdowns. The Trojans' top two receivers have combined for 24 touchdowns while the top two Irish receivers total 8 touchdowns. USC's top two tight ends have 9 touchdowns between them while Irish All-American Tyler Eifert and Troy Niklas only have 5 touchdown passes total. The SC tailback tandem is only 56 yards behind the Notre Dame tandem on the season. In short the Trojans have been an offensive juggernaut most of the season. It remains to be seen if Max Wittek can preside over the scoring machine that is the USC offense.

The Trojans averaged 34 points in their four losses despite 14 turnovers. Eliminate those turnovers and they could conceivably be undefeated. While that may seem far-fetched it does indicate their offense has kept them in every game where an occasional porous defense has let them down.

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USC is ranked 27th in total offense with 468 yards per game, 65th in rushing offense with 161 yards per game, and 20th in passing offense with 307 yards per game. They rank 26th in scoring offense at 36 points per game. They are 87th in third down conversions making 48 out of 129 third down attempts for 37%.

The Trojans rank 112th in turnovers with 29 by throwing 15 interceptions and coughing up 14 fumbles. There's no ranking on total fumbles, but USC has laid the ball on the ground 22 times this year. USC is 62nd in tackles allowed for losses with 61 and 29th in sacks allowing 15. They are 119th in penalties committed per game with an average of 8.6 penalties per game that has yielded walk-offs against the Trojans for 71 yards per game.

In the Red Zone offense rankings USC is ranked a misleading 87th having scored on 37 of 48 trips inside their opponent's twenty. That breaks down to 9 rushing touchdowns, 22 passing touchdowns, and 6 field goals for a total of 234 points. There are close to fifty teams above USC that hasn't matched their 234 point total in the Red Zone.

Trick Plays & Wrinkles

Southern California runs the end-around and reverse primarily with wide receiver Marqise Lee #9 who averages 9.7 yards on 11 rushes including a long of 38 yards. Two other receivers have had one rush each with Robert Woods #2 going 76 yards for one and Nelson Agholor #15 going 7 yards for the other.

USC likes to run the tight end in motion to a wide receiver the sideline for a blocker on a bubble screen. They are capable of faking that by having the wide receiver sitting down for the bubble screen and the tight end taking it up the field. They were wide open with that play for the tight end to go the distance against Stanford who came up anticipating the bubble screen and blew the coverage, but Barkley didn't read it and went away to another receiver. It was six points if he had seen it.

USC runs the wildcat with either back. I'd expect some form of trickery from this set.

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USC Projected Starters & Significant Contributors

QB #7 Matt Barkley, 6-2, 230, senior, 46 games, 46 starts

TB #25 Silas Redd, 5-10, 200, junior, 34 games, 16 starts **OR**

TB #22 Curtis McNeal, 5-7, 190, fifth year, 32 games, 9 starts

FB #31 Soma Vainuku, 6-0, 250, RS freshman, 10 games, 5 starts

WR #9 Marqise Lee, 6-0, 195, sophomore, 22 games, 18 starts

WR #2 Robert Woods, 6-1, 195, junior, 35 games, 35 starts

TE #86 Xavier Grimble, 6-5, 260, RS sophomore, 22 games, 9 starts **OR**

TE #82 Randall Telfer, 6-4, 255, RS sophomore, 21 games, 12 starts

LT #75 Max Tuerk, 6-6, 285, freshman, 10 games, 3 starts **OR**

LT #70 Aundrey Walker, 6-6, 300, sophomore, 12 games, 7 starts

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LG # 66 Marcus Martin, 6-3, 325, sophomore, 21 games, 18 starts

C #78 Khaled Holmes, 6-4, 305, fifth year, 37 games, 34 starts

RG #59 John Martinez, 6-2, 300, RS junior, 25 games, 22 starts

RT # 77 Kevin Graf, 6-6, 295, RS junior, 26 games, 22 starts

Skill Players

USC has a wealth of skilled players, both starting and in reserve. Many reserves would start on other FBS teams. What's scary is that their receiver and tight ends are young and will get better and their best running back has another year left unless he comes out. The only starters they lose for sure this year will be their quarterback and center.

