

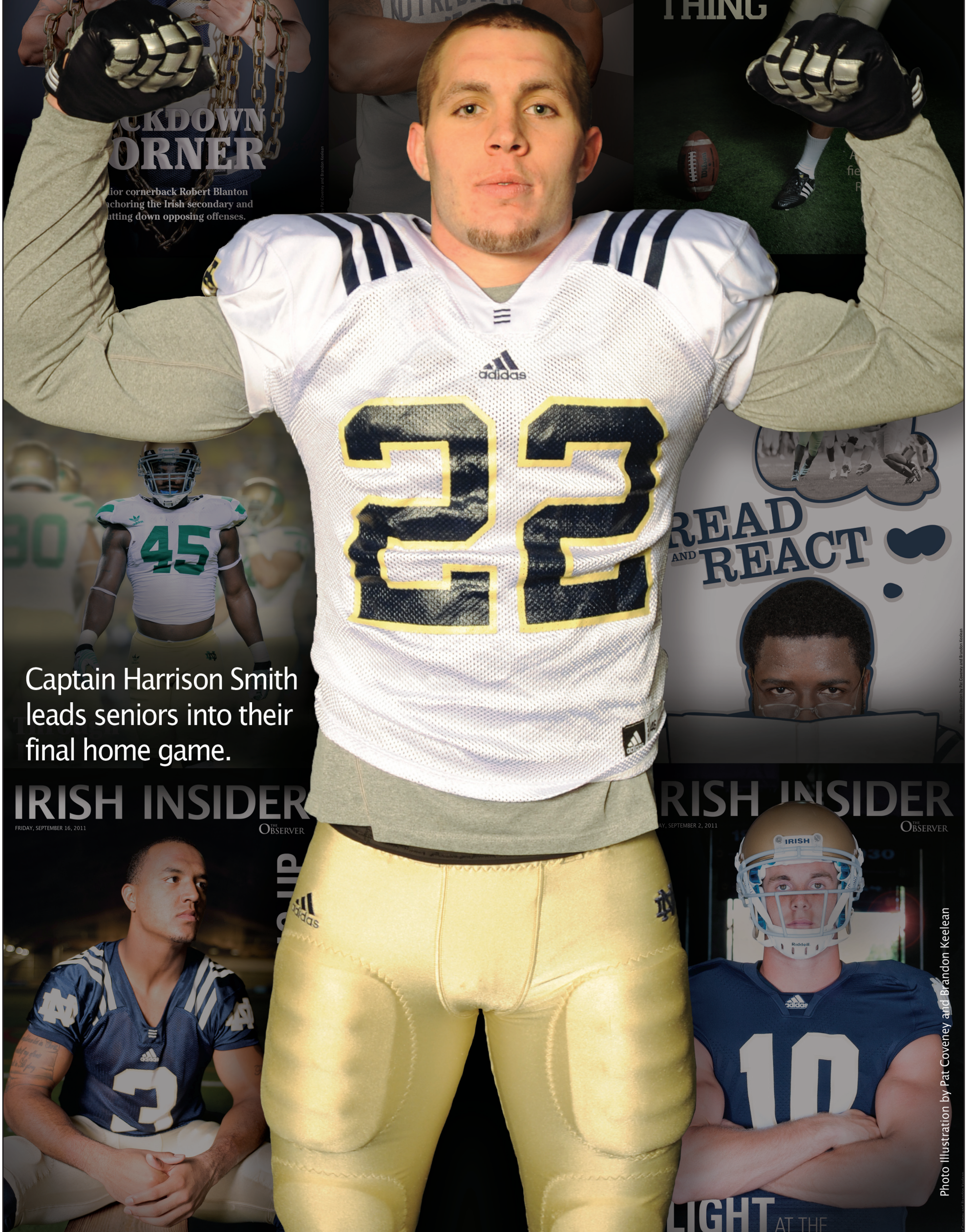
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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2011

Senior Day Edition

THE OBSERVER



KICKDOWN CORNER

Senior cornerback Robert Blanton anchoring the Irish secondary and shutting down opposing offenses.

Captain Harrison Smith leads seniors into their final home game.

Photo Illustration by Pat Coveney and Brandon Keelean

COMMENTARY

Two years from now, we'll thank this class

Apparently I will invent a time machine two years from now, because I'm about to issue a sincere piece of gratitude from 24 months in the future.

To this year's 38 seniors, 24-year-old Douglas Farmer thanks you. Really, thank you.



Douglas Farmer
Editor-in-Chief

Next year, Notre Dame will be successful, but it will also be going up against a schedule so crazily difficult it could not have been created by Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick, but rather by his alter ego, Captain Jack Sparrow.

Two years from now, Notre Dame will find itself in the spotlight as soon as the first preseason magazines hit the news racks, and that spotlight will not diminish until the first week of January. This year's 38 seniors deserve credit for that spotlight, but two years from now, how will we ever thank them?

That is why I hopped in my time machine and came back to write this column.

Thank you 38 for showing up every day, two (in some cases three) years under Charlie Weis' command, and two years under Brian Kelly's command. A few of your classmates, even role models in the class ahead of you, departed during the coaching change. You stuck by your teammates and your University.

Thank you 38 for not driving a wedge through the team after a difficult 6-6 season in 2009, and thank you for not doing so after opening last season 1-3. Both instances begged for a mutiny, and in both instances, you were the stabilizing force, as the older players looked toward their own futures, and the younger players looked to you for guidance.

Thank you 38 for bouncing back from both of those dismal records, now holding a career tally of 28-20. No, that is not stellar, and it is certainly not the record you envisioned when you took the field against San Diego State in 2008, but it is still a testament to what you 38 have done.

You 38 have embraced Kelly. Three weeks ago he threw most of you under the pro-

verbial bus during his Thursday press conference before the Navy game. Some senior classes would have quit on a coach after such a bone-headed gaffe. Instead, you handled the drama in-house in graceful fashion.

You 38 have removed some of the sting from the loss to USC a few weeks ago, and instilled belief once again in your classmates, all 2,000 of us. That loss was a dagger, to us and to you. Honestly, many of us gave up at that point, but you did not.

And your lasting legacy: You 38 have established a culture in the Irish locker room. This culture, one of fun-loving Trick Shot Mondays yet also one of an all-consuming desire to pursue victory each and every week, will still be visible two years from now. As fans bemoan disco-ball helmets, field turf and jumbotrons, this culture is becoming the defining characteristic of Notre Dame football. Thank you.

When receiver Michael Floyd and quarterback Dayne Crist committed to Notre Dame four years ago, it was seen as an unparalleled recruiting coup. Neither of their careers has panned out as they expected, both laden with injuries and controversy, yet both have maintained positive attitudes through it all.

When linebacker Darius Fleming and defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore joined them in that recruiting class, word of their potential traveled faster than my time machine does. While both Fleming and Lewis-Moore have excelled at points in their careers, they have also become the core of the tight-knit Irish locker room.

In Floyd's and Crist's wake, two years from now TJ Jones and Tommy Rees will walk, stockpiling stats.

In Fleming's and Lewis-Moore's roles, Louis Nix and a trio of current freshmen will stand. Nix, Stephon Tuitt, Aaron Lynch and Ishaq Williams will spread as much humor to their teammates as they do fear to their opponents.

Rightfully so, Jones, Rees, Nix and Co. will receive accolades for these accomplishments in two years, but the real thanks go to you 38, who established a precedent they had no choice but to follow.

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu
The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.

FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Two visit for final home game

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Editor

As the season draws to a close, so too does the weekly rush of visitors to campus. Only two prospective players will take official visits to campus this weekend. One is California tight end Taylor McNamara, who has verbally committed to Arizona. While McNamara is still ostensibly considering the Irish, not landing him would not be the end of the world for Notre Dame, according to Irish recruiting expert Mike Frank.

"I think with [freshman tight end] Ben Koyack they just felt like there was a guy who could play early and they probably didn't need another tight end," said Frank, who runs the ESPN affiliate Irish Sports Daily. "I think they're looking for one guy possibly — if they didn't get anybody it wasn't that big of a deal. ... If it isn't coming this class, they'll certainly take two next class. There aren't a lot of great tight ends this year. McNamara's the only guy they're really interested in. I don't think they'll look at anybody else but they do really like him."

Frank said recruits like McNamara notice the proud tradition of Notre Dame tight ends, a list that includes current NFL players Anthony Fasano, John Carlson and Kyle Rudolph.

"I just think that they do a really nice job of developing tight ends and then getting them the ball," Frank said. "Tight ends have caught a lot of passes for Notre Dame over the last 10 years, and those

guys notice that when they're looking at where they'd like to play football."

Frank considers tight ends coach Mike Denbrock to be one of the main reasons tight ends who have big aspirations look to commit to the Irish.

"They've got a really good run of tight ends and putting guys in the NFL and guys being really productive," Frank said. "I think Mike Denbrock's proven that he's one of the best tight end coaches in the country."

Iowa receiver Amara Darbow will also take his official visit to South Bend this weekend — but it will certainly not be the first time Darbow learns about Notre Dame.

"He's been to Notre Dame six or seven times, coming to games, coming to camps, I believe [he has been to] spring practice," Frank said. "He's been around Notre Dame quite a bit. He knows a lot about the program [and] knows a lot about the coaches."

"I think [safeties coach] Chuck Martin's done a very good job of recruiting him and he's certainly been a guy that they've been high on for a long time."

Frank said Darbow's biggest asset is his pure athleticism.

"He's just a fantastic athlete," Frank said. "He's maybe a little more raw than, say, [Notre Dame commit] Deontay Greenberry ... but he's got more downfield speed."

"Notre Dame needs guys that can stretch the field, and he's certainly a guy that can do that."

The Irish will be competing with two other storied pro-

grams for Darbow's services.

"A lot of people think Michigan and Florida are the two other schools in this race," Frank said. "I think it's going to be important for Notre Dame to get him around players and get him to hang out with Notre Dame's players. He's got the type of personality that will fit in real well with Notre Dame's players."

Indiana quarterback Gunner Kiel, who recently backed off his commitment to Indiana, may also take an unofficial visit to South Bend this weekend. Kiel's presence will be determined largely by the result of his playoff game Friday night, but Frank said if Kiel does visit, it will be another good sign that the Irish are the frontrunners in the race for the home-state gunslinger.

"I would say Notre Dame's doing really well with Gunner Kiel," Frank said. "I think Notre Dame can be very hard to beat in this race as long as they continue to impress on the field and show that they're headed in the right direction team-wise. I think they're going to be in pretty good shape when it all comes down to decision time. If he visits again this weekend, I think it's another really good sign for Notre Dame."

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank's irishsportsdaily.com. Email Mike at mikefrank18@sbcglobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu

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HARRISON SMITH

Smith honored as lone captain

Despite switching positions often early in his career, senior Harrison Smith solidifies the defense

By ERIC PRISTER
Senior Sports Writer

In a career filled with ups and downs, winning seasons and losing seasons, and position changes, fifth-year safety and captain Harrison Smith has always remained consistent.

On the field, he has started every game over the past three seasons and leads all active Irish players in tackles, pass break-ups and interceptions. Off the field, Smith said he leads, not vocally, but as a rock for his teammates.

"I'd say credibility with my teammates [is my greatest strength as a captain]," he said. "They all know the kind of guy I am. I'm not a fake guy, I'm not a 'rah rah' guy. If you're looking for a great speech, I might not be the guy. But they all know they can count on me and that I'll do anything for them."

Ever in Irish coach Brian Kelly, when he told Smith he would be the lone captain for the Irish throughout the season, reminded the fifth-year safety to remain consistent.

"He just told me not to be somebody I'm not," Smith said. "He said just to keep doing what I've been doing to this point — that's why he wanted me as captain. So he said just be yourself and keep doing what you've been doing."

Smith said that in being a captain, he not only has a re-

sponsibility to remain steady for his teammates, but for all of Notre Dame's fan base.

"It's a big responsibility," he said. "So many people love this school and follow this school, so there is a lot you have to live up to. It's also good though because it makes you want to elevate your game all the time and always be that guy that people can look to."

Smith redshirted his freshman season, but has played in every game since. The Gatorade player of the year in Tennessee as a senior in high school, he said the camaraderie he saw on Notre Dame's team was what drew him to the school.

"The recruiting process — I hated it, so I didn't take all my visits," he said. "I visited Tennessee and here, and at the end of the day, I just really liked

how the team interacted with each other. Obviously everything else is great — the tradition, everything Notre Dame has to offer academically. But just the way the guys acted with each other, how close everyone was, was really what sold me on the place."

Smith played in every game of his sophomore season at safety, starting all but four contests and finishing fourth on the team in tackles. He continued to play safety through the first half of his junior season before switching to outside linebacker after six games. Smith said the transition was difficult, but made him a better player in the end.

"I would say [changing positions] could be good or bad,"

he said. "If you're not mature enough and don't know enough about the game and are not ready to handle a bunch of different roles, I don't think you'll ever be able to settle into a role. But I'm glad I did it now because I learned so much from it."



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

Senior safety Harrison Smith surveys the field during a 28-3 win over No. 14 Utah on Senior Day in 2010. Smith recorded seven tackles and an interception in the victory.

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"Now I know what it's like to be a linebacker, and so what they're thinking when I'm playing behind them. But I've always seen myself as a safety, even when I was down

there, I was more of an undersized linebacker, so it's good to be back playing safety."

Despite the position switch, Smith had another productive year in 2009. He was third on the team in tackles with 69 and started every game for the Irish. When Kelly took over as head coach before the 2010 season, he moved Smith back to his natural position at safety. Smith took advantage, finishing second on the team with 93 tackles, and added seven interceptions to his résumé. He picked off his first career pass against Boston College and intercepted three passes in the first half of the Sun Bowl against Miami, which tied a team record. His seven interceptions ranked fourth in the nation in that category.

"Ever since last year [my thought process] is always [to] make a play," he said. "If there's ever an opportunity for an interception, that's what you've got to go for. But if you realize that the ball's coming down and you're not in position for an interception, you've got to go for the breakup."

Smith is currently second on the team in tackles behind junior linebacker Manti Te'o and leads in pass break-ups with

nine. Kelly said Smith is excellent at leading through his actions, both on and off the field.

"[He is a] leader by example, how you prepare, how you take

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Harrison Smith
senior safety

care of yourself, both on and off the field, what it's like to represent Notre Dame football seven days a week, 24 hours a day," Kelly said. "I mean he's the kind of guy that you can model as to what your programs look like because of the way he handles himself all the time. When you're in the mix of changes going on in your program, he has to be a great communicator to the other players as well. He sometimes has to carry the water, so to speak, in terms of the messages. And he'll always be welcome here because of what he's meant to us, I mean our entire program here, too."

Smith credits some of his development to his position coach Chuck Martin. He said Martin does a good job balancing a strict on-field relationship with a genial relationship outside the stadium.

"There's been so many people who have had an effect on my time here that it would be hard to name everybody," he said. "Now, Coach Martin has made an impact on my game and just being around him, picking up things off of him — he's been very influential."

"He really does a good job separating when he's mad at

you on the field and then when you're off the field, and he does that with all of the players. He's always looking out for everyone and making sure they're alright, but once you're on the field, he's going to get after you."

When asked about his next step, Smith said his goal is the same as any other player who plays college football — the NFL. He is currently ranked sixth among graduating safeties on Scout.com for draft potential.

"[The NFL] is everybody's dream, who plays college football, to go on and do that," he said. "So, if that's an opportunity then that's what I want to do."

Smith said despite all the ups and downs of his career, his experience at Notre Dame has been one of the best of his life.

"I wouldn't want to say [it was] a wild ride, but [my time at Notre Dame] has been kind of like a roller coaster, on and off the field. But I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's been great — just the relationships you make with not only teammates and coaches, but with students. The

guys in the dorm, my roommates — I had the same roommate every year, John McGeehan. Relationships like that are things that I'll never forget.

"If anything has gotten stronger than it was when I was recruited here, [it is the] things that people don't see when you watch a game, just our day-to-day lives, stuff like that. How many of us always hanging out, talking about anything, it's just really cool to be a part of."

Harrison Smith
senior safety

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GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

Senior safety Harrison Smith tackles a ballcarrier in Notre Dame's 59-33 win over Air Force on Oct. 8.

ROBERT BLANTON

Blanton seizes starting opportunity

Senior cornerback Robert Blanton shuts down opposing receivers to lift the Irish defense

By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Sept. 23 edition of The Observer.

They call it being on an island. No man's land. Responsibilities range from deflecting a pass to jamming a receiver to shedding a block to making an open-field tackle to intercepting the opposing quarterback. Candidates must possess a sub-4.5 40-yard dash time and a minimum 36-inch vertical.

Still interested in the cornerback position?

"You don't have any help out there. If you don't have safety help over the top, there's no help out there. It's like an island. If you mess up, it's going to be a touchdown hands-down."

Take it from senior cornerback Robert Blanton, Notre Dame's stalwart cornerback.

Blanton played four quarters of shutdown defense, deflecting passes and recording six tackles in one of the most impressive defensive performances this season, a 31-13 win over Michigan State on Sept. 17 that included Blanton's key sack of Spartans quarterback Kirk Cousins in the third quarter.

"We felt very strongly about Robert Blanton coming into the season, that he would give us great play," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "I think he's exceeded everybody's expectations at this point. He's been a consistent performer for us."

Blanton's natural comfort at the cornerback position comes

from experience as much as athletic ability. A one-time safety, Blanton converted to the cornerback position as a sophomore in high school and never looked back.

But that natural comfort did not translate to success on every down early in Blanton's career, and the corner found himself shuffling in-and-out of the starting rotation as a sophomore after starting against USC, Syracuse and Hawaii as a freshman.

Following a year of rotations with former Irish cornerback Darrin Walls and senior Gary Gray in 2010, Blanton secured his position on the perimeter in his final year in pads for the Irish.

