

Expectations even higher for Irish

2002 turnaround was third-best in school history

SOUTH BEND, Ind. (AP) — At first glimpse, Tyrone Willingham appears to be the same coach as a year ago.

He still runs from station to station during Notre Dame football practices. He still talks so quietly that players have to strain to hear him. And he still smiles when he gives a cliché-filled answer to reporters.

Notre Dame players, though, say Willingham is different. His already-high expectations are even higher following a 10-3 season last year — the third-best turnaround in school history.

“He’s turned up the heat,” linebacker Courtney Watson says. “It’s hard to explain how. You can just tell he expects more. The training wheels are off.”

Notre Dame hasn’t finished in the top 10 since 1993, when it finished No. 2 behind Florida State. The Irish haven’t won a national championship since 1988 — the second longest drought in Notre Dame history.

Willingham concedes expectations are higher this year, but said it is the players who are setting the standard.

“They understand that even though there may have been some good things we accomplished a year ago, that’s not all they wanted. They wanted a lot more,” he said.

Notre Dame’s 8-0 start under Willingham conjured up memories of Knute Rockne, Frank Leahy and Ara Parseghian; its 2-3 finish brought back painful reminders of the Bob Davie era. Worse yet, the losses to Southern California and North Carolina State in the Gator Bowl were embarrassing routs.

Players say it is the poor finish that drove them to work even harder.

“It’s on all of our minds,” quarterback Carlyle Holiday said. “We can’t wait to get back out there and show

2002 RESULTS

Notre Dame 22, Maryland 0
 Notre Dame 24, Purdue 17
 Notre Dame 25, Michigan 23
 Notre Dame 21, Michigan St. 17
 Notre Dame 31, Stanford 7
 Notre Dame 14, Pittsburgh 6
 Notre Dame 21, Air Force 14
 Notre Dame 34, Florida State 24
 Boston Coll. 14, Notre Dame 7
 Notre Dame 30, Navy 23
 Notre Dame 42, Rutgers 0
 USC 44, Notre Dame 13
 N.C. State 28, Notre Dame 6*
 *—Gator Bowl, Jacksonville, Fla.

everybody we’re a top-quality team.”

The expectations have been raised, though. Matching last season won’t be good enough for Notre Dame fans. Willingham expects this year to be tougher for that reason — and a lot of others.

“The second year is more difficult simply from the standpoint of human nature. The second time around everyone believes they know,” he said. “Unfortunately it breeds a certain amount of complacency. That’s where coaching comes in. We can’t let our football team get overly comfortable.”

