

Preview: ND-Bama

Written by LTD

Monday, 07 January 2013 08:59



The number one ranked Fighting Irish of the University of Notre Dame take on the number two ranked Crimson Tide of the University of Alabama in Miami's Sun Life Stadium tonight at 8:30 PM Eastern Standard Time. The game will be televised by ESPN with the duo of Brent Musburger and Kirk Herbstreit. The weather forecast is calling for a low of 67 degrees, northeast winds across the field at 12 miles per hour, and a 20 percent chance of scattered showers.

The 14th BCS title game will be contested by the top two leaders in national consensus championship team titles. Notre Dame has 11 consensus national titles while Alabama has 10. Notre Dame's last title was in 1988 while Alabama has won three national titles since then, one consensus in the 13-0 season in 1992 and in two BCS Championships.

The Irish are making their 32nd bowl appearance, their fourth BCS bowl appearance, and their first time in the title game. Notre Dame and Alabama have met five times beginning with the 1973 Sugar Bowl an exciting 24-23 Irish win. The last time these teams faced each other was in 1987 when the Irish prevailed 37-6. In total head to head competition the Irish are 5-1 against Alabama including a 4-0 record against the great Bear Bryant. The Irish are 2-0 against Alabama at home and on the road.

Alabama is led by four-time National Coach of the Year, Nick Saban. The '73 Kent State graduate is in his sixth season in Tuscaloosa following head coaching stops at Toledo, Michigan State, LSU, and the Miami Dolphins. Saban has won three BCS national titles, one at LSU and two at Alabama, and will be coaching in his sixth. Saban has worked for a veritable coaching

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legends tree toiling for Don James, Earl Bruce, George Perles, Gerry Glanville, and Bill Belichick. His college career record as a head coach is 153-55-1 with a 62-13-0 record in Tuscaloosa.

Notre Dame – Alabama Connection

Alabama's athletic director is Mal Moore who coached running backs from '83-'85 at Notre Dame and was also the assistant head coach in '84 and '85 under Gerry Faust. He coached for Bear Bryant as a graduate assistant, defensive backs coach, offensive backs coach, and offensive coordinator. Moore has participated in nine national titles at Alabama as a player, coach, and athletic director. Moore also spent a considerable time sharing his knowledge of the Wishbone offense to yours truly, for which I will always be grateful, in a clinic at Notre Dame during the Gerry Faust years.

Alabama Offense

The Alabama offense is based on running the football and they do it well. The Tide is ranked 38th in total offense with 439 yards per game, 19th in rushing with 225 yards per game, and 78th passing with 214 yard per game. The Tide is ranked 13th in scoring with 39 points per game. Their third down efficiency is 21st converting 72 out of 154 third downs for 47 percent.

Alabama is 14th in turnovers with 15, 12 lost fumbles, and three interceptions. They are ranked 52nd in allowing 23 sacks.

In the Red Zone the Tide is ranked 15th scoring 51 times on 57 trips into the opponent's 20. The breakdown for those scores is 30 rushing touchdowns, 11 passing touchdowns, and 11 field goals. Also, the Tide has scored 22 touchdowns from 21 yards or more.

Trick Plays & Wrinkles

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Alabama runs the following from the Wildcat: The quarterback splits wide and Bama runs a jet sweep from the opposite side and the runner flips the ball to the quarterback who hits a receiver down field.

They can run a fake field goal. Their holder is their quarterback. They shift into a shotgun formation with one wide out and a slot (the kicker) opposite the tight end. At the snap both receivers both cross the field drawing coverage with them. Alabama brings the tight end underneath the formation into the area vacated by the receivers and it's an easy throw as the tight end is usually all alone with a defensive lineman chasing him.

They also run a fake punt on short yardage snapping the ball to the up back, usually a tight end, who then looks for a hole inside.

