

## **Irish's Samardzija: From obscurity to Samardzijamania**

**By Michael Rothstein**

He started as nothing this season, a footnote to this Notre Dame team. Not even a starter.

Merely a tall guy who could catch and throw some mean rawhide on the pitcher's mound.

Now look at him. One of the nation's top receivers. A cult following around the Notre Dame campus. An article written on a major sports Web site denoting Samardzijamania.

Now, Jeff Samardzija can add something else to the list – Biletnikoff Award Finalist.

He found out from his brother, and promptly told him to go home.

“Surprised,” Samardzija said of his reaction. “I don't really keep up with what everyone else around the country is doing and stuff.

“...I was pretty shocked. At first you are kind of shocked.”

He shouldn't be.

He's tied for fourth nationally with 13 touchdowns. He has 999 receiving yards. And he started off the year so strongly – eight straight games with a touchdown reception – that people couldn't help but notice.

More time for awards

Coupling with Samardzija's good fortune, junior quarterback Brady Quinn added to his list of accolades Tuesday.

The Dublin, Ohio, native became a finalist for the Davey O'Brien Trophy, given annually to the nation's best quarterback.

Not surprisingly, the other two finalists are USC senior Matt Leinart and Texas junior Vince Young – the same two quarterbacks that Quinn is in competition with for every other major award this season.

Quinn has completed 238 of 367 passes for 3,201 yards and 29 touchdowns – all single-season records.

“Twenty-nine touchdowns and five interceptions, that's great play,” said Stanford coach Walt Harris, who recruited Quinn while Harris coached at Pittsburgh. “Everyone who recruited Brady

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thought he would be a good player.”

Chase for a thousand

Eighty yards separate sophomore halfback Darius Walker from history. Eighty yards from a 1,000-yard season, the first since Julius Jones got there in 2003.

There have been 13 1,000-yard seasons in Notre Dame history, led by Vagas Ferguson, who gained 1,437 yards in 1979.

Walker, while saying it is a goal of his, is more focused on what a win Saturday would ultimately mean.

“It’s a goal of every rusher to get over 1,000 yards,” Walker said. “It’d feel really good to get it.”

Not as bad as it looked

Senior kicker/punter D.J. Fitzpatrick flew into the air after being hit on a field goal attempt Saturday against Syracuse.

After being down, he trotted off and appeared to be all right.

Notre Dame coach Charlie Weis confirmed Tuesday that Fitzpatrick will be back for Stanford this week, as will defensive end Ronald Talley, who was nicked during the game.

“If we had to play on Monday or Sunday, I don’t know what his status would be,” Weis said of Fitzpatrick. “But he’s a day better than he was yesterday.”

NBC scores big

Notre Dame football on NBC earned a 3.6 average rating this season, the highest in more than a decade and a 44 percent increase over last year.

Last season, Notre Dame games on NBC averaged a 2.5 rating.

This year’s average rating was the highest since 1995, when it was 4.5.

The rating is the percentage of all homes with TVs, whether or not they are in use.

His own Utopia

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Never question Weis on his love for all things New Jersey.

Throughout the season, the crew-cut Jersey-bred coach has made multiple mentions of his home state – from his time coaching high school football to his favorite eateries.

Then, there is the Jersey Shore.

“That’s me,” Weis said, when asked what he liked about the beaches of his home state. “You talk about utopia. If you were from the Jersey Shore, you’d understand that.”