

Michigan faces another test, in South Bend

Katie McVoy

The Observer (U. Notre Dame)

SOUTH BEND, Ind. (U-WIRE) — On Saturday, Michigan will enter Notre Dame Stadium, and not one of the players will have ever played on Notre Dame turf. The defense may not be so worried. Michigan's has been touted as one of the strongest defensive units in the country. But what about the Michigan offense?

The Wolverine offense will be facing a very solid Notre Dame defense, one that has shut down two teams' passing game and one team's running game. They will face off against a veteran defense. And they will face off amidst the yells and screams of a green student section and an alumni section that wouldn't put Michigan high on its list of favorite schools. So who can they depend on?

They will all tell you: John Navarre. "I have had confidence since he got here and took over for Drew Henson in 2000," senior tight end

Bennie Joppru said. "He is playing with more confidence now, and I think that is very dangerous."

Navarre, the senior quarterback from Cudahy, Wis., has started the last 16 games. After taking over for Henson in 2000, he started all 12 games last season, attempting a record 385 passes.

As he enters this Saturday's game, Navarre is just a little more than 500 yards short of reaching the 4,000-yard mark. He would be only the eighth quarterback in Michigan football history to reach that landmark. He is eighth on the Michigan career passing yards list and seventh on the career touchdown list with 32. If he continues to play well this season, he could move all the way to second on that list, finishing 2002 behind Elvis Grbac's 71 touchdowns record.

But those stats aren't as key this weekend when Michigan comes to Notre Dame as the fact that Navarre has game experience.

"I think, anytime, you would

rather have a guy that has some experience in (road games)," Michigan coach Lloyd Carr said. "In terms of this game, I think that the fact that John has played in a lot of big games on the road will help him, certainly."

Navarre started this season with a career-high 286 yards against Washington. But he hasn't faced a secondary like Notre Dame's. If he wants to add any more yards to that 3,460, he's going to have to protect the ball.

"(Protecting the ball) is a big premium every game — but especially against a team that is dangerous," Navarre said. "With the speed that they have and what they have done in the past couple of games, you have to be especially careful."

Navarre, who threw 13 interceptions last season, would hate to add one more to the two-interception total this season. Navarre took some heat last season, and losing the ball was a contributing factor. But his team is focused on helping him

keep the ball this season, even against a defense like Notre Dame's.

"I think (Navarre) has a lot more confidence," junior running back Chris Perry said. "Last year, he took a lot of heat that he didn't deserve. But the supporting cast didn't help him out too much either. Everyone is a lot stronger, and we know our assignments, which in turn makes everyone look a lot better."

But before he can focus on protecting the ball, he needs to just focus on the ball. The question buzzing around the weekly Michigan press conference on Monday was whether Navarre could focus on the game despite the distractions of playing in Notre Dame Stadium.

It goes without saying that the crowd will be hyped for this game. And, although Notre Dame Stadium doesn't rival stadiums like Nebraska's for its noise, the crowd will do its best to be a distraction.

"You cannot look at the big picture and all the surroundings and

noise," Navarre said. "You have to focus on what you are doing and what your offense is doing."

As Navarre looks to better his 58.3 career completion percentage amidst the hoots and hollers of Notre Dame stadium, Carr is worried about just one thing — communication.

"The question is, if you have guys that can hear — and sometimes you can't hear," the coach said. "There are stadiums out there where you can't hear, and you have to feel the guy next to you."

So is Navarre ready for this game? Is he preparing any differently?

"You have to ask John that question," senior offensive lineman Tony Pape said. "He prepares every game like any other game."

And if you ask him, he's just focused on getting his job done.

"If we play like we did on Saturday," Navarre said, "if we control the ball and stop the defense like we did last week, things will take care of themselves."

Vandals

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yards on 40 carries. He has carried the ball into the end zone once, but his longest run so far is 11 yards.

That's a fact not easily lost on Cable.

"We got dominated on the line of scrimmage. Period. End of story," Cable said after the loss to Washington State in which Idaho gained just 85 yards on 34 attempts, an average of 1.5 yards per carry. "In Division I college football, particularly who we're playing, you've got to play big up front, and we just didn't do it."

The Ducks' ground and air attacks are primed for a big day

against the Vandal defense. Opponents have averaged 236.5 yards per game running and 273.5 per game in the air against Idaho.

A Vandal has managed to snag one interception — junior cornerback Rod Bryant's against Washington State — but will find the going tougher against the Ducks' star receivers.

"They have some really good receivers in Samie Parker and Keenan Howry, who are very, very good," Cable said. "I don't know that any team we play has two guys like them with that kind of speed and play-making ability."

Overall, the Ducks and Vandals have met 57 previous times, al-

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though the two schools have played just twice since 1970. The Ducks lead the all-time series 50-3-4, and Idaho's last victory against Oregon came in 1950.

With the ever-changing climate of the NCAA, Idaho could soon find itself relegated to Division I-

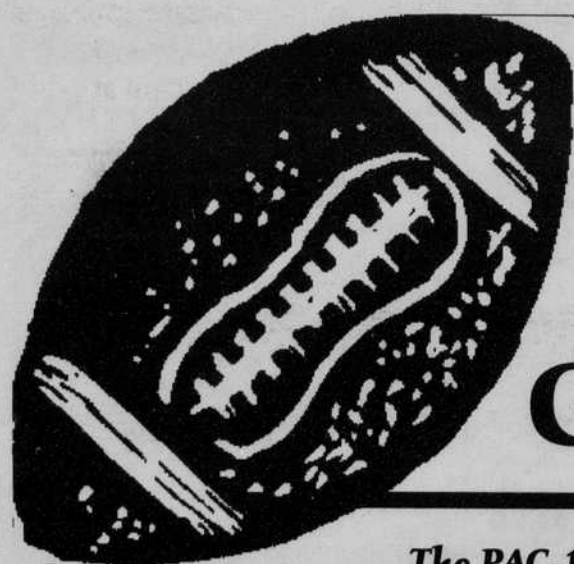
AA. Beginning in 2004, all Division I schools must average at least 15,000 fans per game and play at least five home games against fellow Division I schools, among other guidelines regarding other sports. Last season, the Vandals averaged 16,230 in attendance and

this season will play five home games, one against Division I-AA powerhouse Montana.

But for Cable, the time is in the here and now, the future be darned. Against Oregon, Idaho will have to bring its "A" game.

"The bottom line is we have to play at a very high level and then play at that level consistently to have a chance to be successful," Cable said. "It's another big, big test for us, but all we can do is worry about us and continue to get better and try to put some consistent play together that's of high quality."

Contact the sports reporter at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.



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