Projected Offensive Starters and Significant Contributors

QB #10 A. J. McCarron, 6-4, 210, junior, 39 games, 26 starts

RB #42 Eddie Lacy, 6-0, 220, junior, 37 games, 13 starts

RB #4 T.J. Yeldon, 6-2, 216, freshman, 13 games, 0 starts

WR#9 Amari Cooper, 6-1, 195, freshman, 13 games, 8 starts

WR #8 Kevin Norwood, 6-2, 195, junior, 35 games, 10 starts

WR #22 Christian Jones, 5-11, 185, sophomore, 25 games, 10 starts

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TE #89 Michael Williams, 6-6, 269, senior, 53 games, 40 starts

TE/HB #31 Kelly Johnson, 6-3, 230, senior, 51 games, 21 starts

LT #71 Cyrus Kouandijo, 6-6, 311, sophomore, 21 games, 13 starts

LG #65 Chance Warmack, 6-3, 320, senior, 44 games, 39 starts

C #75 Barrett Jones, 6-5, 302, senior, 49 games, 49 starts

RG #61 Anthony Steen, 6-3, 303, junior, 38 games, 24 starts

RT #D. J. Fluker, 6-6, 335, junior, 39 games, 22 starts

Skill Players

Quarterbacks

A.J. McCarron #10 is an intelligent quarterback who manages the game well, is a great leader, and is an above average college passer. The nation's leader in passing efficiency is a very poised and accurate quarterback who doesn't beat himself evidenced by his 26 to 3 touchdown to interception ratio. McCarron doesn't have an NFL arm, but it's strong enough to get the job done.

McCarron's passing statistics are 191-286-3 for 67%, a long of 85 yards, and 26 touchdowns. He's not a great runner, but athletic enough to take off and hurt a defense that's not watching

him for the run. Eliminate the sack yardage and McCarron averages 6.5 yards per run with a long of 24 yards and 1 touchdown.

McCarron's statistics in his three toughest games were 48-82-3 for 58% and 3 touchdowns. That's certainly down from his season average, but a lot of quarterbacks would take that in such big games. Plus, he helped put 77 points on the board in those games, and in no game did the Tide score less than 21 points.

McCarron's backups have a combined passing record of 8-14-0 for 57 percent and one touchdown.

Running Backs

Alabama has two 1000-yard rushers that average 6.5 yards per carry. As a tandem the pair averages 168 yards per game and keeps each other fresh nearly splitting their average of 26 carries per game. Running and receiving they've contributed nearly 2500 yards to the Bama total offense. Comparatively, the Irish tandem of Justin Riddick and Cierre Woods has produced a little over 2000 yards in total offense.

Eddie Lacy #42 replaced All-American Richardson as the Alabama starter. He is the prototype Alabama back, good size, power, quickness, and straight ahead speed. Lacy has a good burst through the hole, reads his blocks very well, and exhibits good leg drive, and he churns hard in heavy traffic. He has good balance, a killer spin move, and runs with his feet on the ground, which translated means an ability to take a hit and have the defender bounce off him and not get knocked down easily like some backs on initial contact. Lacy has 1182 yards rushing, a 6.4 yard average, a long of 73 yards, and 16 touchdowns. As a receiver he has 20 receptions for an 8.6 yard average, a long of 27 yards, and 1 touchdown.

Freshman T. J Yeldon #4 burst onto the national scene with a stellar performance against Michigan in the season opener. He's a good sized back with good speed, power, moves, and great instinct. Once in the secondary defenders are loath to take him on high. Look for him to jump over defenders if they come in low. Yeldon has 1000 yards rushing, a 6.5 yard average, a long of 43 yards, and 11 touchdowns. As a receiver he has 10 receptions for an average of 13.1 yards, a long of 28 yards, and 1 touchdown.

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Fullback Jessie Williams #54 is the starting nose guard, but he brings his size and strength into the game in short yardage and goal line situations to lead the way for Lacy or Yeldon.

H-back/TE Kelly Johnson #31 is primarily a blocker with no rushes and 4 pass receptions for and 8.5 yard average and a long of 16 yards.

Receivers

Freshman Amari Cooper #9 led the Tide in receiving this year. He has great body control, climbs the sky for high balls, and does a good job shielding defenders with his body. His long arms and good hands make him an inviting target for McCarron. Cooper gets off of press coverage well and finds the seams in a zone. He's sneaky fast and able to get deep at the wrong time for defenses lulled to sleep by the Bama running game. Cooper hauled in 53 passes for a 16.9 yard average, a long of 54 yards, and 9 touchdowns.