Quarterback

Max Wittek #13 is supposed to start. Wittek had a lot of offers by the major players of college football and was also offered by Coach Kelly. He has less than thirty plays behind a college center in actual game play. Judging by what I've seen of a small percentage of those less than thirty plays he has that freshman problem staring down his primary receiver too often. That's the known negative. One knock on Wittek coming out of high school was his accuracy. I don't see it on the college passes he's thrown. I see him as being very accurate. Another knock I have is how he ran in high school, struggling for every yard. Not wise at this level for a quarterback that isn't a great runner. On the positive side, he has a strong arm and his velocity on short to medium throws can get balls to receivers quickly, leaving a short window for the defense's recovery time.

From all reports Wittek is a student of the game and it must be remembered that while he has little game time he's been in the USC system for two years, has beaten out his fellow red shirt

freshman Cody Kessler #6 for the backup position, participated in two spring scrimmages where he was 7-10-0, and isn't some fuzzy faced true freshman. Wittek throws well on the run, looks down field as he keeps a play alive with his legs, and he's capable of running for positive yardage, far more so than Barkley. This season he is 8-9-0 as a passer for an 89% average, with a long of 24 yards, and 1 touchdown.

We know even less about Wittke's backup Cody Kessler #6 except he's shorter and he also had a ton of offer by big time schools. His game action consists of 2-2-0 for 100%, a long of 8 yards, and no touchdowns.

Running Backs

Silas Redd #25 is the Penn State transfer that Kiffin landed. A slashing runner, Redd has that second gear where he can break one open. Couple that with elusiveness in the open field and he's a scary back. He's beefed up what was already a powerful body coming out of high school without a loss of speed and can make moves in at the LOS that cause free defenders to miss. Redd has low center of gravity and he's also a smart and determined runner in short yardage and goal line. As a receiver he's a threat, but he will drop passes he shouldn't. He's not a great blocker, but he does get in the way enough to foil his share of blitzes. Redd had a 5.2 average per carry at Penn State, but his production is up somewhat at USC. Statistically he averages 5.4 yards per carry, has a long of 59 yards, and 9 touchdowns. As a receiver Redd has 6 receptions that average 15.5 yards per reception, a long of 41 yards, and no touchdowns.

Curtis McNeal #22 didn't get many offers coming out of school and wasn't ranked high by the major recruiting service. Big mistake. McNeal is small, but he's a tough package. He runs behind his big lineman, is hard to find, has great vision, plus his elusiveness makes it even harder to get a good shot at him. He hits quick and hard and is dangerous if he gets to the second level. McNeal has played second fiddle to Redd this season, but was the featured back against UCLA last week and ran for 131 yards and a 5.3 yard average and 2 touchdowns. He averages a gaudy 6.3 yards per carry, has a long of 62 yards, and 2 touchdowns. As a receiver he has good hands and he has 7 receptions that average 15.9 yards, a long of 25 yards, and 1 touchdown.

Fullback Soma Vainuku #31 is a near clone of former USC fullback Stanley Havili without the Havili speed. He's a powerful runner that breaks tackles and will even line up and run at tailback. The native Tongan has good hands out of the backfield and can make big plays in the

passing game. He's a force on run blocking as well. Vainuku has a 3.7 yard average, a long of 11 yards, and 0 touchdowns. As a receiver he has 7 receptions, a 5.7 yard average, a long of 16 yards, and no touchdowns. I worry about him on the goal line. Like they've been saving him for such an occasion.

Receivers

I can't think of any superlatives that haven't been heaped upon Marqise Lee #9 and Robert Wood #2. They are the best college receiving tandem that Notre Dame has faced this year and probably the best in college football. The duo has hauled in 68% of the USC completions and both can be lined up anywhere, even the backfield, as USC seeks to create one-on-one matchups. What's interesting is that they have switched roles as Lee is the dominate USC receiver this year as opposed to Woods being the top dog last year.

