

BLUE GOLD REPORT

OCT. 3, 2018 ♦ NOTRE DAME AT VIRGINIA TECH

Game Info

Date: Oct. 6, 2018.

Site: Lane Stadium (65,632).

Kickoff: 8 p.m.

Television: ABC.

Radio: This broadcast can be heard live on SIRIUS Satellite Radio (channel 129) and on Notre Dame's IMG affiliates.

Series Facts: This will be the second all-time meeting between the two programs. Virginia Tech won the first matchup 34-31 at South Bend in 2016.

Head Coaches: Virginia Tech — Justin Fuente (22-9, third season); Notre Dame — Brian Kelly (74-34, ninth season).

Noting Virginia Tech: The Hokies are aiming for their 26th straight bowl appearance, a streak that started in 1993 under legendary coach Frank Beamer ... Fuente won 10 games in his first season and nine contests a year ago ... If Virginia Tech can reach the nine-win mark again in 2018, it would mark the first stretch since 2009-11 that it hit that threshold three consecutive seasons ... Despite the praise of the atmosphere in Blacksburg, Virginia Tech's last home win against a top-25 team came in 2009 against Miami ... The Hokies are 0-6 since then, and 0-3 against top-10 programs.

Brian Kelly Previews Virginia Tech

Corey Bodden • BlueAndGold.com

The 24-hour rule is one coaches and players almost always discuss after big wins.

For Notre Dame, it is necessary this week.

After taking down Stanford 38-17 on Saturday, the Irish will travel to Blacksburg this weekend to take on No. 24 Virginia Tech.

Lane Stadium is known for being rowdy in big-time matchups, but the Hokies have not defeated a ranked team at home since 2009. Notre Dame will look to continue that trend.

"Our job is to handle the environment and go in and play really good football," Brian Kelly said on Tuesday. "If we do that and handle the environment, handle ourselves and our preparation, we'll be in pretty good shape. If we can't handle the environment, we can't prepare the right way this week because we're distracted because everybody's telling us how great we are, then we'll be in big trouble.

"But this team's shown an ability to prepare the right way, a maturity to stay away from the distractions. We've been preparing for this kind of environment

for quite some time. So I'm confident we'll be able to handle the moment when it comes."

Virginia Tech bounced back to defeat then-No. 22 Duke 31-14 this past Saturday in Durham, N.C. It was the first start of the year for redshirt junior quarterback Ryan Willis after replacing redshirt sophomore Josh Jackson, who went down with an injury during a 49-35 loss to Old Dominion Sept. 22.

"They've had an injury at the quarterback position, but you wouldn't know it," Kelly noted. "Willis has come in and done a really, really good job. He's a big athletic kid, transfer from Kansas, that has got escapability and real arm talent.

"And it's complemented again from their perspective by having really good wide receivers, a good host of wide receivers. I think they're 17th in passing efficiency. He's a really solid quarterback, and he's a veteran presence."

Senior Steven Peoples and redshirt sophomore Deshawn McCleave lead the ground attack with 100 carries for 516 yards and six touchdowns between them. Ball State transfer Damon Hazelton, a redshirt sophomore, paces the wide receivers with 348 yards and four touchdowns on just 15 catches. Junior Eric Kumah has hauled in 12 passes for 211 yards and a touchdown, while sophomore Hezekiah Grimsley also has 12 receptions for 167 yards.

"McCleave is extremely explosive, a big-play kind of back," Kelly stated. "Peoples, they bring in [Redshirt freshman Terius] Wheatley, they bring in a host of backs. Their fullbacks we know very well, are part of their offense. Their tight ends.

"But I think you would look towards also the receiving corps with Hazelton, Grimsley and Kumah. It's a really good group with great size."

When most think of Virginia Tech, defense is the first thing that comes to mind, especially under longtime coordinator Bud Foster.

