PERFECT RIVALS

NOTRE DAME, MIAMI,

and the Battle for the Soul of College Football

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For Tom Wilcox, who sent the most encouraging text message
I have ever received: "Catholics vs. Convicts? That's a great idea!"
May a copy find its way to the other side and into his hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFF CARROLL is a freelance writer for the *South Bend Tribune* and the *Times* of northwest Indiana. His work has been honored seventeen times by various professional organizations, including the Indiana Society of Professional Journalists, the Associated Press Sports Editors, and the Illinois and Indiana state press associations. He lives in the Chicago area with his family.

ABOUT THE TYPE

The text of this book was set in Legacy, a typeface family designed by Ronald Arnholm and issued in digital form by ITC in 1992. Both its serifed and unserifed versions are based on an original type created by the French punchcutter Nicholas Jenson in the late fifteenth century. While Legacy tends to differ from Jenson's original in its proportions, it maintains much of the latter's characteristic modulations in stroke.

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PERFECT RIVALS

PROLOGUE

Who Started It?

Of all the questions that would spring from the most heated college football rivalry of the 1980s, this is one that lingers. The inquiry usually arises in reference to the famed dustup in the tunnel on October 15, 1988, when History's Team, the University of Notre Dame, finally informed the Team of the Decade, the University of Miami Hurricanes, that it was not surrendering the neighborhood without a fight. Despite the seemingly obvious differences, the programs had more in common than they, or anyone else, thought at the time. Both programs had been defined largely and for a long time by their quarterbacks, and now the Hurricanes were starting a midwestern Catholic, Steve Walsh, who seemed like the perfect fit for the Irish, while Notre Dame was starting a black South Carolinian, Tony Rice, who was the kind of southerner the Hurricanes rarely let get away. In the early twentieth century, Notre Dame had built its program on the strength of working-class sons of immigrants, cast-asides, and a renegade coach who happened to be a genius. Likewise, Miami's burgeoning dynasty had featured three-star recruits with hardscrabble backgrounds and something to prove. Both head coaches, Jimmy Johnson of Miami and Lou Holtz of Notre Dame, had arrived from programs in turmoil.

With so much in common, perhaps the programs should have considered themselves kindred organizations. But by 1988 they decidedly did not, and had the bloodied knuckles to prove it.

So who started it?

Would you believe *a leprechaun*?

Not in 1988, not in the tunnel, but four years earlier, in the same stadium.

In 1984, first-year Miami head coach Jimmy Johnson brought his defending national championship team into South Bend, where the Hurricanes easily dispensed of their hosts, the Fighting Irish. But even as his team rolled by almost three touchdowns, Johnson did not enjoy the afternoon. He was frustrated by the lack of a police presence to keep the Hurricanes sideline free of unwelcome loiterers. He was tired of Notre Dame marching band members wandering past their boundaries into Miami's space. But most of all, he was of a mind to punt Notre Dame's leprechaun mascot all the way to the end of the rainbow.

"That obnoxious little student in the Irish getup kept running up to me and getting in my face," Johnson would later recall. "Anybody else might have knocked him on his ass. And I can't tell you it didn't cross my mind."

Johnson was too smart to be that brazen. Instead the Hurricanes, game firmly in hand, ran sideline plays designed to steamroll the energetic little guy.

Miami's offense, despite its best efforts, never did manage to run down the Irish leprechaun in the 1984 game. Instead, a year later, the Hurricanes would steamroll the Fighting Irish themselves. As they journeyed to Miami to conclude the 1985 season and head coach Gerry Faust's forgettable tenure—he had resigned earlier in the week to beat the firing squad—the Irish had dropped three of four to the Hurricanes, and none of the defeats had been close. In a series long dominated by Notre Dame, the tables began to turn in Faust's first year, 1981. After eight consecutive defeats to the Irish by double digits, the Hurricanes battered Notre Dame 37–15 in that season's final regular-season game. John Krimm, a cornerback on Faust's first team, remembers feeling "toyed with" by Miami quarterback Jim Kelly. Notre Dame managed to eke out a 16–14 victory over the 'Canes the following season, but losses by 20 and 18 points followed the next two years. And yet, frustrating as those games were, they were nothing compared to what awaited Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl on November 30, 1985.

