

They Didn't Quit

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 08 January 2013 03:46



MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. – Notre Dame was beaten by Alabama on Monday night in the BCS Championship Game. There is no disputing that fact. The Irish were outplayed and overmatched by Alabama from start to finish, but they never quit in their 42-14 defeat.

“I loved the way our guys kept fighting and competing,” Head Coach Brian Kelly said of his team after the lopsided loss. “They didn’t quit at all. They understand how to play the game. They (Alabama) played it better. They were the better football team today, but I loved the way our guys just kept playing.”

No player better exemplifies the fight the Fighting Irish displayed in the face of defeat than Louis Nix. With his team already trailing 28-0, Nix went down with an apparent ankle injury on Alabama’s second play of the second half, a 16-yard run by Eddie Lacy. Nix missed five plays, but he limped back on the field to continue to battle.

“I honestly feel like Alabama had the best O-line and I feel like just going my hardest every play,” Nix began when asked why he was able to keep going. “I don’t think there will be any guys better than those guys next year. I just want to have every chance I can against the best O-line in the country – that’s gonna better me.”

Nix was Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. You could hear him saying “You couldn’t knock me down Ray” every time he hobbled across the gridiron and kept coming at the best offensive line in the

They Didn't Quit

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 08 January 2013 03:46

country despite the fact that the outcome had already been determined. Nix was not the only one though. The Irish gritted their teeth and kept coming at Alabama despite the odds.

"I never quit," defensive end Stephon Tuitt said afterward in a dejected Notre Dame locker room. "I play until the last minute. It got away from us today. We can't do anything about that but move on and learn from our experiences. This was our first time in the big championship. I've still got two years left. It's gonna be exciting to see what this team can do as we move on and build from this experience."

And that is the lone bright spot Notre Dame can take from this championship experience. They were punched in the mouth, but they kept trying to punch back. Sure, sometimes those punches merely connected with air, but the fact is they kept trying to throw whatever haymakers they could muster.

"I'm proud of my team," Manti Te'o said after what was the last game of his amazing season and career. "I'm proud of the way they battled not only today, but (also) all season."

Te'o finished the game with 10 tackles to give him 113 in his last season in a Notre Dame uniform. It was a season that he helped create with his galvanizing spirit and leadership. Te'o is arguably the most important player in the history of Notre Dame football and he helped make his team better with his presence both on and off the field when he could have been playing in the NFL this year.

Te'o's spirit buoyed Notre Dame nation and helped propel Notre Dame football into the BCS Championship Game for the first time in program history. All those awards he raked-in along the way are nice, but it has never been about award for Te'o, Kelly (winner of seemingly a zillion coach of the year awards) or any member of the 2012 Fighting Irish.

"It's my brotherhood," Bennett Jackson said of his team after the game while choking back tears. "It's my last time playing with Zeke (Motta), my last time playing with Kap (Kapron Lewis-Moore) and my last time playing with Te'o. You don't give up when we've pushed so hard to get where we wanted to be. It's just upsetting that we didn't finish the right way."

They Didn't Quit

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 08 January 2013 03:46

While Nix was able to return to finish the game, but Lewis-Moore was not as lucky. The senior defensive end had to be carried off on his shield after suffering what Kelly termed a "significant knee injury" in the second half. Lewis-Moore was on crutches and in sweats on the sideline as the final minutes ticked off the clock and his career at Sun Life Stadium.

"Our whole team is a brotherhood," Zeke Motta said after the game. "I'm proud to say that we came out and kept fighting no matter what the situation was."

"Everybody loves each other on this team," fellow safety Matthias Farley added. "It's a brotherhood that they're not just your teammates they're your brothers. Everybody loves each other and everybody's gonna give what they have each and every snap, because they know that everybody else is doing the same thing."

The battling mentality the Irish showed Monday night is not one that was always prevalent just a year ago. They were inconsistent throughout an 8-5 2011 campaign. They gave-up more points in the first half (28) to Alabama than they surrendered in any game this season, but quitting was not an option. It was not an option because quitting on your family is out of the question.

"There's a tremendous amount of pride in this locker room," Mike Golic, Jr. said afterward. "That's what this team's been built on all year – fighting every play (and) fighting for the guy next to you. That's what it's always come down to with us. That showed in the fourth quarter. Obviously this game didn't go the way we wanted, but no one was willing to lay down."

Like Te'o and Lewis-Moore and Motta, Golic played his last game for Notre Dame on Monday night. While he and others will be gone, Golic believes the bond that made the Irish strong this season will go even farther next season.

"These guys will take this pain in the offseason and they'll do all the things necessary to take the next step," he continued. "We took so many strides as a team this year and made up so much ground to get back to the BCS level, but now we saw what it takes today to win that championship. Now these guys know what this looks like and they know what this feeling is on the other end."

They Didn't Quit

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 08 January 2013 03:46

Notre Dame will miss key leaders next season, but Jackson is among the players who could grow into that role in 2013.

“You need great leadership,” Jackson said. “You need guys that are willing to do everything that they can for you. That grows your relationships. When you love each other you do more for each other and you give more effort. Today we just came out flat and Alabama wanted it more than us.”

“What I learned from them is to play hard until the last minute and never quit,” Tuitt said of 2012 captains Te'o and Lewis-Moore. “Always believe in your team. Don't ever quit. Don't ever say anything bad about the other team. Be the player that's there for everybody. We proved that today, because even though we were down we still went out there and played hard.”

It may not seem like it now, but there are still great signs that things will continue to blossom under the golden dome. The Irish need to continue to get stronger and they need to continue to sign faster, elite talent – that can be fixed. What has already been fixed are the intangibles that don't just happen overnight. The Irish found something in themselves in this 2012 season that ended with a 12-1 record that nobody thought possible and there are no signs that their immeasurable heart is going away anytime soon.

“I'm shocked at how we performed on a national stage in the biggest game of our lives,” Nix said as sweat dripped off his body as he sat between Tuitt and Lewis-Moore. “We all let ourselves down. As a team we'll bounce back from this. We'll get better. People can say what they want, we're just gonna keep working.”

You couldn't knock me down Ray.