

Irish Win National Championship At Start of Notre Dame's Era of Ara

Coach Ara Parseghian, in his third season at Notre Dame, made a difficult decision at the start of the 1966 season, picking sophomore Terry Hanratty as his starting quarterback over classmate Coley O'Brien, yet the decision proved without a doubt to be the correct one. Hanratty and split end Jim Seymour, also a sophomore, turned out to be one of the best passing combinations Notre Dame fans have ever seen.

The two had begun working together during the previous winter, developing their timing, moves, and patterns so they would know each other's habits inside out when the 1966 season began. Seymour was a good bet to take over one of the end positions that was being vacated after the '65 season, but Hanratty had no such assurances of whether or not he would be the number-one quarterback.

Fortunately for Hanratty, Parseghian decided to balance an already steady running game, manned by Nick Eddy, Larry Conjar and Rocky Bleier, with the passing talent of Hanratty.

The decision bore fruit in the first game of the season, as Hanratty and Seymour hooked up 13 times for 276 yards — Notre Dame records for receptions and yards — and three touchdowns, which tied a school record. The Irish defeated Rose Bowl-bound Purdue that day, 26-14, in South Bend.

Notre Dame traveled to Northwestern for

the second game of the season and won, 35-7. The Irish defense gave up its last points for the next three games and showed the kind of stiffness that ensured Notre Dame would never be out of any contest. Notre Dame returned home for the next two games and defeated Army and North Carolina by a combined score of 67-0, setting the stage for a showdown with Oklahoma.

Notre Dame traveled to Norman for what was supposed to be anybody's ballgame. The game was billed as a matchup between the small, quick, strong Sooners and the big, slow Irish. But Oklahoma was out of its depth. Although the Irish lost Seymour to an ankle injury that would cost him two games, the Fighting Irish rolled to a 38-0 victory and their third straight shutout of the young season.

Notre Dame pounded its next three opponents—Navy, Pittsburgh, and Duke, giving up only one score, a touchdown to Navy. Meanwhile, the offense was hitting on all cylinders, racking up 31 points versus the Midshipmen, 40 against Pitt, and a whopping 64 against the Blue Devils.

The game of the century took place on November 19 when number-one ranked Notre Dame traveled to East Lansing, Mich., to play second-ranked Michigan State for all the marbles.

Notre Dame fell behind 10-0 in the second quarter, but O'Brien, who had been diag-



Coley O'Brien and Larry Conjar

nosed with diabetes only a few weeks earlier and was still adjusting, brought the Irish back to a tie in the second half. The Spartan offense was unable to net a single yard running the ball in the second half, and when Notre Dame intercepted a pass and returned it to the Spartan 18-yard line in the fourth quarter, it looked like Notre Dame's chance to win. But three plays and minus-six yards later left the Irish with a 41-yard field goal attempt, which sailed wide to the right.

Notre Dame had the ball again on its own 30 with 1:24 left in the game. But rather than gamble with passes deep in their own territory, the Irish attempted to run the ball out of danger. The game was a 10-10 tie.

The Irish held on to their top ranking and traveled to Los Angeles to play Rose Bowl-bound USC. The Irish tore the Trojans apart, 51-0, posting the team's sixth shutout in 10 games and ensuring another unanimous number-one selection for the national championship.

— Willie Shearer

1966 — 9-0-1

► "There's pressure in every coaching job, but winning makes it a lot easier to accept. Fortunately, we have been winning. But like one fan told me, we're with you Ara, win or tie. You notice he didn't say anything about losing."

— Ara Parseghian

► "Man, those cats hit and stick to you. That game was rough."

— Bubba Smith, Michigan State defensive end

► "Sure I do. Absolutely. I have no qualms about it, but ... there's not enough difference between No. 1 and No. 2 to say that whoever wins, it could be an upset."

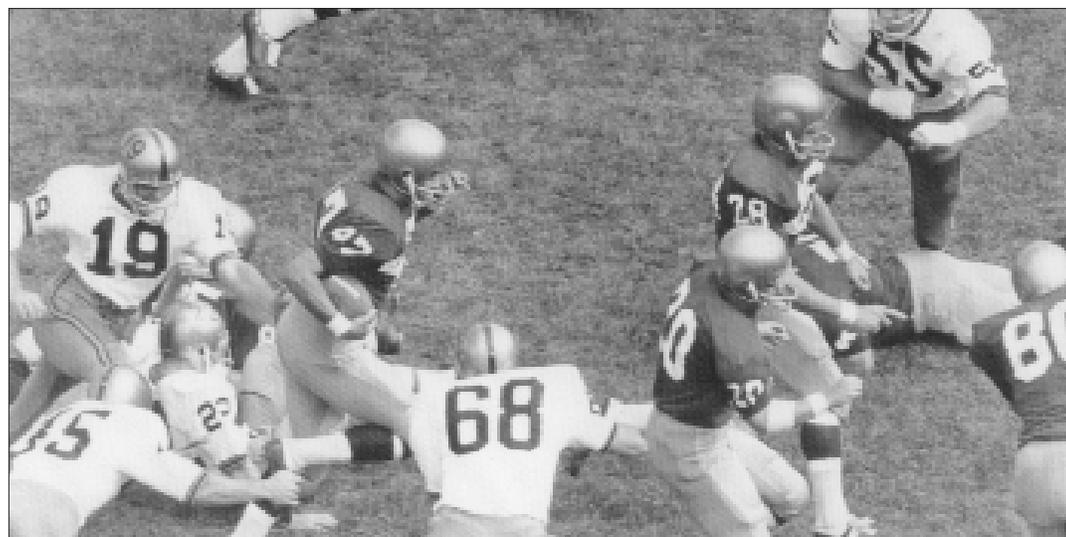
— Ara Parseghian responding to a question about entering the MSU-ND game as the number-one team

► "I knew there was going to be a winner and a loser, and I thought we were going to win. I never thought about a tie. The last thing Duffy Daugherty or I wanted was a tie."

— Ara Parseghian

► "The Super Bowl was not as big as that Michigan State-Notre Dame game."

— Captain Jim Lynch, who also played in Super Bowl IV, remarks on the MSU-ND game 25 years later



Rocky Bleier and Don Gmitter clear the path for Nick Eddy en route to a 26-14 Irish win over eighth-ranked Purdue.