Robert Woods #2 is athletic, fast at 4.4 for the forty, a great route runner, possesses good body control, and has been highly productive in his three years at USC. His stride is deceptive and lures a secondary to sleep while he gets separation. He has the speed to get deep and is deadly on the skinny post, post, and slant. He is adept at double moves and his deep threat ability makes him tough to cover on deep outs or stops. Woods adjusts well to the ball in the air, catches the ball over the shoulder, and has the hand strength to grab a ball that's thrown on a rope while he's extended.

There are flaws in Wood's game though. He drops too many passes and lets too many passes hit his pads either through a lack of concentration or an impatience to get going with the ball. He's been putting up with a nagging ankle injury for the entire season. Woods has 66 receptions, an average of 10.9 yards per catch, a long of 41 yards, and 10 touchdowns. He also has 1 rush on the season, one that went for 76 yards and a touchdown.

Marquis Lee #9 has exploded this season and has replaced Woods as Matt Barkley's go to receiver. Anything less would be foolish on the USC end as he's the best receiver I've seen this year and it isn't even close. He is currently ranked as the second leading receiver in receptions in the FBS. He has eight games of 100 or more receiving yards and is coming off his fourth straight game of 157 or more yards including one of 345 yards. His 345 yard game is a USC and PAC-12 record, a record he had broken by halftime.

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Lee is athletic, has good hands, and makes the difficult catch. He runs good routes, but what's most scary about Lee is what he does after the catch. A highlight reel of Lee would consist of pass after pass hauled in and him going to afterburners leaving defenders in his Wake. A negative for Lee would be his desire to "officiate" the game even to the point of demonstrating for a flag as the play is still going on with the pass going to him and needless to say he didn't go after it. Equally bad are the three fumbles in the last three games. Lee has 107 receptions, a 15.0 yard average, a long of 83 yards, and 14 touchdowns. He's also rushed the ball on reverses and the end-around 11 times for a 9.7 yard average and a long of 38 yards.

Nelson Agholor #15 is the fourth leading receiver for USC. A fluid athlete Agholor has excellent speed, good hands, and has progressed as a route runner in this his freshman season. He's a definite deep threat. Agholor exhibits good concentration and has been the wide out the USC staff has been looking for to draw some coverage from Wood and Lee. Once he gets the ball he's a running back capable of breaking it which makes it even more difficult to double Woods or Lee. He has 19 receptions for a 17.9 yards average, a long of 76 yards, and 2 touchdowns. He too will run a reverse or end-around with 1 carry for 7 yards.

The rest of the Trojan wide receiving corps has a total of 3 receptions on the year. The tight ends are often left in to block especially against a tough front like Stanford which makes them a good change of pace in short passing yardage.

Tight end Xavier Grimble #86 is the type of tight end that a team can align anywhere a la Tyler Eifort. He's also the best blocker of the two red shirt sophomore tight ends in the USC attack. Grimble has good hands, a strong lower body, and his height makes him a Red Zone threat. He's improved his route running over last year and his body command in relation to positioning himself against defenders is better as well. Grimble has 26 receptions, an 11.1 yard average, a long of 31 yards, and 5 touchdowns.

Randall Telfer #82, the other red shirt sophomore, is an in-line tight end who runs good routes and knows how to run after he catches the ball. Yes, Grimble is the better blocker of the two tight ends, but Telfer blocks well too. His technique is very good, great hands, good extension, and he usually moves his feet very well to control the opponent. He's a potential deep threat on deep threats on seam routes, double moves, and the play mentioned in the Trick Plays & Wrinkles section. Telfer has 12 receptions, an 8.3 yard average, a long of 23 yards, and 4 touchdowns.