Kevin Norwood #83 was the second leading receiver for Alabama. He's not very fast, but a good effort player who isn't afraid to go over the middle and will leave himself exposed trying to make a tough catch. He had 26 receptions, a 15.2 yard average, a long of 47 yards, and four touchdowns.

Kenny Bell #7 is a very big home run threat. Bell broke his leg six weeks ago. He has practiced in Miami, but his status is unknown. Bell had 17 receptions, a huge 25.4 yard average, a long of 85 yards, and three touchdowns. Alabama is not ruling him out.

Christion Jones #22 was the third leading receiver who took over for Kenny Bell. Jones pulled in 25 receptions, averaging 13.1 yards, a long of 34 yards, and four touchdowns. Jones has good speed and ball instincts and runs hard after the catch.

Tight end Michael Williams #89 is a tough blocker who may be underused as a receiver. A big target with good speed Williams caught 21 passes for a 7.9 yards average, a long of 22 yards,

and three touchdowns.

Offensive Line

This unit is the best offensive line in college football. It has two consensus First Team All Americans, one Walter Camp Second Team All American, and one player so good that the Alabama staff moved a 2011 All American to another position.

Offensive line coach Jeff Stoutland obviously has talent, but his unit is so fundamentally sound, so physical, and so flawless in execution that they must have caused some long hours for Bob Diaco and Mike Elston.

Left tackle Cyrus Kouandjio #71 is a player with a bright future. The Tide staff sees him as an elite left tackle and was confident enough in his ability to move a 2011 All-American and left tackle to center for this season. Kouandjio can do it all.

Right tackle D. J. Fluker #76 is a load at 335 pounds. Fluker, a future NFL player, graded out at 98 percent this season missing only 11 assignments in 653 plays. A fierce drive blocker he does an overall effective job as a pass blocker although he has trouble with speed rushers and has allowed four sacks. Fluker occasionally drops his head and quits moving his feet when locked up in the running game allowing the defender to get off the block.

Center Barret Jones #75 was that All-American left tackle that the Tide staff moved to center where he just won the Rimington Trophy emblematic of the best college center. Jones, perhaps the most versatile offensive lineman in years, was the Outland Trophy winner in 2011 as a tackle and was runner up this season as a center. Prior to the move to tackle he started 25 games at right guard. Intelligent, fundamentally sound, and extremely skilled Jones footwork is text book and he often seems a man playing with boys when blocking for the pass or the run. It appears he also has a good mean streak. Jones pass blocks like a left tackle and gets off the ball well in run blocking. Great at sustaining blocks Jones usually latches on to an opponent and the play is over for that individual.

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Left guard Chance Warmack #65 is a load. The All SEC guard might be the best run blocker on the Bama line. He's strong, physical, and tough and some of his blocks are highlight films. Warmack is considered by many to be the best guard in this year's NFL draft. He's quick and light on his feet and possesses long arms for his height. As a pass blocker he gets a good punch on the rusher, moves well to contain rushes to the inside or outside, and handles the bull rush well too. He's been flagged only twice this season in 728 snaps.

Right guard Anthony Steen #61 is a nasty individual. He pulls well, blocks well in space, and gets to the second level well. He never gives up and if a man moves inside him he throws himself at the opponent.

Alabama Defense

The Alabama defense of Nick Saban is a complicated defense with a lot of personnel groupings. The defense is a multiple front, but Saban leans more to a 3-4 and uses that fact in his recruiting.

The Tide is ranked first in total defense giving up an average of 246 yards per game, first in rushing defense allowing 80 yards per game, and second in passing defense allowing 166 yards per game.

The Tide is ranked second in scoring defense giving up 11 points per game. In getting off the field on third down they are 16th, only allowing opponents to convert 59 of 182 third downs for 32 percent.

The Alabama defense ranks 27th in sacks of opposing quarterbacks with 33 sacks. They are 21st in turnovers with 28 which divide into 11 fumbles and 17 interceptions.

Alabama is ranked first in Red Zone defense holding opponents to 17 scores on 27 trips inside the Bama 20. That breaks down to nine rushing touchdowns, five passing touchdowns, and three field goals.

