

■ Pac-10 game of the week

# No. 9 Notre Dame next on No. 1 USC's list

*This weekend the Trojans will bring their 27-game winning streak and national title defense to Indiana*

BY JEFFREY DRANSFELDT  
SPORTS REPORTER

When Charlie Weis left the two-time defending champion New England Patriots, he brought the spread offense to Notre Dame. To say the adjustment process has gone smoothly is an understatement.

Notre Dame has outsmarted, outplayed and outscored its opponents.

Currently ranked No. 9, Notre Dame has tackled previously ranked teams Pittsburgh, Michigan and Purdue. If not for a few miscues against Michigan State, Notre Dame's record would remain unblemished.

Saturday, Weis will see the closest thing to an NFL program, when No. 1 USC visits South Bend, Ind. Kickoff is set for 11:30 a.m. on NBC.

Last week, Notre Dame had a bye and was able to watch USC struggle at times against Arizona, tied for last place in the Pacific-10 Conference with Washington. Before Arizona, USC struggled in the first half against Oregon and Arizona State, hampered by injuries and offensive inefficiency.

USC has areas to be exploited, namely penalties and a weakened secondary. In three Pac-10 Conference games, USC has averaged 77 penalty yards and has sustained injuries to Kevin Ellison and Terrell Thomas.

The hype leading up to the USC/Notre Dame game started early with a press conference, where Weis addressed the match-up nine days prior to game time. Weis has an NFL connection with USC coach Pete Carroll as they both worked with the Patriots, though not at the same time.

"He has been good for college football," Weis said. "He came in there when that program was a little down. Obviously, they are the bar now."

The influence former pro coaches add to programs can't be overstated, Weis said, especially in terms of recruiting and the excitement former NFL personnel bring to college.

"When you can sit there and tell a guy about your experiences in the NFL, I think it really can have a very positive effect on many kids you end up recruiting," Weis said.

The USC program is made of Carroll recruits, while Weis is working mostly with ex-coach Tyrone Willingham recruits, Notre Dame's coach has quarterback Brady Quinn playing like the Patriots' Tom Brady, and Darius Walker running with the efficiency of Corey Dillon, averaging 105.6 yards per game. Wide receivers Jeff Samardzija and Maurice Stovall average 99.8 and 77.6 yards per game, respectively.

Notre Dame is averaging 37 points per game and 504 yards of total offense. They will be going against a tough USC defense, though having some issues is sound under Carroll, Weis said.

"He always has safeties who will come up and make plays," Weis said. "He always has guys who can rush the passer. He always has linebackers who can run."

Though USC gives up averages of 337 yards of total offense and 19.2 points per game, it has the ability to make big plays at key moments. Last week, with USC leading 35-21 with 10 minutes left and Arizona threatening

to cut the lead to single digits, linebacker Collin Ashton tipped quarterback Richard Kovalcheck's pass to safety Ryan Ting, who intercepted it and ended the Wildcats' upset hopes.

USC remains the nation's top program as its problems, compared with the average program, can be considered trivial. Against Oregon, Arizona State and Arizona, USC again showed its ability to make adjustments after a rough first half.

Tinkering resulted in second half explosions by running backs LenDale White and versatile Reggie Bush, as USC broke away each time.

The offensive numbers are overwhelming. Against Arizona, Bush ran for 110 yards as White had 179 yards and a career-high four touchdowns. Quarterback Matt Leinart threw for 360 yards and two touchdowns. Wide receivers Steve Smith and Dwayne Jarrett contributed 135 yards and 116 yards, respectively. As a team, USC had 724 yards in total offense.

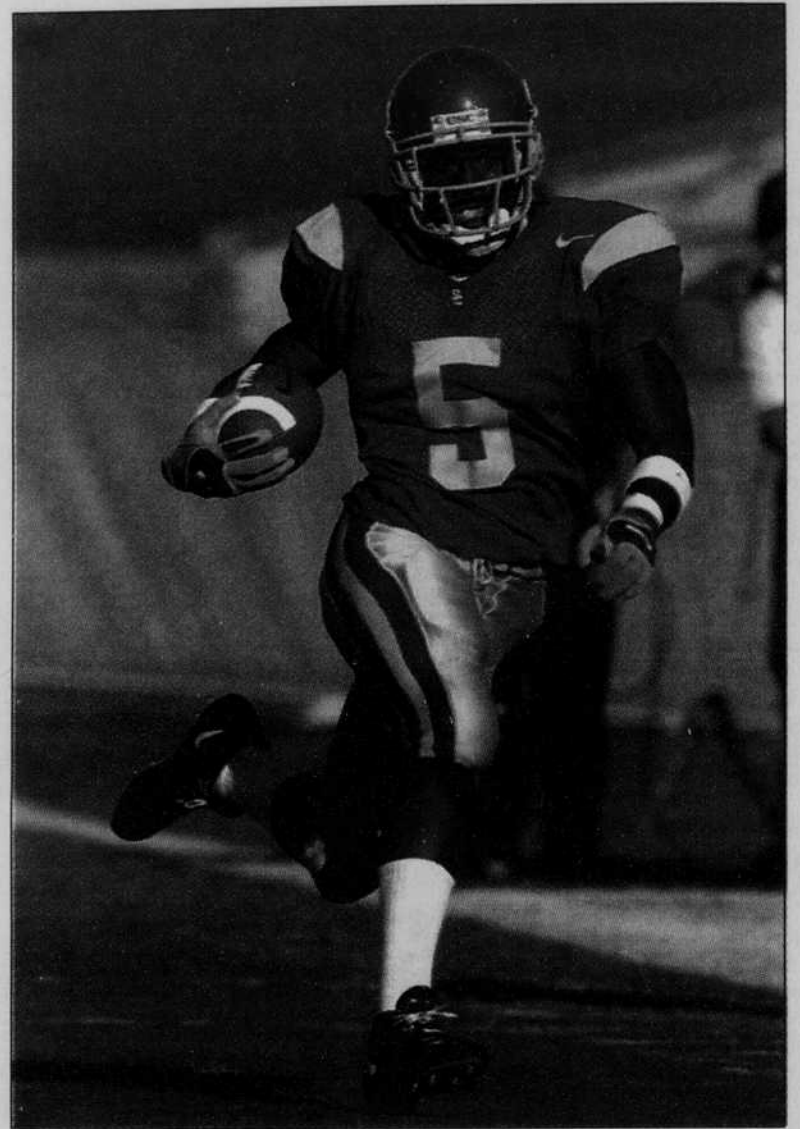
White and Bush ran for more than 100 yards apiece for a third consecutive game, a USC school record.

Suffice it to say, USC isn't struggling very much. Its biggest concern might be Bush's status as he sustained a minor right knee sprain last week.

Weis watched USC against Arizona on television and the Trojan's performance against Arizona State. Saturday's showdown between ranked teams will be a game with large bowl implications and Weis said Notre Dame will be ready.

"Am I anxious for this opportunity to go against the best team in the country? Yes. I would be lying if I said otherwise," Weis said.

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COURTESY

Top-ranked USC and running back Reggie Bush travel to No. 9 Notre Dame Saturday. The Trojans have a NCAA-best 27-game winning streak.

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