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It Was A Close Call, But Notre Dame Won Its Tenth Straight Game Over Southern Cal

by Kevin Weinman

Notre Dame traveled to Los Angeles over the Thanksgiving weekend with the hopes of recording their tenth straight victory over Southern Cal, finishing the regular season at 9-1-1 and enjoying the sunny climate during a scheduled trip to Disneyland. Irish players came home realizing that you can't have everything, however, as the Disneyland excursion was nixed after the team physician's recommendation that the plethora of ill players be able to return to South Bend to recover from cases of the flu before classes resumed.

Notre Dame completed a "Decade of Dominance" in this inter-sectional rivalry by defeating coach Larry Smith's Trojans, 31-23. Yet a quick scan of some post-game facts and figures seems to indicate otherwise. Southern Cal quarterback Rob Johnson set career highs with 27 completions in 41 attempts for 302 yards, while former Heisman

candidate Rick Mirer completed five passes out of 14 attempts for 74 yards.

Enter the Reggie Brooks factor. Not even an intense case of the flu could stop Reggie, despite dizziness and vomiting before and during the game. Brooks accumulated his yardage on 19 rushes, averaging nearly 12 yards per carry. Three of his runs went for more than 40 yards. His three touchdowns coupled with fellow flu-mate Craig Hentrich's field goal and four extra points meant that sick Irish players outscored the Trojans, 25-23.

The game was not a sure Irish victory at any point prior to the ten second mark of the fourth quarter when Tom Carter intercepted a weak pass from Johnson to ensure yet another year of Trojan frustration. The Trojan passing game had few problems moving the ball from the outset. After receiving the opening kickoff, Johnson marched Southern Cal 60 yards for the game's first score, a 35-yard field goal by

Cole Ford. On the drive, Johnson was four for five for 37 yards. His lone incomplection occurred when he underthrew an open Travis Hannah on third-and-three on the Irish 18-yard line.

The Irish responded by storming 74 yards down the field in seven consecutive rushing plays in only 2:38. Brooks and Jerome Bettis alternated carries, gaining 35 and 34 yards respectively. The drive, which former USC and Los Angeles Rams coach John Robinson called "One of the most physical drives I have ever seen," ended with Brooks swinging wide right off a pitch from Mirer and scampering 12 yards for six points. Bettis had the big carry, a 27-yard rumble after hitting men inside and bouncing toward the right sideline.

The Trojan offense gave the defense some time to rest by putting together a touchdown drive and moving ahead, 10-7. Curtis Conway, who Trojan fans liken Raghieb Ismail, caught two passes for 33 yards. His

second reception culminated in a nifty run as Conway slashed and cut to his right three times before finally being brought to the ground by Jeff Burris. Deon Strother pounded the ball in from the 1-yard line two plays later for the score.

The Irish answered with a whimper in contrast to the roar of their previous drive. After moving the ball nowhere in two plays, Mirer threw what was ruled an interception to Stephon Pace at the Notre Dame 31. Replays seemed to show that the ball never touched Pace's hands and was trapped between the turf and his legs.

The Trojans moved nine yards in two plays before 245-pound short yardage specialist Wes Bender was stuffed for no gain on third-and-one. Larry Smith elected to go on fourth down and pulled a clever play from his bag of tricks, a play that was successful in USC's 31-21 win over Washington State.

Johnson took the snap from center and squatted momentarily as if he had fumbled, then rose to pass to tight end Yonnie Jackson, who was stealthily creeping toward the end zone. But Jeff Burris stayed at home and batted down the pass, saving what could have been a touchdown.

Hurt by an ill-advised option pitch by Mirer to Brooks who was promptly flattened by Willie McGinest for a 5-yard loss, the Irish began a swapping of punts with a 54-yard boot by Hentrich. Mike Miller evoked memories of Ricky Watters' negative 17-yard punt return in Miami in 1989 with a 12-yard loss of his own off a

39 yard John Stonehouse punt.

