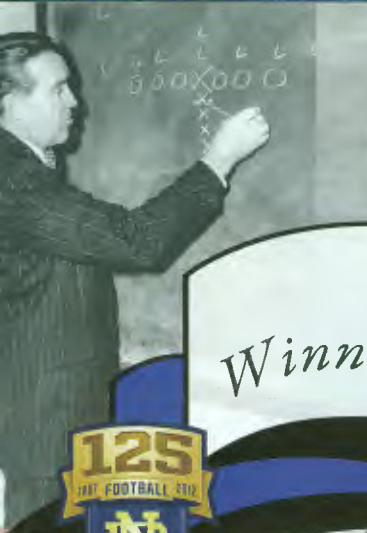


# THE COACHES:

*Winning Championships from Rockne to Holtz*

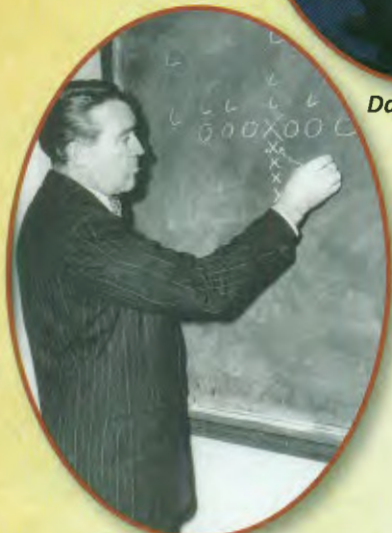




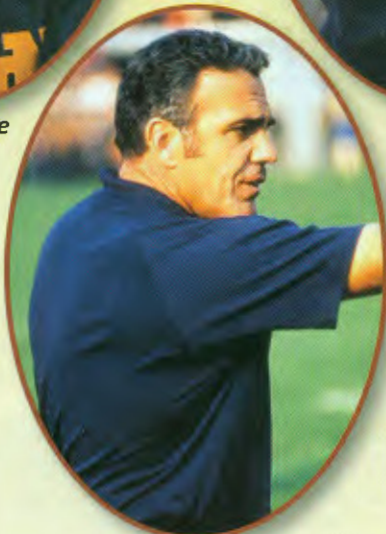
Dan Devine



Lou Holtz



Frank Leahy



Ara Parseghian



Knute Rockne

# THE COACHES:

## *Winning Championships from Rockne to Holtz*

by Douglas Farmer

*A*fter their morning Mass at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart and their subsequent journey across campus through hordes of cheering fans, University of Notre Dame football players receive one last reminder of the history of Fighting Irish history as they enter Notre Dame Stadium. To their right, a whistle-wearing Knute Rockne looks down upon them.

It is more than fitting that Notre Dame football still begins with Rockne each and every home game, as the old coach started the University's winning ways on the gridiron. Opposite the tunnel, on the other end of the stadium, fans finish their tailgating and enter through the Frank

Leahy Gate. Flanking that south entrance are the Ara Parseghian Gate and the Lou Holtz Gate, with the Dan Devine Gate welcoming fans entering the northeast corner of the facility.

Though these gates originally were generically named, the men they now honor were far from conventional. Combined, they won 440 games while prowling the Notre Dame sideline for a combined 52 seasons. Beginning with Rockne's three and led by Leahy's four, they delivered 11 consensus national championships to Irish faithful in six separate decades.

Lest the current Notre Dame student body feel neglected, the 10,000

undergraduate and graduate students enter through "Gate E"—a truly generic name—only to be greeted by over-sized replicas of those 11 national championship rings.

Those 11 championships, just as each Saturday in Notre Dame Stadium does now, began with Rockne. Then again, Notre Dame Stadium itself began with Rockne, though "The House That Rockne Built" was built after he already had won two titles.

### **KNUTE ROCKNE: 1918-1930; 105-12-5**

Rockne's career at Notre Dame began as a 22-year-old freshman in 1910. Playing

the early 20th-century version of tight end, Rockne earned All-America status in 1913, due in part to his role in bringing the forward pass to the mainstream.

