

Leahy Returns From Service to Lead Irish To First of Four Consecutive Undefeated Seasons

World War II had finally ended and the United States was ready to think about something more pleasant than international conflict for a change — like Notre Dame football. The year was 1946, the coach was hard-driving Frank Leahy and it was the beginning of a dynasty for Notre Dame football.

In 1943, Leahy had guided the Fighting Irish to their first wire-service national championship, and fourth overall, behind Heisman Trophy winner Angelo Bertelli and future Heisman winner John Lujack. World War II took many football players from college, including Bertelli in the middle of his Heisman campaign in '43, but many returned to the gridiron after the war ended, including Lujack, who would go on to win the Heisman in 1947.

For the players who returned to Notre Dame in '46, losing a college football game was not to be one of their post-war experiences. From 1946 to 1949, Notre Dame went 36-0-2 and won three national championships in one of the most successful four-year periods in college football history.

The 1946 season started it all. Halfback Terry Brennan and linemen Bill Walsh, Bill Fischer, and John Mastrangelo were among the group of returnees from the previous season. There were several new faces who came to Notre Dame after Navy hitches had interrupted their respective careers at Holy Cross and Texas A&M. There were also players for whom the war had postponed college football, like end Jim Martin and running back Emil (Red) Sitko, and there were freshmen like Leon Hart. Returning to Notre Dame along with Lujack were veterans such as tackle Zygmunt (Ziggy) Czarobski, end Jack Zilly, and fullback Jim Mello. Even Leahy was coming back to Notre Dame after a couple years in the service.

Leahy was a perfectionist and strict disciplinarian, and enduring his practices wasn't much more fun than being a soldier. But it sure produced results. The Irish usually had two separate platoons ready for each game, and often the first string didn't play much more than half the game. On the football field, the Irish had strength in numbers, and Leahy fought a war of attrition.

The season began with the Irish routing their first five opponents — Illinois, which went on to win the Western (now Big Ten) conference championship, Pittsburgh, Purdue, Iowa, and Navy before facing top-ranked Army. Coached by the great Earl (Red) Blaik and featuring Doc Blanchard and Glenn Davis in the backfield, Army had won two straight national championships and 25 straight games, including two defeats of Notre Dame in the previous two seasons by a combined score of 107-0.

The showdown was set for November 9 in Yankee Stadium where 74,121 fans turned out to see a 0-0 tie. Notre Dame advanced to the Army four-yard line in the second quarter for the game's deepest scoring threat, but the Cadets held on downs. Blanchard broke into the clear once and appeared to be headed for a score, but an open-field tackle by Lujack saved the Irish from defeat.

Army retained its top ranking in the Associated Press poll after the game. But the Irish walloped their final three opponents by a combined score of 94-6 and were named national champions in the final poll of the season. When the smoke cleared, the Irish found themselves the nation's statistical leaders in total offense (441.3 yards per

game), rushing offense (340.1 yards per game), total defense (141.7 yards per game) and scoring defense (2.7 points per game) and had allowed only Illinois, Purdue, Iowa, and USC to score points against them. For the season, Notre Dame outscored its opponents 271 to 24 in nine games.

It was only the beginning.

— Willie Shearer



Irish star John Lujack (32) awaits the coin toss preceding one of Notre Dame's early-season clashes during the 1946 season.

1946 — 8-0-1

► "Prayers work better when the players are big."

— Frank Leahy on the cover of *Time* magazine Oct. 14, 1946

► "I have told our players that they can expect the same thing (losing a game) to happen to them at any time if they let down or get to believing they are the champions after playing only one game."

— Frank Leahy

► "Fifty-nine and forty-eight, this is the year we retaliate!"

— Impromptu battle cry fashioned by the squad for the 1944 and 1945 losses to Army

► "You know, we started to plan for the national championship when spring practice opened last April. I told the boys that I thought we could make it, but that it would take hard work and lots of it; long, tiresome hours of sweat and toil on the practice field. The players dug in right from the start and gave everything they had and were rewarded with the national championship."

— Frank Leahy

► "A team that won't be beat can't be beat. That's the story of the Army-Notre Dame scoreless battle in Yankee Stadium."

— Bill Corum, *New York Herald-American*

► "A new Notre Dame football comet soared over the gridiron of Memorial Stadium this afternoon and crushed Illinois' championship hopes into dying embers, 26-6. It is a comet which promises to grow in brilliance as the season progresses and eventually light up the gridiron picture with victories over Navy, Army, Northwestern and Southern California for an undisputed national title."

— Gene Kessler, *Chicago Times*