"The difference now is that he comes into this year with a lot of experience, a lot of confidence," defensive backs coach Kerry Cooks said.

"He's got to be one of the guys back there in the secondary that sets the tone. When he goes out there and he makes plays, he's one of those guys that's just got a personality that energizes everybody."

While Blanton brings a renewed enthusiasm to the position, Kelly met with the corner earlier in the year to discuss his verbal approach on the field.

"I don't allow talk on the field, so we had our conversations in

the first couple of practices last spring," he said. "Since that time, he's curtailed the talking."

"It's great that he's got that kind of personality. He just doesn't talk on the field. He does it with his actions, which is what I expect of him."

Those actions included an electrifying 82-yard interception return late in the fourth quarter to dash any chance of a Spartan comeback and seal the Irish victory, a critical win after an 0-2 start. At the conclusion of the return, stadium public address announcer Mike Collins recapped the play with a new call: "Sir Robert Blanton."

Collins, who describes the North Carolina native as a "southern gentleman," said he has only used a handful of nicknames in his 30 years as the voice of Notre Dame Stadium, reserving the distinction for only certain occasions.

"So, I met Robert his sophomore year," Collins said. "No matter what, he answers everything with, 'Yes, sir,' — everything. So I went to him after last season and asked if there was something special he did on the field, would he mind if I called him 'Sir Robert Blanton.'"

"Then I said I had to wait until something really special happened, and then it did against MSU, and he is now Sir Robert Blanton."

Collins may call him "Sir", and his teammates may call him 'RJ,' but opposing offensive coordinators simply calling him frustrating. The corner's success, which includes another late interception against Michigan in the second game of the season, stems

"The difference now is that he comes into the year with a lot of experience, a lot of confidence."

Kerry Cooks
defensive backs coach

"We felt very strongly about Robert Blanton coming into the season, that he would give us great play."

Brian Kelly
Irish coach

"He's tall and long. He gives you a lot of difficulty. He presses you. You have to know how to get off the line."

Michael Floyd
senior receiver



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

Senior cornerback Robert Blanton chases a defender in Notre Dame's 31-17 loss to USC on Oct. 22.

from an intense preparation process that begins in the film room.

"RJ's up here studying just as much as the coaches are," Cooks said. "It's ridiculous. Sometimes I'll tell him a play, and he'll already know the play is happening just based on the recognition, the splits. A lot of that comes from studying and understanding what the offense is trying to do to him."

Blanton, who said the cornerback position is 90 percent mental, said he focuses his time in the film room studying opposing receivers and their tendencies rather than highlights of his past performances.

"100 percent I watch my opponent," he said. "Our coaches have a great breakdown for us. They gave us clips, cut-ups. I'll watch those and then watch the receivers and evaluate each receiver on the team. But I don't study too much. It's fun to go in there and evaluate your opponent, and it helps you on Saturday to be successful and see what your opponent's doing. It's like studying for an exam. Saturday is the exam."

While Blanton has been impressive this season, he remains focused on the task ahead, taking each game and each snap one at a time.

A constant test in practice, senior wide receiver Michael Floyd, said Blanton possesses a number of qualities that make him difficult to beat both down the field and in short-yardage situations.

"He's tall and long," Floyd said. "He gives you a lot of difficulty. He presses you. You have to know how to get off the line. He gives us a lot of pressure and a lot of good technique that we can get help on."

Defensive coordinator Bob Diaco said the 6-foot-1 senior utilizes his length to his advantage, allowing Blanton to compete for the football in the air with larger receivers. Still, he credits Blanton's intangibles, character and leadership qualities for his success on the field.

"He's the battery," Diaco said. "He's fun, he's exciting. He's just himself. And he leads by example. He doesn't mind snatching a guy up and getting him right, no matter who it is. He's constantly pressing and making sure the guys are locked in to the task at hand."

In addition to his responsibilities on the field, Blanton has taken on the role of mentor to sophomore cornerbacks Lo Wood and Bennett Jackson.

Cooks said he hopes the young corners will learn from Blanton's "swagger" and relentless enthusiasm toward football.

"I think his passion for the game and his will not to get beat, you want to pass on," Cooks said. "You have to be right on the edge. You got to have a short-term memory. When you line-up, nobody is better than you, nobody can beat you, but at the same time you respect every wide receiver. The reality of it is if you're overconfident, then you are going to get beat."



TOM YOUNG/The Observer

Senior cornerback Robert Blanton returns an interception during the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's 31-13 win over Michigan State on Sept. 17.

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

BRAXSTON CAVE

Cave stays close to home

Granger, Ind., native helps build elite Notre Dame offensive line before suffering injury

By JACK HEFFERON
Sports Writer

Despite its location in northwestern Indiana, one of Notre Dame's strengths has always been its ability to bring in elite players from across the country, players that hail from Hawaii or Florida, and everywhere in between.

But sometimes, they're already here.

Senior center Braxton Cave was born and raised in Granger, Ind., about 10 miles away from Notre Dame Stadium. Cave was immediately immersed in all things Notre Dame, as several of his relatives attended the University, and his parents were diehard fans. Cave is even named after Braxton Banks, a running back who played for the Irish in the late 1980s.

"It's true [that I was named after Banks]," Cave said. "I was 10 pounds, 4 ounces when I was born though, so I think my parents always knew I was probably going to be a lineman, not a running back."

Cave only continued to grow from there and used that size, along with his athleticism and football IQ, to become a star at local Penn High School. After leading Penn to an undefeated regular season and being named the No. 4 center prospect in the country, scholarship offers rolled in. And while Cave and his family did consider every option, one call from former Irish coach Charlie Weis effectively ended the process.

"I looked at other schools," Cave said. "But once I got my Notre Dame offer, this was my first choice."

Cave arrived on campus and

quickly went about making the transition to college life. He quickly cracked the lineup, and served as a short snapper on special teams in the first game of his career against San Diego State. However, that breakthrough was tempered by an injury which ended his season, but granted him both a medical redshirt and an additional year to learn how to excel in college.

"It was tough," Cave said. "You always want to be out there playing and competing, but it gave me another year to learn the offense and to get comfortable with everything. It's different getting ready for major college football compared to high school, but after a year of doing it, you learn the ins and outs of everything."

That initial setback was understandably tough for Cave, as it would be for any freshman stripped of an experience they had barely had time to enjoy.

But while he worked hard on his own to rehab and get back to playing, he also had help from both his family at home and his family in the locker room.

"Having my family here was very help-

ful," Cave said. "Just being able to go right down the street to get a home-cooked meal, or have them bring food over for me and my roommates, always seeing them made things a lot easier."

"Another guy who I could go to was [then-senior center] Eric Olson," Cave said. "He's one of my best friends; I still talk to him almost every week now. He was one of the leaders on the team then. I always looked to him for advice, and he always helped me through everything."

Cave bounced back in his sophomore year and played in 12 games, almost exclusively on special teams. But while that in itself was a bit of redemption for the center, he was not entirely satisfied.

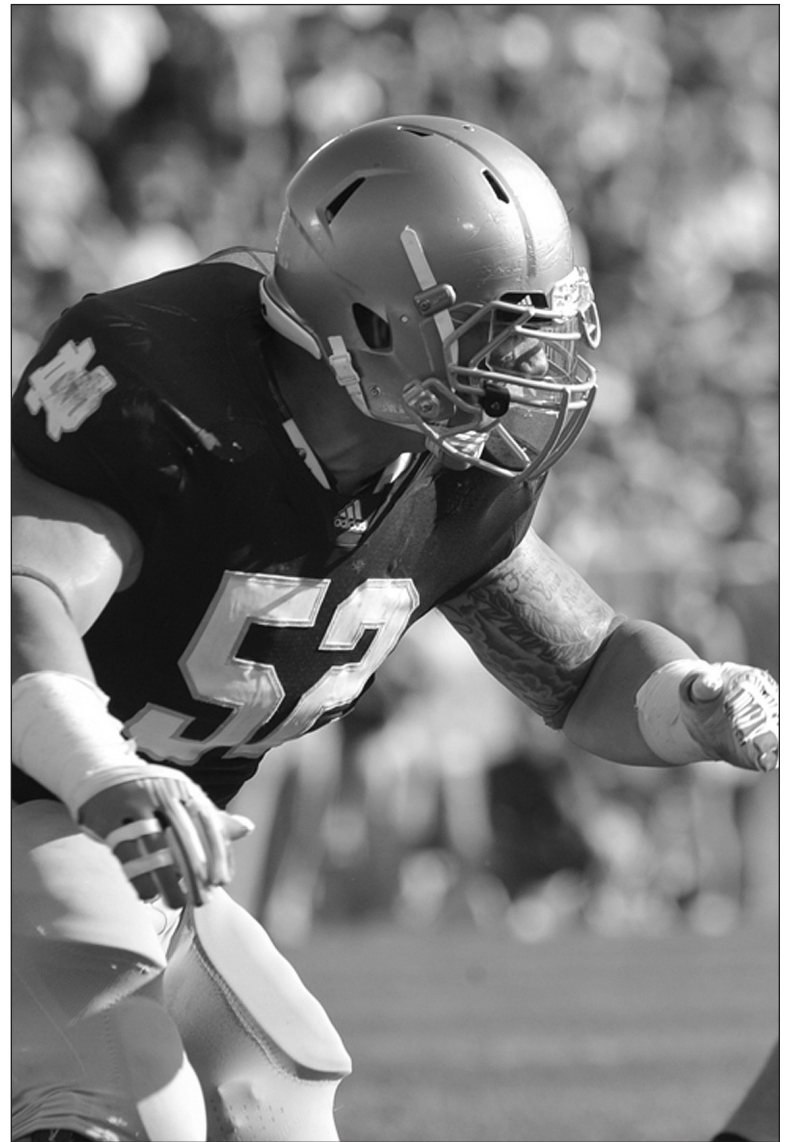
"It was tough because you want to be out there playing, but as a younger guy, special teams is usually your easiest way to get on the field," Cave said. "So I took advantage of being able to get out there on the field through special teams and made the most of it."

Cave did indeed make the most of his opportunity, and his hard work allowed him to take hold of the starting center position in his junior year. Forced to deal with both the new responsibilities of being a starter and learning Irish coach Brian Kelly's new, shotgun-oriented offensive schemes, Cave faced a difficult transition. However, the feeling of controlling every offensive play was enough to get him through it.

"It was a transition for me just as far as the way you go about things every day as a starter, and the way you need to take care of your body on a day-to-day basis just to play again on the next Saturday," Cave said. "It was awesome though, just to know that whatever I did was going to have an influence on the outcome of the game. It was nice to have more of a leadership role."

Cave thrived in that role, and since then has continued that success with an offensive line that has quietly become one of the elite units in the game. Notre Dame allowed just 20 sacks in Cave's junior year, its best performance in a dozen years. The group has been even better this year, and held opponents sackless for more than five games.

The group has also paved the way for running backs senior Jonas Gray and junior Cierre Wood, who have both enjoyed breakout seasons by following the lead blocking of Cave



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior center Braxton Cave looks to block a defender during Notre Dame's 59-33 victory over Air Force on Oct. 8.

and company. Cave credits the group's exceptional performance this year to close friendships they have fostered from four years together in the trenches.

"We're very close. I'd say this is the most close-knit group I've been around since I've been here," he said. "Making sure that we have a running game established and that we protect the quarterback is a big thing the offensive line prides itself on. Being able to rush for 200 yards a game just opens up the passing game that much more, so we took that responsibility upon ourselves."

Cave's season ended after he suffered a torn foot ligament during the win over Wake Forest, and the streak of five sackless games ended the next week. And while Cave is disappointed at once again having a year cut short with injury, he has tried to use his experience to help out his teammates from the sidelines.

"Braxton has been extremely supportive," said senior center Mike Golic Jr., who has started in Cave's place since the injury. "I've been able to draw on his experience now, and that's been very helpful. I think everyone in this locker room will tell you that Braxton is the type of guy that will do anything for his brothers in the locker room and he shows that in the way he plays out there on the field and the way he puts everything on the line for the guys on this team. I think he's a guy you can count on."

With the increased downtime he's had while recovering from his injury, Cave has also been able to slow down and reflect on how blessed he has been to spend his time at Notre Dame.

"There's so many people

around the country, even around the world, that wish they could live a day in our shoes," he said. "When you're doing it on a day-to-day basis you don't really think about it like that, but when you get a chance to step back and look at the big picture, you realize that it's pretty special."

"Being out, I have been able to think about that a little more. You know you hear the saying, 'You don't know how good you've got it until it's gone' and that's a very true statement. You don't realize until you're separated from something you love."

Cave has another year of eligibility, and he plans on using it to come back strong and help the Irish. After that, he'll leave school with a degree in psychology, although he hopes his days of football will extend far past graduation.

"Obviously, my plan first off is to play football, hopefully for another 10-plus years," Cave said. "That's my goal. Depending on how that works out, I'd like to do my own business thing, and kind of see where I can go from there."

But while his future plans may still be somewhat up in the air, one thing Cave is certain about is the experience he's had under the Golden Dome will carry him through the rest of his life.

"I just love the camaraderie and being able to hang out with the guys every day," he said. "You're so used to hanging out with the same people every day, even in the locker room, you're just hanging out and talking, and you never get that ever again. The friendships I've made here I think will last a lifetime."

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ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Senior center Braxton Cave prepares to snap the ball during Notre Dame's 31-17 loss to USC on Oct. 22. The USC contest was the first night game in Notre Dame Stadium since 1990.

LANE CLELLAND

Clelland moves from offense to defense to special teams

By LAURA COLETTI
Sports Writer

Offensive tackle Lane Clelland's experience at Notre Dame has been all about learning, adapting and growing.

But the learning began far before arriving on campus in 2008. Clelland began playing football at the young age of five years old, and grew up with the perfect teacher living in the same household: his older brother, Lance.

Lance Clelland graduated from Northwestern in 2001 and was a four-year starter on the offensive line that won a Big Ten championship in 2000. After graduating, he went home to Maryland to coach his younger brother at the McDonogh School.

"I grew up watching [Lance]," Clelland said. "I come from a blue-collar family and growing up I was just always around football. [Lance] really taught me a lot of stuff."

A dual-sport athlete at McDonogh, Clelland was also a talented wrestler and his time spent wrestling contributed significantly to his football ability.

"Wrestling practice is some of the hardest work out there," he said. "It's good because it gives you a strong work ethic. Also, a lot of the control you need for your upper body as a wrestler is a huge factor in offensive and defensive line play, so I really think [wrestling] helped a lot."

Under the tutelage of his brother and the added benefit of an off-season sport, Clelland was heavily recruited by schools such

as Nebraska, Alabama, Michigan and Boston College, but committed to Notre Dame during the spring of his junior year. After playing both offense and defense in high school, Clelland first took the field as an offensive tackle in 2009 after redshirting his freshman season. Since then, he's taken on a variety of roles for the Irish.

"I played a little bit of defense in the spring of 2010 when Coach Kelly [was hired]," he said. "I'd been moving pretty well and they just wanted to give me a shot. I really liked defense, it was a lot of fun."

Clelland has also spent time on a variety of special teams units. Despite being moved around so much, Clelland's favorite spot is still on offense.

"Defense was a good time, but I'm kind of an offensive lineman at heart," he said. "It's what I was brought up to do. It's been kind of engrained in me from the start."

This year, Clelland has adapted to yet another role. Since tearing his ACL over the summer, he's been sidelined for the year and has learned to be a supportive teammate.

"I've been cheering guys on and motivating the younger guys," he said. "If I see them in practice doing something that I can help them out with, a technique here or there, I try to help them out."

While this role is frustrating at times, Clelland has taken it in stride.

"In general, I think it's just about being more supportive for



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Senior tackle Lane Clelland blocks a defender during practice this season. Clelland has appeared in 13 games during his career.

the team," he said. "It stinks not to be able to play when you have been for just about your whole life. It's all about how you handle it though."

While there are many possibilities regarding the future of his athletic career, Clelland's experiences as a student-athlete at Notre Dame are some that will stay with him for the rest of his life.

"[Being an athlete here] is going to impact [the rest of my life] a lot because I feel like when you're a student-athlete at Notre Dame, it's essentially taking on a full-time job," Clelland said. "You've got however many hours

of work a week, with preparation for everything. Preparation that goes into a game, preparation that goes into the summers, into the spring. I mean, it's a full-time job and that's on top of our school work that we have."

Clelland said he appreciates the value of a challenging Notre Dame education.

"It's going to help. Time management is the biggest thing to learn, and I've definitely gotten a good grasp on it," he said. "I understand how I am with time management and what I have to do and where I need to put focus on at certain times."

A double major in English and

Computer Applications, Clelland hopes to go into business after graduating.

"English majors get the stereotype that they're going into law," he said. "I'm trying to go into business to see what I can do. I feel like I'll bring a different perspective to things."

Whether the future holds another year of blocking defenders on the offensive line or trying to make it as a businessman, the same skill set will be essential and will be what Clelland's done all along: learn, adapt and grow.

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PATRICK COUGHLIN

Coughlin applies lessons from brother to earn role on team

By BRIAN HARTNETT
Sports Writer

For most Division I football players, simply learning the roles and nuances of a single position is a job in itself. For senior running back Patrick Coughlin, life as a Notre Dame walk-on football player has required an understanding of several different positions, as Coughlin has taken on the roles of receiver, running back and both kickoff and kick return specialist during his time at Notre Dame.

However, Coughlin's story of adapting to several different roles

is not simply limited to the football field. Coughlin began his freshman year at Notre Dame as a member of the track team, a position that he had expected to hold throughout his college years.

As three-sport athlete at Brother Rice High School in Chiago, Coughlin played football, basketball and track, but missed much of his final high school football season due to a separated shoulder.

"After I got hurt, I decided to concentrate on track, and I thought that that would be my only way to play a sport in college," Coughlin said. "The coach at Notre Dame

asked me if I was interested in running track here, and I joined the team as a preferred walk-on."