After coach Jesse Harper gave Rockne a football before the 1913 summer break, Rockne and quarterback Gus Dorais spent their downtime in the heat throwing the football around on the beach in Sandusky, Ohio, where the tight end served as a lifeguard. Tracing and subsequently running routes in the sand, the two perfected their respective arts of throwing and catching.

Coaches and officials alike had debated the usefulness of the forward pass since Auburn coach John Heisman's initial 1895 advocacy, but Rockne was one of the first to successfully pull off the ploy. Rockne learned quickly that if he did not want to chase after the football in the waters of Lake Erie, he would have more success catching with his fingertips and hands than with his arms and chest. By the end of the 1913 season, Rockne and Dorais were well known for employing what was still considered a gimmick in games. For a gimmick, it was quite effective, playing a key part in Notre Dame's 35-13 upset of Army at West Point that season.

But a national championship would not come Notre Dame's way until Rockne's own innovations and strategies strolled the sidelines. He took over after Harper's retirement in 1917, and in 1924 the Four Horsemen led Notre Dame to a 10-0 season and its first consensus national championship, complete with a 27-10 victory over Stanford in the Rose Bowl.

Five years later, the Irish doubled their national title count. While Rockne's brilliant innovative nature had been evident to the nation since his exploitation of the forward pass, it was during a Nov. 16 victory over USC when the country learned just how dedicated to his craft Rockne was. Fresh from the hospital with an infected leg, the Irish coach remained in a makeshift cot stationed along the Notre Dame sideline throughout the 13-12 win, directing his players as necessary to preserve their undefeated season.

"Rockne, my goodness, what can you say about him other than just what a great guy he was," said Terry Brennan, a player under Frank Leahy and later a Notre Dame coach himself, of Rockne's devotion to his team. "Anybody who played for him would say the same thing."

His first in Notre Dame Stadium, Rockne's 1930 title season, while lacking the star power of the Four Horsemen or a heroic story such as 1928's "Win one for the Gipper" speech, may be his most legendary title, both dramatically and tragically.

As was evident in Rockne's telling of George Gipp's final wishes, he had a full grasp of all things motivational. Heading into the 1930 season finale, a trip out to Los Angeles to face USC, Rockne threatened to head back to South Bend on his own prior to the game, feeling his team was not sufficiently motivated to face the Trojans. Naturally, his team insisted otherwise, so Rockne stuck around, but not without pushing the boundaries even further.

Former Irish assistant coach Tom Lieb was then coaching at Loyola Marymount, and he let it slip to the local newspapers that he felt Notre Dame was overmatched. The clips promptly found their way to Rockne's locker room bulletin board. Years later, Lieb confessed to simply executing a ploy on behalf of his former boss.

Four months later, on March 31, 1931, Rockne died in a plane crash in Bazaar, Kan. His death shook not only a nation, but also the world. He had become a national hero in Norway, and was well

known as a sports innovator far beyond any borders. President Herbert Hoover called the tragic death "a national disaster" and told Rockne's wife, Bonnie, "every American grieves with you." More than 1,400 people crammed into the Church of the Sacred Heart—now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart—to say farewell to the winningest coach in Notre Dame history, then and now, with many more standing outside. The Four Horsemen, Dorais and the mayors of Chicago and Philadelphia were all in attendance, as were former opponents from Northwestern and the University of Chicago. CBS broadcast the services on national radio.

Rockne had brought Notre Dame to the top of college football and set it up for success for years to come. Not only was Frank Leahy a tackle on the 1929 and 1930 championship teams, but also Ara Parseghian's first sporting memories revolve around Rockne.

"When I was a kid, I remember vividly . . . the newspapers would print extras and they'd be coming down the street in the middle of the day," Parseghian said. "I remember the paperboy coming down the street, 'Extra! Extra! Rockne killed in air crash.'"

## FRANK LEAHY:

1941-1943, 1946-1953; 87-11-9

Ten years removed from the afternoon editions capturing Rockne's tragic death, Frank Leahy took the helm at his alma mater.

Leahy returned to Notre Dame after two seasons as head coach at Boston College. Racking up a 20-2 record with the Eagles, Leahy certainly had Notre Dame's attention when the University went seeking its newest head coach. Only two years removed from an 8-1 squad, named national champions in at least one poll, Notre Dame's expectations were as high as ever.