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Projected Defensive Starters and Significant Contributors

NG #54 Jesse Williams, 6-4, 320, senior, 25 games, 25 starts

DE #49 Ed Stinson, 6-4, 282, junior, 35 games, 15 starts

DE#92 Damion Square, 6-3, 286, senior, 40 games, 31 starts

SLB #42 Adrian Hubbard, 6-6, 248, sophomore, 22 games, 12 starts

MLB #33 Trey DePriest, 6-2, 245, 26 games, 12 starts

WLB #35 C. J. Moseley, 6-2, 232, 32 games, 19 starts

MLB/WLB #32 Nico Johnson, 6-3, 245, senior, 51 games, 21 starts

ILB #47 Xavier Dickson, 6-3, 262, sophomore, 19 games, 6 starts

CB #28 Dee Millner, 6-1, 199, 6-1, 199, junior, 39 games, 29 starts

CB #13 Deion Belue, 5-11, 179, junior, 13 games, 13 starts

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S #6 Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, 6-1, 209, sophomore, 26 games, 9 starts

S #37 Robert Lester, 6-2, 210, senior, 57 games, 39 starts

Defensive Line

The Tide does not have a dominant pass rusher whether in an even or odd front. Looking at their odd front the three starters have eight sacks compared to the Irish odd front starters having 20 sacks. That's not to say that the Bama defensive line is a bad one. Quite the opposite as the defensive line is a good line overall and the strength of the defense. They are just not the dominating line they have been in the past because they lack a great pass rusher. They excel against the run and occupy enough blockers to allow blitz packages to be effective for Alabama.

Nose guard Jesse Williams #54 is Australian by birth and played for Australia against the USA team before attending junior college before being recruited by Alabama. Williams, a 600 pound bench presser, is surprisingly nimble, can penetrate when called upon or rush under control against a quarterback who's a running threat. Basically he's a gap stuffer against the run and gets replaced by better pass rushers in passing situations. Williams has 36 tackles, seven solos, 2.5 for losses, a sack, four quarterback hurries, two passes batted down, and a blocked kick.

Defensive end Ed Stinson #49 is probably their second best pass rusher on the defensive line. He's quick off the ball and an athletic defender. Stinson has 29 tackles, 10 solos, 8.5 for losses, three sacks, and five quarterback hurries.

The other defensive end Damion Square #92 is statistically the top pass rusher among Alabama's defensive linemen. Yet, he's often replaced in passing situations by Xzavier Dixon #47 who has more speed off the edge. Square has 33 tackles, 11 solos, four for losses, 3.5 sacks, nine hurries, a pass defended, and a fumble recovery.

Linebackers

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The Alabama linebackers are almost a carbon-copy of each other, athletic, hard-nosed, and great in pursuit. There's a lot of athletic talent and a lot of depth in this unit. As a unit the starters have 13.5 sacks.

This unit has a consensus All American in C. J. Mosley #32 who, strangely enough, shares his position with Nico Johnson #35. Moseley is supposed to be a better pass defender and Johnson a better run defender. Mosely is an athletic and football smart player who diagnoses plays quickly and speeds downhill to the football. Mosley had 99 tackles, 61 solos, seven for losses, four sacks, two interceptions, four passes defended, three hurries, a forced fumble, and a recovered fumble.

Trey DePriest #33 is an inside linebacker who was second in tackles for Alabama. He's fast, good laterally, is physical, and he's also a good tackler. He had 56 tackles, 29 solos, four for losses, two quarterback hurries, and a pair of passes defended.

Xzavier Dickson #47 is an active and physical linebacker that plays the Jack position for Alabama. He's not the fastest linebacker so unless he's rushing he's usually off the field in passing situations. Dickson has 33 tackles, 12 solos, five for losses, 3.5 sacks, four hurries, a pass defended, and a forced fumble.

Adrian Hubbard #42 is the strongside linebacker. He's good on contain, and perhaps Bama's best pass rusher, and he gets off blocks and plays the run well. He'll play upright or go into a three-point stance as Bama will often go with an even front. Hubbard has 39 tackles, 23 solos, 10 for losses, six sacks, a pass defended, four quarterback hurries, and three forced fumbles.