Coughlin spent his freshman year and the first semester of his sophomore year competing for the team, but soon came to the realization that he truly missed playing football. His longing for the game was not just reignited by watching Notre Dame play on fall Saturdays; it was largely fueled by watching the efforts of his older brother Brian, then a walk-on receiver for the team.

"I never thought that I would play football again until my brother walked on," Coughlin said. "Since he is only one year older, we have always hung out with a lot of the same people and, when he got on the team, I started hanging out with the other walk-ons ... They told me that I could definitely make the team if I tried out, which encouraged me a lot."

With that support system behind him, Coughlin tried out for the team in 2009 and made the squad. He was quickly thrust into the role of scout team receiver, going against Notre Dame's top defenders to prepare them for opposing offenses.

"It's really a different experience as a walk-on player," Coughlin said. "You really have to prove yourself to the coaches and other players before you can start earning respect from them."

Coughlin made another switch at the start of spring practices in 2010, when new coach Brian Kelly asked Coughlin if he would like to make the switch to running back, a position that he had not played since grade school.

"When Coach Kelly came here, there were only four scholarship running backs, and his offense is so fast-paced that it requires two running backs," Coughlin said. "I don't really know what did it for him, but I think they needed a walk-on on the scout team for individual running back drills."

"I was intimidated at first but, looking back, I think it's one of the best moves I've made in my football career."

Despite the lack of experience at his new position, Coughlin made his mark early, rushing for 80 yards in that year's Blue-Gold game. However, with the talent in the Irish backfield, Coughlin's chances at seeing game action meant he would have to make one more switch, this time to the kickoff and kick return special teams units.

Coughlin's strong work ethic in practice helped him earn a spot on the first team kickoff and return units the first week of the 2010 season. He amassed seven tackles in 10 games last season and has so far made one tackle in three games this year.

"This year, I've pretty much been

the 12th man on kickoffs," Coughlin said. "If anyone goes down, I can pretty much play any position needed."

Coughlin put his versatility on display in one of his favorite football memories, this year's contest against Michigan State.

"I had no idea that I was playing against Michigan State until Friday night, and I was playing a position that I had never played before," Coughlin said. "On one of the final kickoffs, I just said that I was going

to run down the field and run over one of the guys on the double team.

"Fortunately, the guy on the double team hit me in such a way that I was able to get right up and help [David Posluszny] with the assisted tackle."

A graduate student currently pursuing his master's degree in accountancy, Coughlin plans to start work at accounting firm Price Waterhouse

Coopers in Chicago after graduating from Notre Dame.

"I hope to have a good career there and then, after that, I don't really know where I'll end up," Coughlin said.

With his trademark versatility, however, Coughlin should have no problem finding his way to success.

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Observer File Photo

Senior running back Patrick Coughlin carries the ball in the 2009 Blue-Gold Game.

DAYNE CRIST

Crist overcomes adversity

Heralded recruit struggles with injuries but remains source of optimism

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Sept. 2 edition of The Observer.

When Dayne Crist snaps on his helmet and runs out of the tunnel for Saturday's season opener, it will not be the first time he has participated in the Irish pregame ritual. But the senior quarterback will have a different feeling now, having battled back from a season-ending knee injury for the second consecutive year to reclaim the role of starting quarterback.

"More than anything, [running out of the tunnel] will have a very gracious feel to it," Crist said. "I'll be incredibly thankful for the opportunity to go out there and play again and do everything and do the things I love. After that it's time to get to work and focus on South Florida."

The signal-caller began the 2010 season as the starter before sustaining a ruptured patella tendon in the loss to Tulsa on Oct. 30. The team went 4-5 with Crist under center before sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees took over the reins and guided the Irish to a 4-0 finish, at which point many fans were ready to forget about the senior leader.

"It was tough — you couldn't really worry about those kinds of things," Crist said. "More than anything it was about getting my body back and just remaining confident in my abilities because I've always had a great deal of confidence in what I can do. Really I just try to focus more on what I can do, how I can help this team as opposed to worrying about all the stuff I couldn't control."

"I just hope [Notre Dame fans] know how much I care and how hard I work to help this team win."

The coaching staff has raved about Crist's performance in fall practice, both with his attitude and on-field performance. The experience has affected him in ways that a healthy 2010 could not have, offensive coordinator Charley Molnar said.

"Here's what the injuries I think did for Dayne — they made him a more resilient man," Molnar said. "In other words, he's really been able to bounce. It's taught him to get off the floor when he's knocked down maybe in a way that he wouldn't have if he had remained healthy. It made him appreciate the opportunity he got."

Irish coach Brian Kelly agreed that Crist has the ideal mindset heading into 2011.

"I would say quite frankly and quite honestly, [Crist] is the kind of guy I want to coach," Kelly said. "He's tougher mentally. He handles himself in that leadership position in the way I want our quarterbacks to handle it. We have great confidence in his ability to lead our football team to a championship."

Neither Kelly nor Crist envision a less mobile version of the senior quarterback in 2011, despite the risk of another injury.

"He has to play the game the way it comes to him," Kelly said when announcing Crist as the starter Aug. 23. "One of the things he did in camp was show great escapability. After two knee surgeries, he moved well, he was able to extend plays. We couldn't have somebody that couldn't extend plays in our offensive system, and he was able to do that."

Crist said it is not in his na-

ture to hold back on the field because of the past injuries.

"I'm going to play with the same intensity I've always played with and that's the only way I know how to play is with full speed," he said. "I'm going to do everything I can."

While Kelly has mentioned "championship" when talking about his quarterback, Crist is focused on the short term and looks at each day as an opportunity to grow in year two under the new system.

"This year it's about playing with more maturity and having a greater knowledge base of the offense this year," he said. "I think it's going to help my game grow, so it's going to help the offense grow. Understanding the hard work and preparation I do to help my game is going to help our team get better so we're making sure we're continuing to do that at all times."

When the Irish headed into fall camp in Kelly's inaugural season, anyone and everyone knew the starting quarterback job was Crist's. This year, he had to beat out freshman Everett Golson and sophomores Andrew Hendrix and Tommy Rees, who had a 4-0 record on his side.

The battle was atypical because of the close bond the senior and Rees share, Crist said.

"I've said this before, but we have a brotherly relationship really," he said. "When he first got here I tried to help him with everything I could help him with and making sure he was comfortable here and now it's gotten to the point where he came in and played very well and gained

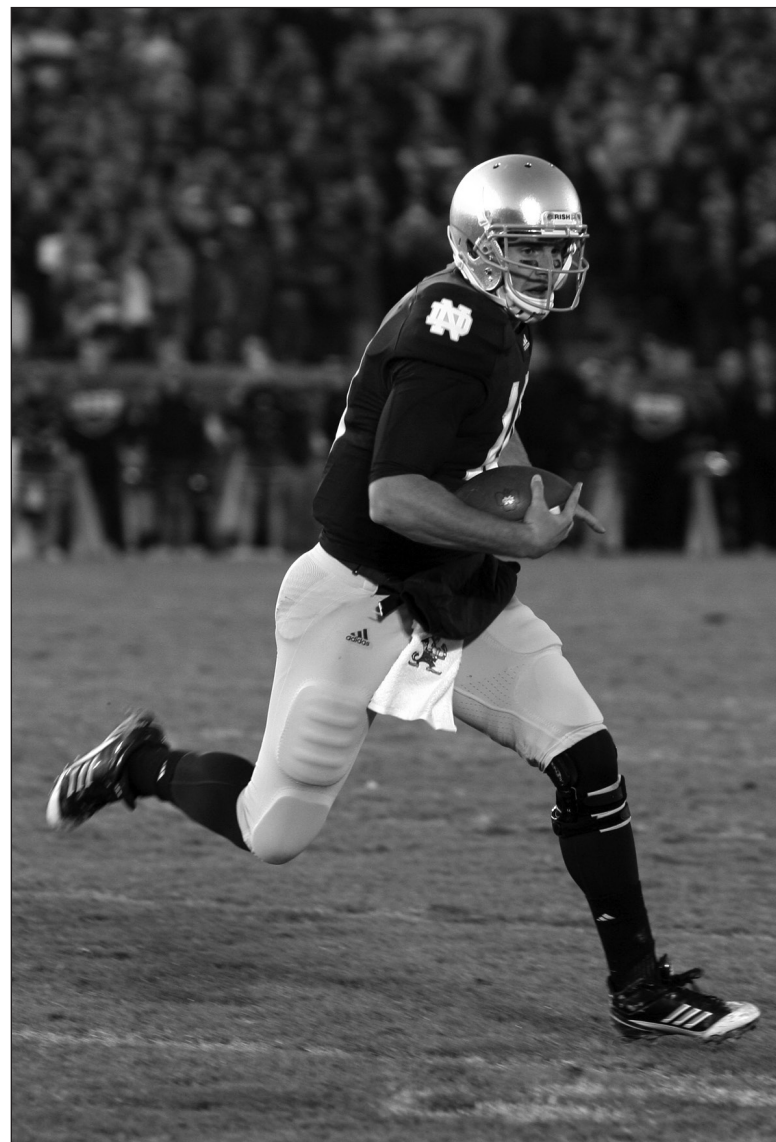
"I just hope [Notre Dame fans] know how much I care and how hard I work to help this team win."

Dayne Crist
senior quarterback



Senior quarterback Dayne Crist throws a pass against South Florida on Sept. 3. Crist completed 7-of-15 passes for 95 yards and an interception in the Irish loss.

JULIE HERDER/The Observer



TOM LATHE Observer

Senior quarterback Dayne Crist carries the ball against Navy on Oct. 29. Notre Dame won the game, 56-14.

some great experience in the games he played in."

The relationship has evolved from Crist teaching Rees to the two instructing each other.

"It's great having a guy out there you can really bounce things off," Crist said. "He sees some things out there I may not have seen and vice versa. We're trying to help each other get better because we're both team guys and understand in helping each other get better we're helping the team get better."

Crist said he hopes his return from the injuries parallels those of Jason White and Sam Bradford, two Oklahoma quarterbacks who suffered knee injuries and came back to win the Heisman Trophy and, more importantly to Crist, earn berths in the national championship game.

"I think it's a positive thing and something to aim for and more than anything it instills some confidence that it can be done and has been done before," he said. "Having that evidence wasn't the sole thing that was driving me through rehab and things like that but it's nice seeing those things and having something to shoot for."

Crist benefits from leading an offense with several offensive weapons that are big-play threats every time they touch the football, such as senior receiver Michael Floyd and junior tight end Tyler Eifert.

"Having the guys we have on offense makes the quar-

terback's job a lot easier, so obviously I need to help those guys because those guys have incredible playmaking ability," Crist said. "I think everybody on this offense has a very aggressive mindset and wants to go out and score a lot of points and that's the goal of the offense. We're real excited those guys are back."

Crist's effect on the team has improved with an increased vocal leadership and confidence, Molnar said.

"I think he is the same guy," he said. "He is probably more confident than he has been just knowing that he's the starter and getting virtually all of his

reps right now with the first unit. He's been even sharper than he was leading into him being announced as the starter."

For Crist, the motivation has always been the same since he

signed with Notre Dame as a five-star quarterback in 2008 and battled through two injuries to reach the point he is at today.

"More than anything, my love for the game, a love of this University and a love for my teammates [motivates me]," he said. "There's nothing more that I want to do other than play with the rest of the guys on this team and win for this University."

Dayne Crist
senior quarterback

"There's nothing more that I want to do other than play with the rest of the guys on this team and win for this University."

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TAYLOR DEVER

Dever anchors offensive line

California native grows well-known locks, matures into dominant line player

By ANDREW GASTELUM
Sports Writer

The free-flowing, golden mane of fifth-year offensive tackle Taylor Dever all but represents the lineman: free-spirited, laid-back and a little rugged.

"I started growing it right before the Hawaii Bowl in December of '08 but it has been a process," Dever said. "It is kind of my identity, from what other people have told me. They tell me that I can't cut it because that is who I am."

But ever since the 300-pound lineman started growing his hair, Dever has grown into a fixture on Notre Dame's stalwart offensive line. Dever, along with his roommate senior right guard Trevor Robinson, serves as the veteran anchor at the right tackle position.

The experienced offensive line has only given up eight sacks on the year, including a five-game stretch where sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees was not sacked. The streak ended Saturday against Maryland — the Irish gave up three to the Terrapins — but lasted long enough for the Irish to take pride in it. Dever attributed the streak to the close bond the members of the offensive line share, most of whom have played together for more than three seasons.

"When things like that [five-game streak] happen against Division-I-level teams that are the best in the country, I think there is something special to say about that," he said. "We have such a tight-knit group that jells and plays well together. We are all re-

ally close and it goes to show how well we are playing. "Our goal every game is to keep Tommy's jersey clean. I am part of the offensive line and it is a group effort. Being a part of that is definitely something to be proud of."

Before the Maryland game, Rees had only been sacked five times in nine games while the offensive line paved the way for a rushing attack ranked 41st in the nation, despite running a spread offense. Irish running backs, junior Cierre Wood and senior Jonas Gray, average 5.6 and 7.1 yards per carry, respectively, a testament to the performance and work ethic of Dever and his teammates in the trenches.

Dever said his most memorable performances have both come against Michigan State in the past two seasons. Statistically, the Spartans have the eighth-best defense in the country this year.

"This year I graded out the best against Michigan State, just like last year," Dever said. "Their defense is always a hard-nosed defense that stops the run and it is so easy to get pumped for a game like that and get the motor going."

The 22-year-old marketing

major said he has come a long way from the recruiting process he experienced as a high school senior from northern California and is happy with the decision he made.

"When you are going through the recruiting process at 17 and 18 it is definitely a cool process," Dever said. "I got offers to most of the Pac-10 schools, but the only schools east of that region that offered me a scholarship were Miami (Fla.), Nebraska and Notre Dame. "Growing up I always loved Notre Dame but the whole, complete package was the main reason why I came here. Meeting the guys, I just felt that I belonged. I kind of just fell in love with it. It felt like the right place. And it has gone by fast but I have made the best of the opportunity and the chances that I have gotten."

Those chances didn't start to materialize until 2010, after spending three years backing up four-year starter Sam Young, now with the Buffalo Bills. But Dever said the time he spent behind Young — whom Dever considers his mentor — helped to develop him into the player he is today. In turn, he now serves as mentor to the younger Irish lineman, just as Young was to him.

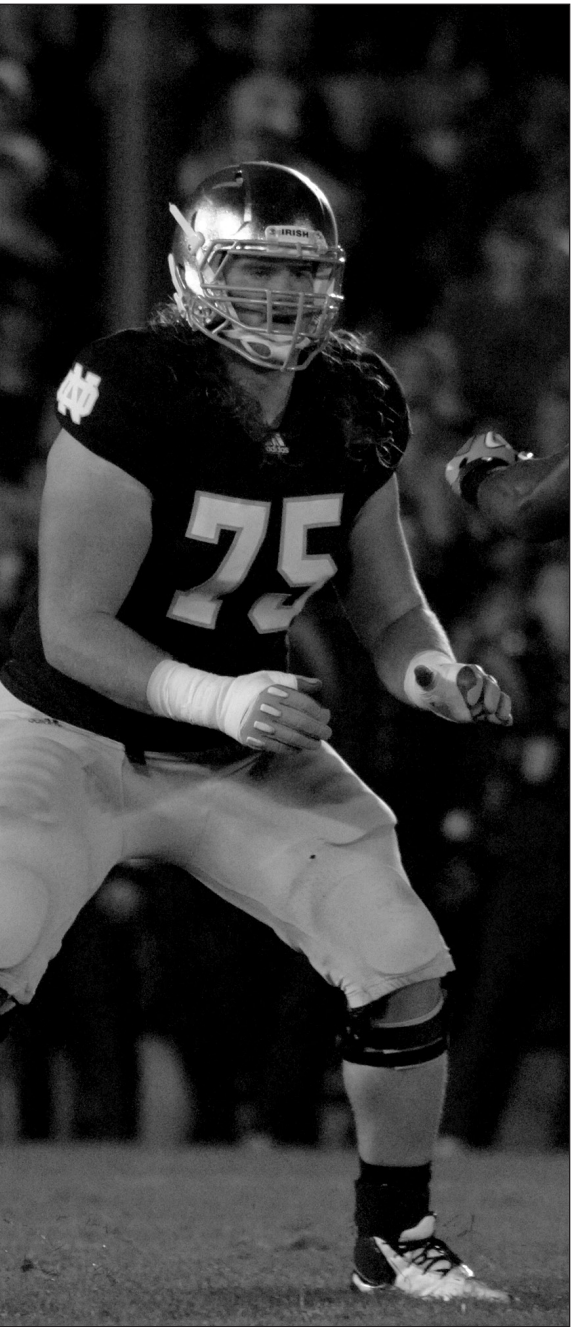
"I started off being in the backup role and a lot of guys go through that and when my time came I made the best of the opportunities that I had," Dever said. "Now I find myself in the position that I

"We have such a tight-knit group that jells and plays well together."

Taylor Dever
senior offensive tackle

"Growing up I always loved Notre Dame but the whole, complete package was the main reason why I came here."

Taylor Dever
senior offensive tackle



ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Senior offensive tackle Taylor Dever looks to make a block during Notre Dame's 31-17 loss to USC on Oct. 22

am in now and I am trying to do everything that I can to help other guys learn and become better football players. "From Sam I learned that football is a game where you have to have a really short memory. You just have got to learn that not every play is going to go your way and you just have to adapt and move on. I still talk to him to this day. He is in Buffalo fighting for a chance and I am pulling for him."

Dever said he plans to follow in the path of his mentor by entering the NFL Draft come April, since the fifth-year business student is officially finished with school at the end of the semester.

"Well I am going to try the whole training thing with the combine and the [NFL] Draft and see where that takes me," he said. "If it doesn't work, I'll still have my Notre Dame degree. I think right now I would want to try to work somewhere for a little bit and go back to school."

