

Irish Exceed All Expectations With Third Title Under Leahy

November 15, 1945 ranks as one of the most important dates in Notre Dame football history. Check the record books, though, and you won't find one of the greatest games in Irish history played on that day.

November 15, 1945, was a Thursday, not a Saturday, and that was the day Lieutenant Frank Leahy was discharged from the Navy. He returned to Notre Dame campus, signed a 10-year contract, and began what was to be one of the most successful four-year runs in college football history.

The 1946 and 1947 seasons brought national championships to Notre Dame. The 9-0-1 1948 team was runner-up to Michigan. But a national championship in 1949 would allow Notre Dame to close the decade in magnificent style.

And that is exactly what happened. Notre Dame went 10-0 which made for a four-year mark of 36-0-2. End Leon Hart won the Heisman Trophy and Leahy had his fourth championship and the school's seventh.

Before the season, however, nobody expected a championship team to emerge from the South Bend campus. The Irish needed somebody to emerge as a leader and attention was focused on Leon Hart, already recognized as the finest end in the college game, along with Emil Sitko, Larry Coutre and co-captain Jim Martin. But most observers agreed that the Fighting Irish would need more than that.

Soon enough, they got it. In the sixth game of the season, against Michigan State on

November 5, quarterback Bob Williams stepped to the fore. He led the top-ranked Irish to a 34-21 victory over the 10th-ranked Spartans in a game at East Lansing that the press thought would knock Notre Dame from its lofty perch atop collegiate football.

Williams continued to shine in subsequent games. He was at his daring best the following week in a game versus North Carolina played at Yankee Stadium. Leahy had given Williams instructions that he was never to pass the football on the fourth down situation on their own 19-yard line with the score tied 6-6 in the second quarter. He couldn't help himself. Knowing that if he failed he'd have to head to the nearest exit to avoid Leahy, the self-assured Williams completed an 18-yard pass to Larry Coutre for an Irish first down. Notre Dame went on to a 42-6 win, and Williams soon became recognized as the nation's best quarterback.

The Irish eased through their final two home games, rolling over Iowa, 28-7, and 17th ranked Southern Cal, 32-0. All that remained was what was sure to be an easy win over Southern Methodist in Dallas. SMU would be without its top player, 1948

Heisman winner Doak Walker, and the nation had virtually conceded the national championship to Notre Dame.

Notre Dame jumped to an early lead before Mustang running back Kyle Rote came to life in the steady afternoon drizzle.

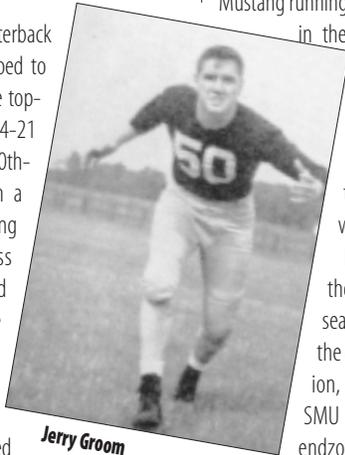
Running at will, he scored two quick touchdowns and thanks to a missed extra point by SMU, the score was tied at 20 with seven minutes to go.

Notre Dame's back was to the wall for the first time all season, and the offense rose to the occasion. In blitzkrieg fashion, the Irish simply pushed SMU straight back into its own endzone with 10 determined rushes that covered 54 yards and put Notre Dame up by a touchdown, 27-20.

The drive was so quick, however, that SMU still had time to score. But in the shadow of the Notre Dame goal post, when Rote tried to pass for the tying touchdown, Notre Dame's Jerry Groom made a game-saving interception.

It was the final play of the game and of a decade that saw Frank Leahy lead the Fighting Irish to three national championships in four years.

— Willie Shearer



Jerry Groom

1949 — 10-0-0

▶ "We'll have the worst team Notre Dame has ever had."

— Frank Leahy in April of 1949

▶ "Of course, I suppose I am always sort of a pessimist."

— Frank Leahy

▶ "It's the greatest college team I've ever seen."

— Red Grange

▶ "We shall always want Notre Dame men to play to win so long as there is a Notre Dame ... to win cleanly according to the rules ... because Notre Dame men are reared here on the campus in this spirit and because they exemplify this spirit all over the world, they are the envy of the nation."

— Rev. John J.avanaugh, C.S.C.

▶ "From the first ringing impact of knuckle upon nose ... Saturday's No. 1 spectacle was as one-sided as an election in Moscow."

— Walter Stewart, *Memphis Commercial Appeal* on the Tulane game

▶ "Make mistakes against the average team and you're in trouble. Make mistakes against Notre Dame and it's suicide ... even a perfect team couldn't have turned back this great Irish squad."

— Braven Dwyer, *Los Angeles Times*



Bob Lally and Jim Mutscheller stop SMU's Kyle Rote just short of the tying tally.