Offensive Linemen

The USC offensive line has helped carve out a 5.1 yard average for their backs and receivers running the ball. They have allowed only 15 sacks on the year. As a group they are very effective at the LOS in the running game, but they suffer, as a group, in space. The left side of the line seems to be the preferred side for USC to run.

SC's best offensive lineman is center Khaled Holmes #78. He's quick off the snap and strong both in the upper and lower body. He gets out quickly on screens, but isn't super effective down the field. His strength allows him to often handle a nose guard all alone which is a major plus for any offensive line. As a result of his total physical talent he gets great push on short yardage for a center.

Right guard John Martinez #59 is a good run blocker who is quick off the line, shows power on the initial contact, and has the tenacity to finish the block. Despite his initial quick move he's slow to the second level and not very effective in space. As a pass blocker he uses his hands well, but all too often gets pushed back too deeply in the pocket.

Left guard Marcus Martin #66 is quick off the ball for someone with such size. He's a good run blocker, tenacious, blocks to the whistle, and maintains good pad level. He plays hard and generally controls the man across from him, but he too has problems in the second level and space. He's not at good pass blocking as he is run blocking and sometimes gets his head down which allows a quick pass rusher to go past him.

Left tackle Max Tuerk # 75 is a true freshman. He's strong, athletic, has long arms, and is alert enough to slide off a combo block or a pile to pick up a potential tackler. Tuerk is an excellent run blocker who sometimes gets his pads too high. He's solid pass blocker with good footwork who often controls his man more so than just keeps him out. There's a very bright future for this kid.

Right tackle Kevin Graf #77 is an athletic tackle who is an above average run blocker, but he has trouble with speed rushers in pass blocking.

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Southern California Defense

USC still runs the base 4-3 defense it has run for decades, but they lack the talent and dominance that was a Trojan trademark under Pete Carroll. The USC defense has been on a decline even before the arrival of Lane Kiffin and his father, Monte Kiffin. The senior Kiffin developed some formidable college and NFL defenses at Nebraska, Arkansas, and Tampa Bay, but has not returned USC's defense to the prominence it once had a few season ago.

Southern California is 58th in total defense allowing 392 yards per game, 49th in rushing defense giving up 150 yards per game, and 67th in passing defense allowing 242 yards per contest.

USC is 6th in turnovers with 29, 18 interceptions and 11 fumbles. They are 5th in tackles for losses with 88 or 8 per game. The Trojans are ranked 4th in sacks with 42. They are 119th in penalties with 94 that average walk-offs totaling 71 yards per game.

In Red Zone defense the Trojans are ranked 43rd allowing scores on 35 of 44 journeys inside their twenty yard line. The breakdown is 12 rushing touchdowns, 13 passing touchdowns, and 10 field goals.

USC Projected Defensive Starters

DE #91 Morgan Breslin, 6-2, 245, junior, 11 games, 11 starts, JUCO

DE #96 Wes Horton, 6-5, 255, fifth year, 43 games, 30 starts

NT #90 George Uko, 6-3, 275, RS sophomore, 22 games, 13 starts

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DT #94 Lenard Williams, 6-5, 270, freshman, 11 games, 7 starts

SLB #18 Dion Bailey, 6-0, 210, RS sophomore, 21 games, 21 starts

MLB #55 Lamar Dawson, 6-2, 235, sophomore, 18 games, 12 starts

WLB #10 Hayes Pullard, 6-1, 235, RS sophomore, 23 games, 23 starts

CB #21 Nickell Robey, 5-8, 165, junior, 36 games, 36 starts

CB #26, Josh Shaw, 6-1, 190, RS sophomore, 21 games, 6 starts *

SS #29 Jawanza Starling, 6-1, 200, senior, 40 games, 31 starts

FS #7 T. J. McDonald, 6-3, 205, senior, 48 games, 34 starts

*Transferred from Florida this past spring on a hardship waiver making him eligible this year.