But before he takes the next step, Dever still has one more game to play on the hallowed

grounds of Notre Dame Stadium.

"To put on the [Notre Dame] helmet for the last time will be cool, fun, sad and everything all in one," Dever said. "I mean that is just part of it. There is always going to be a beginning and an end to things in life and that is what I'll keep in mind."

Taylor Dever
senior offensive tackle

And just as there was a beginning to the golden flow back at the Hawaii Bowl in 2008, there will soon be an end, Dever said, even if there is a Facebook page for them.

"One of my high school buddies plays at Hawaii and he made [Taylor Dever's Luscious Locks] as a joke and it actually blew up," he said. "I have had it for so long that I love it but I am also sick of it. With my career at Notre Dame coming to an end it might be time for the hair to go."

It won't be hard to find Dever this weekend. Just look for the golden mane beneath the golden helmet.

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ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Senior offensive tackle Taylor Dever looks to block a defender during Notre Dame's 15-12 victory over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24. The Irish averaged 5.7 yards per rush in that game.

STEVE FILER

Versatility and leadership mark linebacker's career



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior linebacker Steve Filer chases the ballcarrier during Notre Dame's 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.

By CONOR KELLY
Sports Writer

For many players, roles are set and easily defined. For senior outside linebacker Steve Filer, the only constant has been the need to adapt. In his four years at

Notre Dame, Filer has seen time at all linebacker positions, on the defensive line and special teams, the area where the Chicago native has made his mark most emphatically.

"I just do whatever is needed. I can play pretty much any posi-

tion," Filer said. "I've played both sides of outside linebacker, both ends, a little inside backer, pretty much whatever the defense needs me to do. You have to be a team player no matter what your circumstances are."

In a cruel twist to his senior campaign, Filer suffered a season-ending knee injury in practice on Nov. 10, effectively ending his playing career at Notre Dame. Fellow senior linebacker Darius Fleming wore Filer's No. 46 jersey against Maryland as a tribute to his injured classmate. Though Filer will not play against Boston College on Senior Day, his impact can be seen all over the field.

Filer came to Notre Dame as a much-heralded recruit out of Mount Carmel High School in Chicago, where he was named Illinois Gatorade Player of the Year in 2007 and appeared on numerous All-American lists. Filer made an impact early on for the Irish on special teams and as a reserve linebacker while appearing in the team's final 11 games.

The adjustment to the college game was a learning process, Filer said.

"You have to realize that there's always a microscope on you. Everyone always analyzes everything you do," Filer said. "On top of that, the speed of the game is way faster than in high school. You have to realize that you may not be the best player on the field, but everything that's good is worth working for."

The succeeding two years saw Filer become a special teams

force, leading the team in special teams tackles in both his sophomore and junior years, while competing for time at outside linebacker behind Fleming and former Irish linebacker Brian Smith. Filer registered one-and-a-half sacks and a forced fumble on top of 32 tackles during the two seasons.

While Irish fans have long drooled over Filer's size and athleticism, the kind showcased by a YouTube video in which Filer jumps out of a pool of waist-deep water, the senior's leadership may be what is missed most in the remainder of his injury-shortened senior year and beyond.

Having led the team in special teams appearances as a junior, Filer has helped to instill a pride in special teams play among young players like Bennett Jackson and Austin Collinsworth, whose contributions in this often overlooked segment of the game have helped to continue Filer's legacy.

"I take a lot of pride in that part of the game because [special teams play] just shows that you don't need to be an offensive or defensive player to make an impact," Filer said. "Special teams is just as important as any play on offense or defense, and we have to bring the younger players up the right way or else they won't do things the right way when they're older. We were taught a lot of things by guys like [former Irish linebacker Maurice] Crum and [former Irish

linebacker] Scott Smith and I try to continue that tradition. Players can be coaches too."

For Filer, the thrill of playing for Notre Dame has not worn off since his first trip through the tunnel in 2008.

"I'll miss that feeling when you walk out onto the field for the first time, because it's the same the second time and the third," Filer said. "All that just really takes your breath away."

On top of that, Filer said his teammates and friends at Notre Dame will be what he misses most when is time under the dome is done.

"The people I've met here have gotten me into all kinds of new things, and I'm a smarter person than I was when I got here," the former Dillon Hall resident said. "The memories of big wins and just being with my teammates are what bring a team together. Those are the things that you will remember for the rest of your life."

Filer, a management-consulting major with a minor in anthropology, has not ruled out trying to make a living in the NFL, though he looks forward to a possible career in consulting. The senior's attitude toward work echoes that of his approach to football.

"They say it's a lot of hours," Filer said. "But when you're doing something you love, you never work a day in your life."

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JONATHAN FRANTZ

Longtime Irish fan fulfills dream after waiting two years

By WALKER CAREY
Sports Writer

Senior walk-on outside linebacker Johnny Frantz was born with Notre Dame in his blood.

His father, Michael, was a walk-on defensive end with Ara Parseghian's Irish in the early 1970s and earned a letter as a senior in 1972. Frantz's ties to Notre Dame contributed to his strong fandom from an early age.

"I grew up always watching and rooting for Notre Dame," Frantz said. "And always rooting against everyone else."

Frantz arrived on campus in the fall of 2008 and spent two seasons in the student section cheering on his beloved Irish. But when the spring of 2010 came around, the then-sophomore set his sights on walking on to the football team he grew up cheering for.

"Throughout that spring, I began communicating with the program about the possibility of walking on," Frantz said. "Then in the fall, they brought me in for some early morning skill sessions like catching some passes and whatnot. They really wanted to see how I was on my feet and how I moved."

Before arriving at Notre Dame, Frantz attended Saint Ignace

High School in Cleveland — the same high school former Irish players Robby Parris and John Ryan attended, as well as Frantz's current teammate, junior inside linebacker Dan Fox.

"Seeing those guys come from my high school and play here, especially defensive guys like John Ryan and Dan Fox, was a big part of making me decide that I wanted to walk-on," Frantz said. "Watching those guys [Parris and Ryan] play here was great and playing with Fox has been great. They are all great guys."

The experience of playing for the Irish and the relationships he has formed on team is not something Frantz will ever forget.

"The whole experiencing of playing with everyone and the feeling of brotherhood has been

incredible," Frantz said. "Being part of something that I have always dreamed of and having the opportunity to be with these guys every day has just been fantastic."

Notre Dame walk-ons are known for the camaraderie that exists among them and Frantz said he has also savored that part of the experience.

"Being a part of WOPU (Walk-On Players Union) has been great," Frantz said. "I actually



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

Senior outside linebacker Jonathan Frantz makes a play during Notre Dame's 2011 Blue-Gold spring game. Frantz spent two seasons as a regular student before walking on to the Irish.

live with [senior walk-on] Pat Coughlin and [senior walk-on] Sean Oxley and those guys have been here longer than I have, but they have been great in bringing me into the whole WOPU experience and making me a part of it. I have really enjoyed my experience in WOPU."

Away from the football field, Frantz's most memorable Notre Dame experience came during his junior year when his parents came in from Cleveland for Junior Parents Weekend.

"Having my mom and my dad come up was great," Frantz said. "The JPW Mass especially was memorable. That whole

weekend with my parents was just fantastic. Just being able to spend time with them at a place we have all loved so much for so long was truly memorable. Notre Dame did a great job putting it all together. It was exactly what I expected though. Notre Dame always does a real great job in planning events."

Frantz, who is an economics major, plans to follow in his father's footsteps and become a lawyer.

"I know that I will be going to law school next year," Frantz said. "I am still trying to figure out where, as I continue to get my applications done. I took

the LSAT on Oct. 1 and am still waiting for that score to come back, but I am sure it will all come into place."

Even though he is looking to be closer to a bigger city, Frantz will not rule out Notre Dame as a potential law school destination.

"I am definitely going to apply [to Notre Dame] for sure," Frantz said. "I am looking to get to a bigger city though. Nothing against South Bend, it is a great city, but I eventually want to be in a bigger market."

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DARIUS FLEMING

Fleming learns to adapt to change

Senior linebacker Darius Fleming solidifies defense during the ups-and-downs of past four years

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Nov. 11 edition of The Observer.

During his time at Notre Dame, senior outside linebacker Darius Fleming has always been willing to adapt to new situations, whether it's the change of a base defense or, off the field, learning to cook.

"I got to eat, so I've actually started to teach myself a little bit," he said. "Just being away from home — Mom's not here to make every meal. We have to teach ourselves a bit."

Fleming admits he is still learning how to cook and is open to trying new recipes, but said he has not tried anything too difficult just yet.

"[I just cook for] my roommates, like [senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore]," Fleming said. "So me and him will cook together and we have to feed ourselves, so we pitch in and figure something out, try new stuff and kind of go from there."

Adapting on the field

Fleming, who has the second most career sacks of any active player, behind Ethan Johnson, has played for two different coaching regimes, and successfully navigated the switch from a base 4-3 defense to the 3-4 the Irish currently employ.

"[Adapting to the changes] has been a challenge at times, but myself and a lot of the other guys have adapted really well through the different coaches and different schemes, and [it] has helped us as players being coached by different coaches

and being in different schemes," Fleming said. "You just appreciate the type of coaching that we do have. I think we've done a good job with that, and I think the coaching staff is set for a while now, so I don't think we have to worry about that in the future."

Senior safety Jamoris Slaughter said the senior linebacker has been an irreplaceable presence for the Irish defense.

"I feel like Darius is a key element to the defense," Slaughter said. "He's one of those guys that does everything right. He's going to set that example and edge for the defense and do his responsibilities. He's good with the pass rush and he's a great player."

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Fleming is crucial to the success of the defense because of his versatility and the several hats he puts on as a playmaker on the unit.

"He has the dual responsibility of putting his hand on the ground and rushing as a defensive end, as well as dropping off in coverage," Kelly said. "That individual position builds that uncertainty, in what you're getting as a pre-snap look. If he's only one-dimensional, in other words, if he can only rush the passer and not drop, everybody knows what you're doing defensively."

"He now has taken that next

step that he's as good in coverage as he is on the line of scrimmage, defending the run, rushing the quarterback. That was the dimension we needed from Darius. He's taken that next step now in year two and can do those things for us. That's where you build the uncertainty — what is he doing, rushing, dropping."

When using a three-linemen look, it makes the role of the outside linebackers even more critical in pressuring the quarterback. Kelly said Fleming is exactly the kind of player the Irish need at the "cat" linebacker position.

"I would say that we placed a high demand on him and we're demanding that kind of play from him," Kelly said. "Instead of just being a good player, we're demanding him to be a great player. And he's risen to that challenge. We're challenging him every day. He'll come to me on Sunday, two sacks one weekend. Are you a real player? You need two more next week."

"So it's always been those jabs at him to keep pushing him to be the kind of player we think he can be. And then along the way, you're gaining confidence as well."

In Fleming's senior season, he has continued to do what he has always done — adapt.

With several defensive players injured, including both defensive ends, the management major has stepped up his game to another level as his teammates thrive on his presence.

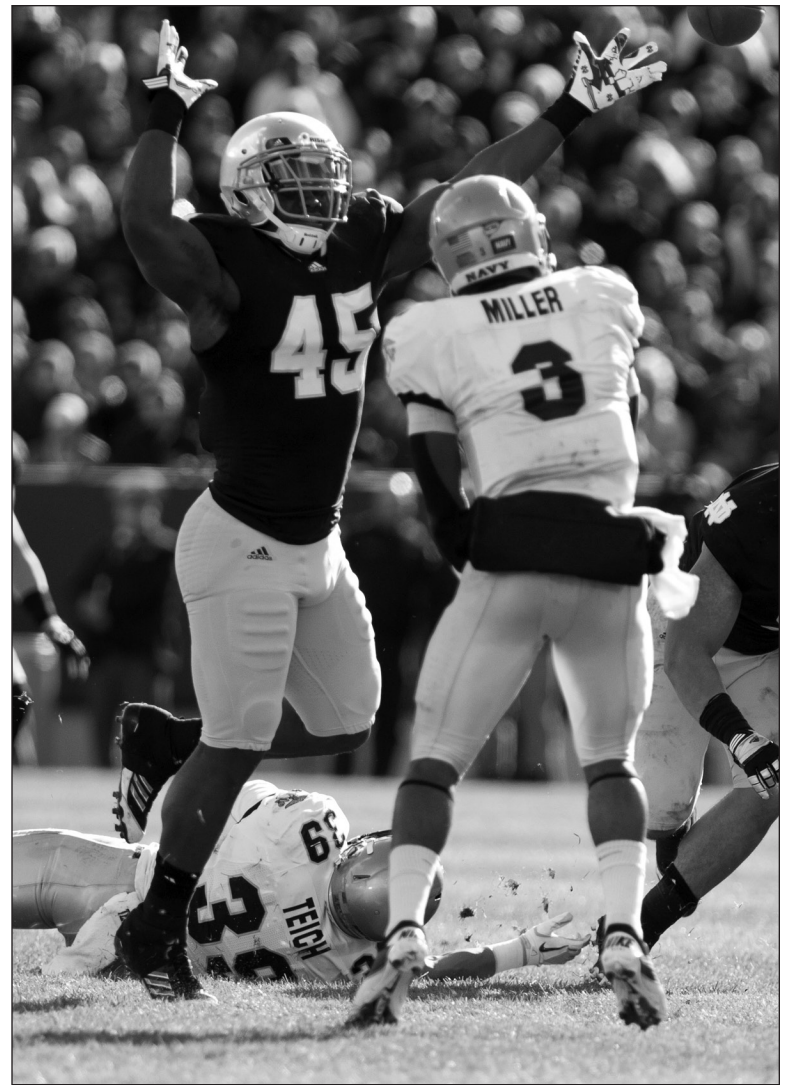
"I just do my job, and I know the guys around me and who is out there will do their job,"

"I feel like Darius is a key element to the defense. He's one of those guys that does everything right. He's going to set that example and edge for the defense and do his responsibilities."

Jamoris Slaughter
senior safety

"I would say that we placed a high demand on him and we're demanding that kind of play from him. Instead of just being a good player, we're demanding him to be a great player."

Brian Kelly
Irish coach



GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

Senior linebacker Darius Fleming attempts to block Navy quarterback Trey Miller's pass on Oct. 29.

Fleming said. "We have guys dinged up, but the guys stepping up are doing a great job and they're helping the team get better every week."

A playmaker making plays

In Notre Dame's 24-17 victory at Wake Forest on Nov. 5, Fleming made a critical play that snuffed out what proved to be the Deacons' final scoring opportunity. Backed against its own end zone, the Irish defense got exactly what it needed — a turnover, in the form of a forced fumble. While senior safety Harrison Smith was initially credited with jarring the ball loose, Fleming was the one who made the initial hit, even if he does not take full credit for it.

"It was a play much-needed at that time," he said. "Me and Harrison, we both joke about it; we made the play. We got there and made a big hit and the ball came out and it was an impact play in the game, so that was something big for us to step up and make that play. I'm not going to take all the credit. I'm actually going to share with Harrison, so I give myself half a caused fumble."

The play ignited the defense the rest of the game, as the unit held the Deacons scoreless throughout the second half, good enough to capture the seven-point victory and improve to 6-3 on the season. Fleming said the defense thrives on making big plays in big moments.

"Forcing turnovers is huge

as a defense, especially when the offense is in scoring position, you have to have players out there that are going to make plays and get the offense back there on the field," he said. "I think we've done a decent job and continue to get better, and I think it will carry over to the games in the future."

With only two games remaining in the regular season and Senior Day this weekend, Fleming said he is starting to realize his time at Notre Dame is about to come to a close.

"I definitely [think about it]," he said. "That's definitely kicked in. It's been a fast time here, but it's fun. The good and the bad. I've enjoyed all my time with all the players, and [I have] just grown with these guys and just competing with them. My time here is narrowing down, but I'm going to enjoy every moment of it."

With the bittersweet ending in sight, Fleming said he does not allow himself to think of what his lasting mark on the program might be.

"To be honest, I couldn't answer that question yet," he said. "We have three more games left and I'm going to try to leave a good mark with those, and after the bowl game, ask me that question and I think I'll be able to answer."

Darius Fleming
Irish linebacker



TOM LA/The Observer

Senior linebacker Darius Fleming, center, helps bring down a ballcarrier in Notre Dame's 56-14 win over Navy on Oct. 29. Fleming recorded two tackles in the victory.

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MICHAEL FLOYD

Floyd among nation's best

Senior receiver Michael Floyd shatters the record book while leaving a lasting legacy

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Sept. 16 edition of The Observer.

Whether working on his degree or snaring passes, Michael Floyd relies on one source of inspiration in everything he does — his close relationship with his mother.

"[My mother] means a lot,"

Floyd said.

"She's my motivator, what keeps me going. She keeps the fuel going in my body to get good grades and play well on the football field. I just want to do well for her and for myself."

Theresa Romero raised Floyd in St. Paul, Minn. and, though now separated by distance, the two remain close during busy autumns. Romero will be in attendance for the Boston College game and was on hand for the Oct. 22 loss to USC and saw her son catch 12 passes for 154 yards and two touchdowns in the season opener against South Florida.

When Floyd announced he would return for his senior season, he said his mother played a large role in the decision.

"I always told my mom I wanted to graduate college, so that was my first goal," Floyd said. "It was the reason why I came back to graduate from here. I think I made it this far in college and I didn't want to leave here without getting a degree."

Floyd's plan suffered a setback when he was arrested March 20 after being pulled over by Notre Dame Security Police and charged with driving a vehicle while intoxicated. Once again, Floyd relied on his mother's support while his status with the University and football team was uncertain.

"You just got to look past that and that was a wrong decision, but moving forward I'm doing a good job with the team, handling things right, being a vocal leader and carrying myself in a positive way," Floyd said.

Since Floyd's reinstatement, the coaching staff says it has seen a more mature leader in the senior receiver.

