

Irish Confront The Best

Since 1977, the NCAA has produced a list of toughest schedules based on the record of Division I-A opponents when not playing the team in question (bowl games are not included). In those 28 years, Notre Dame schedule five times (in 1978, 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1995) has been rated one of the most difficult in the country, three times has finished third (1986, 1999 and 2003) and twice fourth (1979 and 1990).

Notre Dame has ranked among the elite teams in college football in recent years, compiling a combined 160-67-2 (.703) over the last 18 seasons and playing in New Year's Day bowl games in 13 of the last 18 years.

That glossy record becomes even more noteworthy considering no team in the country has faced a more difficult schedule and achieved more victories over quality opponents than the Irish during that period.

In 2005, the Irish defeated three ranked opponents during the regular season with all of those victories coming on the road (at #23 Pittsburgh, at #3 Michigan and at #22 Purdue). Charlie Weis's debut season at Notre Dame featured five contests against ranked opponents, including a last-second loss to then-#1 USC in Notre Dame Stadium.

During the 2002 season, Notre Dame defeated four ranked teams in the regular season, tying them with Miami for most wins against ranked opponents during the regular season. Willingham's final team in 2004 faced four ranked opponents, defeating two (#8 Michigan, #9 Tennessee).

During Bob Davie's five seasons, Notre Dame faced 21 ranked opponents. The 2000 schedule saw the Irish open the campaign against four ranked opponents, marking only the second time in college football history that has happened (Central Florida was the other team in 1999). The '99 schedule featured six games versus ranked opponents and was rated the third toughest. In Davie's first season, the Irish also played six ranked foes and had a schedule that was determined to be the 15th toughest nationally.

During Lou Holtz's 11 seasons, Notre Dame played 56 games against teams appearing in the Associated Press top 25 poll — with the Irish achieving a 34-20-2 (.625) record, including a 21-15-1 mark (.581) against top 10 teams.

Thrice during the Holtz era — in 1987, 1989 and 1995 — the NCAA rated Notre Dame's schedule the most challenging. In fact, over the combined five years between 1986-90, Notre Dame also rated tops on the difficulty list, according to the NCAA statistics.

The Irish peaked in that category in both 1989 and 1990 (when Notre Dame was finishing 12-1 and 9-3, respectively) when in each of those seasons they faced seven ranked opponents, the most ever confronted in a season by a Notre Dame squad.

In '89, Notre Dame finished the year with three straight road games against ranked foes, knocking off top-ranked and unbeaten Colorado in the Orange Bowl. In '90, the Irish closed the year playing four straight ranked teams (three on the road), including wins at Tennessee and at USC.

The Irish have faced four or more ranked opponents in 16 of the last 19 seasons and in 21 of the last 25 years.

In 1990, Notre Dame faced seven teams that held rankings at the time of the game and in 1989, the Irish again met a total of seven teams that were ranked at the time of the contest and faced eight teams that appeared in bowl games. In 1988, Notre Dame defeated teams ranked #1 (Miami), #2 (USC) and #3 (West Virginia) at the time of the games. That marked the best effort in that category since Notre Dame's national champi-

Toughest Schedule Rankings

Here are the year-by-year top two teams in the toughest-schedule ratings, plus where the Irish finished (regular season only):