Defensive Linemen

The USC defensive line took a big hit through graduation and it shows in their statistical defensive rankings, especially against the run. This is the youngest USC defensive line that the Irish have faced in some time, but it has a great deal of talent.

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The best defensive lineman on the USC front is Morgan Breslin #91. The JUCO All-American is disciplined in playing his responsibility, does a good job setting the edge, and pursues with speed to the sideline. His speed rush is excellent and would be amazing if he had the strength that comes with forty or fifty more pounds. His major weakness is diagnosing and playing the zone read, but that's hard for any defensive end. Breslin has 49 tackles, 36 solos, 17.5 for losses, 11.5 sacks, 4 passes broken up, 4 passes defended, and 1 fumble recovery.

Breslin's counterpart is defensive end Wes Horton #96. He hasn't really elevated his statistics much over last year which is unusual for a senior who hasn't missed any games. He's not a great speed rusher because he doesn't have that first step burst, but he keeps coming. Horton reacts to the screen quicker than his line mates. He also doesn't read the play as fast as the USC staff would like, but he makes an effort. He's the best Trojan defensive lineman in getting his hands up when he can't get to the quarterback. He has 32 tackles, 14 solos, 6 for losses, 5 sacks, 2 passes broken up, 2 passes defended, and 1 fumble recovery.

Nose guard George Uko #90 is an undersized nose guard at 275 pounds. However, he is quick off the snap, penetrates well, and has quick feet for size in redirecting. When motivated he's a force despite his size. Uko has 24 tackles, 10 solos, 7.5 for losses, 4.5 sacks, 1 pass broken up, 1 pass defended, 1 fumble recovery, and 1 forced fumble.

Defensive tackle Leonard Williams #94 is athletic and good enough to be starting as a true freshman. He's quick off the ball, gets off blocks well, and displays a lot of intensity and effort. He's another with a bright future ahead. He pursues better than all the defensive linemen at USC. Williams has 42 tackles, 27 solos, 12.5 tackles for losses, 7.5 sacks, 1 interception, 2 passes broken up, 3 passes defended, and 2 fumble recoveries.

Linebackers

Strongside linebacker Dion Bailey #18 came to USC as a defensive back and still carries defensive back size at 210 pounds. Bailey reacts quickly to the pass or the run, blitzes well, and is excellent in coverage. His size makes getting off blocks a problem but he can often outrun his mistakes with his speed. Bailey has 71 tackles, 45 solos, 8 tackles for losses, 1 sack, 4 interceptions, 3 passes broken up, 7 passes defended, and 1 forced fumble.

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Middle linebacker Lamar Dawson #55 fits the cliché of having the “linebacker mentality” and has been a starting middle linebacker since his sophomore year in high school. He’s physical, sheds blockers, and arrives at the point of attack to punish ball carriers. Dawson plays under control in a disciplined style that seldom leaves him grasping at air. He plays from sideline to sideline against the run and plays the pass well. What he lacks is the instinct and play recognition of the type exhibited by Manti Te’o. He’s also not the best in getting the deep drop so necessary for cover two. Dawson has 64 tackles, 31 solos, 1.5 for losses, 1 interception, 2 passes broken up, 3 passes defended, and 1 forced fumble.

Weakside linebacker Hayes Pullard #10 is a big hitter who’s also an athletic linebacker. He has quick lateral movement and changes direction well. Pullard has 78 tackles, 48 solos, 6.5 for losses, 2 sacks, 1 interception, 1 pass broken up, 2 passes defended, 1 QB hurry, and 1 forced fumble.

Secondary

All-American T.J McDonald #7 is not only the leading tackler for USC, but he is the best defensive player following in the footsteps of his two time All-American and All-Pro father, Tim McDonald, at safety. T. J, which stands for Tim Junior, has great size, speed, and athleticism. He’s a force against the run, a player who forces quickly and tackles securely, and he’s a far better cover man than who he replaced at USC, Taylor Mays. McDonald will be one of the top three free safeties drafted in the next NFL draft. McDonald has 89 tackles, 46 solos, 6 for losses, 1 sack, 2 interceptions, 3 passes broken up, 5 passes defended, 1 QB hurry, and on special teams 1 blocked kick.

