

Hold-Your-Breath Season Ends Perfectly With National Title In Fiesta Bowl

It wasn't long after Lou Holtz's arrival as head football coach at Notre Dame that he opined that the Irish couldn't expect to be a great team until they were great on defense.

That prophesy came true for Holtz and the Irish in 1988 - ironically, just a year after Notre Dame's Tim Brown had captured the Heisman Trophy. But with his departure came a revitalization of the defense, led by senior defensive end Frank Stams, junior linebacker Michael Stonebreaker, sophomore defensive tackle Chris Zorich and senior linebacker Wes Pritchett, all of whom merited some sort of All-America honors. They were supported by cornerback Todd Lyght, linebacker Ned Bolcar and defensive tackle Jeff Alm, who went on to earn that same All-America acclaim a year later.

The end result was a consensus national championship for the Irish in 1988, thanks to a perfect 12-0 campaign. The title came in Holtz's third season as Irish head coach, much as Frank Leahy, Ara Parseghian and Dan Devine before him had claimed national crowns in their respective third seasons as Irish head coach. It came thanks to riveting regular-season triumphs over Michigan, Miami and USC — and it ultimately featured wins over teams ranked first, second and third in the polls when they faced Notre Dame.

When the 13th-ranked Irish debuted against ninth-rated Michigan in Notre Dame Stadium, Holtz knew his youthful offense would be tested, particularly with a green group of receivers featuring Ricky Watters at flanker in a switch from tailback, plus rookies Derek Brown and Raghib Ismail. His concern was borne out when Notre Dame did not score a touchdown from scrimmage.

But Watters returned a Michigan punt 81 yards for a touchdown, and unheralded walk-on kicker Reggie Ho knocked through four field goals, twice bringing the Irish from behind including the game winner with 1:13 remaining. A field goal miss from 48 yards as time expired by the Wolverines earned Notre Dame a 19-17 opening victory.

Four wins later, the fourth-rated Irish welcomed top-ranked Miami and its 36-game regular-season unbeaten streak to Notre Dame Stadium. The streak bit the dust that

day by a 31-30 count, as Notre Dame forced seven Hurricane turnovers and made use of a bevy of heroes, lastly Pat Terrell, who knocked down Miami quarterback Steve Walsh's two-point conversion pass with 45 seconds remaining.

Terrell previously ran an interception back 60 yards for a score, Stams forced two Walsh fumbles, recovered another and tipped the pass Terrell intercepted — and quarterback Tony Rice threw for a career-high 195 yards. The Irish took the lead for good midway through the third period after thwarting a fake punt by Miami and then held on down the stretch. Though Walsh threw for 424 yards, the stingy Irish front line limited the 'Canes to 57 rushing yards.

The season finale found the 10-0 and top-ranked Irish underdogs against second-rated and also unbeaten USC in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Again, it was defense that dominated for Notre Dame in a 27-10 victory. Stams had nine tackles, two and a half sacks, fumble recovery and made life miserable for Trojan standout Rodney Peete. Cornerback Stan Smagala ran an interception back 64 yards for a 20-7 halftime lead after Rice had skirted left end for 65 yards for the first points of the game.

The Irish prevailed despite going 29 minutes in the second and third periods combined without a first down — and in spite of the fact leading rusher Tony Brooks and leading receiver Watters, both sophomores,



Frank Stams

were suspended the day before the game.

Notre Dame met third-ranked and unbeaten West Virginia in the Fiesta Bowl in hopes of claiming the championship — and the Irish rode early leads of 16-0 and 23-3 to an eventual 34-21 victory banking on another staunch defensive effort.

Rice ran for 75 yards and completed seven throws for 213 more yards. Meanwhile, Stams had two sacks on his way to the defensive MVP award, and the Irish dominated a heralded Mountaineer offensive line that had been one of the main reasons West Virginia had never trailed in a game all season. The more physical Notre Dame team knocked quarterback Major Harris out of the contest early due to a bruised shoulder and limited the potent Mountaineer ground game to 108 yards.

Holtz's final pronouncement: "This team will go down as a great football team because nobody proved otherwise."



Tony Rice

1988 — 12-0-0

► "If you look at it on paper, there is no justification for Notre Dame to be rated in the top 20."

— **Irish head coach Lou Holtz in the preseason**

► "If we are number one, I don't care who is number two."

— **Irish coach Lou Holtz**

► "I was so tired, I was wondering if we'd ever get off the field."

— **Defensive End Frank Stams after the USC game**

► "I think this team is underrated even if we are No. 1. I've read articles that people have sent to me all year saying we were lucky against this team or that. Our football team is prettier than I am, but that's about it. We don't play pretty all the time, but we sure play together as a team."

— **Irish coach Lou Holtz**

► "The poll is great and it creates a tremendous amount of interest. But I only pay attention to the last one. It's amazing. Here we are number one and I'm scared to death of a team that hasn't won a game."

— **Irish coach Lou Holtz**

► "I'm exactly the same today as when I woke up yesterday. The players are the same. We're not bigger. We're not stronger. We're not faster. We're not going to change our uniforms. If you start worrying about No. 1 and try to defend it, the pressure would be tremendous."

— **Irish coach Lou Holtz**

► "Winning the national championship was never in my thoughts. I have been asked the question did I ever dream about winning the national championship.

"Yeah, you dream about it, but I never really thought that it would happen to me. I never thought I would coach a national championship team. It still hasn't sunk in on me yet."

— **Irish coach Lou Holtz**

► "We're going on a mission this year, a couple of weeks of sacrifice for something that we're going to be able to enjoy and celebrate the rest of our lives. That's a small price to pay."

— **Senior tailback Mark Green**