"Michael has been what we expected and more," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "He's been great in the

locker room, he's been great around our teammates, he's a joy to coach, he's upbeat and positive about everything, and he's a great competitor. I'm just lucky that I get an opportunity to coach him."

Floyd's strong work ethic has been a constant throughout his time at Notre Dame and has set an example for the rest of the offense, offensive coordinator Charley Molnar said.

"I say it over and over again, his best form of leadership is

this: He comes to work every single day and does his best, he gives his all," he said. "He's really the hardest worker we have on the offense. Day-in and day-out, he really is the benchmark for effort offensively."

Proving he's the best

Floyd returned to school with a chip on his shoulder after professional scouts rated other receivers higher while evaluating potential draftees.

"Just knowing that they see other guys with more stats or whatever means I have to prove to everybody that I am the best receiver in the country and I'm going to show it," he said.

Despite Floyd's watermark performance over his first three seasons, the preseason All-American has elevated his game to another level in 2011.

"I think I'm moving around a lot more on offense and exploiting the defense's weaknesses with our advantages," he said. "That's put me in a position to get good catches and keep the chains moving."

Through 10 games, Floyd has caught 77 passes for 922 yards and seven touchdowns.

"He's more mature, just like most of the guys on offense," Molnar said. "A year in our system has certainly helped,

knowing what our expectations are. I think his skill set has improved dramatically from when we first got here — things that you may not recognize but as coaches we see day-to-day, things that he didn't do as consistently a year ago, he's doing right now.

"He knows how to set up a defensive back where maybe

"Just knowing that they see other guys with more stats or whatever means I have to prove to everybody that I am the best receiver in the country and I'm going to show it."

Michael Floyd
senior receiver



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior receiver Michael Floyd runs after a catch against Maryland at FedEx Field on Nov. 12. Notre Dame won, 45-21, as Floyd caught nine passes for 90 yards and a touchdown.



TOM LA/The Observer

Senior receiver Michael Floyd is wrapped up by a defender in Notre Dame's 56-14 win over Navy on Oct. 29.

a year ago he would just use his strength and try and run through him, where now he'll do things to try and turn a cornerback's or a safety's hips and get himself in the best position to get open."

Chemistry with Rees

Part of Floyd's success at the end of 2010 and in 2011 can be attributed to the relationship with sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees.

"I think it's what the defense gives us," Floyd said. "I think he knows that with that wide receiver corps whatever coverage they give somebody's open. I think he knows that and that we can bail him out of any situation that he has."

In the last 14 games, dating back to 2010, Rees and Floyd have developed a strong rapport and the signal caller has been able to take advantage of his top playmaker's talent.

"As far as my job goes, when you have a player on the field like Michael, you try to get him the ball as much as you can," Rees said. "Our offense does a good job of putting him in different situations on the field to keep a defense guessing and different ways to put the ball in his hands. For me, it's pretty easy — if I can get it to him, things work out pretty well. I think a lot of the work we've done in the past year-and-a-half in practice has prepared us to be successful."

Molnar said the work the two have put in together has

paid off early in 2011.

"Tommy's pretty good about going through his progression and finding the right guy, but Mike's getting open and he's working his progression to Mike, and Mike's coming up with the ball right now," he said.

Record-breaker

With his 12 catches against South Florida on Sept. 3, Floyd passed Jeff Samardzija to become the all-time Notre Dame receptions leader with 183 (he now has 196). His two touch-

downs increased his career total to 30, padding a record he set last season. Despite the accomplishments, Floyd said he only pays attention to wins and losses.

"[I didn't know] until the news told me," he said.

"It means a lot and whatever I can do to help the team to do win is the main goal and that's what I'm trying to do. At the end of the day you want to win and whatever you break, if you're not winning, it doesn't mean too much."

As a senior, Floyd knows his days at Notre Dame are numbered, and he already envisions what type of mark he wants to leave on the program.

"I just want [people] to know I was a fun guy and a leader on and off the field and in the community," he said.

A legacy like that is sure to make any mother proud.

"At the end of the day you want to win and whatever [records] you break, if you're not winning, it doesn't mean too much."

Michael Floyd
senior receiver

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MIKE GOLIC, JR.

Center follows in father's steps yet blazes own path



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior center Mike Golic, Jr. looks for a block in his first start, Notre Dame's 45-21 victory over Maryland on Nov. 12.

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

By the time Notre Dame senior center Mike Golic, Jr. got his first start for the Irish against Maryland on Saturday, he had the opportunity to make both plays on the field and videos of them.

After the tape of Golic's personal rendition of Toto's song "Africa," complemented by back-up dancing from senior

nose guard Brandon Newman, brought in 2,000 hits on YouTube, the pair were a success and the Film, Television and Theatre (FTT) major realized a new dream of his.

"Brandon and I weren't playing a ton before this year. Football's a big part of our lives, so you have to have something to blow off a little steam every once in a while," the West Hartford, Conn., native said. "Being FTT majors, we've made it a lit-

tle goal on the side to become a YouTube sensation."

Aside from the karaoke, Golic and Newman also paired up for a behind-the-scenes broadcast series called, "Our Team, Our Story," which features updates about the team from a more personal vantage point.

"People see what we do on Saturdays all the time and the hard work, but we just want them to see the personality of this team because we think it's a great one," Golic said. "It's something fun we've been able to do on the side. Me and my partner in crime, Brandon, we've been blowing up YouTube since the whole Toto incident."

Golic's decision to major in FTT stemmed not only from his love of movies and television, especially 'Modern Family' and 'Glee,' but also the major's perfect academic fit for a future in sports broadcasting. Following in the footsteps of his father, ESPN analyst and former Notre Dame defensive lineman Mike Golic, Sr., Golic hopes to join his father on television screens across the nation.

"When it's all said and done, I'd like to work in the industry like my dad," Golic Jr. said. "I know that like football, sports broadcasting is a tough road and a tough field, and I think that's something that I was fortunate to see — all the hard work that my dad put in to get where he is career-wise."

The father and son share many things in common, like their name, a spot on the Notre

Dame football team and an appreciation of the visual arts of television, but they do have their differences.

"I'm much better looking than my dad. I'm the much better looking of the Mike Golics. I'm funnier, I'm smarter, far more humble. I'm a way better dancer. He does have a great head of hair though, very full and rich waves, so I can't compete with him in that aspect," Golic said with a laugh. "All kidding aside, at the end of the day, we are each our own person, but seeing the way he's lived his life, I've very fortunate to have a role model like him. As a player, the way he lives his life, the way he's raised my brother [Notre Dame junior tight end Jake Golic] and sister and me, and as a husband to my mom — he's been my hero since I was a little kid."

Golic's passion for sports broadcasting and his academic calling in FTT are a good fit for the self-proclaimed "visual learner."

"I think seeing the way things and concepts play out, the way they're used visually is definitely how I get things," Golic said. "I always say, 'You can draw things up Xs and Os all day, but going out there and doing them is always the best way that I learn.'"

Golic got his chance for on-field learning experience during his sophomore year when he played in three games for a combined seven minutes of competitive action, the first

in the later minutes of Notre Dame's 35-0 shutout of Nevada in its 2009 season opener.

"It was definitely a rush ... getting to run out of the tunnel of the stadium with 82,000 people in the stands," Golic said. "It was the icing on the cake to be a part of the end of the game."

This past Saturday, he made his first career start for Notre Dame against Maryland at FedEx Field in Landover, Md.

"It was everything I hoped it would be," Golic said. "It was an exciting moment for me, and I just really was happy to help this team in a bigger role."

With his first start coming so late in his career, Golic said he had extra nerves to settle before kickoff against the Terrapins.

"It was something I had to wait a long time for," Golic said. "I tried to calm myself down more than anything, remind myself that it's a football game. No matter how long you sit, you don't forget how to be a football player if that's who you are."

Golic also met up with his dad at the end of Notre Dame's 45-21 win over Maryland.

"I saw him right after the game. He was just proud more than anything else," Golic said. "It probably meant just as much to him as it meant to me. We're both happy that that time finally came."

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JOHN GOODMAN

Receiver shows versatility in switching from quarterback

By SAM GANS
Sports Writer

When most football players arrive at Notre Dame, the position they play for the Irish is one they've worked at for years and years. That was not the case, however, for senior receiver John Goodman.

Goodman, whose job for the Irish is to catch the football, spent the majority of his pre-college days throwing it instead. But it was ultimately his two years at the receiver position in high school that led former Irish coach Charlie Weis to offer him a scholarship.

"I was a quarterback my whole life up until high school and then freshman year [of high school], the quarterback that was a sophomore was in our coaches' minds better for the position," Goodman said. "So as I became a sophomore and junior, I was his main receiver for two years and [was on] punt return, kick return — all that stuff. That's kind of what got me noticed, because they got me the ball a lot to make a lot of plays."

"And then as a senior, I came back to quarterback and our coach basically used me as a dual-threat type of deal. It worked out because obviously I got a bunch of offers and couldn't be more thankful for [my coaches putting] me in the position to do that."

Though Goodman has primarily played a receiver at Notre Dame, the former high school all-conference quarter-

back from Fort Wayne, Ind., has also been asked to use his arm on occasion. His 32-yard touchdown pass last season to fellow senior receiver Michael Floyd put the Irish up 14-7 in a 44-20 win over Western Michigan. Goodman also took practice reps at the quarterback position early in his Irish career.

"The thought was always up in the air because coach Weis knew I had played quarterback and the other coaches when they came to my games — I was a senior at the time so I was playing quarterback in front of them — so they knew, 'OK, well that's going to be in the back of our minds all the time,'" Goodman said. "There was one point where I think [former Irish quarterback] Jimmy [Clausen] got hurt and we were down to two quarterbacks and I was the next guy after that. So that was pretty fun to get to experience that a little bit again."

But when Irish coach Brian Kelly was hired prior to the 2010 season, Goodman became a permanent receiver. The coaching switch and new spread offense also caused a difficult adjustment period.

"My adjustment was pretty tough," he said. "It took a while for me to understand Coach Kelly's system in general. Coach Weis' system was slower. It was more of a pro-style type of deal. This is 'go, go, go,' so it's a huge difference when you go from a pro-style offense [and] traditional to a

spread offense."

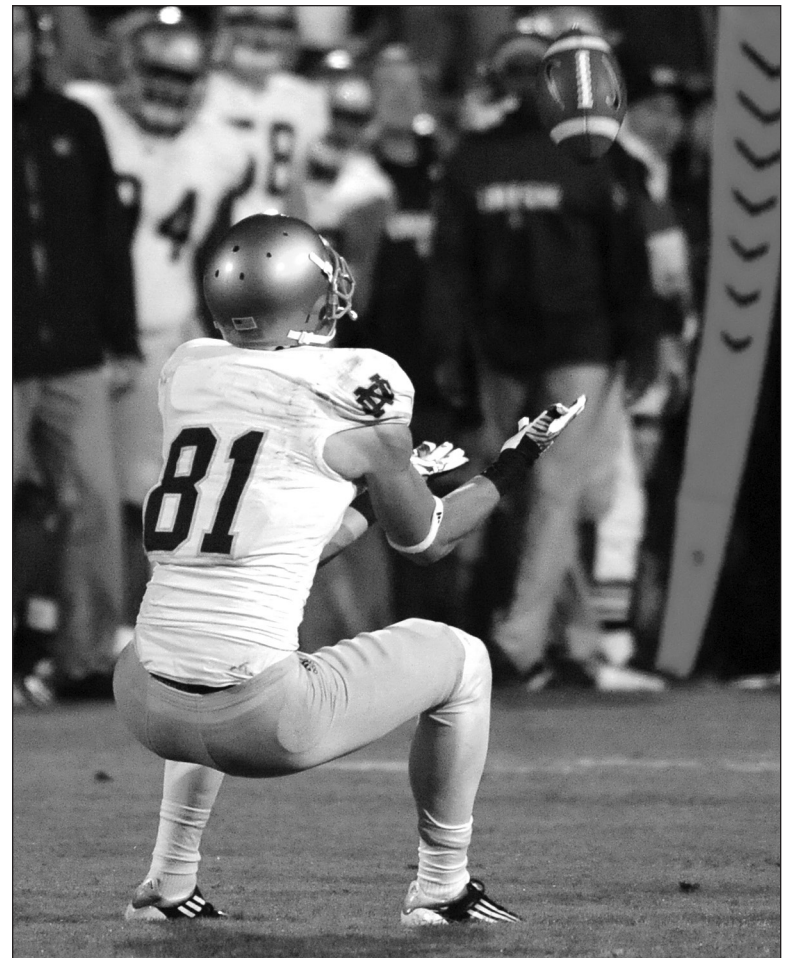
As a senior, Goodman has also had an increased leadership role on the squad, more through example than words.

"I think in our [locker] room, he's a pretty steady guy and guys look up to him because they know he's been here and done that," Alford said. "He does things the right way, as far as living his life right and coming to work and not complaining. He's not a real vocal guy by nature and that's fine, but he's done a nice job."

Goodman, who will graduate in May with a degree in management-consulting, says he will look for internships once his playing career is over. When that moment will occur, though, is not certain, as Goodman has a fifth year of eligibility and could possibly be asked by the coaching staff to return for another year. Right now, however, he is not focused on the future.

"It's just something I can't worry about," Goodman said. "If I don't [get a fifth year], that's life, but right now, I'm just trying to work as hard as I can, get in there and do everything I can in the games to help our team win and things will fall into place."

With such fond memories of many great football moments during his time in South Bend, it is not a surprise that the thing Goodman will miss most is game day. And yet, it's also not a surprise that, with two regular season games and a bowl game left, his thoughts



TOM YOUNG/The Observer

Senior receiver John Goodman fields a punt during Notre Dame's 38-10 win over Purdue on Oct. 1.

are solely on winning.

"[Game day is] what you come here for — to play games and to win games," he said. "And to see that atmosphere, it's just something that here at Notre Dame you only see a few weeks out of the year. And it's

just something that's so special that I'm definitely going to miss. But I can't think too far ahead because we're focusing on Boston College."

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GARY GRAY

Gray quietly makes plays

Despite setbacks, cornerback Gary Gray bounces back and leads the defense

By ANDREW GASTELUM
Sports Writer

When talking about himself, the humility of fifth-year senior Gary Gray shines through despite his quiet mood. Modest and self-effacing, Gray takes the blame for his own mistakes, while attributing his accomplishments to the support of other players and the instruction from his coaches. But behind the face of the South Carolina native lies a fierce competitor.

"Sometimes I am pretty quiet and laid-back but I have a mean streak to me," Gray said with a meek grin. "I just want to be remembered as a great teammate who led by example. Just as someone who made his plays and went out there with everything, not saying much but just making plays."

Irish cornerbacks coach Kerry Cooks echoed Gray's sentiment, praising his defensive back's humility, poise and drive to be lead by example.

"My memory of Gary will be as a very quiet, very humble guy who has a little dog inside of him. He is a pitbull and he plays like that,"

Cooks said. "But he really is a tremendous leader more so by what he does rather than what he says. I appreciate guys like that and he is one of the most coachable guys that I have ever coached."

But the fifth-year corner's battle-tested poise was surely tested Sept. 10 against Michigan, when Michigan junior quarterback Denard Robinson caught Gray out of position a number of times throughout

the game.

The tipping point came with eight seconds left in the game, with Notre Dame up by three. Robinson hung in the pocket before throwing a 16-yard fade to redshirt junior receiver Roy Roundtree, who beat Gray down the sideline and out-jumped him for the ball. The worst part: Roundtree's only catch of the game — the game-winning touchdown — came with two seconds remaining. Gray was even flagged for pass interference on the play as the Wolverines knocked off the Irish with a heartbreaking 35-31 win.

The firestorm of vilification had only just begun, as Gray's performance drew massive criticism questioning the cornerback's toughness and overall ability. Cooks said all of the criticism was completely unwarranted.

"[The Boston College game] is going on our 20th game together. And in 19 of those games, Gary has been as good as any corner in the country," Cooks said. "He had one bad game against Michigan and now everyone thinks he is a bad player. That is not the case and I don't think he

ever lost his confidence. He has moved on and he is going to make the most of his last couple of weeks.

"He has tunnel vision, which means he has the ability to tune things out that he doesn't need to be a part of and tune in to things that are important to him. He has definitely taken that approach and he has played well."

Gray said the criticism affected him only until the next

day, crediting Cooks' help to get him to stay focused on the remainder of the season.

"It affected me at that point, but we have a 24-hour rule and I couldn't let it affect me for the rest of the season because we had pretty good competition throughout. I couldn't let that point lose me for the rest of the season," Gray said. "Coach Cooks has helped me a lot as a person and as a player. He helped me get through it and he is a great teacher and is always on me to practice harder or focus on my keys."

Despite the big setback in the Big House, Gray is tied for the team lead in interceptions with two and ranks fourth in tackles with 49. In his biggest games, the former U.S. Army High School All-American plays his best, averaging more than seven tackles per game against ranked teams, while averaging just under four against unranked teams.

With more than 150 tackles in his collegiate career, Gray has embraced his role as an aggressive tackling specialist within a veteran secondary. But what Gray said he will remember most is the time spent in the locker room with his teammates, especially fifth-year safety Harrison Smith.

"I remember Harrison was playing linebacker when we first got here and he turned into a safety and a demonstrative leader on our defense making all of the calls and putting people in the right place," Gray said. "Most of the guys that I came up with in my class are already gone but Harrison is one of those guys that came in with me. I'll miss him and the memories that I have had and the bonds I have made with all my old teammates and the guys that are here right now."

"The freshmen and young guys crack me up and sometimes remind me of myself."

Gray's role as a leader trickles down to those younger de-



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior cornerback Gary Gray breaks up a pass during Notre Dame's 59-33 victory over Air Force on Oct. 8.

defensive backs as well, and not just for comic relief. When sophomore cornerback Lo Wood — who had seen sparse playing time before Saturday's game against Maryland — returned an interception for a touchdown against the Terrapins, Gray was the first one in the end zone to congratulate his likely successor. But now, all Gray wants to do is score a touchdown for himself.

