

## **Explaining the Love Affair with Notre Dame Football**

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By Joe Flaherty

One hundred twenty-five years of playing the game, 859 wins, 13 national championships, seven Heisman Trophy winners.

The career résumé of Notre Dame's football program looms larger than any other college program in the nation. Even though it has been 25 years since they won their last national title, the Fighting Irish still maintain an enormous worldwide fan base because of their past success. People back winners, and Notre Dame has done a heck of a lot of winning over the years.

This season, Notre Dame fans have a lot to be excited about.

After their controversial overtime victory over the 17<sup>th</sup>-ranked Stanford Cardinal this past weekend, the Fighting Irish have unexpectedly found themselves on a six-game winning streak to start the season. Coach Brian Kelly has led this impressive turnaround after back-to-back 8-5 seasons.

This season's edition of the Fighting Irish is reaching rarefied air: they are currently ranked No. 5 in the nation, which is the highest ranking they've held this late in a season since they finished No. 2 in 1993.

This Notre Dame resurgence is a good thing for college football. More fans get involved because Notre Dame has such a huge following, and it makes for tons of story lines linking this team to great Irish teams of the past.

"This Notre Dame team is the best since..." or "They haven't won this many games since..." Hearing stories like that not only increases an Irish fan's confidence in the current team, it makes him reflect and take pride in the rich heritage he has to look back on.

But it's not only their winning ways, past and present, that has put the Irish on a pedestal. It goes deeper than that, especially here in Chicago.

Notre Dame is in South Bend, Ind., so a lot of Chicagoans adopt the Irish as their favorite team because of their proximity to Chicago. And Notre Dame usually puts a better product on the field than most Illinois schools. It's easier to root for a good team and forget about the bad ones in your back yard.

Notre Dame is also the only team in the nation that has its own network TV contract. NBC has held exclusive rights to Irish home games since 1991, and the deal extends through the 2015 season. Not only does that contract ensure significant national exposure every weekend, it puts a reported \$15 million in Notre Dame's coffers each season.

The national exposure and monetary gain it gets from its partnership with NBC is a huge factor in Notre Dame's popularity.

Another facet of the nation's love affair with the Fighting Irish is their independent status in football. Notre Dame is one of four football-playing schools that do not belong to a conference. The Irish don't need the financial security that comes with a conference affiliation because they have that enormous TV revenue.

Being an independent also gives Notre Dame scheduling flexibility; free of conference obligations, the Irish are able to play some of their oldest rivals every season, such as USC, Michigan, Purdue and Boston College. Rivalry games not only bring in money and viewers, they're usually among the most exciting games of the season.

Notre Dame is also the only independent program to be part of the Bowl Championship Series coalition, which guarantees a hefty payout if the Irish qualify for a BCS game.

Its independent status is one of the qualities that make Notre Dame unique and polarizing. There are heated debates every off-season as to whether Notre Dame should finally join a conference. Even when they're not playing, there's always a reason to talk about the Fighting Irish.

And no matter how the football team performs, Notre Dame is revered worldwide for its religious heritage and academic prestige. As a Roman Catholic institution, it attracts many fans who share its religious affiliation.

Academically, Notre Dame holds its students to a high standard. It's a hard school to get into, and athletes don't get any breaks during the admission process or in the classroom. Being able to manage the demands of both high-level football and a rigorous academic curriculum speaks to the character of Notre Dame's football players. They're a select few who are required to be at their physical, mental, and moral peaks and exhibit excellence in all those areas.

I'm somewhat neutral on the subject of Notre Dame football, but I find it much more exciting when the Irish are competitive. When they succeed, everything "feels right" in the college football world. They sell out their stadium regardless of their record, and I can only imagine how incredible the experience must be to be inside Notre Dame Stadium watching a meaningful game among 80,000 wild fans.

I hope the Fighting Irish continue their run deep into the bowl season in 2013. It will make college football more captivating for the millions of Notre Dame fans across the nation, and the game itself will benefit from the attention.