

## How Notre Dame Football Can Make You a Winner Part II – Notre Dame and the NY Yankees

From 1925-1946 Notre Dame played Army in Yankee Stadium with the exception of 1930 when the game was held at Soldier Field. This rivalry became a big part of American culture. So much so in fact, that during The Battle of the Bulge in World War II American soldiers, in an effort to identify fellow Americans from German spies would ask unfamiliar strangers, “What was the score of the 1944 Army- Notre Dame game?” Every GI knew that Army had pummeled Notre Dame that season 59-0.

In November 2010, this historic rivalry was once again rekindled as the game returned to Yankee Stadium. Players from Army and Notre Dame got a first hand look at the state-of-the-art locker rooms inside the new stadium. But today, it is an outfielder who plays for the New York Yankees who would fit in perfectly inside the Notre Dame locker room.

So what would a 40 year old journeyman outfielder have in common with a group of 18-21 year olds? That commonality would start with the direction being given from Notre Dame coach Brian Kelly.

On the evening of October 7<sup>th</sup>, Kelly is standing in front of his team holding a game ball he eventually awards to the offensive line. Notre Dame has just dismantled Miami 41-3 on national TV. His team is now 5-0, and off to their best start in about a decade. You could see the excitement in his player’s eyes and feel their sky-high energy within the room. It was time for them to celebrate, until Kelly addressed the team.

He complimented them on a fantastic effort and for their flawless execution. “Defensively we took off the board one of the best offenses we saw this year with no touchdowns,” said Kelly praising his defense. The team hooted and hollered until Kelly reeled them in and cautioned them with a key mantra that he’s been preaching all season long.

“Don’t get infected with success!” he shouted.

“You’ve got to understand this was our best week of practice offensively. You saw the way we went, a perfect practice Thursday. We practiced the right way! It will pay off in the end! We need to find a way to beat Stanford. That’s all you need to think about. Whatever way possible! Whatever we need to do to beat Stanford, in our home, they’re comin to us. We have to find a way. This week we find a way to focus on Stanford. Don’t go off the track on your own. It’s a steady climb up, it’s 5-0. Don’t get infected with success!”

It was just moments after a huge win. A win in their annual “Shamrock Series,” an off-site home game played in front of nearly 63,000 people at Soldier Field. The players focus was understandably on the big win. Kelly astutely shifted their focus by reminding them of all the factors that led to

their success and by instructing them to maintain that same focus rather than read their own headlines and bask in their own glory.

In order to understand how this relates to Ibanez you would have to be aware of what transpired during the same week at Yankee Stadium.

On the evening of October 10<sup>th</sup>, the Yankees were trailing the Baltimore Orioles by one run in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning in game 3 of the ALDS. With 1 out Raul Ibanez was called on to pinch hit for an immortal player, Alex Rodriguez. The pitcher he was facing, Jim Johnson, had successfully completed 51 of 53 save opportunities throughout the regular season. Ibanez hit a dramatic solo home run to tie the game. He wasn't done. In the 12<sup>th</sup> inning while facing often dominant lefty relief specialist Brian Matusz, the lefty hitting Ibanez hit a walk-off home run that sent the Yankee crowd into a frenzy.

Seconds later, Ibanez was interviewed on the field. He was asked to explain his heroics. Consider who he batted for. Then, consider who he hit his home runs against.

"I was just trying to get a good pitch to hit, not trying to do too much, just trying to put a short swing on it," He explained

And the second one?

"Same thing, not trying to do too much," Ibanez reiterated.

He was referring back to his focus and also his preparation. His point was consistent with something I often tell my own players. When you try to hit a home run, you get a powerless effort. But, by staying within your capabilities, you get effortless power.

How did he feel during such a magical moment?

'It's definitely a special moment,' Ibanez said. "But at the same time, in baseball, it's moments -- we're talking about it now, but at some point you just have to try to focus on tomorrow, and tomorrow is another big game," he said downplaying the magnitude of what he had just accomplished.

He had just come off the bench in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning and hit a home run to tie the game and then hit another in the 12<sup>th</sup> inning to win a huge playoff game. Judging by the sound of the sellout crowd, he could probably run for mayor of New York City and win. For some players this would be time to pop champagne, a time to celebrate, and a time to bask in their own glory. What was Ibanez focused on?

Tomorrow's game.

To that end, it comes as no surprise that was not Ibanez's last big moment. He would duplicate the same feat against Detroit Tigers closer Jose Valverde in game one of the ALCS when he hit a game tying two run home run with 2 out in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning.

On that same day, it would take a goal line stand by the Notre Dame defense stopping Stanford twice from inside the 1 yard line in overtime. They had found a way to beat Stanford.

Amidst their enormous success, both Notre Dame and Ibanez had remained committed to their preparation, stuck with their daily routines, and maintained their focus.

Neither had become infected with success.