"I really need to score before I leave here," he said. "[Former linebacker] Brian Smith won't let me live it down because he has two touchdowns. But I still have a few more games to get it done."

Gray's chance came against No. 15 Michigan State on Sept. 17 in a 31-13 win over the Spartans. With just under four minutes to play and the Spartans threatening at the goal line, Michigan State senior quarterback threw a pass to one of his receivers, which was then picked off by senior cornerback Robert Blanton and taken 82 yards, deep into Spartan territory. But Gray, who

was in man-to-man coverage on the intended receiver, tipped the pass and was set to intercept the pass before Blanton stole the show.

"He actually took that one away from me. That was my man," Gray said jokingly. "He wasn't even supposed to come over that way, that was supposed to be my pick but he got it and did a great job. He prob-

ably got farther than I would have with it anyways."

Beyond his goal to tally a touchdown before season's end, the corner's unwavering focus remains on one goal: beating Boston College on Senior Day.

"The only thing that is on my mind is to go out and beat BC," Gray said. "I remember a couple of years ago [in 2008] when we lost to Syracuse on Senior Day I was just heartbroken for those seniors and I don't want that to happen to this group. "As far as all the emotions that come with Senior Day, I can focus on that after the game looking at the big picture. The fact that it is [the last home game] is in the back of your head but we just have to focus on going out and beating BC."

That is what everyone is thinking. We have to still prepare the same way. Our goal is to beat BC and the more wins we get the better."

With his five-year stay in South Bend coming to a close, Gray

will take his last run out of the tunnel, but still equipped with his "tunnel vision" that has brought him to this point.

"I'm sure it'll be emotional coming out on the field for the last time but we can't get too emotional because we still have a game to play."

Gary Gray
senior cornerback

"I'm sure it'll be emotional coming out on the field for the last time but we can't get too emotional because we still have a game to play."



TOM YOUNG/The Observer

Senior cornerback Gary Gray pursues a ballcarrier during Notre Dame's 31-13 win over Michigan State on Sept. 17. Gray recorded 10 tackles against the Spartans.

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JONAS GRAY

Gray powers Irish rushing attack

Senior running back Jonas Gray blossoms in his senior campaign to lead the offense

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Nov. 4 edition of The Observer.

Entering the 2011 season, senior running back Jonas Gray had done everything right to get his final campaign off to a fast start. After three years of waiting, Gray had finally found his opportunity to be a featured back.

"He did all the things it takes to have a great year," running backs coach Tim Hinton said. "He worked hard in the summer, in the weight room, in his conditioning. He worked hard in his summer two-a-days. He studied film, he's learned his schemes and he understands the blocking in front of him."

Notre Dame took the ball all the way to the South Florida 1-yard line on its opening drive, and Gray got the call to earn the final three feet and score the first touchdown of his collegiate career.

Moments later, South Florida cornerback Kayvon Webster had returned a Gray fumble 96 yards for a touchdown, and Gray's dream start was in disarray.

"I was shocked that it happened," Gray said. "I kept trying to remember in my head what happened. It happened kind of fast, and I was thinking, 'Did the ref blow the whistle? Was I down by contact?'"

The fumble stood, and Gray found himself facing doubt yet again. But when he re-entered the game later, his own troubles were not foremost on his mind.

"I was a little worried, especially when I got back in and people started booing," Gray said. "I was worried about my mom in the stands and how she was doing. I know she was probably going crazy."

Gray's loyalty to his mother

stems from his upbringing in Pontiac, Mich., and he carries the lessons his mother taught him to this day.

"We're just a close-knit family. She's a parent but at the same time she's like my best friend," Gray said. "We just always stuck together. That's why I have that loyalty to my teammates, because she instilled that in me."

That loyalty to his "football family" paid off for Gray when the Irish rallied around their senior tailback after his season-opening miscue.

"My teammates rallied around me, my coaches rallied around me, so I was okay," Gray said.

Yet despite rebounding and hitting his midseason stride, Gray said not a day goes by when he does not think about that South Florida contest — but not because of the fumble.

"In a lot of ways — I know people are going to say it's not true — I feel like [senior quarterback Dayne Crist] getting benched had a lot to do with me," Gray said. "With him being one of my best friends, it was tough. It still is tough. That's why I think about that game every day. You think about how fast it can be taken away from you."

Belief from the top

After the first game, Irish coach Brian Kelly did not berate Gray, nor did he bench him. Instead, Kelly simply issued a challenge.

"He talked to me about it, and he just said, 'How do you want to be remembered? It's up to you. You're the only person that can make it better or make it get

worse,'" Gray said. "That was it. He said he believed in me."

Hinton echoed Kelly's sentiments and shored up Gray's belief in himself when the senior back needed it most.

"After the game, [coach Hinton] pulled me in his office and he was upset with himself ... He said, 'I should have played you more after it happened,'" Gray said. "That right there, it was refreshing — he and coach Kelly coming together and making sure

that I didn't get in the tank, and then realizing the talents that I had and the capabilities that I had when I didn't even believe in myself."

Hinton and Gray have developed a close relationship that has helped spur Gray to rebound and accept Kelly's challenge in the best of ways — Gray has reeled off eight touchdown runs in the last five games.

"We are very close. He always talks about how he loves us as people," Gray said. "It's just trust between me and him and the rest of the running backs in the room. We're like an intermediate family inside of a bigger family, and he's the head of the house."

"[This success] is just great coaching. That's what it comes down to."

From his role calling plays, Kelly has been able to watch the fruits of the relationship between Hinton and Gray turn into success on the field.

"Our job as coaches is to develop our players. It has to be a 50/50 relationship with them. We can only do so much," Kelly said. "I think coach Hinton has done a great job with him. He's

"He's finishing his runs. He's playing like a 230-pound back. It's fun to watch."

Brian Kelly
Irish coach



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior running back Jonas Gray eludes an Air Force defender in a 59-33 victory on Oct. 8. Gray scored two touchdowns in the win.

finishing his runs. He's playing like a 230-pound back. It's fun to watch.

"His focus has been on finishing runs, being physical and being that physical element in our running game. It's really helped our offense."

For his part, Gray credits Hinton with his renewed commitment to winning physical battles.

"I love it. It's exciting. It's like coach Hinton always says: 'Break your will with their toughness.' That's what it is," the English

and political science major said. "You're out there running hard, you lower your shoulder and after a while they're not going to take you head on."

Running after records

In response to Kelly's challenge, Gray gave himself one task: building a legacy.

"My one thing I wanted to do was leave a legacy of a guy who dealt with all that adversity, continued to come back, continued to play at a high level and played through things," he said. "I think I've done that, and I think there's still a lot left to do."

"I always say it's been so much of a journey. It's had its ups and downs, its negatives and positives, but I wouldn't change a thing."

Not only has Gray finished his career with its best play, but the presumed power runner has turned heads with his breakaway speed.

"He had to be a physical downhill presence ... and he's done a great job," Hinton said.

"His explosiveness has been a little surprise and a happy surprise."

Gray has been so explosive, in fact, that he has challenged a decades-old Notre Dame record for much of the season. Gray is currently averaging 7.1 yards per carry on the season, and

averaged 8.5 yards per carry through the Navy game on Oct. 29. Reggie Brooks owns the modern record of 8.0 yards, set in 1992, with the all-time school record of 8.1 yards per carry posted in 1920 by the

famed George Gipp.

"It is crazy, especially thinking about where I came from, where I started," Gray said. "To talk about breaking a record with a guy like that is — breaking any type of Notre Dame record from where I started — it's pretty incredible."

Though Gray knows his senior campaign may have put some in the NFL on notice, he has just one goal for the end of the season — a goal fittingly inspired by the season's start.

"For these last four games, I'm trying to do everything I can to help the team win," Gray said. "If I work hard, I'm going to help this team win and I'm going to help myself in the future."

"I don't think there's a game really where I don't think about that very first game. I think about going out there and paying attention to detail and helping my team win — going out there and playing my hardest."

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TOM LA/The Observer

Senior running back Jonas Gray finds a hole in Navy's defense in a 56-14 Irish victory over the Midshipmen on Oct. 29. Gray rushed for 69 yards and three touchdowns in the win.

MIKE GRIECO**Walk-on kicker earns storybook ending against Air Force**

By PETER STEINER
Sports Writer

It all started with a transfer from Holy Cross to Notre Dame, which led to walking on the football team, which created one memorable play during his senior year — a storybook ending for senior punter and kicker Mike Grieco.

Grieco attended Holy Cross his freshman year, but always had his sights set on Notre Dame and the football program.

"I have loved Notre Dame since I was really young and always wanted to go here," he said. "Ever since I started going to Holy Cross and didn't have the grades to get in here, I knew that I had to have a new mindset and I knew that if I was going to transfer and do both with football and academics, I needed to be on top of my game."

Grieco transferred to Notre Dame after his freshman year and immediately starting pursuing his next goal — playing for the football team.

"I tried to walk-on with [former Irish coach Charlie] Weis but they were in midseason and then the [coaching] transition happened," he said. "I had a try-out in the spring of my sophomore year when the new staff came in. I tried out as a kicker and they wanted me to both punt and kick so I was happy to take any opportunity that I could get."

In addition to Grieco's own desire to play for Notre Dame, a

former Irish football player also provided support and motivation.

"Former kicker Bob Thomas and his father actually first inspired me to kick and also encouraged me to try out at Notre Dame," Grieco said.

Thomas was a place kicker for the Irish from 1971-73 and there was no better role model for Grieco than a former Notre Dame kicker.

After making the team in a backup role, Grieco finally received his moment to shine when he kicked an extra point in the Air Force game this year.

"Being able to kick an extra point, which [Irish coach Brian] Kelly and [special teams coach Mike] Elston agreed to let me kick with the help of [senior kicker David] Ruffer, was just an awesome feeling," Grieco said. "Everything that I worked for just paid off and getting all the high fives from all the teammates was very cool."

Yet, his journey has not been easy, requiring lots of dedication and hard work. In addition to achieving the grades needed to transfer to Notre Dame, Grieco has also had to balance practices with the rigors of the classroom.

"I have had to be organized and disciplined during both weekdays and weekends," he said. "You have to sacrifice a few nights of partying here and there, but it has been well worth it."

Time management is not the only lesson Grieco will take away from his time as a member of the



Senior kicker Mike Grieco attempts an extra point during Notre Dame's 59-33 victory over Air Force on Oct. 8. Grieco made the extra point, the first attempt of his career.

COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

team, as he has learned many things from both his teammates and coaches.

"Coach Kelly preaches attention to detail, discipline, both mental and physical toughness," he said. "Those are great things that you can translate into your school work and after when you hopefully get a job."

During the past two years having Kelly as a coach, Grieco said he realized Kelly's ability to get the best out of his players is what makes him great.

"I think he is a great guy,"

Grieco said. "He demands the most out of us and he pulls the most out of us. This team will definitely win a championship in the next few years and I really believe that."

As his time as a player and a student at Notre Dame winds down, Grieco, a political science and sociology double major, is hoping to stay involved in sports, but from a different angle.

"After this year, I think I want to try to get into sports management," he said. "I want to be an agent or work for the front office

of a professional athletics team."

Reflecting on his journey, Grieco said he has no regrets.

"The path was great and everything has worked in my favor, which I'm very thankful for," he said. "Being able to play even that one play was awesome. When you are on the practice field and in the Stadium you can see Touchdown Jesus and the Dome, it just reminds you what you are playing for and working for."

Contact Peter Steiner at psteiner@nd.edu



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IRISH PASSING

The Irish face the No. 84 pass defense this week, so sophomore quarterback Tommy Rees should have no problem finding Notre Dame's playmakers early and often.

Rees had his most efficient outing of the season, completing 30-of-38 passes for 296 yards and touchdown passes to senior receiver Michael Floyd and junior tight end Tyler Eifert.

While Rees has had his fair share of ups-and-downs in 2011, he should experience more of the former and not the latter against a putrid Eagle defense.

Notre Dame did not allow a sack for five consecutive games before Maryland sacked Rees three times last weekend.

Aided by a powerful running game and strong pass blocking, Rees should roll in his first career matchup against Boston College. There's a good chance Floyd will add to his school-record career touchdown total in this one.

IRISH RUSHING

Notre Dame has found a groove offensively this season behind the efforts of senior running back Jonas Gray and junior running back Cierre Wood, who could become the first tandem in Irish history to record 1,000-yard rushing campaigns in the same season. Wood needs 93 yards to reach 1,000, while Gray needs 270 in the final three games, including the bowl game.

Boston College's rush defense ranks 62nd in the nation, and should be manhandled by the cohesive Irish front. The rose among thorns on the Eagle defense is junior linebacker Luke Kuechly, who leads the NCAA by a wide margin with 168 tackles this season.

If the Irish are able to establish the running game early, which they should have no problem doing, the offense should click throughout the game.

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Irish coach Kelly and offensive coordinator Charley Molnar should have no problem out-smarting overmatched Eagles coach Frank Spaziani and his staff Saturday.

Notre Dame's bread and butter for most of the season has been its rushing attack, and Gray and Wood should be able to set the tone behind their coaches' early calls.

Head-to

Notre Dame Offense

WR	7	TJ Jones	So.
	81	John Goodman	Sr.
WR	9	Robby Toma	Jr.
	7	TJ Jones	So.
LT	70	Zack Martin	Jr.
	72	Nick Martin	Fr.
LG	66	Chris Watt	Jr.
	51	Bruce Heggie	So.
C	57	Mike Golic Jr.	Sr.
	76	Andrew Nuss	Sr.
RG	78	Trevor Robinson	Sr.
	65	Conor Hanratty	Fr.
RT	75	Taylor Dever	Sr.
	74	Christian Lombard	So.
TE	80	Tyler Eifert	Jr.
	18	Ben Koyack	Fr.
WR	3	Michael Floyd	Sr.
	87	Daniel Smith	So.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

RB	20	Cierre Wood	Jr.
	25	Jonas Gray	Sr.
QB	11	Tommy Rees	So.
	10	Dayne Crist	Sr.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SCHEDULE

- Sept. 3 South Florida (L, 23-20)
- Sept. 10 @ Michigan (L, 35-31)
- Sept. 17 Michigan St. (W, 31-13)
- Sept. 24 @ Pittsburgh (W, 15-12)
- Oct. 1 @ Purdue (W, 38-10)
- Oct. 8 Air Force (W, 59-33)
- Oct. 22 USC (L, 31-17)
- Oct. 29 Navy (W, 56-14)
- Nov. 5 @ Wake Forest (W, 24-17)
- Nov. 12 Maryland (W, 45-21)
- Nov. 19 Boston College
- Nov. 26 @ Stanford

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

The difference between Notre Dame's special teams in September and November is light and day.

Senior kicker David Ruffer has been much more consistent lately, which includes a converted 52-yard field goal in the 45-21 win over Maryland last Saturday.

Freshman running back George Atkinson has already returned two kickoffs for touchdowns in 2011, and a third against Boston College is not too far-fetched. His explosiveness has added another dimension to the Irish special teams.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

Notre Dame Specialists

PK	97	David Ruffer	Sr.	S	22	Harrison Smith	Sr.	CB	12	Robert Blanton	Sr.	
					15	Dan McCarthy	Sr.		23	Lo Wood	So.	
P	35	Ben Turk	Jr.		ILB	48	Dan Fox	Jr.	OLB	45	Darius Fleming	Sr.
						44	Carlo Calabrese	Jr.		46	Steve Filer	Sr.
LS	50	Ryan Kavanagh	Sr.		ILB	5	Manti Te'o	Jr.	DE	90	Ethan Johnson	Sr.
	60	Jordan Cowart	Jr.			54	Anthony McDonald	Sr.		19	Aaron Lynch	Fr.
PR	81	John Goodman	Sr.		S	26	Jamoris Slaughter	Sr.	NG	9	Louis Nix	So.
	3	Michael Floyd	Sr.			17	Zeke Motta	Jr.		98	Sean Cwynar	Sr.
KR	34	George Atkinson	Fr.		CB	4	Gary Gray	Sr.	DE	7	Stephon Tuitt	Fr.
	28	Austin Collinsworth	So.			2	Bennett Jackson	So.		50	Chase Hounshell	Fr.
KO	27	Kyle Brindza	Fr.						OLB	55	Prince Shembo	So.
										56	Troy Niklas	Fr.

Predictions

Allan Joseph
Sports Editor



My eyes really hurt. Now, I can't actually tell whether that's just from working on this massive special section for so long or from looking at just how bad this Boston College squad is. I mean, I knew they weren't going to be particularly good, but 112th in the country in total offense? That's abysmal.

So expect this game to be a total laugh. From the first senior to step on the field with his parents to the last strains of the Alma Mater, Notre Dame will have nothing to worry about except celebrating the careers of these seniors. In fact, I'm pretty confident the halftime marshmallow fight will be the most competitive thing we watch all day. For two straight years, seniors will leave their last home game happy.

In short, Saturday will be easy on the eyes.

Douglas Farmer
Editor-in-Chief



Dear Eric (to my right), I know you grew up in South Bend and graduated with a degree in something last year. I know you are now a know-it-all graduate student, and I know you're convinced I'm an idiot.

But news flash: It's not a rivalry if your students never travel en masse to the away games, if your coach doesn't admit to in the week ahead, and if you hold the opponent to less than 50 yards rushing two years in a row.

Yes, look for the Eagles to have more penalty yards than rushing yards Saturday. And look for Notre Dame to pay homage to its 38 seniors with 38 points, hopefully with a touchdown thrown from senior quarterback Matt Mulvey to senior receiver Deion Walker.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 38, Boston College 0

Eric Prister
Senior Sports Writer



Last senior day, the Irish faced a ranked Utah squad which was supposed to make easy work of an underachieving Notre Dame team. But the seniors had a different idea.