Somehow, Leahy met them, and then exceeded them, setting a standard many would say has yet to be met.

As seems to have become tradition at Notre Dame, Leahy won his first national championship in his third year leading the Irish from the sidelines—Parseghian, Devine and Holtz also followed suit in their third seasons. Led by Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Angelo Bertelli, the 1943 Irish claimed the national title despite losing their season finale to Great Lakes 19-14. The loss would be the last suffered under Leahy's leadership for the rest of the decade.

Like many of his players, including 1947 Heisman-winning quarterback Johnny Lujack, Leahy entered the Navy following the 1943 title. They missed two seasons due to the Second World War, but in some ways the wartime hiatus aided the Notre Dame teams of the latter half of the decade.

"Part of it was just the guys coming back from the service," said Terry Brennan, 1945-1948 running back. "There was a lot of talent. . . . We were overpowering teams. We didn't do anything special. We didn't have to do anything fancy, just play a solid, fundamental game and you were going to win."

With a 26-6 trouncing of Illinois, Leahy's veterans set the tone for what would become one of the 20th century's greatest sports dynasties. Led by Lujack in 1946, the Irish won eight games, against a sole tie. The tie became a piece of lore, as the scoreless draw against Army would have settled many debates come season's end. Notre Dame won the national championship, with the Cadets sitting with a 9-0-1 record in the second slot. Notre



**KNUTE ROCKNE**



**FRANK LEAHY**



Dame had remained behind the team from West Point in the rankings until a season-closing 26-6 win over No. 16 USC. Heading into the tilt with the Trojans, the team could have been distracted by the big-picture implications the game would have, but instead Leahy kept them focused on each and every detail.

"He was so solid in the fundamentals," Lujack said. "He wanted perfection in the smallest, tiniest little things. He just covered everything relentlessly."

The 1947 season saw more of the same. That is, more success. An undefeated 9-0 record led to Leahy's third title. Lujack won that season's Heisman, and only one game was decided by less than two touchdowns. Notre Dame was redefining what it meant to succeed on a football field.

"You never know if you're going to win or lose, but if you put out and play to your abilities, we felt that we had the ability to play and win," Lujack said. "Winning is really kind of the fun thing about playing sports."

The winning continued. Though Notre Dame did not win a title in 1948, it was not a result of losing. The final Associated Press poll put a 9-0 Notre Dame in the second spot, behind 9-0 Michigan. The following week the Irish suffered a 14-14 tie in Los Angeles against USC.

Note, on the Leahy teams of the late 1940s, a tie would qualify as something to be suffered, and it would not be tolerated the following year. A 10-0 season to close out the decade cemented the Irish as a football team of a different breed, running up a 38-0-2 record over four seasons. End Leon Hart led the 1949 squad to the national title, as he won the Heisman, making it three Heisman winners in the decade for Leahy's Irish.

Amid win after win after win, Notre Dame kept them coming largely thanks to Leahy remembering his college coach's, Rockne's, motivational tactics.

"He would motivate you all the time," Lujack recalled. "You had confidence in your ability, but it calls for a team effort."

"We were never looking out for any individual awards or anything, it was just winning. Then the awards just happened to come, and really they were kind of a surprise at the end. When I won the Heisman Trophy, I was as shocked as anybody."

Leahy would coach one more Heisman winner—Johnny Lattner in 1953—before stepping aside following that 1953 campaign. Finishing third and second in the polls, respectively, in his last two seasons, many wondered about Leahy's sudden departure. His contract held two more years on it.

Those close to the team, particularly those close to Leahy, knew he retired due in large part to failing health. In consecutive weekends, the coach collapsed in the Irish locker room. Modern-day fans might think the stresses would strike a coach most fiercely when he worries about his job security during a failing season, but not Leahy. The 1953 Irish were ranked atop the polls until a late tie against Iowa.

"Frank often worked himself into a frenzy of worry and concern over an upcoming game, even when Notre Dame was heavily favored to win," University president emeritus Father Theodore M. Hesburgh wrote in his memoirs "God, Country, Notre Dame." At the time, Hesburgh was executive vice president at Notre Dame, and held complete oversight over the athletic department. "Frank was a very intense man, a classic type-A personality."