Notre Dame was fortunate in putting three points on the board on its next drive. After Mirer completed his first pass of the game with 6:32 left in the second quarter, a 15-yard strike to Adrian Jarrell, he and the Irish offense faced a third-and-five at the Trojan 19. Under pressure from Pace and McGinest, Mirer buried the ball in the turf with no eligible Irish receivers in sight, an act the officials awarded with a yellow hankie. The grounding penalty could have knocked the Irish out of field goal range, but during the ensuing discussion, an official was apparently

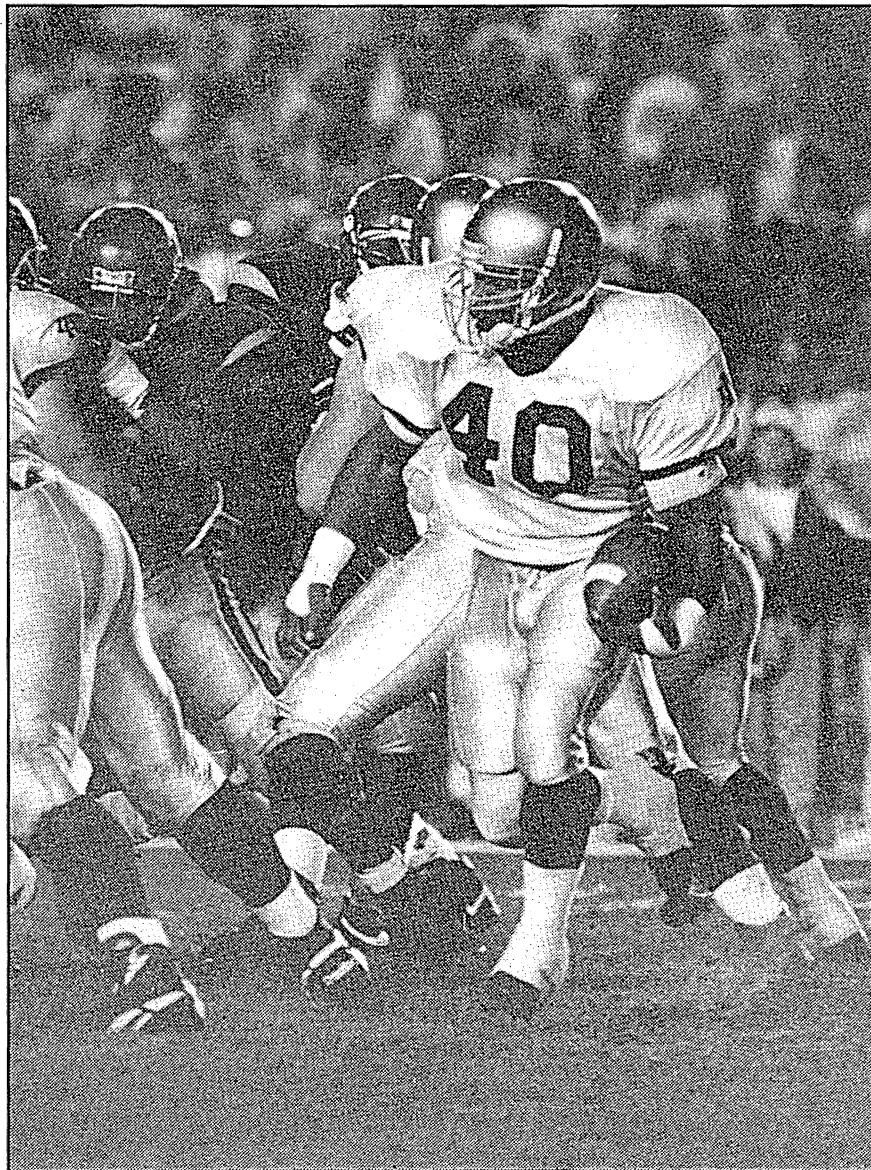
convinced Mirer was throwing to someone, won his argument and waived the foul. Hentrich booted a 37-yard field goal to knot the score at 10 points apiece.