Nico Johnson #35 is versatile and often plays both Will and Mike during the course of a game. Johnson is tough against the run as like most Tide linebackers he gets off of blocks and pursues well. Johnson has 54 tackles, 23 solos, two for losses, two hurries, a pass defended, and two forced fumbles.

Defensive Backs

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This unit is not as good as the great defensive backfield that the Tide had last year, but it has some great talent with a consensus All American. Of the three defensive units this is the weakest one and the one where Alabama opponents have found success. Some of that success may be due to the shoulder injuries that both starting corners have dealt with this season. As a total unit, starters and the dime man, they have 14 interceptions

All-American DeMarcus Milliner #28 has it all - size, speed, physicality, toughness, ball skills, and coverage ability. The junior corner, who would be a first rounder if he came out, led the SEC in pass breakups and can play as the boundary or field corner equally well. Milliner possesses good size, great recovery speed, and the confidence to battle any receiver man to man. He excels at bump and run coverage, but he isn't perfect and he can get turned around. Milliner has 51 tackles, 33 solos, four for losses, 1.5 sacks, 20 passes defended, a forced fumble, a recovered fumble, and a blocked kick.

Deion Belue #13 is the other cornerback and while he's not a Milliner in overall talent, experience, and size he has more speed, supposedly 4.3 speed. His speed allows him to close very fast on the ball and to outrun his mistakes. Belue has good ball skills and comes fast on corner blitzes. He's weak on double moves and not the best tackler. Belue has 36 tackles, 24 solos, 5.5 for losses, two interceptions, eight passes defended, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery he took back 57 yards.

Robert Lester #37 is the most experienced defensive back in the Tide secondary and earned his fourth letter this year. His physical package and athleticism makes him an ideal safety, but he has been inconsistent this season. He has good awareness for what's developing in front of him, but can be found taking bad angles and missing tackles. Lester has 42 tackles, 21 solos, 3.5 for losses, 1.5 sacks, four picks, seven passes defended, and a fumble recovery.

The other safety is HaHa (Ha'Sean) Clinton-Dix #6. He's the starter, is better against the run, but he gives way to Nick Perry #27 in most passing situations even though he leads the team in interceptions. The sophomore has 30 tackles, 19 solos, four interceptions, seven passes defended, and a forced fumble.

Vinnie Sunseri #3 is the leading tackler among secondary personnel even though he's not a starter and is one of those players who seems all over the field and does everything. He has 52

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tackles, 34 solos, six for losses, 1.5 sacks, a pair of interceptions, five passes defended, and two fumbles recovered.

Nick Perry #27 comes in in the nickel and dime package or replaces Clinton-Dix in many passing situations. He has 37 tackles, 17 solos, two for losses, a sack, two passes defended, and a fumble recovery.

Alabama Special Teams

The place kicker for Alabama is a two-headed package. Cade Foster #43 handles field goals over 40 yards. Foster was good in 2010 hitting 7 of 9 field goals over 40 yards, but fell off to 2 of 9 in 2011. This season he is 4 of 9 with a long of 52 yards. He has made field goals of 52, 51, 51, and 46 yards. His misses have come from 44 to 52 yards. Foster has had a kick blocked.

The short field goal kicker is Jeremy Sheller #5 and he has been perfect hitting on 11 for 11 with a long of 38 yards.

Foster also handles the kickoffs and his 92 kickoffs are averaging 63.4 yards per kick with 42 being touchbacks and none going out of bounds. His return team is ranked 72nd allowing 21.9 yards per return and a touchdown, a 99-yarder to Missouri.

The punter is Cody Mandell #29. His 46 punts have averaged 43.8 yards per kick. He has a long of 61 yards, 12 over fifty yards, 17 inside the 20, 5 touchbacks, and 13 fair caught. His coverage team is ranked 57th allowing 7.7 yards per return.

Punt returning is primarily the job of Christion Jones #2 has returned 20 punts for a 10.6 yard average and has a long of 31 yards. His backup Cyrus Jones #8 has returned eight punts for a 7.6 yard average and a long of 32 yards.