It has been an up-and-down year, however, on that side of the ball so far. The Hokies rank in the top five nationally with just 84.0 rushing yards allowed per game, but the secondary has surrendered 303.8 passing yards per contest. Foster's group ranks 37th nationally in scoring defense (20.8 points allowed per game).

"Coach Foster can do about everything from a defensive standpoint," Kelly said. "If you watch their film this year, they've shown you everything, from double eagle, Bear defense to their structured invert defense, four down, to drop eight, to cover-zero pressure. This past week we saw a lot of coverage. Drop eight, the week before, we saw a lot of pressure.

"You have to really prepare for a lot. And there's a lot of moving parts to their defense. One of the best parts is [fifth-year senior] Ricky Walker, their defensive tackle, extremely disruptive and multi-year starter, really good football player.

[Redshirt junior] defensive lineman Houshun Gaines on the outside, leads the teams in sacks, is an athletic player. And they run to the football. They're athletic and they play really hard."

Despite the home reputation, Virginia Tech's last home win against a ranked foe came in 2009 against the Miami Hurricanes. Since then the Hokies are 0-6 and 1-8 overall versus top-10 opponents.

Irish Will Be 'Most Complete & Talented Team' Hokies Have Faced In 2018

Corey Bodden • BlueAndGold.com

It was a rough middle of September for the Virginia Tech program.

The Hokies fell 49-35 on the road to in-state foe Old Dominion, a member of Conference USA, while losing starting quarterback Josh Jackson due to injury in the process. The next day, the Hokies dismissed their top defensive end, Trevon Hill, from the team.

But head coach Justin Fuente and his group bounced back last Saturday with a 31-14 road win over then-No. 22 Duke with redshirt junior Ryan Willis taking the helm at quarterback while Jackson recovers.

Now the attention moves to the No. 6 Notre Dame Fighting Irish for Saturday's prime-time matchup in Blacksburg, Va.

"It will be the most complete and talented team that we've played to date," Fuente stated during his weekly press conference. "They have all things clicking in different areas of the game and have recently made a quarterback change. The last two weeks they've been very explosive, averaging 47 points per game.

"Defensively, they've played really well the entire year with giving up less than 20 points a game. So, it's going to be a tremendous challenge for our team. I know we will have a great atmosphere, but we've got to do a great job of preparing this young squad heading into this ball game."

Notre Dame's defensive line has received much of the attention this year, especially with the group earning the top pass rushing grade (42.2) by Pro Football Focus through five weeks. The Irish are also the lone team that has four players with at least 10 pressures each.

"They're a movement team and will play a little bit of man coverage in the back end and are pretty darn good at it," Fuente noted. "They're good at flying to the football. They're aggressive and good at making it hard for people to run the football.

"It all starts with that and finding a way to run the football and people haven't had much success with that. They have fallen behind the chains and will pin their ears back and get at the quarterback."

Lane Stadium has quite the reputation across college football for being a rowdy and raucous environment for opposing teams. Despite the noise and atmosphere, ranked teams have not had much trouble taking down the Hokies on the road.

Since defeating a top-25 Miami squad in 2009, Virginia Tech is 0-6 at home against ranked opponents while posting an 8-2 mark on the road. Under Fuente, the Hokies are 1-5 against ranked foes (0-1 at home).

Saturday is a prime-time matchup at 8 p.m. on ABC, and Fuente has zero doubts his group is ready for the task of upsetting the No. 6 Fighting Irish.

"We played in a big prime-time game at the first of this year and the first of the year last year, so the stage shouldn't change the way we prepare and play," Fuente said when asked about lessons learned from past experiences. "We've played some really good people on big stages and we'll be ready for this one. I've always steered clear of how the stage defines how we prepare.

"I think we've got to do a great job, we've proven that we can't handle not doing a good job not preparing and if we do a great job, we've at least got a chance. We'll take that same mindset moving forward, regardless of whether the game is on TV or at night or in the morning time or wherever it is, we've got to be ready to go."