This year, Notre Dame is the ranked team on senior day, and they should make easy work of a struggling Boston College squad.

But this is a rivalry game. No matter how much Notre Dame students hate it, the Eagles are Notre Dame's rival, and anything can happen in a game with pride on the line.

Senior wide receiver Michael Floyd will play well, the Irish will run the football with Jonas Gray and Cierre Wood, they will stop the run, and Notre Dame will win the game. Just don't expect it to be quite as much of a blowout as the teams' respective talent levels suggest.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 28, Boston College 24

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 56, Boston College 10

o-Head

Boston College Defense

CB 4 **Donnie Fletcher** Sr.
5 Al Louis-Jean, Jr. Fr.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

S 37 **Hampton Hughes** Jr.
19 Sean Sylvia R-Fr.

OLB 49 **Steele Divitto** So.
35 Andre Lawrence So.

DE 56 **Max Holloway** Jr.
33 Dan Williams Sr.

DT 95 **Dominic Appiah** R-Fr.
97 Conor O'Neal Jr.

DT 98 **Max Ricci** Fr.
92 Dillon Quinn Jr.

DE 91 **Kasim Edebali** So.
99 Brian Mihalik Fr.

OLB 34 **Sean Duggan** Fr.
25 Josh Keyes Fr.

S 9 **Dominique Williams** R-Fr.
23 Jim Noel Jr.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

CB 21 **Manny Asprilla** Fr.
29 James McCaffery R-Fr.

Boston College Offense

WR 83 **Alex Amidon** So.
14 Johnathan Coleman So.

TE 81 **Chris Pantale** Jr.
87 Lars Anderson Sr.

RT 77 **Emmett Cleary** Jr.
67 Seth Betancourt R-Fr.

RG 62 **Ian White** So.
64 Harris Williams R-Fr.

C 69 **Mark Spinney** Sr.
59 Andy Galik R-Fr.

LG 76 **Bobby Vardaro** R-Fr.
60 Bryan Davis So.

LT 73 **John Wetzel** Jr.
70 Aaron Kramer R-Fr.

WR 1 **Colin Larmond, Jr.** Jr.
30 Donte Elliott Jr.

WR 10 **Bobby Swigert** So.
7 Spiffy Evans Fr.

QB 11 **Chase Rettig** So.
15 Dave Shinskie Jr.

RB 28 **Rolandan Finch** So.
44 Andre Williams So.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

BC OFFENSIVE COACHING

Boston College has an anemic offense that ranks 112th out of 120 FBS teams in total offense.

Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's attack flummoxed the Eagles in 2010, and the Irish are a much more talented unit now than 13 months ago.

Boston College will need its most complete offensive performance of 2011 if it has a chance to pull off the upset of Notre Dame. The Eagles once brought their A-game against the Irish each year, but that was under previous coaching regimes.

BC PASSING

To say Boston College has issues throwing the football would be an understatement.

Though sophomore quarterback Chase Rettig has improved since the Irish faced him in his first career appearance in 2010. This season, he has completed 53.1 percent of his passes for a measly 158.8 yards per contest, to go with nine touchdowns and nine interceptions.

The Irish secondary has been mostly consistent this season. Senior cornerback Gary Gray has performed much better since the miscues in the early weeks of the season that cost Notre Dame dearly.

Sophomore Bobby Swigert leads Boston College with 35 receptions on the season and junior Colin Larmond, Jr. leads the team with 500 yards and three touchdowns.

Irish senior defensive end Ethan Johnson returned to action last week after an ankle injury held him out for over a month. Though he is not at full strength, his return will keep freshmen Aaron Lynch and Stephon Tuitt fresher on pass rushes.

BC RUSHING

The Eagles rank 81st in the country on the ground, which compares favorably to its 106th-ranked passing attack.

Sophomores Rolandan Finch and Andre Williams receive most of the calls on the ground from offensive coordinator Kevin Rogers, who served in the same capacity at Notre Dame under former Irish coach Bob Davie.

Notre Dame's rush defense has been stellar this season, and this weekend should be no different, especially with the unit ignited by the emotions of Senior Day. Irish opponents have scored only seven touchdowns, which pales in comparison to the 23 Notre Dame has recorded.

The defense has been opportunistic at times throughout the season, the most notable play of which came in the 24-17 win at Wake Forest on Nov. 5, when seniors Kapron Lewis-Moore and Darius Fleming forced a fumble while the Deacons were about to tie the game.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

BC SCHEDULE

- Sept. 3 Northwestern (L, 24-17)
- Sept. 10 @ UCF (L, 30-3)
- Sept. 17 Duke (L, 20-19)
- Sept. 24 Massachusetts (W, 45-17)
- Oct. 1 Wake Forest (L, 27-19)
- Oct. 8 @ Clemson (L, 36-14)
- Oct. 22 @ Virginia Tech (L, 30-14)
- Oct. 29 @ Maryland (W, 28-17)
- Nov. 3 Florida State (L, 38-7)
- Nov. 12 North Carolina State (W, 14-10)
- Nov. 19 @ Notre Dame
- Nov. 25 @ Miami

BC SPECIAL TEAMS

Sophomore kicker Nate Freese is 9-of-15 on field goals this season and only 2-of-5 from 30-39 yards. His long of the year is 52 yards, so the inconsistent kicker does have some power.

Senior Ryan Quigley's punt average of 37.9 yards per game is subpar, as only four of his 54 punts have traveled 50-plus yards.

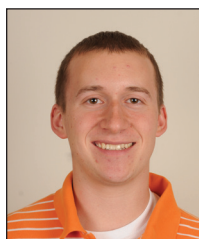
Boston College has little explosiveness on the kick return and punt return units. Freshman Spiffy Evans has averaged 21.4 yards per kick return, with a long of 32 yards, while sophomore Bobby Swigert has returned seven punts for an average of five yards per return.

Boston College Specialists

PK 85 **Nate Freese** So.
P 46 **Ryan Quigley** Sr.
LS 57 **Sean Flaherty** Jr.
PR 10 **Bobby Swigert** So.
KR 7 **Spiffy Evans** Fr.
KO 85 **Nate Freese** So.

Andrew Owens

Associate Sports Editor



When I was scanning the list of seniors set to play their final game at Notre Dame Stadium, what struck me was how quickly the past four years have elapsed.

This class made a commitment to Notre Dame following the worst season in school history and, while the 28-20 record is not what they had in mind when they debuted in 2008,

they have set the program up for success in the very near future.

Boston College brings its best when playing Notre Dame in this annual matchup (don't call it a rivalry, because it's not), but the Eagles are no match for the Irish this year. Cierre Wood and Jonas Gray will control the game and get closer to 1,000-yard seasons, which would be the first time two players have accomplished that feat at Notre Dame.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 42, Boston College 10

Chris Masoud

Assistant Managing Editor



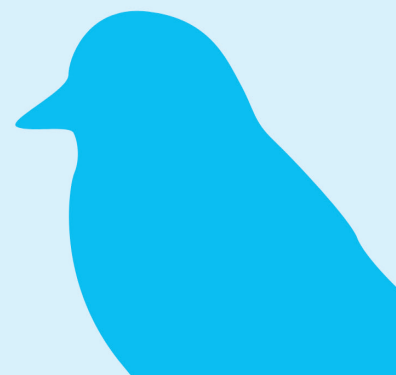
This one could get out of hand. Fast. Notre Dame is riding a three-game win streak for the second time this season, and its last five games of the season are strikingly similar to the five before. The Irish crushed an overhyped and overpowered Air Force team en route to its fourth consecutive win Oct. 8,

setting up a crucial matchup with a Pac 12 foe in USC.

While dismantling a three-win Eagles team on Senior Day will be slightly less satisfying than upsetting No. 14 Utah, sending off the seniors with a win is all that matters. And after notching its second fourth-straight win, Notre Dame will head to Palo Alto for its second showdown with a Pac 12 rival: Stanford. But this time, luck will be on Notre Dame's side. Wait...

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 48, Boston College 10

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RYAN KAVANAGH

Walk-on earns his way to two starting roles



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior holder Ryan Kavanagh holds the ball for a kick during Notre Dame's 45-21 win over Maryland on Nov. 12

By JONATHAN WARREN
Sports Writer

Very few players can say they earned a starting position on Notre Dame's football team. Even fewer players can say they earned two.

But senior walk-on Ryan Kavanagh is both the starting kick holder and long snapper this season. Kavanagh has been long-snapping since the fifth grade and is listed as a long snapper in the program, but started first for the Irish as a kick holder against Purdue in 2010.

"You really can't replicate the speed and the nerves in practice," Kavanagh said of his first start. "It was pretty surreal. You try to block as much of it out as you can, but at the same time you want to try to soak it in and enjoy the time you have out on the field."

Kavanagh's opportunity to hold kicks was due largely to the coaching turnover in 2009. When Irish coach Brian Kelly took the reigns, the team had no incumbent kick holder. Kavanagh saw a chance to start and taught himself how to hold kicks.

"The old coaching staff would have never considered me as a holder," Kavanagh said. "The change provided me a unique opportunity to get a clean slate and get on the field."

Kavanagh held kicks for the entire 2010 season and contributed to David Ruffer's 23 consecutive made field goals — the longest streak in school history. Ruffer and Kavanagh have a close relationship that helps them succeed on the field, Kavanagh said.

"We have that kicker-holder relationship," Kavanagh said. "We have a pretty loose relationship. I think it helps build a trust factor between the two of us in terms of kicking. I'm starting to get that way with [junior punter Ben Turk] now that I'm snapping to him."

Kavanagh earned the nod as starting long snapper for punts during this season's game against Purdue, when junior long snapper Jordan Cowart was injured. He has held the position ever since.

"Doing whatever I can to help the team motivates me," Kavanagh said. "I've been able to stay locked in, knowing that I can be out on the field at any minute. You just have to be ready to help the team at any time."

As a senior, Kavanagh's leader-

ship role on the team has expanded. He said he hopes his preparation motivates younger players.

"I just try to be a leader for some of the younger guys, to be someone they can look up to," Kavanagh said.

A civil engineering major, Kavanagh has utilized his hard-working attitude in the classroom as well. Managing time with a strenuous course load has been Kavanagh's greatest challenge, and he hopes to work in the oil industry after graduation.

"It's been difficult," Kavanagh said. "It's taken a lot of my time, but it's always been a focus of mine to maintain my grades. It's hard to maintain a balance between doing your work, being committed to football and trying to hang out with friends."

Despite the workload associated with being a football player and a full-time student, Kavanagh has cherished his time on campus.

"It's more than I could have ever dreamed for coming here, and I'm just thankful for it," Kavanagh said. "I've made a lot of memories and have a great group of friends."

Many of those friends are fellow walk-ons, members of the Walk-on Players Union Nation (WOPU) who share in each other's struggles and accomplishments.

"We stick together," Kavanagh said. "We've all been through similar experiences and have a good time together. We take pride in the work that we do. Anytime a guy can get on the field, it's a big deal. We're all here because we love Notre Dame."

A lifetime Notre Dame fan, Kavanagh will play his last game in Notre Dame Stadium on Saturday. After defeating the odds by being taken off the waitlist and earning his way on the team as a walk-on, Kavanagh will start at two positions against Boston College.

"It'll be pretty emotional," Kavanagh said. "I never thought I would be here in the first place. I can still remember coming out of the tunnel in that very first spring game and setting foot on the field. Knowing it will come to an end probably won't hit me until I'm walking out of the locker room, but I'm just going to try to go out with a win and do what I can."

Contact Jonathan Warren at jwarren3@nd.edu

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Observer Sports

ETHAN JOHNSON

Johnson leads defensive line

Senior-year injury doesn't stop defensive end from serving as mentor to those around him

By ANDREW OWENS
Associate Sports Editor

He played in each of the first 43 games of his career, but early in his senior campaign defensive end Ethan Johnson hit a roadblock and missed four consecutive contests due to an ankle injury.

As a senior leader and rock on the defense, Johnson kept the issue in perspective while trying to get back on the field.

"[Missing the four games] was rough," he said.

"Having not missed any games due to injury up until this point I didn't think or want it to be this year. If I could choose a year it probably wouldn't be my senior year to be injured. But you don't get that choice. Things happen and it's a part of the game. It made me realize what gameday is like, just not playing."

Instead of participating in his regular routine and preparing for Saturdays, Johnson was forced to trade time with coaches and players for time with the training staff.

"I had never been injured before like this, so I really didn't know how fast I'd bounce back or how fast I could heal," he said. "Our trainers told me what was expected for the injury, so I just took it a day at a time. I really just didn't know. You can be hopeful you'll be back sooner than expected, but if you don't feel good, then you don't. There's no reason to come back early and reinjure yourself. I didn't want to do that, but at the same time I definitely pushed it."

Johnson, Notre Dame's ac-

tive sacks leader with 12, returned to action Saturday in a 45-21 Irish victory over Maryland. Midway through the first quarter, Johnson worked his way around a Terrapin offensive lineman and stuffed fullback Tyler Cierski. While it was the only play a limited Johnson made in his return, it still felt good, he said.

"It was a nice play," Johnson said. "The left tackle is a good player, just looking at him before the game I thought he was the best lineman. We thought he was their best lineman, so it was good to make a play against him. I definitely wish I had driven [the fullback back more]."

Not being able to participate in the game he loves with the team-mates he loves has given Johnson a deeper appreciation for the opportunity to play at Notre Dame, he said.

"It felt good to be back out there and I had a lot of fun and it was great to be out there with the guys," he said. "I really missed that — running out there for the first drive of the game and I'm never going to take that for granted. I feel like I never did take that for granted. It's a very special place to play here and I've really enjoyed it here."

Passing it on

Johnson, who has played un-

der two coaching staffs and has transitioned from a 3-4 base defense to a 4-3 before ultimately returning to the 3-4, has played a key role as a mentor to freshman defensive ends Stephon Tuitt and Aaron Lynch, two players who were called into duty when Johnson was injured. His return also eases the burden on the rest of the defensive line, Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco said.

"It's just great to have him back," Diaco said. "He's a fundamental technician. We got so many reps under his belt on the techniques that play within our defense and it's nice then the other guys can have opportunities to cut it loose. They're not having to play three quarters or the whole game. They can take and pick their moments."

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Johnson has been key in helping the underclassmen buy into the second-year coach's plan.

"All of our seniors have had an impact in the direction and expectations," Kelly said. "When I say direction, [I mean] my voice, and how we want to do things. Certainly [Johnson] had an influence in making sure the program continues to grow in whatever we put in front of him."

Senior defensive tackle Sean Cwynar said Johnson is a positive influence on the entire defensive line, not just freshmen.

"Coming in with Ethan — he's a great player and one of the things he brings to the table is all the experience he's shown on the field," Cwynar said. "He's always there trying to help the freshmen out and he's always trying to help me in a certain area, so I think Ethan



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Senior defensive end Ethan Johnson sings the Alma Mater after Notre Dame's 31-13 victory over Michigan State on Sept. 17.

is one of the main leaders on the defensive line. He means a lot to us."

Junior linebacker Manti Te'o echoed Cwynar's sentiments and said Johnson is committed to preparing the right way.

"He's definitely the veteran of the defensive line," Te'o said. "He knows what's going on. He knows how to practice and he knows what we expect of him so from that standpoint he plays a very important role."

Winding down

When Johnson runs out of the Notre Dame Stadium tunnel Saturday for the final time, it will be a bittersweet moment, but he said he is anxious to move on to new opportunities.

"I feel like I'm going to miss this place but at the same time, I'm ready to be finished," Johnson said. "It's been a long road. It's pretty tough here academically and football-wise too with all the coaching changes and I've made some great relationships here and it's got to end eventually. I'll be finished in December with all my credits. I'm just ready for whatever's next and I've had a great time here and I'll always remember how great it was."

Even with the season and a collegiate career coming to a close, Johnson does not allow his mind to drift into endless what-if scenarios, but he did say what a potential best-case

scenario would be.

"First pick of the [NFL] draft," Johnson said with a laugh. "I really haven't put much thought into that — especially since I was injured ... You work so hard for your senior year and I really haven't thought about it and won't think about it until the end of the year."

"I would love to play in the NFL and the higher the better, but I haven't thought about it. If I get to go play, that would be awesome, if I don't get picked up, then I don't get picked up. That's life."

Johnson said he does not know what his personal mark on the program is, but the senior class is trying to complete a strong finish to the season and pave the way for future success at Notre Dame.

"Other people can define [my legacy]," he said. "Hopefully I had a positive impact on this place and I had a lot of fun. I feel like I've done my best while I was here."

"I feel like I just want to finish strong and finish the way we did last year. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't be able to do that. All the teams were going to play are good teams and battle-tested teams, even if their records don't show it. We know we're going to get a team's best, especially Boston College."

"If I could choose a year it probably wouldn't be my senior year to be injured. But you don't get that choice."

Ethan Johnson
senior defensive end

"It's a very special place to play here and I've really enjoyed it here."

Ethan Johnson
senior defensive end

"Hopefully I had a positive impact on this place and I had a lot of fun."

Ethan Johnson
senior defensive end



NICOLE TOCZAUER/The Observer

Senior defensive end Ethan Johnson makes a tackle during Notre Dame's 23-20 loss to South Florida on Sept. 3. Johnson made four tackles during the season-opening loss.

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NICK LEZYNSKI

Walk-on hopes to use football to enter coaching

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

Just playing football for Notre Dame is not enough for walk-on defensive back Nick Lezynski. The graduate student has always had his sights set on a higher position on the field. After he leaves, Lezynski wants to trade in his helmet for a headset and become a coach.

"I've always had the itch to coach. Obviously the past four years has made that interest more keen and makes me want to come back and pursue what my dream has always been," Lezynski said. "I loved playing sports, I've always had that coaches mindset, and I've always thought that I'd be a better coach than I'd be a player."

