

Bullied, But Future Still Bright

Written by Christian McCollum
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MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. – This isn't how it was supposed to end, but this isn't really where and when it was supposed to end either.

Notre Dame saw its bids for a 12th national title and a perfect 13-0 dream season vanquished by Alabama at Sun Life Stadium here in Monday night's BCS National Championship Game as the Crimson Tide bullied the Irish in a 42-14 stomping.

The Irish weren't lucky to make it here, they earned it, but no amount of luck or prayers at the Grotto could have changed this outcome. Notre Dame certainly didn't play well, but the players came to play, played hard and didn't quit. They were just overmatched.

Despite an amazing year that exceeded just about all of their expectations, Irish fans won't have much to comfort them in the immediate aftermath of seeing their team exposed badly against the SEC's best. Notre Dame isn't quite ready to battle with the nation's elite, at least not Alabama. The Notre Dame defense that was lauded as SEC-caliber was shredded by an Alabama offense that came in ranked as the fourth-best unit in that conference.

Alabama running back Eddie Lacy tossed Danny Spond when the Irish linebacker tried to tackle him in the second quarter. Lacy's throwdown didn't come as the shock it would have had the Crimson Tide not been beating up on Notre Dame so badly up to that point. T.J. Yeldon embarrassed Manti Te'o in the backfield with a shake on a third down in the second quarter,

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again long after the Tide had proven they had the superior athletes.

Nope, the Irish never really had a chance in this one.

Still - when the time comes to put things in the proper perspective, and it will - Irish fans will have plenty to be proud of and perhaps even more to be excited about in the future.

They'll lose several key players off this year's roster, including the unquestioned team leader in Te'o, but several young players will return and while they weren't ready for the big lights this time, if they're ever fortunate enough to get back here, they'll undoubtedly be more prepared. And with the players Brian Kelly and his staff continue to bring in on the recruiting trail, the talent disparity that was on display here will continue to diminish.

If anything good came out of this loss for the Irish, it'd have to be their chance to see what a true elite team looks like up close.

"They were the better football team and they deserved to win," Kelly acknowledged after the game. "On our end, there are great things to look forward to. It looks like now our guys understand where they have to go and meet that bar."

Everett Golson was ready to look at it as a learning experience by the time the game was finished.

"It hurts me to see the seniors kind of go out like this, but for me, I felt this," he said. "So this is the kind of experience that I've gained, and I don't want to feel this feeling again."

Kelly acknowledged his staff would use the experience as a learning tool as this was their first time in this type of game, but the most glaring difference on Monday was between the athletes.

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“We've got to get physically stronger, continue to close the gap there, and just overall you need to see what it looks like,” said Kelly. “Our guys clearly know what it looks like.”

“They're back-to-back national champs. So that's what it looks like. Measure yourself against that, and I think it was pretty clear across the board what we have to do. And again, I don't want to minimize the fact that we have made incredible strides to get to this point. Now it's pretty clear what we need to do to get over the top.”

The future promises bright moments, but there were plenty of those along the road to South Beach as well that shouldn't be erased by one ugly performance.

Even some of the most optimistic prognosticators had 2012 pegged as a nine, or at most, 10-win season for the Irish. Somehow Kelly found a way to navigate a regular season schedule that had Irish fans fearful since it was announced years ago.

Leading the Irish to the championship game despite having to face multiple obstacles along the way cemented Kelly's stock among the sport's elite. Leading his program back to the game's biggest stage while also assembling one of the best incoming recruiting classes in the country is exactly the type of progress that needs to be shown. And leading his squad to the final college football game of the season while his team ranked tops in the nation among graduation was something even level-headed pundits considered impossible.

It may have seemed like a long journey back to the ultimate showcase game, but Kelly has his program in the fast lane.

It wasn't that long ago - Halloween of 2010 to be exact – when questions about whether Kelly was the right guy had to be asked. That's what happens when you have back-to-back humiliating losses to Navy and Tulsa, the decommitment of a key recruit and tragedy off the field that couldn't even compare to a game in your first year.

With the specter of an absolute failure of an opening season, a seemingly crumbling recruiting class and that daunting 2012 schedule hanging in year three, nine games into his Notre Dame

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career, people were calling on Notre Dame Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick to admit he'd made a mistake in hiring Kelly and requesting he go through another coaching search less than a year after he completed one.

But Kelly kept his head down and kept working the plan he had mapped out. A blocked punt by Robert Blanton against Utah after a much-needed bye week was the first glimmer of real hope. That glimmer started to flicker as the Irish ran off four straight wins to end that debut season.

Even with a victory over a top-15 team, another against a USC team Notre Dame hadn't beat in almost decade and a bowl win, Kelly still had his skeptics. Supporters pointed to the job his staff did to save that 2011 recruiting class, eight wins over a nine-game period in year two and another impressive recruiting class in 2012.

The jury remained out heading into year three.

Losing a national title game hurts. Losing the way the Irish did hurts bad – and it should. The result of Monday's game was decided earlier than anyone would have hoped, but the verdict on Kelly was in long before.

Kelly may or may not get the chance to bring the Irish back here, but he's convinced he will be and will be in better shape when he does.

"We'll get back to work next week and we will be back in this game again and we will be better prepared to be a national champion," he said.

"It's a great, great opportunity that we had here. It's disappointing we lost the football game, but it's going to make my job very easy when it comes to talking to players about how you win a National Championship."