Leahy's sudden, though understandable, departure left Notre Dame wanting for a coach of his stature, a want which would

go unfulfilled for a full decade. After bringing the Los Angeles Chargers into the American Football League as their general manager in 1960, Leahy died in 1973.

## ARA PARSEGHIAN: 1964-1974; 95-17-4

In the 10 years after Leahy's retirement, Notre Dame suffered 48 losses. The silver lining to those less glamorous days, bottoming out with a 2-7 season in 1963, was that they brought about the need for a coach like Ara Parseghian. Initially, a coach like Parseghian simply meant a coach who had been beating up on Notre Dame. Then again, Parseghian was the first coach since Jesse Harper not to be a Notre Dame graduate, nor was he Roman Catholic, a distinction only Edward McKeever—the 1944 interim coach—had held since Harper.

Those issues aside, Parseghian spent eight seasons at Northwestern before traveling the 113 miles east to coach the Irish. In four of those, 1959-1962, Parseghian found joy in beating the Irish. Hesburgh watched. Executive vice president Father Edmund P. Joyce watched. Notre Dame quarterback John Huarte watched.

How does the old saying go? If you can't beat them, join them.

That's exactly what Hesburgh and Joyce did. As discussions with Parseghian progressed, they asked him why he wished to leave what seemed to be a good thing in Evanston.

"Ara said to us, 'I've gone as far as I can... I'm a believer in emotionalism in athletics, and I know they have it at Notre Dame, and I know I can do better there,'" Hesburgh wrote. "Ara was right, of course, and he proved it many, many times."

When Parseghian arrived on the South Bend campus, his new team knew who he was. They, perhaps emotionally, remembered the 35-6 trouncing Northwestern issued to the Irish in Evanston in 1962.

"They would run their offense, it was nothing special, but effectively going up and down the field," Huarte remembered of that lopsided affair. "I was leaning on my helmet next to [wide receiver] Jack Snow, we're both looking across watching this offense operate. We said to each other, 'We can do that.'"

Sure enough, Huarte and Snow could. Before Parseghian's arrival, Huarte had yet to earn a letter at Notre Dame. In 1964, not only did the quarterback win a letter, but he also threw for more than 2,000 yards and won the Heisman Trophy. More than half of those passing yards landed in the outstretched hands of Snow. Huarte started every game, and Parseghian made it clear to him that would be the case from the outset.

"Ara said to me, 'John, if you make a mistake, don't worry about it. You're my quarterback. I'm going with you,'" Huarte said of their conversation before the season opener at Wisconsin. "I think that was really smart as I look back on it. It made me kind of relax and go on to have a big year."

Though the 1964 team narrowly missed a national title, as a season-ending 20-17 loss at USC dashed those hopes, it marked a return to previous expectations for Notre Dame.

"Basically the talent was here, it was just sort of misplaced," said Parseghian, who still lives in South Bend. "It's like anything else, nothing succeeds like success, and failure is reversed obviously. They had been beaten down, hadn't won, hadn't done well. When we came in, we did a lot of switches."

ARA PARSEGHIAN



Once Parseghian established a habit of winning, the Irish took to it like gold to the Dome, and in his third season, just as Leahy did, the Era of Ara struck gold with a national title. The 1966 title team ended the season with mixed emotions. A 10-10 tie with undefeated, second-ranked Michigan State was pushed from the fans' memories by a 51-0 thrashing of No. 10 USC in Los Angeles the following Saturday.

Yet, in history, it is the tie which most remember. Often considered one of the best games of the century, Parseghian was at times criticized for accepting the tie toward the end of the contest. He justified the decision by citing numerous Irish injuries in the first half of the game, and crediting the valiant effort needed by his team to come back from a 10-0 deficit.

"There was only the national championship we could strive for," Parseghian said. "The circumstances we were facing when we started our season...all we were fighting for, the only thing open to us, was a national championship, and that's pretty hard to achieve when you're going against 120 schools."

Parseghian nearly led his team to that goal once again in 1970, only falling to USC in the final regular season game. Even though the Irish beat top-ranked Texas in the Cotton Bowl, they would only rise to second-best in the final rankings.