Year	Team (Record)	Opponents' Record				Year	Team (Record)	Opponents' Record			
		W	L	T	Pct.			W	L	T	Pct.
1977	1. Miami (Fla.) (3-8)	66	42	2	.609	1993	1. LSU (5-6)	67	38	5	.632
	2. Penn St. (10-1)	61	39	2	.608		2. Purdue (1-10)	66	38	2	.631
	13. Notre Dame (10-1)	59	44	4	.570		50. Notre Dame (10-1)	56	54	0	.509
1978	1. Notre Dame (8-3)	77	31	2	.709	1994	1. Michigan (7-4)	67	38	6	.631
	2. USC (11-1)	79	40	1	.663		2. Oklahoma (6-5)	66	39	4	.614
1979	1. UCLA (5-6)	71	37	2	.655	1995	18. Notre Dame (6-4-1)	59	46	6	.559
	2. So. Carolina (8-3)	69	38	2	.642		1. Notre Dame (9-2)	67	37	5	.637
	4. Notre Dame (7-4)	68	38	2	.639		2. Illinois (5-5-1)	69	40	2	.630
1980	1. Florida St. (10-1)	70	34	0	.673	1996	1. Florida (12-1)	70	41	0	.631
	2. Miami (Fla.) (8-3)	64	33	1	.658		2. UCLA (5-6)	66	41	0	.617
1981	14. Notre Dame (9-1-1)	62	45	2	.578	1997	54. Notre Dame (8-3)	58	53	0	.523
	1. Penn St. (9-2)	71	33	2	.679		1. Colorado (5-6)	74	36	0	.673
	2. Temple (5-5)	71	33	2	.669		2. Auburn (10-3)	70	38	0	.648
1982	28. Notre Dame (5-6)	59	48	2	.550	1998	15. Notre Dame (7-6)	69	48	0	.590
	1. Penn St. (10-1)	63	34	2	.646		1. Auburn (3-8)	74	34	0	.685
	2. Kentucky (0-10-1)	63	34	5	.642		2. Missouri (7-4)	65	36	0	.647
1983	13. Notre Dame (6-4-1)	62	46	1	.573	1999	82. Notre Dame (9-3)	52	61	0	.460
	1. Auburn (10-1)	70	31	3	.688		1. Alabama (10-3)	71	35	0	.670
	2. UCLA (6-4-1)	68	37	5	.641		2. Auburn (5-6)	61	35	0	.635
1984	50. Notre Dame (6-5)	50	49	5	.505	2000	3. Notre Dame (5-7)	73	46	0	.613
	1. Penn State (6-5)	58	36	3	.613		1. Florida (10-3)	79	42	0	.652
	2. Georgia (7-4)	60	39	4	.602		2. Florida State (11-2)	78	44	0	.639
1985	13. Notre Dame (7-4)	59	44	3	.570	2001	34. Notre Dame (9-3)	61	50	0	.550
	1. Notre Dame (5-6)	72	29	3	.707		1. California (1-10)	71	38	0	.651
	2. Alabama (8-2-1)	65	32	5	.662		2. Mississippi State (3-7)	69	37	0	.651
1986	50. Notre Dame (6-5)	50	49	5	.505	2002	22. Notre Dame (5-6)	64	45	0	.587
	1. Florida (6-5)	64	29	3	.682		1. USC (11-2)	107	58	0	.648
	2. LSU (9-2)	67	36	2	.648		2. Iowa State (7-7)	107	62	0	.633
1987	3. Notre Dame (5-6)	68	39	1	.634	2003	28. Notre Dame (10-3)	94	72	0	.566
	1. Notre Dame (8-3)	71	34	2	.671		1. Alabama (4-9)	98	50	0	.662
	2. Florida State (10-1)	60	29	4	.667		2. Florida (8-5)	89	48	0	.650
1988	1. Virginia Tech (3-8)	57	31	0	.648	2004	3. Notre Dame (5-7)	89	49	0	.645
	2. Arizona (7-4)	70	37	3	.650		1. Texas A&M (7-5)	86	42	0	.671
	25. Notre Dame (11-0)	56	45	4	.552		2. North Carolina (6-6)	74	39	0	.654
1989	1. Notre Dame (11-1)	74	38	4	.655	2005	7. Notre Dame (6-6)	78	49	0	.614
	2. LSU (4-7-0)	67	41	1	.619		1. Oklahoma (8-4)	84	38	0	.689
1990	1. Colorado (10-1-1)	72	42	3	.628	2005	2. Stanford (5-6)	66	37	0	.641
	2. Stanford (5-6)	67	39	4	.627		52. Notre Dame (9-3)	66	57	0	.537
	4. Notre Dame (9-2)	63	38	5	.618						
1991	1. South Carolina (3-6-2)	57	31	2	.644						
	2. Florida (10-1)	66	37	1	.639						
	14. Notre Dame (8-3)	68	49	2	.580						
1992	1. USC (6-4-1)	68	38	4	.636						
	2. Stanford (9-3-0)	73	43	4	.625						
	14. Notre Dame (9-1-1)	61	45	4	.573						

onship team defeated the teams that finished #2 (Iowa Pre-Flight), #3 (Michigan) and #4 (Navy) in the final AP poll.

In 1987, Notre Dame played eight teams in the top 20 either at the time the game was played or in the final regular-season poll. In 1986, Notre Dame played four teams ranked in the top 10 time of the game, which marked the first time an Irish team met four top 10 teams in a season since 1978.

Since the weekly AP rankings began in 1936, the 1989 and 1990 campaigns marked the first in which the Irish played seven ranked opponents during the season. Notre Dame has had 10 seasons in which it played six ranked opponents (ranked at the time of the game) — in 1952 (Notre Dame finished 7-2-

1 against that schedule), 1953 (9-0-1), 1958 (6-4), 1978 (9-3), 1980 (9-2-1), 1991 (10-3), 1992 (10-1-1), 1997 (7-6), 1999 (5-7) and 2002 (10-3).