Kickoff returns are done by the same Joneses. Christion Jones has 10 returns averaging 25.0

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yards per return with a long of 41 yards. Cyrus Jones has 6 returns for an average of 30.3 yards and a long of 99 yards for a touchdown against Old Miss.

THE GAME

Intangibles

McCarron is the number one ranked quarterback in passing efficiency in the FBS. The highest ranked quarterback the Irish have faced this season is Pitt's Tino Sunseri, ranked 19th.

Notre Dame is 5-0 when a #1 plays #2 and the Irish are the number one team.

Nick Saban has won three BCS Championships and is 3-0 in those games.

The last time the Irish won a national title their quarterback, Tony Rice, was from South Carolina. Everett Golson is from South Carolina.

Alabama is penalized less than four times per game.

Notre Dame has never gone 3-0 on the road against top 10 teams.

The Irish have scored 20 points or less in five games. Alabama has never scored less than 21 points.

Offensive Keys

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I'd like to see the Irish employ a hurry up offense and put Alabama through a workout in the first quarter. Texas A&M did and the Bama defense was sucking air by quarter's end and down 20-0. Alabama doesn't have the depth it did the previous title games.

Everett Golson needs to have an excellent day recognizing an elite defense that's had over a month to prepare for him.

Golson must hit a few big passes or runs to defeat Alabama's Mush Rush if they use it against the Irish (a containment and methodical pass rush designed to keep a running QB in the pocket). Texas A&M did so, especially early, building a lead Alabama couldn't overcome. They don't need to be long gainers, just the right plays at the right time, which will make them big plays.

The play of the Irish offensive line is the second most important key of this game. Failure to establish a running game will make scoring difficult as well as put more pressure on the defense.

Pick up the Alabama blitzes and take advantage of those blitzes. The Tide does not have a great pass rusher so they compensate by blitzing, often from the secondary which weakens the secondary's primary assignment - coverage.

Notre Dame needs some big plays to be made. Few drive the ball against Alabama in long sustained drives.

No turnovers. Big games are so often decided by that one big turnover at the wrong time.

Defensive Keys

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Keep the Tide off the scoreboard early. I don't want to see Everett Golson tested by the complicity of Alabama's defense in trying to come from behind.

Tackling will be at a premium as well as toughness. The Irish didn't wilt under Stanford's pounding running game and shouldn't under Alabama's either.

Limit the Alabama running game. The Irish have been able to blunt the rushing totals of every team they've faced this season save Pittsburgh, and in some cases they've just stifled their opponent's rushing game. It is imperative them Irish do well in this area Monday night.

The Irish secondary must be alert to the play action pass as Alabama will pound and pound and then go up top. They love to go deep on first down after a series of pounding runs, especially around mid-field.

The Irish defensive front versus the Alabama offensive line is the major key to this game. In particular is the clash between Notre Dame's Louis Nix and Alabama's center Barrett Jones. Nix's comments about Notre Dame's academic load being something other school's players don't always have to deal with were presented to Jones in a press conference. The William V. Campbell Award winner handled the bait well, but you could tell he just got extra motivation for Mr. Nix. (Jones is a 4.0 student with a bachelor's and master's degrees already earned at Alabama. The award mentioned above is for academic, community service, and field performance excellence.)

No cheap touchdowns. A cheapie can be morale busting in a tough game.

Special Teams Keys

No turnovers. A broken record, but special team goofs can just demoralize a team and turn the game.

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Blocking for punts and place kicks is paramount as the Tide has blocked three kicks this season.

Leave no points on the field. Points will most likely be at a premium in this game.

Notre Dame's Ben Turk needs to keep Alabama pinned and will hopefully have a memorable day as an Irish punter.

My Pick

The last time the Irish played in a game for the national title I got physically ill, like many Irish fans did that day, due to the tension in a game that was really against a team that posed little problem for the Irish. Lord knows what I and other Irish faithful will face Monday night as Alabama is the toughest test the Irish will face all year.

I never picked against the Irish all year. I wanted to against Oklahoma, but I didn't. I wanted to against Stanford and I didn't. I thought about it against Miami and didn't. I can't do it now either.

Notre Dame 17 Alabama 16