"When you least expect it, you might have [a title]," he said. "When times are predictable that you are chosen to be, things can happen that you don't even come close."

The better of those two scenarios, an unexpected title, came to become reality in 1973. A depth-starved Notre Dame team capitalized on freshman eligibility to secure Parseghian's second, and Notre Dame's ninth, consensus title. A Sugar Bowl victory over No.1 Alabama propelled third-ranked Notre Dame to the top of the polls.

"Coach Parseghian knew what was important," tight end and 1973 Notre Dame All-American Dave Casper said. "Everything he said was important... The best thing about Coach Parseghian was you knew it was very important to shut up and listen."

Parseghian considered retirement following his second ring-winning season, but instead led the Irish to a 10-2 record in 1974 before resigning. The departure, much like Leahy's, surprised many around him.

"Our only goal was to win a national championship. That's a pretty lofty goal," fullback Steve Orsini said. "He did a darn good job of doing that, but my thought was, when I learned of his decision to retire, 'Boy, he must have had a lot of stress during his career here.'"

Parseghian remains active around campus, particularly with research for a cure for Niemann-Pick disease Type C, a disease which damages the nervous system and has led to the death of three of his grandchildren. He joined the College Football Hall of Fame in 1980.

## **DAN DEVINE:** 1975-1980; 53-16-1

Parseghian's departure opened the door for Dan Devine, also considered for the job in 1964. Devine left the storied NFL Green Bay Packers to take over in South Bend, and, again following a trend, only needed until his third season to strike pay dirt.

Midway through that 1977 season, No. 11 Notre Dame hosted No. 5 USC, obviously as an underdog. The Irish had fallen 20-13 to Mississippi in the second week of the season, and were still

trying to work their way back up the rankings. Devine had a trick up his sleeve.

After conferring with his captains, including Orsini, Devine planned to surprise his team with green jerseys before kickoff.

"We came back from warm-ups and there were our jerseys hanging on our lockers," Orsini said of the ploy. "It was a celebration even before the game, that's how motivating it was for our team."

A 49-19 victory followed and by the end of the regular season, the Irish sat fifth in the polls. Fortunately, Notre Dame would face top-ranked Texas in the Cotton Bowl. Unfortunately, the Cotton Bowl, as always, was played in Dallas. Just as they did in 1970 under Parseghian, the Irish topped the No. 1 Longhorns in their own backyard, this time by a resounding tally of 38-10. Unlike 1970, the win was enough to elevate Notre Dame to the top of the polls.

"We wore the green, we wore the green at the bowl game, it brought us a national championship," Orsini said. "I give all the credit to Coach Devine and his coaching staff for getting us ready both mentally, physically and strategically to win a national championship."

Devine left Notre Dame only three seasons later, primarily to spend more time with his multiple sclerosis-suffering wife.

"There's that old adage, it's hard to fill the shoes of a legend, and Ara Parseghian surely was a legend, and it probably applies to Coach Devine," Orsini said. "But I really learned a lot at Notre Dame about leadership and working with people, and I owe that to Coach Devine."

Devine won maybe the most dramatic postseason bowl game in Irish annals—the 1979 Cotton Bowl triumph over Houston that featured a stirring second-half comeback from a 34-12 deficit. And the first game of what became his final season in 1980 featured maybe the most amazing ending to a Notre Dame Stadium game—Harry Oliver's 51-yard field goal as time expired that beat Michigan.

