

^AM-FBC--Florida St-Notre Dame ,1298(

^Wrapup Optional(

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SOUTH BEND, Ind. (AP) _ It wasn't the ghost of the Gipper or the legend of Rockne that beat Florida State. It was something much more down to earth _ Notre Dame's punishing ground game.

On the same field where Hornung ran and Montana threw, the second-ranked Fighting Irish added another chapter to their football lore by beating a team many considered unbeatable.

Notre Dame ran out to a 17-point lead and hung on to beat top-ranked Florida State 31-24 Saturday when Charlie Ward's desperation pass was knocked down on the goal line as time expired.

If the Irish (10-0) beat Boston College next week and win their bowl game, they will capture their ninth national championship.

"The mystique didn't hurt us; it helped them. ... Their kids played like they were possessed," Florida State coach Bobby Bowden said.

No one was more possessed than Lee Becton, who ran for 122 yards and one of four Notre Dame rushing touchdowns against a defense that had given up only two on the ground in nine previous games.

Jeff Burris ran for two more scores as the Irish won college football's Game of the Year and the 28th meeting between the top two teams in The Associated Press poll.

"I was afraid with all the hype the game might not live up to it," Notre Dame coach Lou Holtz said. "I don't know how it looked from the press box or the stands, but I don't want to see anything more exciting than that from the sideline."

For Bowden, it was another devastating big-game defeat. His teams have finished in the top four the past six seasons, but they've never finished No. 1 because of losses to intrastate rival Miami.

"Some people will sure say the big one got away," Bowden said. "After six years I found out what the big one is _ it's the one you lose."

"I'd just like to be Lou Holtz for one night _ tonight. We have no excuses. Notre Dame ran the football on us. They deserve to win. They did the things I was afraid they would."

Bowden could still get a shot at the title in a Fiesta Bowl rematch against Notre Dame, but that depends on whether the Seminoles (9-1) can finish No. 2 in the polls.

"I wish we could win the rest of our games and get a shot at them again, but they're pretty darn good," Bowden said.

If the Seminoles don't get another chance, Notre Dame may play No. 3 Miami in the Fiesta or No. 4 Nebraska in the Orange Bowl.

Notre Dame fans swarmed onto the field to celebrate as the Irish band played. One of the Irish cheerleaders ran across the field carrying a white flag that read "No. 1."

"There were so many times we had a chance to knock them out," Holtz said. "But they refused to be knocked out. They're a great football team."

After the Irish took a 24-7 lead on Kevin Pendergast's career-best 47-yard field goal in the third quarter, Florida State pulled to 24-17 on Ward's 6-yard touchdown pass to Warrick Dunn and a 24-yard field goal by Scott Bentley, who turned down a scholarship offer from Holtz.

Notre Dame built a cushion when Burris, a defensive back who is used as a runner in goal-line situations, scored on an 11-yard run with 6:53 remaining.

Florida State made it 31-24 on a tipped, 20-yard touchdown catch by Kez McCorvey with 2:26 left. Notre Dame recovered the Seminoles' onside kick, but Florida State got the ball back with 51 seconds remaining.

Operating with no timeouts, the Seminoles drove from their 37 to the Notre Dame 14 in the closing seconds. But Ward's final pass for Dunn was knocked down at the goal line by cornerback Shawn Wooden as time expired.

"I saw the ball coming to me, and I looked around to see if there were any receivers who could make the catch," Wooden said. "The guys were saying in the huddle to just stay focused on not let anybody get behind us."

Both teams entered the game with 16-game winning streaks, tied for longest in the nation. The Seminoles were favored by a touchdown because they had been more dominant, outscoring their opponents by an average of 44-6.

But after falling behind 7-0, the Irish scored 24 straight points, harassed Heisman Trophy favorite Ward and dominated the smaller Seminoles before a frenzied crowd of 59,075 at Notre Dame Stadium.

"We executed well and we maintained our poise," Burris said. "This is the way Notre Dame plays."

In pregame interviews, several Seminoles said they weren't worried about Notre Dame's history and tradition, and two referred to Knute Rockne as "Rock Knuteny." But they should be believers now.

"They come here into our stadium and shoot their mouth off," defensive back John Covington said. "I don't know if they really respected us. I think they're shocked."

Prior to the game, Bowden said his biggest worry was stopping Notre Dame's powerful rushing attack. His fear was justified.

The Irish ran for 165 yards and three touchdowns in the first half and finished with 239 yards on the ground - more than twice the average given up by Florida State. Notre Dame's huge offensive line, which outweighed Florida State's defensive front by 42 pounds per man, consistently opened up big holes for Becton and other Irish backs.

Notre Dame's defense kept Ward in check in the first half and shut down the Seminoles' "fast-break" offense, which was leading the nation in scoring with a 44-point average. Ward, sacked only seven times all season, was sacked twice for 22 yards in the first half and finished 31-for-50 for 297 yards and three touchdowns.

He also threw his first interception after 159 attempts without having one picked off.

"We missed some opportunities, but they played well," Ward said. "We played well in the second half. We have no reason to hang our heads."

After holding Notre Dame on its first possession, Florida State went on an 89-yard, 10-play scoring drive. Ward scrambled twice for 34 yards and completed all five of his passes, including a 12-yard TD toss to Kevin Knox, who made the catch at the 8 and spun past defender Greg Lane.

Notre Dame came back with its own long scoring to tie the game. Adrian Jarrell, a punter and flanker, capped the 80-yard drive by scoring on a 32-yard reverse - his first run this season and only third of his career. Jarrell took a pitch from quarterback Kevin McDougal, turned the right corner and followed a convoy of blockers to the end zone.

Florida State stopped McDougal for no gain when Notre Dame went for it on fourth-and-1 at the Seminoles' 30 early in the second quarter. But the Seminoles couldn't stop Notre Dame's powerful rushing attack, which was averaging 274 yards per game.

Becton's 26-yard TD run gave the Irish a 14-7 lead with 10:42 left in the first half. Becton, who tied a school record with his fifth straight 100-yard rushing game, broke through a huge hole on the left side and went all the way without being touched.

The Irish made it 21-7 on their next drive, marching 39 yards in four plays after Covington intercepted a pass by Ward, who had thrown only one interception all season. Notre Dame's score came on a 6-yard run by Burris.

"They didn't turn the ball over at all and we turned it over twice - that was probably the difference in the game," Bowden said. "Plus the wind affected us. When you're throwing the ball into it for two quarters - that's when we had our interceptions."

Notre Dame was playing in its ninth 1-2 game, but its first at home in 25 years. The Irish are now 5-2-2 in those games, including 1-2-1 as the No. 2 team.

AP-NY-02-22-98 1721EST<