

Why They Play The Game

Another classic confrontation at Notre Dame Stadium

by Peg Ward

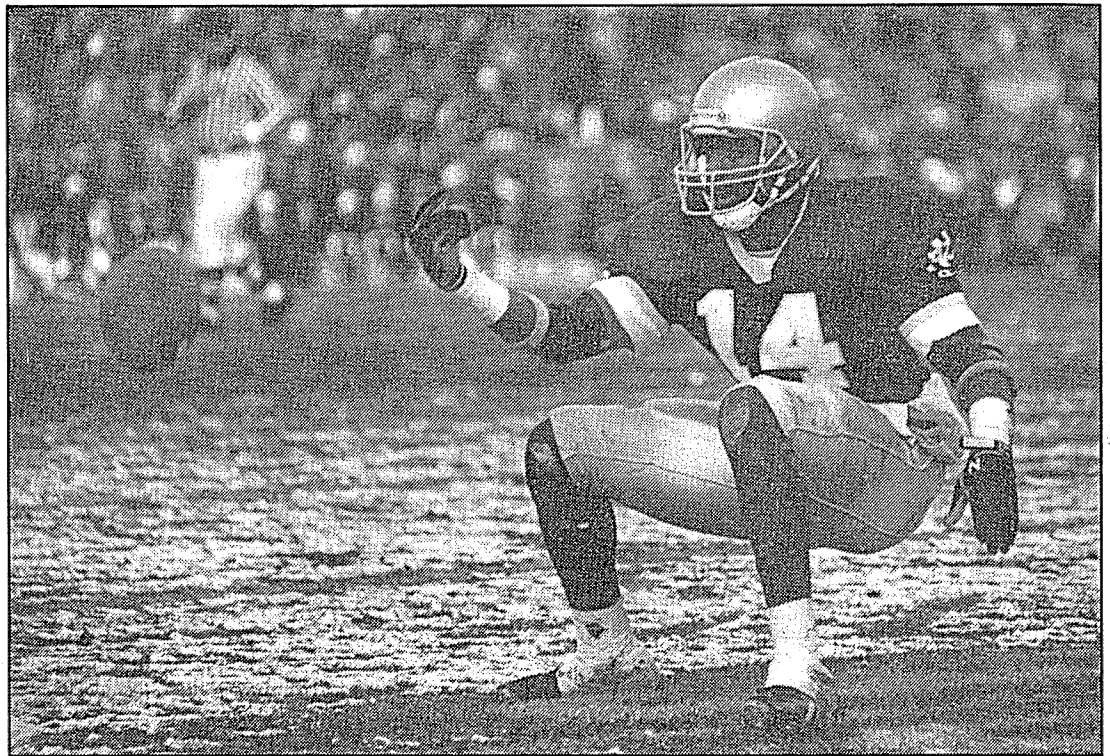
With the temperatures dropping and the snow falling, the Day of Reckoning — November 14, 1992 — had arrived. “The cold, the snow, black shoes, plain uniforms and a traditional rival. This is what football is all about. This is why we play the game,” proclaimed Notre Dame linebacker Demetrius DuBose.

DuBose and the other Fighting Irish football seniors would be making their final appearances in the House that Rockne Built, and they were determined to capture a victory that had eluded them for the past two seasons — a win over Penn State. In their two previous games against Penn State, the Irish had lost by scores of 35-13 and 24-21.

Coach Lou Holtz, commenting on these two games, said, “We didn’t play well against Penn State in the second half two years ago in our stadium, and we did not play well at all last year at Penn State. I think our players feel the need to redeem themselves for that.”

The question still remained: Would Lou Holtz and the Notre Dame football team send the Nittany Lions back to Happy Valley with their tails between their legs, or would the Irish once again be denied a win over Joe Paterno’s charges?

The Irish players took to heart Holtz’s call for redemption and beat Penn State, 18-17. With the score staying close throughout the game, the contest went down to the wire. Notre Dame, down 17-10 with a little under five minutes left in the game, orchestrated a drive down the field that was capped off by quarterback Rick Mirer’s 3-yard touchdown



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This pass to Ray Griggs fell short. Moments later, the senior wide receiver made a clutch catch that kept Notre Dame’s winning drive alive.

pass to Jerome Bettis. This set up a spectacular two point conversion catch by Reggie Brooks, the senior running back who truly emerged this season as the “go-to man” for the Irish. The victory was the most thrilling in recent memory. As the final gun sounded, the crowd rushed the field, transforming it into a sea of cheering students and fans, all reveling in an incredible victory.