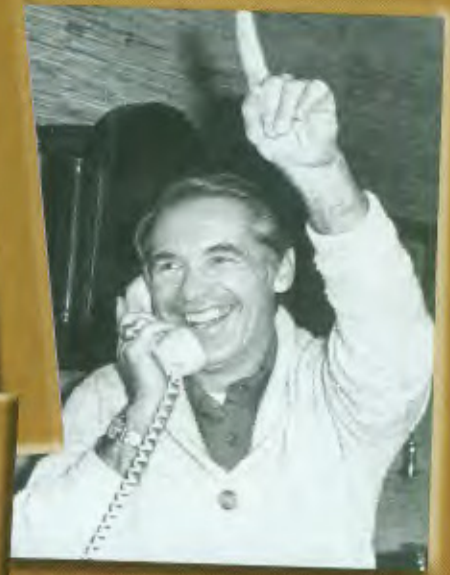
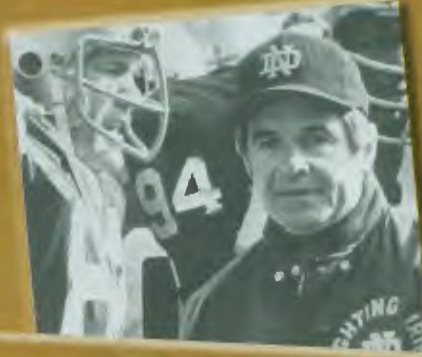
Among the Irish standouts Devine coached were Outland, Lombardi and Maxwell award-winning defensive lineman Ross Browner, Walter Camp Player of the Year and tight end Ken MacAfee, first-team All-Americans Steve Niehaus at defensive tackle, Luther Bradley at cornerback, Bob Golic at linebacker, Dave Huffman at center, Vagas Ferguson at tailback, Tim Foley at offensive tackle, Bob Crable at linebacker, John Scully at center, Scott Zetek at defensive end, plus all-star quarterback Joe Montana.

Devine later became executive director of the Arizona State University Sun Angel Foundation in Phoenix. In 1992, Devine returned to the University of Missouri as athletic director and then retired at the end of the 1993-94 academic year. He was elected into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1985. Devine died in 2002 at age 77.

## **LOU HOLTZ:** 1986-1996; 100-30-2

After Devine, in came Gerry Faust. His five seasons produced only four more wins than losses, and Notre Dame was back in the market for a head coach. Meanwhile, at Minnesota, Lou Holtz was preparing to accept a bid to the Independence Bowl. In doing so, Holtz also made himself eligible for his dream job, the gig in South Bend.

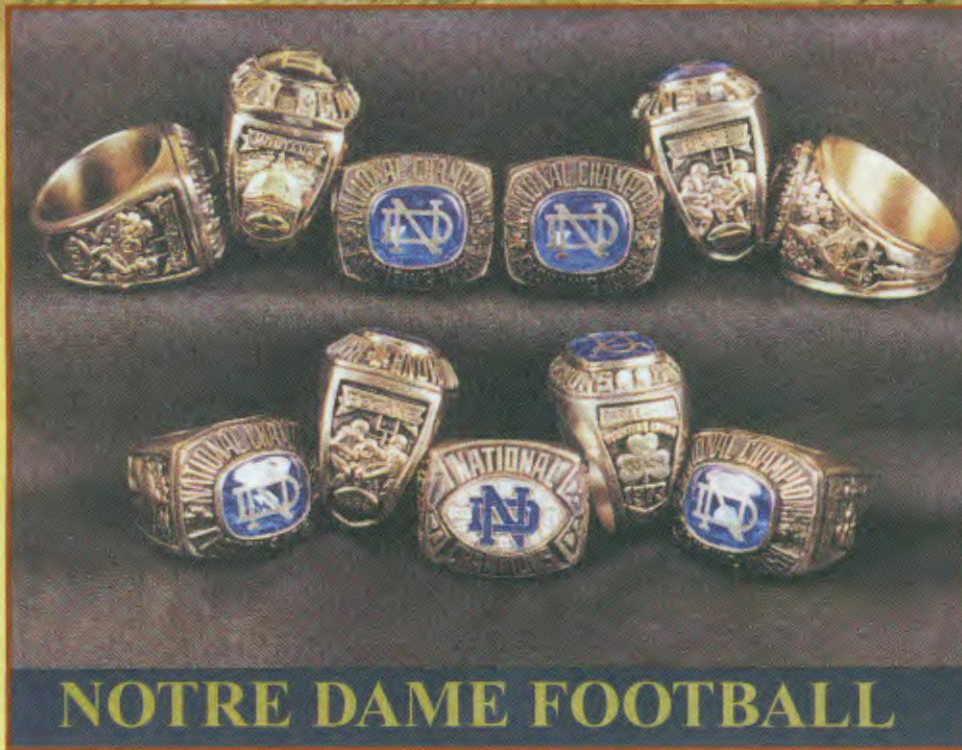
**DAN DEVINE**



**LOU HOLTZ**







## NOTRE DAME FOOTBALL

When he arrived in the Twin Cities two seasons earlier, coming from Arkansas, Holtz had insisted on a "Notre Dame clause" in his contract. Often forgotten about this clause in the retelling is it was only activated once the Gophers accepted a bowl bid. Once they did so, Holtz could go to Notre Dame at any point, assuming the Irish would have him.