Conway frightened Irish fans with a 30-yard kickoff return, but several plays later he would hand Notre Dame an undeserved gift. After a 23-yard pass to Strother and a 13-yard run by Dwight McFadden (USC's longest in a game in which they only mustered 78 yards on 37 carries, not a typical "Tailback U" performance), Johnson fired a pass from the 26-yard line to a wide-open Conway streaking toward the end zone. The ball bounced harmlessly off his hands. "It was a lack of concentration," Conway later remarked. Cole Ford slid a 38-yard field goal across the uprights for a 13-10 Trojan lead.

From this point onward, Trojan tacklers played Reggie Brooks as though they feared catching the flu from him: they no longer seemed to get near him. Brooks had quietly amassed 61 yards at this point, but had not broken one for over 10 yards. His next 10 carries netted 166 yards. After two consecutive completions by Mirer, Brooks got the call and responded.

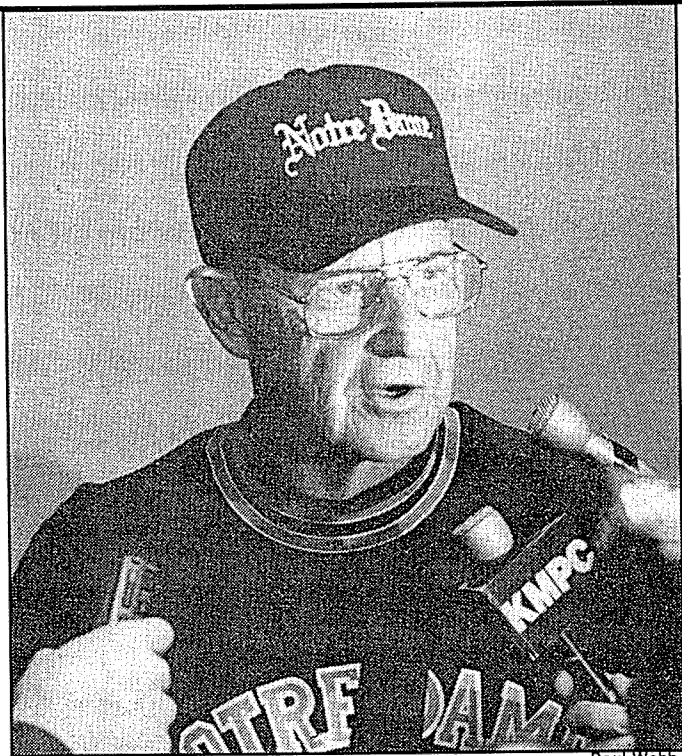
After working his way through the Trojan front seven, Brooks exploded, accelerating through the secondary, making Trojan safeties miss from both directions. His 55-yard score put Notre Dame ahead for good, 17-13. However, the outcome was far from determined.

Notre Dame's defense took the momentum provided by the offense and stuffed Johnson and



Reggie Brooks, sick with the flu, ran for 232 yards and three touchdowns, including a 55-yarder. He was selected the game's MVP for his efforts.

Paul Webb



Paul Webb

Although this was the tenth straight victory for the Notre Dame over USC, it was not an easy win for Coach Holtz and the Irish.

USC's offense on three plays as the second quarter wound down. Stonehouse punted the ball weakly, and Charles Stafford, an up-man, drifted back to make the catch. Mike Miller moved forward to catch the short punt, colliding with Stafford. Jeff Kopp was quick to jump on the fumble for the Trojans, who now were in position for a late score. Johnson, with 15 seconds to move 28 yards for a touchdown, spotted Conway across the middle.

During the run after the catch, it was not clear whether the shifty Conway would pirouette his way into the end zone or dance the Trojans out of time. John Covington and Karmeeleyah McGill stopped him at the Irish 14 with two seconds remaining. Ford nailed a 32-yard field goal to provide the 17-16 halftime score.