The game opened with the Irish offense taking the field. Senior quarterback Rick Mirer and company wasted little time in marching into Lion territory. The drive was keyed by two receptions by senior tight end Irv Smith. Mirer hit Smith for a 19-yard pickup, and two plays later, as the Penn State defense blitzed, the offensive line held strong and Mirer was able to find Smith along the sideline for a 14-yard gain that

brought the Irish to the Penn State 15-yard line. Then, the Lion defense buckled down. Faced with fourth down and four yards to go from the 9-yard line, Holtz opted to call in the kicking unit. Senior placekicker Craig Hentrich converted the 26-yard field goal attempt and put the Irish on the scoreboard early, 3-0.

The teams would trade interceptions on the following two possessions. The Notre Dame defense spoiled Penn State’s offensive debut by playing with a vengeance. With Penn State still on its own 45-yard line, Irish linemen Karmeleeyah McGill and Bryant Young brought down Lion quarterback Kerry Collins in the backfield for a 5-yard loss. Two plays later Notre Dame regained possession of the ball when free safety John Covington picked off Collins’ first pass attempt of the game. Collins

intended receiver was tight end Ryan Grube, but as the ball arrived, cornerback Tom Carter put a severe hit on the Penn State player, causing the ball to be deflected into the hands of Covington.

Notre Dame regained control of the football at its own 49-yard line, but like Penn State, it too would have a difficult time holding onto the ball. Under heavy pressure on the Lions' 27-yard line, Mirer missed

State kicker V.J. Muscillo's point-after attempt. "That's something I take pride in," said Taylor. "I tipped one earlier this season against Michigan State. I just went as high as I could. Fortunately, I timed it right." This outstanding defensive effort wound up giving the Irish the one point cushion needed for the victory.

Penn State's touchdown came with 1:26 left in the first quarter, and neither team

yard line. Bettis carried the ball 15 times for 89 yards during the game, despite being sidelined with a sprained ankle for the opening quarter of the game. Brooks, meanwhile, set a career high of 23 rushing attempts accumulating 88 yards.

Highlighting this drive was freshman wide receiver Derrick Mayes' 12-yard interception. Mayes prevented a possible interception when he wrested the ball away from Lion linebacker Brian Gelzheiser on the play. The Irish still could not put the ball into the end zone, however. Earlier in the quarter Mirer overthrew Irv Smith in the end zone on a fourth-and-one play from the 5-yard line. This time, Holtz opted to take the three points. With time running out in the half, Hentrich put the ball through the uprights, and the score was tied, 6-6.

The third quarter, much like the first half, was dominated by the defenses. Penn State punted three times and Notre Dame twice, but the Irish did manage to put three points on the board after a ten-play, 54-yard drive. Starting from the Irish 26-yard line with ten minutes left in the third quarter, Mirer connected on passes of nine and 30 yards to wideout Lake Dawson. Bettis rushed for 15 yards on



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Snow showers made for slippery footing, but the "Thunder and Lightning" combination of Reggie Brooks and Jerome Bettis still struck for 146 yards on the ground.

target Dean Lytle on a throw over the middle, and the pass was intercepted by Lion safety Lee Rubin. It was once again Penn State's turn to show some offensive firepower. This time the Lions took full advantage of the opportunity. Penn State drove 72 yards down the field and, despite a strong goal-line defensive effort by the Irish, running back Richie Anderson leapt up and over into the end zone to put Penn State on top, 6-3.

Both teams lined up for the usually routine extra point, but Notre Dame free safety Bobby Taylor had other intentions. In what would become the key defensive play of the game, the freshman phenom blocked Penn

would put any more points on the board until the final ten seconds of the first half. Throughout the remainder of the first quarter and continuing well on into the second, the Irish and Lion defenses held the opposing offenses in check. The second quarter would see four consecutive punts and a turnover by each team. Finally; with 4:14 left in the half, Notre Dame regained possession of the ball, and, led by the rushing tandem of Reggie Brooks and Jerome Bettis, the Irish ground attack came alive.

Collectively referred to by coach Holtz as "Thunder and Lightning," this dynamic duo blasted through Penn State's defensive line, forcing the ball down to the Penn State 6-

the drive to bring the Irish down to the Penn State 20-yard line. The Irish still could not convert on third down, however, and were forced to settle for the field goal. Hentrich converted the 37-yard attempt with 5:27 left in the third quarter to put the Irish on top once again, 9-6. The third quarter ended with the same score. It seemed as though both teams were saving up all their fireworks for the final period.

With the competition stiff and the score tight, the stage was being set for a last-second victory. Notre Dame had possession of the football at the start of the final period, but after a failed fake punt attempt, Penn State regained control at its own 34-yard

line. The Nittany Lion drive was impressive, as five rushes by Richie Anderson totalled 25 yards and receptions of 15, 7 and 5 yards by O.J. McDuffie brought Penn State to the Irish 15-yard line. The defense hung tough, however, and Bryant Young sacked Collins for an 8-yard loss to push the Lions back to the 23. Penn State struck back. On third down and eighteen Collins hit Troy Drayton for a 22-yard pickup that carried the Lions down to the 1-yard line. The Irish defense dug in deep, refusing to let Paterno's team into the end zone. Led by Demetrius DuBose and Devon McDonald, Notre Dame stood firm at the goal line and forced a Penn State field goal. Muscillo converted the 22-yard attempt to even the score at 9-9 with eight minutes left in the game.