Thus, if Minnesota had turned down the Independence Bowl invite, Holtz would not have been available when Fathers Hesburgh and Joyce called.

"That was a breakthrough. Once we had accepted that bowl bid, then Notre Dame contacted me a week later," Holtz said. "I don't even think they knew anything about that contract."

Once at Notre Dame, the coach knew he could not be content.

"I just felt flattered and honored and proud to be associated with Notre Dame," Holtz said. "I didn't feel a sense of accomplishment when I went to Notre Dame. I felt a sense of responsibility to do the best I could with that football program."

Holtz certainly did so. After a combined 13-10 record in his first two seasons, he nearly matched that win total in his third season with an undefeated, national title-winning 12-0 team. The 1988 Irish beat the Nos. 1, 2 and 3 teams when they played them, Miami, USC and West

Virginia, respectively. Best remembered for then-No. 4-ranked Notre Dame's 31-30 victory over the Hurricanes, the national champions relied on Holtz's intensity and attention to detail.

"It was those little things," quarterback Tony Rice said. "[Holtz] used to yell at me a lot, 'Tony, stop. Stop here. Stop what you're doing. Look at your feet. Look at your placement. What degree is that?' I'm saying 45. 'No it's not. That's 44. We don't do that. We need a 45-degree angle.'"

But Holtz also has a witty side college football fans are now familiar with, having watched him showcase it on ESPN. It was that sense of humor, and sense of the moment, which won him many recruits, including Rice. Although, in Rice's case, it was not Rice whom Holtz set to impress. Rather, Holtz sized up the situation, and targeted Rice's grandmother. He gauged it correctly, as once she was sold, she instructed her grandson as to his next destination.

"Coach Holtz did a magic trick for her, and she had never seen anything like that before, and she said I was going to follow that little man," Rice said. "He tore the newspaper in half... He has those quick hands. I was studying him, and I still don't know how he did it."

Holtz and Rice nearly led the Irish to a repeat national championship in 1989, falling only to Miami in the regular

season finale. Similarly, in 1993, Holtz came within a whisker of another title.

"I felt '89 or '93, either one of those, we could claim," Holtz said. "In '89 they said, 'Well Miami beat you head to head.' In '93, we beat Florida State head to head but that still didn't matter... We lost one game each year and that was our fault, it wasn't anybody else's."

Holtz left Notre Dame after the 1996 season, with exactly 100 wins. His final game at Notre Dame Stadium, a rout of Rutgers, ended with fans storming the field in appreciation for all their favorite had done, holding bumper stickers reading, "Don't Blame Me. I Voted For Lou."

That 1993 season, and the debate among voters between Notre Dame and Florida State, marks the last time the Irish seriously contended for a national championship. Without

Rockne, Leahy, Parseghian, Devine or Holtz guiding the way, no season since has aligned just so.

So the sixth gate remains, Gate E, welcoming students into Notre Dame Stadium. Those students wait for a coach with the right mix of Rockne's innovation, Leahy's all-consuming desire, Parseghian's eye for talent, Devine's subtle motivation and Holtz's attention to detail. Though, as stories are told of the coaches, oftentimes one's characteristics are applied to another without correction. No correction is needed. At Notre Dame, underneath the watchful eyes atop the Golden Dome, standing without a conference, always facing a strenuous nationwide schedule, a coach needs intensity, passion and talent to rise to the top of the college football polls.

The five who mark Notre Dame Stadium's entrances possessed those traits, and those traits yielded 440 wins and, more importantly, 11 national championships.

Who will greet the students? Who will mark Gate E? Who will bring No. 12 to Notre Dame?

*Douglas Farmer is a 2012 University of Notre Dame graduate who is a member of the sports staff at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.*