Cornerback Nickell Robey is the fastest man in the USC secondary with sub 4.4 speed. He has great closing speed and is fearless as a player. His small size houses a tough package. Robey, a smart player, has good ball skills, uses his hands well in coverage, and is someone opponents usually throw away from. He has 45 tackles, 32 solos, 1 interception, 4 passes broken up, 5 passes defended, 1 forced fumble and 1 special teams kick block.

Strong safety Jawanza Starling #29 is a player devoted to watching film and his play shows that film study preparation works. Almost never out of position he takes good angles to the football with good closing speed. Starling has 30 tackles, 20 solos, 1 for a loss, 3 interceptions, 4 passes broken up, 7 passes defended, 1 fumble recovery, and 1 forced fumble.

The other corner is Josh Shaw #26 who has taken over midway through the season for last year's starter Torin Harris #4. The Florida Gator transfer uses his hands well, is good in press coverage, and is physical. Shaw has 23 tackles, 13 solos, 2 for losses, 2 interceptions, 5 passes broken up, and 7 passes defended.

Southern California Special Teams

USC's kicker is Andre Heidari #48. He's 8-13 in field goals, with 2 being blocked, and 37-39 in extra points. He hasn't tried a field goal longer than 45 yards this season, but he has a career long field goal of 50 yards. His misses this season are from 38, 40, 41, 44, and 44 yards. His long this season is 41 yards. Heidari missed his two attempts last week against UCLA, a miss from 44 yards and a 38 yarder was blocked.

Heidari also does the kicking off for USC most of the time. His 34 kickoffs average 61.7 yards per kick with 12 touchbacks and 0 out of bounds kick. The other kick off specialist is Craig McMahon #46. His 37 kickoffs average 61.1 yards with 17 touchbacks and 1 out of bounds kick. No matter who's kicking off the USC coverage team is ranked 70th allowing 21.8 yards per return.

Kyle Negrete #35 does the punting for USC. His 33 punts average 42.2 yards per punt with a long of 65 yards, 8 over fifty yards, 0 touchbacks, 12 returned, and 9 fair caught. His coverage team is ranked 71st in punt return defense allowing 8.7 yards per return on 12 returns.

Kick returns feature Marquis Lee #9 who has the bulk of the USC returns this season and is ranked 10th in the country. Lee has 24 returns for a 29.3 yard average, a long of 100 yards, and 1 touchdown. A lesser role is played by Nelson Agholor #15 who has 5 returns for a 24.2 yard average and a long of 37 yards.

Punt returns have been the duty of both Robert Woods #2 and Nickell Robey #21. Woods has 11 returns for an average of 3.8 yards with a long of 31 yards. Robey has 8 returns for an average of 9.5 yards and a long of 34 yards.

THE GAME

Intangibles

Rivalry game. Nuff said.

Notre Dame is 5-2 versus USC when ranked number one and 20-9-2 when ranked higher than USC.

There are currently three teams in the top twenty-five that Notre Dame has defeated this season, Stanford 11th, Oklahoma 14th, and Michigan 20th.

Stephan Tuitt needs two sacks to break the Irish season record.

USC's goal was a National Championship. A win over Notre Dame goes a long way to soothing that failed goal.

USC may be better off without Barkley. He's thrown a career high number of interceptions and made some dubious decisions.

So very much is on the line for Notre Dame's players and staff.

Offensive Keys

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No turnovers. USC excels in creating them. Even with Wittek at the helm USC still has potential to score and I'm sure they will. Don't give them more opportunities.

Don't give up on the run no matter what the success is. Wear USC down like the Irish have other teams this year.

Control the ball. Keep USC's offense off the field. They have so many weapons and an advantage in athleticism. Even with an inexperienced quarterback the tandem of Lee and Woods can score.