Mirer opened the second half by promptly hitting Irv Smith for 29 yards across the middle, but the Irish were stopped at midfield. The Trojans were forced to punt as well after Bryant Young sacked Johnson on third-and-nine.

Notre Dame drove 65 yards in seven plays, culminating in the second of Brooks'

three long runs, a 44-yard carry off a Mirer pitch. Brooks continued to entertain the Notre Dame contingent at the Coliseum, a significant and vocal portion of the 90,063 in attendance. The eight point lead provided by Brooks' heroics would loom large for the remainder of the game.

The Trojans, outscored 14-3 over the previous nine and a half minutes, fought back. Johnson completed four out of four passes for 44 yards and the Trojans took advantage of a personal foul facemask call during a quick 67-yard touchdown drive to bring USC back to a 24-22 deficit. Larry Smith elected to kick the extra

point rather than go for the two point conversion. With 18 minutes to play, Smith decided it was too early to go for two.

As a result, Smith set the tone for the rest of the game, ultimately dooming the Trojans to a last minute long shot drive for no more than a tie.

Notre Dame and USC traded ineffective drives before the Irish took over first-and-ten on its own 20. Mirer gave the ball to Brooks, who charged 27 yards before he was aware of a holding call against the Irish. Had the play stood, Brooks would have broken George Gipp's season record for yards per carry, and would have been one yard shy of the Notre Dame single game rushing record of 255 yards set by Vagas Ferguson against Georgia Tech in 1978. The Irish then pro-

ceeded to stall and Hentrich punted to Conway.

Again, Conway flirted with a breakaway with a 30-yard punt return that easily could have gone for much more. It was a moot point, however, when a Trojan was flagged for illegal use of the hands. The Trojans got as far as their 42-yard line before Brian Hamilton and McGill recorded back-to-back sacks. McGill hit Johnson as his arm was cocked but not yet moving forward. The officials ruled the ensuing fumble as an incomplete pass, and the Trojans were allowed to punt.

After stalling in its previous two possessions, the Irish running game again came alive. Brooks broke yet another big one, a 43-yarder down the left sideline. At the Trojan 18, Bettis was given the opportunity to get in on the scoring, and he carried the ball four straight times up the middle. The fourth run resulted in a nine yard score, increasing the Irish lead to 31-23.

Conway took the kickoff 20 yards. Bryant Young dropped Johnson four yards behind the line of scrimmage to record the third consecutive sack for the Irish, who sacked Johnson six times in the second half. On third-and-fourteen, Johnson's pass was dropped by Johnnie Morton, one of several passes he dropped in the fourth quarter. However, the Trojans were given a reprieve when Demetrius DuBose was flagged for roughing the passer. The Irish stood up the



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Stomping to a tune of 6.9-yards per snap, Notre Dame's offense netted 405 yards.

Trojans four plays later on fourth-and-four and took over the ball near midfield.

Three runs up the middle netted eight yards and Hentrich booted the ball into the end zone. The Trojans had time for one final drive, and needed a score and a two point conversion to salvage a tie. Johnson hit Morton twice and Strother once to move the Trojans to the Irish 43. Morton again dropped a pass 18 yards down field to set up a third-and-one. After a 5-yard run and a 4-yard pass, the Trojans went deep.

Tom Carter did not buy Johnson's fake left and stayed with Travis Hannah step for step down the right sideline. But somehow Hannah came down with Johnson's rainbow, snagging a 41-yard reception from Carter's hands. USC had a first-and-goal at the Irish 5 with 25 seconds and one time out remaining.

