

After the worst football season in their history two years ago, the Fighting Irish hit the

NOTRE DAME — 1958 CHAMPS?

THIS COULD BE the season in which Notre Dame finds the right fork in the road on its long journey back to national football laurels.

The South Bend, Ind., school, one of the pioneers of big-time college football, isn't doing too much talking about this—at least not for publication.

It's been 10 years since the Irish have won the national title. And though some observers close to the Notre Dame scene say that 1958 still will be part of the rebuilding program, there are solid reasons why the Irish might wind up on top of the heap. In any case, they should be very strong contenders.

Though he's starting his fifth season at what is generally regarded as the toughest job in college football, Notre Dame's coach Terry Brennan, at 30, is the youngest of the game's major skippers.

Yet Terry already has carried as heavy a load of problems, pressures, and headaches as many of the old salts of the college coaching fraternity.

After winning 17 of its 20 games in the first two seasons under Brennan, Notre Dame blew a big gasket in the 1956 season, losing eight of 10 games in its worst season in history.

Buzzards could be seen circling over Terry's head. There were cries of "Fire the coach" from many corners; charges that Notre Dame was de-emphasizing the sport she had made famous; that Brennan had been a good coach while he was using the material of his predecessor pilot, Frank Leahy; that Brennan was a baby trying to do a man's work.

The ignoble '56 season hit its dramatic peak on the eve of the final game when Leahy stepped into the picture with a public statement that the legendary "Fighting Irish" lacked fight. Brennan was deeply hurt by the remark of his former coach, and there has been a reported coolness between the two ever since.

Brennan had been a bread-and-butter halfback under Leahy, whose explicit instructions to the Notre Dame quarterback were: "Remember, when it's fourth down within striking distance of the goal and you only need a few yards, give the ball to Terry." Brennan, who never lacked fight, almost always delivered.

LOSING FOOTBALL seasons at Notre Dame are about as rare as Democrats in Vermont. There was the 0-1 record in 1887, the 1-2 season in 1888, the 3-5-1 one in 1933, and the worst of them all, the 2-8 misery in '56.

So it figured that this school, founded by the French, made famous by a Norwegian immigrant coach, Knute Rockne, and identified as "Irish," would be a target for questions before last season.

Father Hesburgh, the school's president, fenced beautifully with the big question of de-emphasis. He said simply: "You can only de-emphasize that which you have emphasized, and we have never emphasized football here at Notre Dame. We like having good football teams but will not lower our scholastic standards to have them. The passing grade at Notre Dame is 70, but our athletes must average

77 to be eligible for competition with the varsity."

But for the hardened sports buff, who counts success in wins and losses, Brennan and his Notre Dame players answered the question with action in '57, posting an amazing 7-3 record against a murderous schedule.

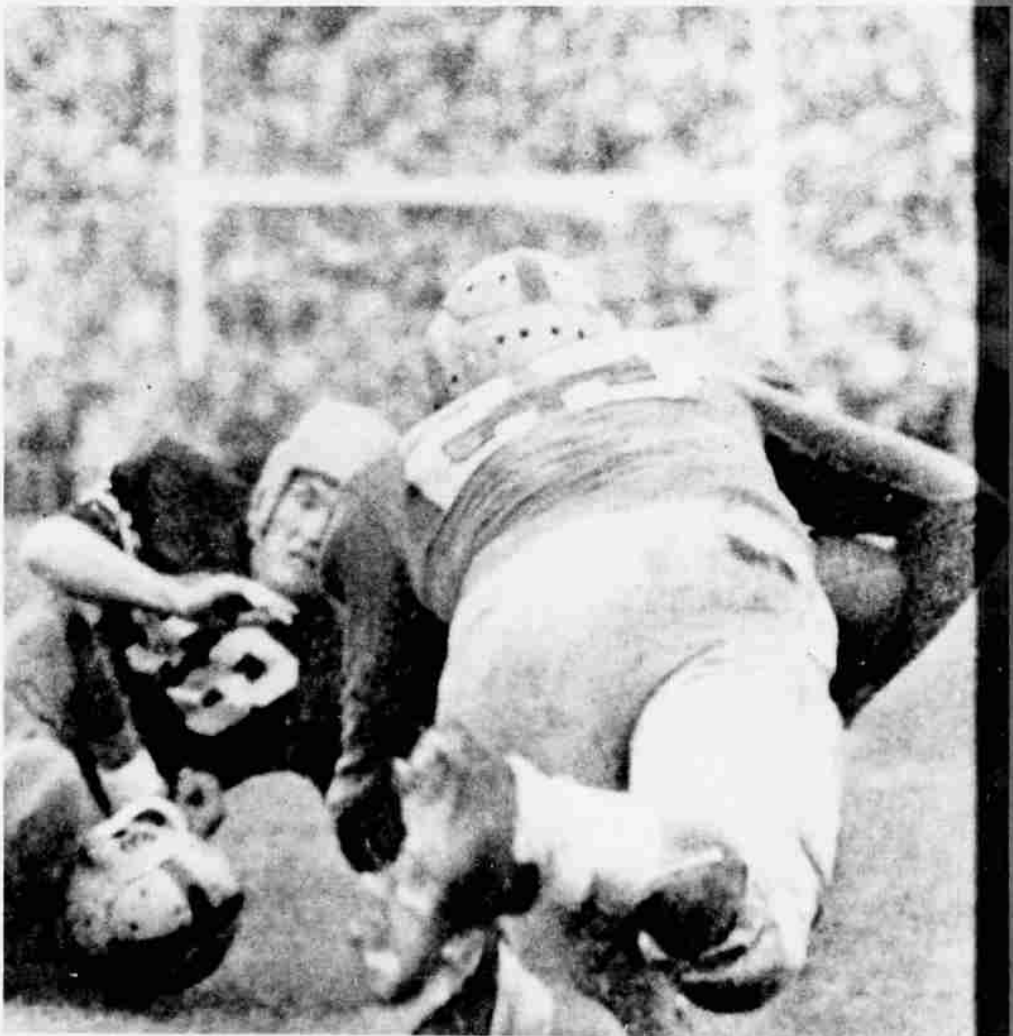
In many ways, Notre Dame, long accustomed to taking the bows, regarded this as its greatest season of glory—even better than a national title.

She had gone into last season in a rare role, a

distinct underdog. Even her die-hard, loyal "subway alumni" didn't see any hope of better than an even split in 10 games. But what she accomplished became the comeback story of the sports year.

"Sleepy" Jim Crowley of Four Horsemen fame, who knew many hours of Notre Dame grid glory, called it "my favorite Notre Dame team of all."

Among the wins were dramatic performances over Army and the big blast which stopped Oklahoma's winning streak. Those two games would



The Fighting Irish, with their all-out brand of football, may have the horses to drive to the 1958 title.