Notre Dame Preparing To Block Out The Noise

Lou Somogyi • BlueAndGold.com

For the second week in a row, Notre Dame will attempt to end a dubious 0-3 record.

Mission accomplished last week with a resounding 38-17 victory against then-No. 7 Stanford to snap the 0-3 drought versus the Cardinal from 2015-17.

This week it is a different 0-3 streak that needs to be snapped to keep its momentum toward a College Football Playoff (CFP) berth. Since beginning its partial ACC football membership schedule in 2014, Notre Dame is 0-3 against ranked league members on the road.

- It began in 2014 with 6-0 Notre Dame losing a 31-27 heartbreaker to No. 2 Florida State, the reigning national champion with quarterback Jameis Winston. The Seminoles went on to advance to the four-team CFP in the first year of its existence.

- In 2015, unbeaten Notre Dame lost 24-22 at No. 11 Clemson and the Tigers went on to play for the national title versus Alabama.

- Last year, 8-1 and No. 3 Notre Dame traveled to unbeaten and No. 7 Miami with CFP dreams — and was promptly crushed 41-8. It was clear after an early Hurricanes onslaught the Fighting Irish were shell-shocked by the atmosphere of the raucous atmosphere.

“I was public in saying that I don’t think I handled it the right way and giving them enough information about the situation,” Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly said of what his team encountered last year in Miami. “I can’t be caught off guard — and maybe I was the one that was caught off guard because I didn’t prepare them the right way. We won’t be caught off guard going into Lane Stadium.

“... We’ve been preparing for this kind of environment for quite some time. So I’m confident we’ll be able to handle the moment when it comes.”

Putting in strobe lights with much noise in the weight room and “chaos sessions” in practice have been part of the extracurriculars since the offseason to serve as a form of shocks to the system. The Irish head coach stated that reminders of the Miami debacle have not been needed to emphasize what will be faced at Virginia Tech. Simulating the atmosphere has its limits on the practice field with piped-in noise, but past visuals serve as a prompting, too.

“There’s plenty of video to show what that environment is like,” he said. “So our guys are well accustomed to what it looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like. They know there will be a lot of Orange. The decibels will be loud. The’ll be reminded of it during the week.”

Virginia Tech was classified in the 2018 preseason as potentially the type of “marquee” game that Florida State 2014, Clemson 2015 and Miami 2017 were, but the stunning 49-35 loss to Old Dominion Sept. 22 and some recent attrition to quarterback Josh Jackson (injury) and defensive end Trevon Hill (dismissed from team) took off much of the luster.

Some of it was regained with an impressive 31-14 bounce-back win at No. 22 Duke last weekend, which moved the Hokies back to No. 24 in the Associated Press poll.

Meanwhile, Notre Dame is coming off an emotion-laden game with Stanford, so a possible letdown at Virginia Tech on the road could have far more ramifications than the one at home versus Ball State following the victory versus Michigan in the opener.

Virginia Tech has not necessarily thrived in the last decade in marquee matchups. The Hokies’ last home win versus a ranked opponent came against Miami on Sept. 26, 2009. Since then their record is 9-18 against a ranked opponent and 1-8 versus the top 10 (a win over 2014 eventual national champ Ohio State on the road).

Since that 2009 win versus Miami, the Hokies’ home record against ranked opponents is 0-6 (0-3 versus top-10 foes). Unlike Florida State in 2014, Clemson in 2016 and, to a degree, Miami in 2017, the Hokies are not deemed a bona fide CFP-caliber outfit, especially after the loss to Old Dominion. That is impertinent to Kelly and his troops.

“Our job is to handle the environment and go in and play really good football,” Kelly summarized. “If we do that and handle the environment, handle ourselves and our preparation, we’ll be in pretty good shape. If we can’t handle the environment, we can’t prepare the right way this week because we’re distracted because everybody’s telling us how great we are, then we’ll be in big trouble.

