

Clements and Talented Irish Backfield Clinch Title With Sugar Bowl Win Over No. 1 Tide

Every college football season seems to have its own game of the century, but the 1973 matchup between Notre Dame and Alabama was special. It came in the Sugar Bowl, and it was to be a dream game.

Two undefeated, highly-ranked teams with long and storied gridiron traditions were set to battle for the national championship.

The prognosticators' predictions rang true as the Fighting Irish emerged 24-23 victors over the Crimson Tide of Alabama in a thriller that saw the lead change hands six times.

Bob Thomas, who had missed two earlier attempts in the game, kicked a 19-yard field goal with 4:26 remaining to give the Irish and coach Ara Parseghian the one-point triumph over top-rated Alabama. The win clinched Notre Dame's sixth wire-service national championship and ninth overall as the Irish finished the season with a perfect 11-0 record.

The balanced Irish attack was keyed by four backs who gained over 300 yards apiece: fullback Wayne Bullock (752), halfback Art Best (700), halfback Eric Penick (586) and quarterback Tom Clements (360). It was one of the fastest backfields Notre Dame had ever assembled, as Penick had 9.5 speed in the 100-yard dash, while Best checked in at 9.7.

The Irish were ranked in the eighth spot with wins over Rice and Army, setting the stage for what everyone considered to be Notre Dame's first real test of the year, a home battle with sixth-ranked USC.

The Trojans came to town riding a 23-game unbeaten streak, and Notre Dame was full of memories of the previous season's clash, which saw running back Anthony Davis romp for six touchdowns in a 45-23 Trojan win.

Squib kicks were the solution to the problem of Davis returning kicks, and a fired up defense held him to just 55 yards on 19 carries. Quite simply, the day belonged to Notre Dame, as Penick ran for 118 yards, 50 more than the entire USC squad. The Irish pulled off a 23-14 win and jumped to fifth in the polls.

Notre Dame cruised through the remainder of the schedule. Navy was an easy victim, 44-7, and 20th-ranked Pittsburgh played the docile host to the Irish and fell 31-10. The Irish finished off Parseghian's first perfect regular season with a 48-15 win over Air Force and a 44-0 whitewashing of Miami at the Orange Bowl.

The stage was set for the contest between number-one Alabama and third-ranked Notre Dame that seemed to deserve every phrase of its high-powered buildup. The Irish opened the contest with a superb defensive effort that held the Tide without a yard in the first period as Notre Dame took a 6-0 lead. Alabama's thoroughbred backs made it out of the starting gate in the second period, however. They produced three long drives that resulted in a pair of touchdowns, the first of which put the Tide up 7-6.

Early in the fourth quarter, the game took a wild turn with three turnovers in 90 seconds. Alabama took charge and put in its own version of the razzle-dazzle.

With the ball on the Notre Dame 25, quarterback Richard Todd handed off to halfback Mike Strock, then raced to the sidelines where he took a return pass from Strock and went in for the score.

But Alabama missed the conversion try and the Tide had only a slim two-point lead.

Notre Dame then marched 79 yards in 11 plays. Strong runs by Hunter, Penick and Clements and a 30-yard pass from Clements to Dave Casper carried the drive to the Alabama 15-yard line. The Irish got to the three, but couldn't get any closer before the call went to Thomas. His kick was true, the game belonged to the Irish, and so did the national championship.

— Willie Shearer

1973 — 11-0-0

► "It was the kind of game you could sink your teeth into."

— Bear Bryant on the 'Bama-Notre Dame Sugar Bowl

► "I really thought it was going to be intercepted."

— Irish quarterback Tom Clements on his 38-yard pass out of the end zone to help Irish run out the clock

► "This was not only a great game for Notre Dame, it was a great game for college football."

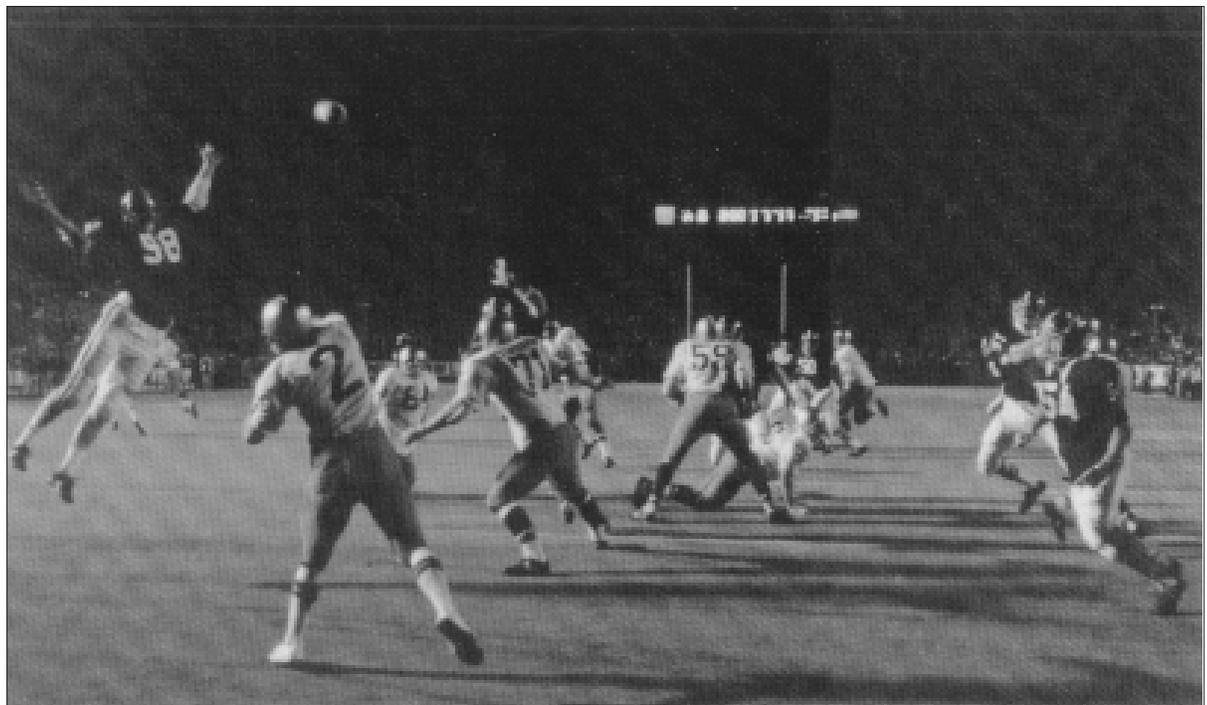
— Ara Parseghian after the Alabama game

► "I just remember breaking free. I can't remember anything else."

— Eric Penick commenting on his 85-yard touchdown that gave Notre Dame its first victory over USC since 1966

► "How does it feel? It feels like the end of four long waiting years. It feels like the top of the world. And only one thing could possibly beat this — 11-0."

— Brad Doherty after the Miami win



Quarterback Tom Clements throws out of the end zone to Robin Weber to seal a victory over Alabama in the Sugar Bowl.