

South Bend Breakdown



“A coach’s greatest asset is his sense of responsibility – the reliance placed on him by his players.” – Knute Rockne

Notre Dame used to be the iconic Catholic school, a place where academic, moral, and athletic standards were set and met at a level few parochial or private school students met. For generations of sports fans, Notre Dame had another more pedestrian following, mostly work-a-day Catholics who toiled in cityscapes like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Indeed, every Autumn across the land, Notre Dame football fans found a gin mill or living room on Saturday to gather and root for the “fighting” Irish. Those legions of Notre Dame blue collar boosters, this writer included, would never see the admissions office in South Bend or touchdown Jesus. Most Notre Dame fans were content to bask in the reflected light of the golden dome as “subway alumni.”

Notre Dame University (French for Our Lady) is an artifact of

French and Jesuit Catholic colonial imperialism, an irony lost on generations of Irish Catholics.

Today, the most famous names associated with the golden dome are Knute Rockne and Brian Kelly. Rockne matriculated at South Bend where he later taught chemistry and won three national championships as head football coach. With the 2021 season, Coach Kelly now has more football wins than Rockne, but still no national titles. Kelly doesn't win big games.



Rockne is a legend at Notre Dame. If you can believe the obituaries after his untimely death, he is also a national treasure of 20th Century sporting history. Millions mourned his passing. Rockne went out as a class act.

Comparisons between Rockne and Kelly are as inevitable as they are misguided. At the height of his career, Rockne never made more than \$75K, about \$1.2 million in today's dollars. Kelly just signed a contract for \$100 million to coach at Louisiana State University. After watching Kelly at the close of the 2021 season, you might believe college football remuneration and character are related only in inverse proportions.

Kelly is no Rockne; Kelly, LSU (60% graduation rate), and the South East Conference probably deserve each other. It's difficult to imagine, Knute Rockne having a hissy fit on the sidelines, giving some referee the finger, deceiving his players, or abandoning his team, deceptively, before a one-loss season was over.

Class and character appear to be the real losers in Kelly era football at South Bend.

Coaches across the country still study and quote Knute Rockne, because he had something to say about winners, profound words about the connective tissue between training, learning, and success. "The secret is to work less as individuals and more

as a team. As a coach I play, not my eleven best, but my best eleven.” Rockne understood that life and success were team sports.

Loyalty is a two-way street. Brian Kelly was a coach who never understood the value of leading by example – or supporting a team as he would have the team support him and the school.

Alas, one man’s fail is another man’s fortune.

Next year, Marcus [Freeman](#) and Tommy Reese will lead the blue and gold out of the tunnel at Notre Dame. Neither assistant chose to follow Kelly for better money at LSU. Without Kelly, maybe Freeman will put character back in the Notre Dame playbook, if for no other reason than to cover the mess left by Kelly.

Or as Knute Rockne might have put it: “If winning isn’t everything, why bother keeping score?” Kelly never won on or off the field when and where it mattered. Ever the perennial petulant, Coach Kelly underlined his “also ran” reputation with his recent premature withdrawal from South Bend.

Kelly’s manner of departure, literally and figuratively, took his reputation a lot farther south than Baton Rouge.

G. Murphy Donovan usually writes about the politics of national security.