"Before that game is played," says Frank Stams, a freshman fullback on the '85 Irish, "we go out an hour and fifteen minutes before the

game. We go through our warm-ups like a well-schooled, well-disciplined team. We're doing everything the right way.

"Then I look over on the Miami side, and they're coming out of their locker room, and they don't even have their shirts on. Their belts are unbuckled. They're walking around bullshitting with people. Jimmy Johnson is bullshitting with people. You talk about swagger? I saw the swagger."

Doing color commentary on the game for CBS was former Notre Dame head coach Ara Parseghian. Notre Dame reveres its great coaches, and Parseghian is right there in the South Bend pantheon along with Knute Rockne, a mythic figure not just at Notre Dame but in American sports culture, and Frank Leahy, who built the Irish dynasty of the 1940s. By the time he shared an Orange Bowl booth with Brent Musburger for Faust's final game at Notre Dame, Parseghian had not coached a college football game at Notre Dame—or anywhere—for eleven years. When Miami was looking to revive its program in the late 1970s, it had actually made a preliminary inquiry to Parseghian, but the overture had not panned out. Parseghian instead turned out to be the rarest of birds in his profession: a coach who announced his retirement and then actually stayed retired. But just because you can take the coach out of Notre Dame doesn't mean you can take Notre Dame out of the coach, and as Miami's lead ballooned, Parseghian clearly sympathized with the Irish.

Or, as Jimmy Johnson would later put it, Parseghian had worn his "gold underwear" for the broadcast. In the fourth quarter, with the Hurricanes well on their way to a 58–7 victory, Parseghian's allegiance to the visitors became difficult for him to mask.

"It's time for Jimmy Johnson to show some compassion," he moaned.

The commentary by Parseghian and his booth mates cut straight to the heart of what annoyed Miami's players and coaches about Notre Dame: the idea that one of the most dominant programs in the country owed a collection of players who weren't as talented as Miami was—who didn't work nearly as hard as Miami did—some sort of deference.

"I was sitting at home, because I was a redshirt freshman," says Miami linebacker Bernard Clark, "and I heard them say, 'They're spitting in the face of the Four Horsemen.' I was, like, 'Who are the Four Horsemen? Who is Knute Rockne?' I really didn't know."

After the game, when Johnson heard about Parseghian's on-air laments, he was incensed. After all, Johnson noted, Parseghian himself was known to hang a whooping on an opponent from time to time. In 1966, Parseghian's eventual national champions hammered a hapless Duke squad 64–0. The year before, Notre Dame had clobbered Pittsburgh 69–13. In 1970, Notre Dame destroyed two military academies with long and storied football traditions, drubbing Army 51–10 and Navy 56–7.

"And even poor old Gerry Faust," Johnson would point out, "hung a 52–6 on Purdue in 1983.

"I guess I should have known," he added, "that nobody cries louder and more pitifully than a bully who's just had the shit stomped out of him."

Johnson understood Parseghian's devotion to Notre Dame and its role in his lack of objectivity, but beyond the call for "compassion" he was angry that the former coach's broadcast partners, Musburger and Pat Haden, were completely missing the boat with their explanations of what was happening on the field. Late in the fourth quarter, with the game already out of hand, Faust sent his punter out to kick from his own end zone. Johnson countered with his backup punt return unit. He would swear after the fact that there was no punt block called.

It didn't matter. Miami backup defensive tackle Bill Hawkins saw a gaping hole in the Notre Dame protection scheme and shot through it. He blocked the Notre Dame punt and a Hurricane fell on it for yet another touchdown.

"How can they be blocking punts when the game is completely out of hand?" Parseghian raged.