On the ensuing possession, Notre Dame started from its own 32-yard line. Bettis broke through the Penn State defense for six yards, but on the very next play was taken down in the backfield for a 3-yard loss. On third-and-seven, Mirer threw over the middle to Irv Smith. Smith pulled the ball in, but as he struggled to pick up the first down,

he collided with two Penn State players and fumbled the ball. With Gelzheiser recovering the fumble, the Lions offensive unit took over and began a march down the field that seemed to spell defeat for the Irish.

Lions running back Richie Anderson ran right for four yards, and then found nine yards of daylight down the middle to bring the Lions to Notre Dame's 31. Following a run by Brian O'Neal, Collins hit McDuffie on a slant pattern for a 15-yard gain. The drive concluded with O'Neal picking his way through the Irish defense, carrying the ball 13 yards into the end zone. The score, after the extra point by Muscillo, was 16-9. It seemed as if the Irish were starting to be haunted by the ghosts of past losses that had come at the hands of Penn State.

Notre Dame football teams and fans alike, however, have not been ones to give up hope so easily. At the pep rally the night before the game, Irish leprechaun Dan Wagner assumed the personality of a Jimmy Swaggart-like preacher, asking the crowd, "Do you believe? I said, DO YOU BELIEVE?" Well, the true test of faith was at hand as the

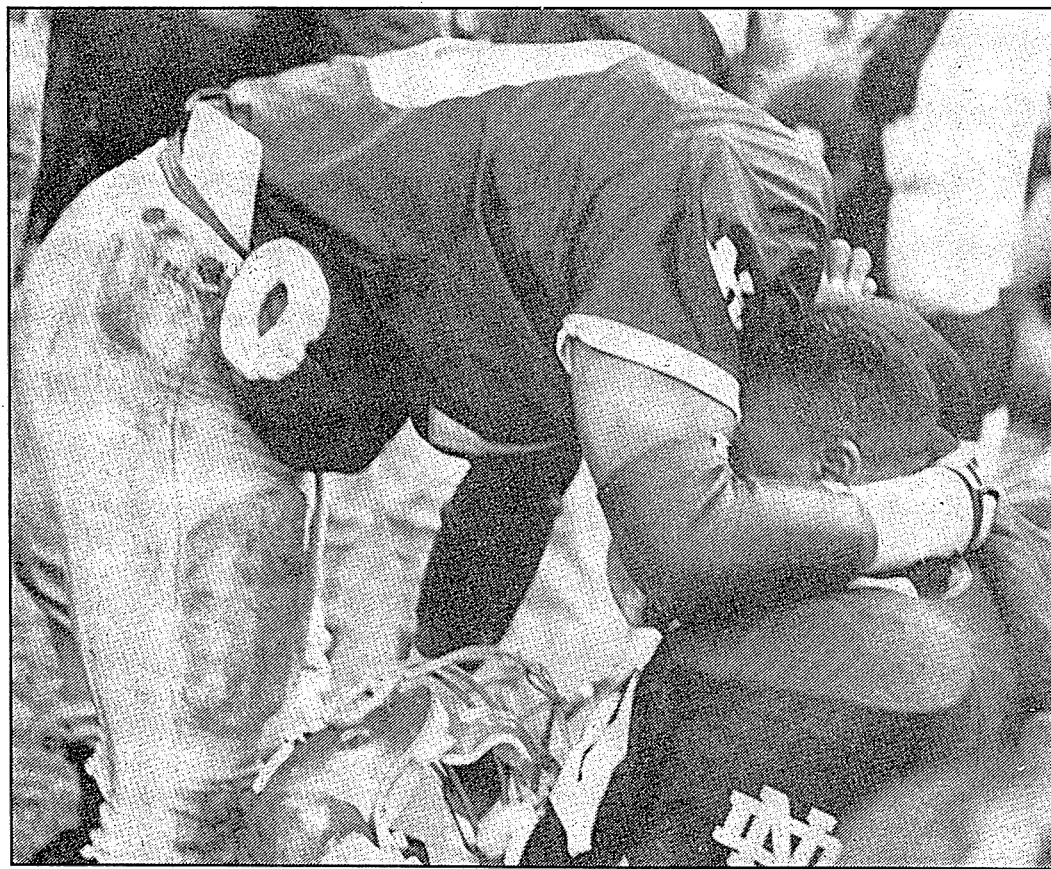
Irish offense took the field. Notre Dame, with pride and confidence on its side, would not disappoint its believers.