“But this team’s shown an ability to prepare the right way, a maturity to stay away from the distractions.”

They have tuned “the noise” out well so far, and they will have to do it in a different manner Saturday night.

The screenshot shows the BlueGold website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with the 'BLUE GOLD' logo. Below it is a grid of article thumbnails:

- Top Left:** A football game action shot with the headline "Inside Look: Notre Dame Offensive Line/Run Game vs. Stanford" by Bryan Driskell, 3h ago.
- Top Middle:** A coach on the phone with the headline "Irish Will Be Most Complete & Talented Team' Hokies Have Faced In 2018" by Corey Badden, 1h ago.
- Top Right:** A coach on the field with the headline "Brian Kelly Prev... Virginia Tech" by Corey Badden, 3h ago.
- Bottom Left:** A football game action shot with the headline "THE Other Sideline Podcast: Talking Virginia Tech With Tim Sullivan" by Corey Badden, 1h ago.
- Bottom Right:** A football game action shot with the headline "Snap Counts: No... Dame vs. Stanfo" by Bryan Driskell, 3h ago.

Below the grid is a sidebar with a "TICKER" section containing three items:

- Item 1:** "BLUEANDGOLD.COM Inside Look: Secondary/Pass Defense" by Bryan Driskell, 19h ago.
- Item 2:** "BLUEANDGOLD.COM Notre Dame Preparing To Block Out The Noise" by Bryan Driskell, 20h ago.
- Item 3:** "BLUEANDGOLD.COM Notre Dame Commit Tracker: Week Six" by Bryan Driskell, 1d ago.

To the right of the sidebar is a "JOIN THE DISCUSSION" section with two posts:

- Post 1:** 10/2/2018 Lou Somogyi: "Alan Page's Wife, Diane, Dies From Breast Cancer" (1h TDH81, 16 replies, 503 views).
- Post 2:** 10/3/2018 Bryan Driskell: "Inside Look/Grades: Offensive Line/Run Game vs. Stanford" (1h jameskroner3, 3 replies, 82 views).

At the bottom right of the sidebar is a yellow starburst graphic that says: "Start Your FREE 30-DAY TRIAL Today! Use Code: BGI30".

2020 Athlete Caleb Willis Reviews Notre Dame Visit

David McKinney • BlueAndGold.com

Notre Dame hosted more than 40 recruits over the weekend for the Stanford game, including class of 2020 athlete Caleb Willis of Jackson (Tenn.) University School.

Willis — a 5-8, 160-pound prospect — said the weekend at Notre Dame was unforgettable. “It was unbelievable in every way,” he noted. “They’ve got great tradition, a great campus and great facilities.”

The 38-17 win over Stanford was the highlight of the weekend, and Willis said the atmosphere inside Notre Dame Stadium Saturday night was unlike anything else he has ever experienced.

“I’ve been on multiple visits, but I’ve never seen a crowd and a student section get so into the game,” he explained. “It was unbelievable.”

In fact, Willis said watching the game had him itching to get on the field himself.

“It made me want to put pads on and get in the game,” he joked. “I’m only 16, but still. Those fans are really dedicated and it’s an amazing atmosphere. Everything was amazing.”

Outside of the game, Willis got the full visit experience, complete with tours of campus and the football program’s facilities. The young Tennessean said he was blown away by what the Irish have to offer.

“The athletic department and stuff like that was great,” Willis said. “I loved the players’ lounge and the locker room. They’ve also got a recovery room.

“They’ve got everything you need. There’s no way you could go to Notre Dame and not succeed.”

So far, recruitment has been slow for Willis.

The University School standout holds just one offer from the in-state Memphis Tigers. However, schools such as Cincinnati, Louisville and Tennessee have recently expressed interest in him.

Now that he’s visited South Bend, Willis said an eventual Notre Dame offer would mean the world to him.

“That would mean a lot,” Willis said. “It would be one of my top schools and would mean a lot to me.”