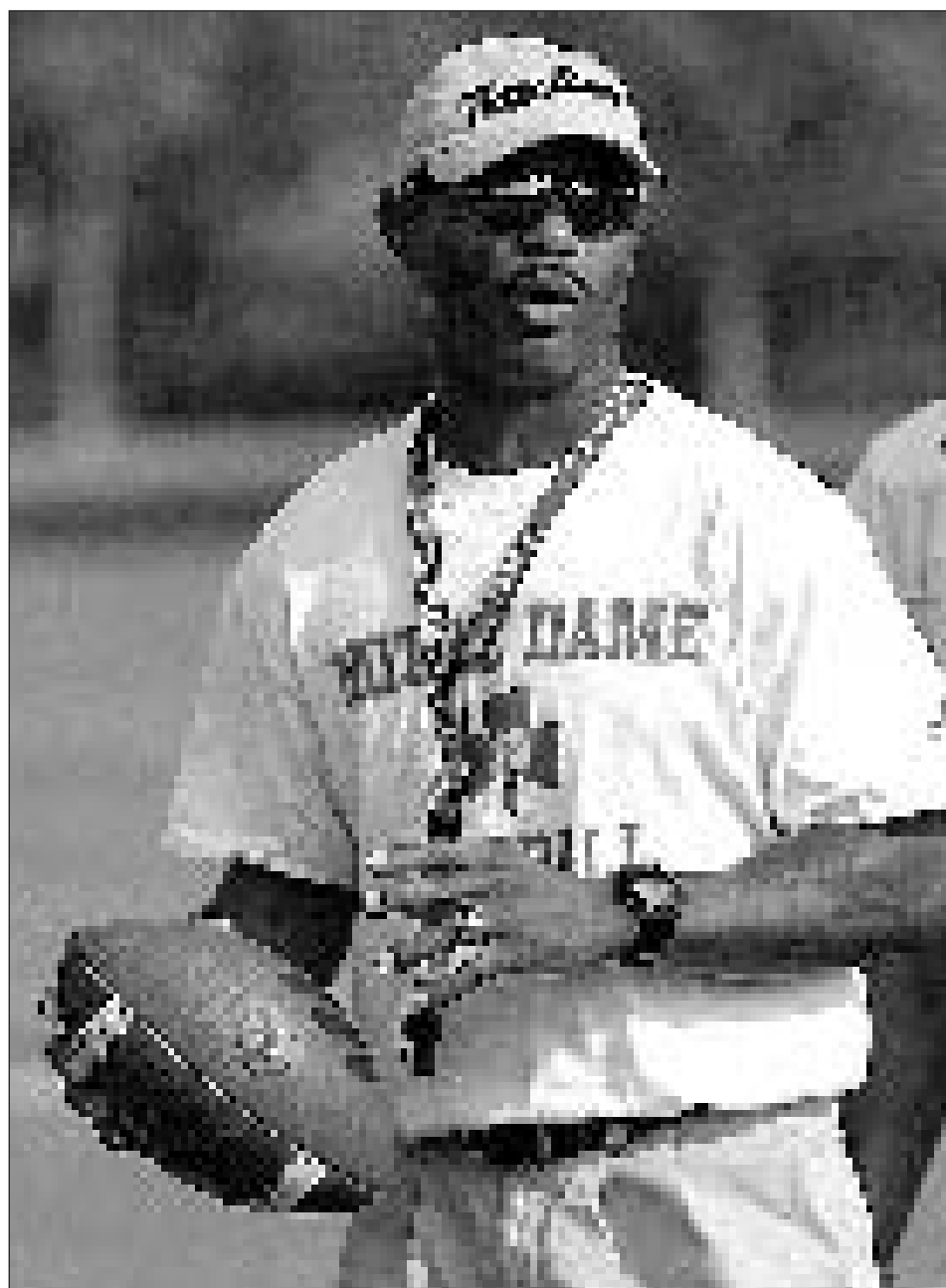
The Irish offense never looked comfortable last season using the newly installed West Coast offense. Holiday completed just 50.2 percent of his passes and the Irish finished the season with the 108th ranked offense in the country, averaging 313.5 yards a game. That’s the second fewest yards by an Irish team in 37 seasons.

Willingham, though, sees reason for hope. He said Holiday has a better grasp of the offense.

“What we’re starting to see from Carlyle is that flow, that timing, that rhythm in our offense, that rhythm in our passing. That’s important,” he said.

The Irish also will get help with the return of tailback Julius Jones, who was academically ineligible last season. Tailback Ryan Grant, who rushed for 1,085 yards, also returns.

They will run behind a rebuilt offensive line that lost



The Associated Press

Notre Dame football coach Tyrone Willingham’s high expectations are even higher following a 10-3 season last year — the third-best turnaround in school history. Irish players say they can notice a difference in the demeanor of the second-year Notre Dame coach.

four starters from last season, including Jeff Faine, a second-team All-American.

On defense, the Irish return eight starters led by Watson, a finalist for the Butkus Award last season. The defense, ranked 13th in the nation, keyed some of Notre Dame’s early wins, but the Irish gave up an average of 463.5 yards and 36 points in their last two games.

“Those two games speak for themselves. They just hurt,” Watson said. “With the way we finished the season, we just want to go out and show people that the first three-quarters of last season wasn’t a mirage; that we really can play ball.”

Willingham, though, is urging his players to stop talking and thinking about last year. He wants them focused squarely on the opener against Washington State on Sept. 6.

“If your mind is on last year,

it is very difficult to exist in the present,” he said. “You can’t be in the past, you can’t be in the future, you have to be in the now.”

And now is when Notre Dame fans expect big things from the Irish.

2003 NOTRE DAME SCHEDULE

Day	Date	Opponent	Time
Sat.	Sep. 6	vs. Washington State	1:30 p.m.
Sat.	Sep. 13	at Michigan	3:30 p.m.
Sat.	Sep. 20	vs. Michigan State	1:30 p.m.
Sat.	Sep. 27	at Purdue	TBA
Sat.	Oct. 11	at Pittsburgh	TBA
Sat.	Oct. 18	vs. Southern California	1:30 p.m.
Sat.	Oct. 25	at Boston College	TBA
Sat.	Nov. 1	vs. Florida State	2:30 p.m.
Sat.	Nov. 8	vs. Navy	2:30 p.m.
Sat.	Nov. 15	vs. Brigham Young	2:30 p.m.
Sat.	Nov. 29	at Stanford	8 p.m.
Sat.	Dec. 6	at Syracuse	1 p.m.