The winning drive was truly one of championship proportions. With 4:25 remaining and Notre Dame trailing 16-9, the only realistic hope that the Irish had was to put the ball into the end zone and then go for the two point conversion. The march down the field started with a few steps backwards, though. On the first play, linebacker Rich McKenzie sacked Mirer for a 6-yard loss. Mirer followed it up with a stunning 21-yard completion to Bettis and a 15-yard scramble to the Penn State 33-yard line. Ray Griggs then hauled in a 17-yard reception. From there on in the rushing game took control. This was Notre Dame football at its best. With time running down, Brooks and Mirer alternately carried the ball, pushing the Irish to the 4-yard line. Finally, with fourth-and-goal to go and 25 seconds remaining, Holtz called a timeout. It was do or die. The two teams met at the line of scrimmage and the ball was snapped. Mirer dropped back, looked and threw over the middle to a wide open Bettis

in the end zone. With twenty seconds remaining, the touchdown brought Notre Dame to within one, 16-15.

There was never any doubt that the Irish would go for the two point conversion. The only question was who was going to get the call to put the ball into the end zone. The pass went to Brooks, but if you talked to Lou Holtz before the game, you would not have thought that the Irish were going to throw to him in this situation. Said Holtz, "You wouldn't believe this, but Reggie Brooks has bad hands. He wouldn't be the first guy I'd want to throw to."

The play actually called for Mirer to throw to one of three players who were lined up wide on the left. Everyone was covered, however, and as Mirer rolled right he saw that Brooks, the "fourth option" on the play, was open in the end zone. Mirer released the ball and Brooks pulled the ball into his grasp with all the grace and assuredness of a Pro Bowl receiver. The Irish went ahead 17-16 and with four seconds left, the



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Irish players come together to console one another as time runs out and it seems that the game is slipping away.

spectacular catch guaranteed an Irish win.

What was Brook's reaction to the winning play? "Well, I made the catch. I had no doubt in my mind that I was the guy to catch it. I thank the Lord that I got open on the play. Rick just checked off on his other receivers and spotted me in the clear"

The victory not only ended another Notre Dame football season at home, but also ended a long standing rivalry between the two teams, evening the overall record at 8-8-1. Penn State joins the Big Ten conference next season and will no longer play Notre Dame. The win served as the storybook ending to the home season and the rivalry between the Fighting Irish and the Nittany Lions, between Lou Holtz and Joe Paterno, between the Gold and Blue and the White and Blue. It will surely go down in the long book of Notre Dame football as one of the great games for Fighting Irish football fans to remember. □

This was the scene at Notre Dame Stadium after the Irish pulled out a last-minute victory over the Nittany Lions on a touchdown pass to Jerome Bettis and a two-point conversion to Reggie Brooks.



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GAME SUMMARY

Scoring Summary

	1	2	3	4	Final
Notre Dame	3	3	3	8	17
Penn State	6	0	0	10	16

1st Quarter	ND: Hentrich 26 FG at 9:54 PS : Anderson 1 run (PAT failed) at 1:26
2nd Quarter	ND: Hentrich 31 FG at :09
3rd Quarter	ND: Hentrich 37 FG at 5:27
4th Quarter	PS : Muscillo 22 FG at 8:35 PS : O'Neal 13 run (PAT) at 4:25 ND: Bettis 4 pass from Mirer (Brooks 3 pass from Mirer)

Team Statistics

	ND	PS
First Downs.....	17	14
Rushing.....	8	8
Passing.....	9	6
Penalty.....	0	0
Rushing.....	180	107
Passing.....	164	131
Total Net Yards.....	344	238
Average Gain Per Play.....	4.5	3.5
Fumbles-Lost.....	3-2	1-1
Penalties-Yards.....	4-32	2-10
Punts-Averages.....	4-39.0	6-36.0
Kickoff Returns.....	2-21	5-100
3rd Down Conversions.....	6-17	5-16

Individual Statistics

Rushing: ND - Bettis 14-68, Brooks 23-78, Lytle 3-35, Becton 2-5, Zellars 1-3, Mirer 10-(-9) PS - Anderson 26-73-1, O'Neal 6-30-1, McDuffie 1-12, Archie 2-1, Collins 5-(-9)
Passing: ND - Mirer 23-12-164-1-1, Hentrich 1-0-0-0-0 PS - Collins 28-7-131-0-1
Receiving: ND - Smith 4-59, Dawson 2-39, Bettis 2-24-1, Jarrell 2-13, Griggs 1-17, Mayes 1-12 PS - McDuffie 3-46, Drayton 2-29, Thomas 1-46, O'Neal 1-10