

Play Like a Champion

Contributed by Greg Tuel, Class Of '87
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They played the best team in the ACC, and both of the teams who played for the PAC-12 Championship.

We can consider them unofficial champions of the American Athletic Conference after they beat two of the three best teams from the Group of Five. They defeated the best of the military academies and in doing so probably the best option team in the country.

They handled a Big 12 blue blood, the only school to lay an "L" on both Oklahoma and Baylor this season. Now, they are poised to play the defending National Champion and the school many believe to be the second, or even first, best team in the BIG.

They squared up against the number one ranked defense in the country as well as the number seventh, and are about to play the number tenth.

Their opponents were from nine different states spread throughout the country, ten as of New Year's Day. One of the games was on the diamond at Fenway Park in Boston, another at Clemson's "Death Valley", and still another in Palo Alto, California.

They are the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame, and they are the most interesting college football team in the world. They are what they are because they have the most interesting schedule in the country and they have that schedule because they are independent.

Their schedule cuts across almost every major conference in almost every major market in every climate that this transcontinental country of ours offers.

If there were any soft spots or less than interesting games, they were more than likely tied to the conference obligations the Irish have assumed. The Wake Forest game gives us a taste of what not being able to customize their schedule would feel like, but on a more regular basis.

College football needs Notre Dame. By comparing their game against Clemson to their game against Stanford to their game against Texas to their upcoming game against Ohio State, one can get a feel for the relative strengths and weaknesses of those major conferences. Playing a strong Notre Dame team keeps the conferences honest in a day and age when a team like Alabama loads up on out of conference teams like Middle Tennessee, Charleston Southern, and Louisiana Monroe.

During Brady Hoke's Sirius radio broadcast on Wednesday afternoon, USC's new head coach, Clay Helton called in to talk about the exciting schedule the Trojans had next year and he specifically mentioned Notre Dame as one of the big reasons that their schedule was so exciting. Later on, after a Buckeye fan called to talk about the early start for the Fiesta Bowl, Hoke said that when you play Notre Dame, regardless of whether you play the Irish at 11:00 am or 3:00 am, you are awake and ready to play.

The PAC 12 press release about its competitive 2016 schedule included this gem.

The Pac-12 Conference announced today its 2016 football schedule that pairs a competitive nine-game Conference schedule with a non-conference slate that includes four contests against teams currently ranked in the CFP Top 15 – No. 2 Alabama, No. 8 Notre Dame (2), and No. 14 Michigan. In all, more than a third of the Pac-12's non-conference schedule pits the league against a Power 5 conference opponent, as well as independents Notre Dame and BYU.

That was the first paragraph, and it was more Irish than a showing of Rudy on St. Patrick's Day.

Just in case you still feel bad for Notre Dame because they do not have a conference playoff or receive a share of a conference payout, consider that the next two year's schedules includes Texas, Michigan State, Stanford, Miami, Duke, Virginia Tech, Georgia, North Carolina and USC. Perhaps you have heard of some of those teams.

Interested in any of the new or up and coming coaches in the news over the last two weeks: Kirby Smart, Ken Niumatalolo, Clay Helton, Charlie Strong, Brian Polian, or Mark Richt? Just watch the Irish games over the next couple years and you will see exactly how they work out.

Mendenhall at Virginia? Besides the fact that the Irish had a hand in heating up the former coach's seat, the Cavaliers currently only have two games scheduled for 2019, Notre Dame and BYU.

Whatever your thoughts about Notre Dame's chances of reaching the Championship tournament without joining a conference, you cannot deny the fact that the Irish, because they are independent with a tailor made schedule, are able to Play Like a Champion throughout the season. They are the most interesting team in college football.