It's time to "Release the Golson." I want to see more option and more zone read. Everett Golson's legs are a fantastic weapon and Coach Kelly has been moving toward them more and more. I really felt letting Everett run more in mid-season jump started his career and gets him into the game more and more. I want more.

Kelly and Golson need to spread the ball around in the passing game.

Everett Golson must make good reads and deliver the ball on time. USC has too many ball hawks each of whom can all close very quickly. Golson can't risk being late with the ball. This is my biggest fear Saturday.

Score early and hopefully often. Make Kiffin impatient.

The last time the Irish defeated USC Michael Floyd had a big day. A similar one may be needed from Tyler Eifert.

Defensive Keys

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Where's Lee and who has him should be the primary pre-snap read and communication. My fear, and there are many with Lee, is who has him on a wheel route out of the backfield. The same goes for Woods when he's in the backfield.

Stuff the run, the best friend of an inexperienced quarterback, and put the game in the hands of the red shirt freshman quarterback.

Pressure Wittek, shorten his decision time, and even drop eight at times. Confusion and indecision on his part are Irish allies.

Be on the alert for screens and draws, the second best friends to an inexperienced quarterback.

If there's (God forbid) a turnover in Irish territory be alert for the immediate home run ball, something that most coaches might use with a young quarterback thinking points may be a premium.

Tackling is paramount this week. USC has so many game breakers once they get out in the open field.

The Irish secondary needs to keep everything before them and then come up and punish USC's receivers after the catch.

Special teams Keys

No turnovers.

Don't leave points on the field in the kicking game.

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Cover kicks and punts intelligently. That means stay in your lanes and breakdown rather than fly around like a crazed individual and make sure of the tackles. The Irish giving up a little ground while playing under control is far better than giving a cheap touchdown. I don't see this as a field position game.

Ben Turk being consistent on his punts, consistently good. Don't give Wittek a short field.

My Pick

On a sane level I don't share the internet philosophy among Irish fans that USC will quit if they get down or have it taken to them physically. People said the same about Pitt and how'd that turn out? USC didn't quit against Oregon or anyone else they played. They didn't quit against the Irish the last time the game was in the Coliseum. Chances are they won't quit this week either.

I also think...no, I know USC has the better athletes. They have great offensive weapons and great talent on defense. The gap is closing as Brian Kelly, his staff, and yes, even Charlie Weis have had a hand in narrowing the gap, but the gap is still there. I really see a close game.

Last week the Irish offense went a long way in soothing my tendency to worry about a consistent offensive output, but another big question remains. Can the Irish outscore an offense as potent as USC's if it comes to that? I don't know, so in my mind it's imperative that the defense plays a great game.

Now to my own ND-USC week insanity/nightmare:

I hope the Notre Dame players don't get as wound as I have been the last few days. I try to think of the common opponent, Stanford, and what light that might shed on the USC contest. I try to rationalize Notre Dame's coverage of receivers that don't match up to Lee and Woods. I agonize over USC's tailback duo being better than Oklahoma's backs and not being able to shut

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Written by LTD

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them down.

I've even found myself starting to research back to the freshman years of Rodney Pete, Todd Marinovich, and Carson Palmer to somehow link Wittek's first start as a red shirt freshman with their respective freshman starts.

I think of all that could go wrong in the game. I think of some things so terrible I don't want to give them a leg up by stating what they are as if putting them to words might cause some figment of fate to make them a reality. Does everyone go through this?

I've been around long enough to remember the nightmare of 1964. The rising from the ashes from the program's decade of poor play to a chance to go undefeated and win the national title all ripped away in the final minutes. I don't think I've ever recovered from that one. In my eyes 1993, hurtful though it was doesn't come close. Unless the Irish blow out USC like Wake I'm going to be a basket case today, all day. So 24-23, uh, 17-14, uh, 14-10, no, 10-7...

Arrrgggghh!!!!!!!

Notre Dame, 24-17