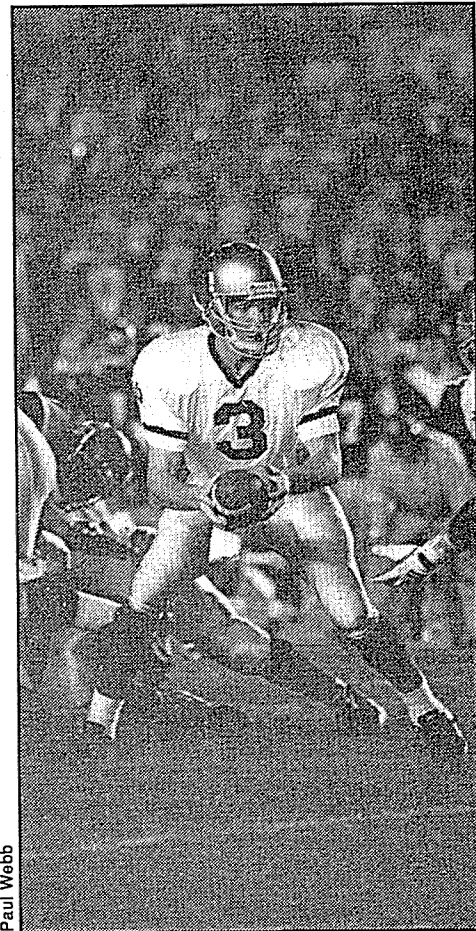
Devon McDonald then chimed in with what, at that point, was arguably the defensive play of the game, blitzing in untouched from Johnson's right, hitting him for a 7-yard loss. The sack and following use of the final time out eliminated any possibility of a run. Johnson dropped back, looking left

from the start and tried to loft the ball to Morton in the corner of the end zone. Carter played it perfectly and drifted back for the easy interception.

"My man did a hitch and I tried to stay with him so that the quarterback would think the receiver behind me was open," Carter explained. "But you could kind of read where he was going, and I had drifted back about when he threw. I saw the ball all the way. I knew I was going to make the interception."

This win, like the last three wins, was certainly not easy for the Irish. But this game, like the previous nine between the two schools, was won by the men from South Bend. Rob Johnson underestimated the full effect of the Decade of Dominance. "This is my first loss to Notre Dame, but one is just as frustrating as ten for me," he claimed. Ten, then, must be as frustrating as 100 for Trojan faithful. □

Rick Mirer and the Irish offense were frustrated by USC on three of their last four possessions.



Paul Webb

GAME SUMMARY

Scoring Summary

	1	2	3	4	Final
Notre Dame	7	10	7	7	31
Southern Cal	10	6	7	0	23

1st Quarter SC: Ford 35 FG at 10:21
ND: Brooks 12 run (PAT) at 7:23
SC: Strother 1 run (PAT) at 3:15

2nd Quarter ND: Hentrich 37 FG at 4:55
SC: Ford 36 FG at 2:39
ND: Brooks 55 run (PAT) at 1:19
SC: Ford 32 FG at 0:00

3rd Quarter ND: Brooks 44 run (PAT) at 7:02
SC: Crayton 18 pass from Johnson at 3:05

4th Quarter ND: Bettis 8 run (PAT) at 7:58

Team Statistics

	ND	SC
First Downs.....	20	24
Rushing.....	13	7
Passing.....	5	15
Penalty.....	2	2
Rushing.....	330	78
Passing.....	75	302
Total Net Yards.....	405	380
Average Gain Per Play.....	6.9	4.9
Fumbles-Lost.....	1-1	0-0
Penalties-Yards.....	5-50	4-24
Punts-Averages.....	5-44.6	5-37.8
Kickoff Returns.....	40	96
3rd Down Conversions.....	1-9	4-13

Individual Statistics

Rushing: ND- Brooks 19-322-3, Bettis 18-89-1, Becton 3-17, Mirer 5-(-3) SC- McFadden 9-45, Strother 12-38-1, Conway 1-6, Mooney 2-5, Bender 3-3, Johnson 10-(-19)

Passing: ND- Mirer 14-5-75-0-1 SC- Johnson 41-27-302-1-1

Receiving: ND- Jarrell 2-29, Smith 1-29, Bettis 1-11, Griggs 1-6 SC- Morton 9-91, Conway 7-84, Strother 4-36, Hannah 3-57, Crayton 2-24, Mooney 1-6, Jackson 1-4