

Notre Dame may be relevant again, but Alabama is still No. 1

Written by Jerry Byrd
Thursday, 08 November 2012 16:04 -

Brent Musburger summed it up after Notre Dame beat Oklahoma 30-13 last week.

“Folks,” he said, “let me say this loud and clear. Notre Dame is relevant again.”

It may be a bit early to stir up memories of George Gipp and the Four Horsemen, but the Fighting Irish were more impressive against OU than Notre Dame teams have been in several years.

Last week, Notre Dame trailed Pittsburgh 20-6 in the fourth quarter before rallying for a 29-26 triple overtime victory. Notre Dame, now 9-0, is off to its best start since 1993.

This may be the year when the Irish wake up the echoes, but they will have to beat somebody better than Oklahoma to convince me they're serious contenders for the national championship.

Saturday, the Irish needed a late 99-yard touchdown drive to tie Pittsburgh 20-20 in the last two minutes, and scored a touchdown in the third overtime for the 29-26 victory. Notre Dame has a huge defensive line and a great linebacker in Hawaiian Manti Te'o, and the front seven on defense is probably as good as anybody in the country. But that has been the case several times in recent years.

The only opponent remaining on their schedule that has a realistic chance to beat Notre Dame is the regular-season finale with Southern California at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The Irish offense is built around redshirt freshman quarterback Everett Golson, who played well at Oklahoma but doesn't remind many people of Johnny Lujack.

But the team to beat this year, as usual, is still the No. 1-ranked Alabama Crimson Tide, who rallied to defeat LSU 21-17 in a thriller last Saturday at Tiger Stadium.

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Nick Saban and Les Miles are both outstanding coaches, but in recent years Saban has been able to recruit better players than LSU or any other collegiate football program – and the team with better players usually wins, at any level.

Paul “Bear” Bryant was a tough act for any Alabama coach to follow, but I doubt that any of his national championship teams had as much talent as Saban has attracted in recent years.

When Paul Dietzel’s LSU Tigers won the national championship in 1958, the Chinese Bandits defensive unit attracted a lot of attention. But the LSU offense was built around Billy Cannon, the only Heisman Trophy winner in LSU history.

The Tigers don’t have a Cannon in their lineup this year — or anybody that is close to his amazing combination of power and speed. When he was at Istrouma High in Baton Rouge, Cannon set state records in both the 100-yard dash and the shot put.

Most of the starters on Dietzel’s 1958 team came from Baton Rouge high schools. But homegrown talent isn’t likely to produce a national championship now.

Fred Miller, an All-State tackle for the 1957 Homer High “Iron Men,” was a freshman at LSU in 1958. I doubt that he got much playing time that season, but he later became an All-American tackle for the Tigers, and went on to an outstanding National Football League career with the Baltimore Colts that included a 1971 Super Bowl victory over the Dallas Cowboys in the Cowboys’ first appearance in the Super Bowl.

Dietzel divided his 1958 LSU team into three units. The White team was the starters on both offense and defense. The Gold team (or “Go” team according to a few writers who didn’t understand Dietzel’s pronunciation of “Gold”) was the No. 2 offensive unit and the Chinese Bandits were the No. 2 defensive unit, although the Bandits sometimes had to run a few offensive plays because of weird substitution rules in effect at that time.

Jerry Byrd is the former sports editor of the Bossier Press-Tribune and an award-winning columnist. Check out a few hundred of his columns on www.jerrybyrd.com. You can contact him by E-mail at jbsportswriter@comcast.net

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