On one hand, Johnson understood the emotion. Faust's forced resignation had brought many people squarely over to his side, especially Parseghian, who knew more than anybody what kind of pressures the head coach of the Irish faced. And Faust was such a stand-up, kind man that no one with a beating heart wanted to see him go out this way—which was all fine by Johnson and the Hurricanes. In fact, the Miami coach had gone into the game fully expecting Notre Dame's players to rally around their departing coach. In an era before the Internet carried news around the country at lightning speed, the true tenor of the Notre Dame football team at that point, decidedly dour and interested in

nothing more than getting its season-long nightmare over with, was something that Johnson had failed to perceive. Instead, the Notre Dame team his Hurricanes lined up against that day had quit on their coach well before they arrived in south Florida.

"I remember," recalls ND linebacker Wes Pritchett, "Michael Irvin was on that Miami team, and every pass he caught, whether it was a one-yard out or a twenty-yard touchdown, he did his little dance and rubbed our face in it."

Through the years, the Hurricanes would do plenty to contribute to their reputation as the bad boys of college football, so Johnson's shock and dismay at what he perceived was his program's unfair treatment by the media and the public was willfully disingenuous at worst and blissfully unaware at best. As the years went by, Johnson would reveal that it wasn't out of character for his teams to lay a beating on a hapless opponent out of sheer spite. Two years after breaking Notre Dame's spirit, for example, Johnson's Hurricanes would do the same to his own alma mater, Arkansas. That 51–7 victory was sweet revenge aimed at Arkansas head coach Frank Broyles, Johnson's college coach. Johnson felt that Broyles had embarrassed him during a job search years earlier, and he would later call Broyles "the first of three men I have written off in my life."

Nonetheless, looking back on the development of Miami's reputation as the unquestioned villain figure in college football, Johnson felt that no one played a bigger role than Parseghian that afternoon against Notre Dame. When the Hurricanes heard about Parseghian's emotional commentary, they stewed about the hypocrisy. "I don't like all that tradition stuff," Hurricanes running back Melvin Bratton said after the game. "I don't like Notre Dame. I hate them."

"We just pounded Gerry Faust into retirement," says Dan Sileo, a defensive lineman on the 1985 'Canes. "We beat the fuck out of them, and I remember the alumni guys coming up to us and saying, 'Hey, Notre Dame used to come in here under Ara Parseghian and beat us 77–7.' Ara Parseghian blasted Jimmy for it, but hey, bro, you used to come into the Orange Bowl and blow out Miami that way, and now you don't like it because it's Notre Dame? Tough shit.

"[Former Miami linebacker] Ted Hendricks would tell me, 'These fuckers would come in here and blow us out and not think twice about

putting seventy on you,'" Sileo adds. "So when Miami was blowing them out, it was great. It was justice. It's called defending the 'U.'"

Notre Dame's players didn't feel that they had simply lost a football game or that their talent level didn't measure up to Miami's. They were left wondering if their entire operation was being left in the dust by the Hurricanes, who had their own way of "respecting the game": steamrolling over opponents and dancing on their graves.

"It was, like, 'What's the point of what we're doing?'" Stams says. "'Why can't we do it their way?' You grow up being disciplined and regimented in the game, but there's always an exception to the rule. Those guys were the exception. And yeah, you start scratching your head like 'Jesus, are we doing it the right way?'"

Even the coach they helped drive from a job respected the Hurricanes' aggressive style. "They were in the national championship picture at that time," says Faust. "In those days, how badly you beat a team affected the polls. So I didn't blame them one bit. That's football."

After the contest, the teams lined up for their customary postgame handshake. Among his Notre Dame teammates, Terry Andrysiak was not known as a locker room rabble-rouser. "He wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful," Stams says.

But in the aftermath of the 51-point embarrassment, even the reserved backup quarterback had had just about enough. As the handshake lines moved along, Andrysiak spotted Johnson up ahead. Playing behind junior starter Steve Beuerlein, the quiet sophomore had gotten into the game only for fourth-quarter mop-up duty. But that didn't mean he hadn't taken the loss to heart any less than teammates who had suffered through nearly all sixty minutes of the epic humiliation.

When the paths of the backup quarterback and the winning coach finally crossed, Andrysiak took Johnson's hand and stared him straight in the eye.

"Coach," he began, "that was one of the most classless acts I've seen in my life. And in a few years, when you come to our place, we're going to kick your ass."

PART ONE

Collision Course