Lezynski graduated from Notre Dame in May 2011 with an undergraduate degree in marketing, but has stayed on the team for his fourth year of eligibility while pursuing a theology degree. Lezynski, a Newtown, Penn., native, has recently looked into how to make the transition from a player to a coach.

"I'd probably become a grad assistant at a college. I would be a part time grad student," Lezynski said. "Basically your job is on the football staff. That would be one of the things that I want to look into, and I've been searching that stuff for a while now."

Starting at the lower ranks and climbing up is something that Lezynski has practiced as a walk-on, competing for playing time against scholarship players.

"Basically in any profession, you'll really have to work your

way up the ranks," Lezynski said. "So being here, and especially being a walk-on, you start from the bottom and earn your way up. It's kind of a familiar path. I'm hoping that can help me. There are a lot of transferable skills for whatever career in the sports industry I choose."

Lezynski has played for the Irish under two different head coaches, and their respective staffs have provided lessons and examples for him to use as he builds his career.

"In the past four years, I've learned a lot of general lessons that will stick with me for a while," Lezynski said. "I've learned how to do things and how not to do things. I think that definitely I aspire to be at that level one day, to be considered in those ranks and be an elite college coach. There are good examples and bad examples I've seen."

Lezynski said that as he climbs the ranks in the coaching side of the game, he would like to eventually return to the sidelines of Notre Dame Stadium.

"I feel like a coach at Notre Dame is a person that can galvanize an entire community, the entire Notre Dame nation, and that kind of excites me," Lezynski said.

As the son of two graduates, both of whom were Notre Dame athletes, it was only natural for Lezynski to arrive in South Bend. His mother was a monogram winner, and his father was both a boxer and a wrestler at Notre Dame. His older sister danced on the pom squad for the Irish, and his brother Blaise is a freshman on the baseball team. Lezynski's

youngest brother also has aspirations to attend Notre Dame.

"My brothers and sister and I always wanted it," Lezynski said. "Seeing the games when I was little, it just made the mystique even greater to me, and I knew the only way I could do it was through getting good grades."

From walking on upon arriving at Notre Dame to receiving playing time in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's one-touchdown win over Pittsburgh in 2010, Lezynski's career has been embodied by a constant effort to improve.

"When you first walk on the team, you're at the bottom of the totem pole," Lezynski said. "When I first walked on, all I wanted to do was make the team. It's never worn off, but at the same time, I've never been content with my role on the team. [I'm trying] to improve [my role] and to get on the field."

His leadership and past presidency of the Walk-On Players Union (WOPU) has given him some experience in team leadership for coaching. Lezynski is now the President Emeritus of the union, he said.

"To be honest, you don't envision being a walk on, you envision winning Heisman Trophies and being an all-American," Lezynski said. "I feel like through the trials and tribulations I've gone through as a walk on, with the brotherhood that I have with all the other walk-ons, that we're all in this together. We always play as a team, we play for Our Lady and we've always got each other to lean on."

A large network of people have



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Fifth-year defensive back Nick Lezynski takes the field before Notre Dame's 28-24 loss to Michigan on Sept. 11, 2010.

molded the player and prospective coach Lezynski came to be throughout his years as a member of the Notre Dame football team.

"It's the support from my family, my girlfriend — an '11 ND cheerleader — and my teammates, especially the WOPU guys. They're the ones that have kept me through this the whole time," Lezynski said.

Lezynski cites his parents as driving forces in helping him become a leader on the team and developing the qualities he will need down the road in coaching positions.

"My parents have always encouraged us to be leaders," Lezynski said. "I have this sign above my

door that says, 'What is popular is not always right, what is right is not always popular,' so I always wanted to do the right thing, encourage people and have a voice. I like to think I have leadership qualities."

Lezynski hopes his leadership will be the biggest legacy he leaves at Notre Dame, at least while as a player.

"I'm not the most talented guy, or the biggest guy, but I'd like to think that I've been able to make an impact here," Lezynski said. "That's something I hope to share with other people around me."

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DENNIS MAHONEY

Football is just another challenge for future law student



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Senior offensive lineman Dennis Mahoney, right, takes the field for warmups before Notre Dame's 23-12 victory over Purdue on Sept. 4, 2010.

By ADRIANA PRATT
Assistant Managing Editor

A history major focused on getting into law school and completing a senior thesis about crusades sounds like a busy student. Add a 40-hour-a-week time commitment to the Notre Dame football team, and you'll have senior offensive lineman Dennis Mahoney. "It's tough. I mean, you have to be able to really manage your time well," Mahoney said. "But once you get into your routine, I think it's not too hard to handle."

The former Dillon Hall resi-

dent began playing football in seventh grade. He looked to his older brother Patrick, a 2007 Notre Dame graduate, for the inspiration to play in college.

"He tried [walking on]," Mahoney said. "He tore his Achilles ... so that was kind of it. But he always got me into football."

The Maryland native said his family, and especially Patrick, were ecstatic when they found out Mahoney made the team.

His parents have made the trek from Baltimore to South Bend for most of the Irish

home games. Seeing them and other fans line the team's path to the Stadium on game days is one of his favorite college memories, Mahoney said.

"It's just a good tradition," Mahoney said. "There's a lot of people and fans. My family's usually there."

Another highlight of Mahoney's football career includes his block against Air Force during the Oct. 8 Irish victory at home. The game was Mahoney's first chance to see time on the field since he joined the team.

"The first time I got in, [sophomore quarterback An-

drew] Hendrix was in and he had a long run," Mahoney said. "I made a block and I got up and looked and he was running downfield and it was pretty, pretty exciting."

Mahoney joined the Irish after completing the team's August 2008 training camp before his freshman year. After he found out he was admitted early to Notre Dame, his high school coach helped him compile a highlight film to send the Irish coaches, who then invited him to train with the team.

"[The coaches] said, 'Yeah, come for camp and if you get through camp, then you can stay on the team throughout the fall and into spring,'" Mahoney said.

After four years on the Irish offensive line, Mahoney is looking forward to getting back 40 hours in his week, but unsure what he'll do with it. As a football player, his schedule often involves 8 a.m. practices followed by morning classes, meetings, another practice, team dinner then homework.

"This takes up your time," he said. "[No longer playing] will be weird because I've never experienced it, so I don't

know."

Two things he will take away from his time on the line are a group of close friends and a tough work ethic.

"I think you just learn, you know, what it takes — how hard you have to work," Mahoney said.

He looks to his fellow walk-ons senior linebacker Sean

Oxley and senior cornerback Nick Lezynski for both guidance and friendship.

"It's good. It's a good group of friends who have this unique aspect," Mahoney said.

For now, Mahoney said he is focused on finishing

the season and preparing for law school. He is looking at both Notre Dame and Georgetown's law programs and is also considering schools close to his Baltimore home.

Spending time on the Notre Dame football team has been both a challenging and rewarding experience, he said.

"It's been good," Mahoney said. "You know, it's been tough at times. But it's always been something I wanted to do."

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"It's been good. You know, it's been tough at times. But it's always been something I wanted to do."

Dennis Mahoney
senior offensive lineman

KAPRON LEWIS-MOORE

Lewis-Moore bolsters line

Lewis-Moore teaches freshmen after a knee injury sidelines him midway through 2011

By CHRIS MASOUD
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Oct. 7 edition of The Observer.

The dream of donning the gold and blue, running out of the tunnel and playing in Notre Dame Stadium usually begins at a very early age. Legendary games like the 1993 contest against No. 1 Florida State or the 1988 "Catholics vs. Convicts" battle against Miami foster the desire for an aspiring football player to lace up for the Irish.

But in Texas, the Big 12 reigns supreme, and for Irish senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore, landing at Notre Dame was less of a dream-come-true story than a dream dashed.

"Being a Texas kid, your dream schools are Texas, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, [Texas] A&M — the Big 12. You kind of stay close to home," Lewis-Moore said. "I was actually committed to Texas A&M my senior year in high school."

A native of Weatherford, Texas, Lewis-Moore was recruited into the Aggie program by then-coach Dennis Franchione. But following Franchione's resignation and subsequent hiatus from college football, Lewis-Moore's college football career took an abrupt 180-degree turn.

"After he resigned after [the Aggies] upset Texas that year, I was kind of in a fluster, didn't know what I wanted to do," he said. "I wanted to talk to my mom, who didn't really have any idea how the recruiting process worked, so I de-committed from Texas A&M at the time, and that's when I took some trips."

Those trips included a recruiting visit to Colorado and, eventually, Notre Dame.

"I came up here, visited, loved the school, loved the people, even though it was like negative 10 [degrees] outside with the sun shining," Lewis-Moore said. "I still had a lot of fun."

Facing the prospects of harsh winters and a life away from home, Lewis-Moore's path took another 180 when he re-committed to Texas A&M. But after conversations with close family and friends, the recruit decided to take a leap of faith.

"My mom — she was happy for me — but at the same time challenged me to do something different with my life. She challenged me to get out of my comfort zone, and my mom being a schoolteacher, she had a real positive impact in my life. Academics was always first and I feel like Notre Dame's one of the best academic institutions in the country."

It seems Mom knows best, as in his fourth year as a member of the Irish, Lewis-Moore has emerged as a pivotal player on a defense that has bolstered the Irish following a disappointing 0-2 start.

In addition to his contribution on the field, Lewis-Moore has accepted his mother's challenge both in the classroom and in the locker room. Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco hails the senior as one of the key members of the entire football organization.

"I would say that [Kapron] understands his place on the team as a leader and a starter," Diaco said. "He doesn't have any feeling of being threatened by anyone else. He understands how important he is to the organization and how much value he has in the organization."

After redshirting during his freshman year, Lewis-Moore earned his first start against

Michigan State in 2009 in what turned out to be a thrilling victory for Notre Dame. Then-senior Kyle McCarthy intercepted a pass late in the fourth quarter, as the Irish defense came through to seal a 33-30 win.

"It was a lot of fun, but I was nervous too," Lewis-Moore said. "Running out there, 81,000 people screaming, your mind's going 100 miles an hour. I had a lot of fun, I enjoyed it and it's something I will never forget."

While walking out of the tunnel has become "old hat" for the senior, he admitted he still feels the goose bumps every time he walks onto the field. But in between the whistles, Lewis-Moore has been playing with a renewed focus as part of a core defensive line that held Purdue to just 84 rushing yards in Notre Dame's 38-10 victory last Saturday.

Lewis-Moore led the line with 16 unassisted tackles, four for a loss, and a forced fumble before sustaining a season-ending injury against USC on Oct. 22.

"He's 290-plus pounds, and he moves like a guy who is 245, 250 pounds," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "Quick feet plus his size give him the ability to do really good things."

Lewis-Moore said he and Ethan Johnson, the two senior ends, have developed a close friendship over the years, barring a minor setback.

"Ethan's a great guy, I love him," Lewis-Moore said. "Except one year, when he changed his number to 90 when he was nine. We've always bonded, but he was always on the other side of the

"I would say that [Kapron] understands his place on the team as a leader and a starter. He doesn't have any feeling of being threatened by anyone else."

Bob Diaco
defensive coordinator



SUZANNA PRATT/The Observer

Senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore runs after an opponent during Notre Dame's 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.

locker, I was right here. When he changed his number, that's when we really started to [develop] a great bond."

Lewis-Moore's roommate and close friend, senior linebacker Darius Fleming said the senior is well-equipped to handle the load Saturday.

"Kap's been a leader all year, he's been doing an awesome job," he said. "Kap will be fine in that role picking up for Ethan and just carrying that D-line. That's one of my best friends. He's a character. He's funny. He's a tough kid. No one dislikes Kap."

That includes a talented duo of Irish freshmen in Aaron Lynch and Stephon Tuitt, who have slowly worked their way into the Irish rotation. Lewis-Moore has embraced the additional role of mentor for the rookies, whose development can be attributed in part to the unofficial coaching of the senior defensive end.

"He understands that these guys are going to help us be successful, so he's doing everything that he can to help them with film study, with things on the field, off the field — just being that mentor for them," Fleming said. "He's not letting the fact that they're battling for his position get into his head. He's just being the leader that he is ... At times, I look up to him."

Lewis-Moore credits the freshmen for adapting quickly to the intensity of the college game, allowing him to take a less hands-on approach and letting the freshmen develop into their own style.

"They came in and they responded well," he said. "It's not so much teaching. You can explain running down the tunnel, being at Notre Dame — how awesome it is. You're always under the microscope, always on the big stage

... Playing in big games, I think they kind of feel for themselves that this is a great institution."

But the mentor admits he still has room for improvement before his final year of eligibility in 2012. Diaco said he expects Lewis-Moore's continued progression to pay dividends this season and into the future.

"Tangibly, he's going to get bigger, faster, stronger. Cardiovascularly, he's going to be able to play harder longer. He can play a lot harder longer than he could a year ago, and it's only going to continue to improve. Mentally, he'll continue to take his mental game to that next level of understanding."

A marketing major, Lewis-Moore hopes to put his degree to good use upon graduation. In the meantime, the senior looks to help out the defense in any way he can.

"I feel like we're a great team, and starting off 0-2 is kind of frustrating," Lewis-Moore said. "We're so much better than what we've shown, but I think the last couple of weeks we've shown that we are a great team and we've got to take one game at a time."

Despite the flip-flop regarding his decision to enroll at Notre Dame, Lewis-Moore said he never regretted his decision, nor his mother's advice, to suit up for the Irish.

"If I would have gone anywhere else — there's no place like Notre Dame to me. There's no place that you can have such a great institution with great people ... I'm blessed, I'm lucky and I'm very privileged to be playing football for this great institution."

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TOM YOUNG/The Observer

Senior defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore, left, chases Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins during Notre Dame's 31-13 win over the Spartans on Sept. 17. Lewis-Moore recorded five tackles in the win.

DAN MCCARTHY

Safety follows in the footsteps of his older brother

By SARAH MERVOSH
Managing Editor

Many athletes say their teammates become like brothers, but for senior safety Dan McCarthy, that bond was a bit more literal.

For half his time at Notre Dame, McCarthy played with older brother Kyle, who was also a safety and currently plays for the Denver Broncos.

"He taught me more than I could thank him for," Dan McCarthy said. "He taught me things off the field, how to act, how to carry yourself and how to play the game the right way. He played with a lot of passion and heart. I try to model myself after that."

Dan said his brother and family influenced his decision to come to Notre Dame.

"Growing up being from an Irish Catholic family, I was always a big Notre Dame fan, my whole family was," he said. "[And] I thought it would be neat to follow my brother here."

When Dan joined the team in 2008, it was the first time the brothers had the opportunity to play on the same team and Kyle McCarthy said he was excited to have his brother on board.

"I tried to help him out as much as possible when he got in but Danny didn't really need much help," Kyle McCarthy said. "He had the work ethic and has all the talent in the world. He was able to make a name for himself pretty quickly."

Dan has seen playing time both as a safety and on special

teams throughout his career and first saw action as a sophomore at the season-opening Nevada game.

"I got a chance to run in there at safety," he said. "That was definitely one of the best memories, just finally, after watching for so long, getting the chance to get out there was truly amazing."

But both brothers said their favorite memory was running out of the tunnel for the first time together.

"I'll never forget, my brother pulled me up to the front and I ran behind him," Dan said. "That was the first time I ran out but I was so excited I didn't really remember it until I got to the end zone."

Kyle agreed the memory was unforgettable.

"It's definitely a feeling neither of us will ever forget," he said.

Dan has also contributed on kickoffs and kick returns, and occasionally sees time on punts and punt returns.

"Whatever's the best way to help the team out is what I'm for," he said. "Whatever I can contribute is what I'm looking to do."

Kyle said it has been rewarding to watch his brother succeed.

"I'm really proud of how far he's come and the type of person he's become," he said.

But the bond between the McCarthy brothers was not the only brotherhood Dan found when he joined the football team. He said the football program has given



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Senior safety Dan McCarthy runs with the ball after an interception during Notre Dame's 2010 Blue-Gold spring game. Dan McCarthy is the younger brother of former Irish safety Kyle McCarthy.

him lifelong friends.

"You hang out with the guys over half the day and you really get to know each other and you adapt to each other ... It's just a great brotherhood," he said. "The memories I've had are just amazing. The friends I've made here and the people I've met here, I'll carry on lifelong friendships."

Being on the football team has also taught Dan how to balance a busy schedule full of daily practices, classes, homework and a social life.

"It's tough, definitely at a challenging school like Notre Dame.

I think football actually gets you on a nice program and you get used to a daily schedule," he said.

But there's one trick to the balancing act that stands out to the younger McCarthy — time management.

"That's what my dad always preached and it really came into play when I got to college," he said.

Because he did not play his freshman year, McCarthy has one year of eligibility remaining and plans to apply for a fifth year. After graduation, however, the finance major plans to put

his time management skills to use in the business world.

"I definitely want to get into the business world and I'll explore my opportunities there when it comes," he said.

In the mean time, Dan McCarthy will enjoy the remainder of the football season and the friendships he has made along the way.

"Just the whole football experience has been great and I've cherished every moment of it," he said. "I'll never forget it."

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ANTHONY McDONALD

Son of USC alumnus has no regrets choosing Notre Dame



Observer File Photo

Senior linebacker Anthony McDonald makes a tackle during Notre Dame's 33-17 victory over Miami on Dec. 22, 2010.

By VICKY JACOBSEN
Sports Writer

For many former USC players, watching a son choose to play for the Irish would be cause for deep shame. For senior linebacker Anthony McDonald's father, Mike, Notre Dame was the lesser of two evils.

"I was being recruited by UCLA also, and [my father] said that if I would have gone there that he would have disowned me because USC just hates UCLA, but they respect Notre Dame," McDonald said. "At first he wasn't too happy with me being here, but he ended up telling me that he's always respected Notre Dame. But he still

gets a lot of [heat] from his buddies."

Notre Dame and USC may be one of the nation's most storied rivalries, but McDonald said his father's choice of school has not caused any unpleasantness even though one of his roommates, senior center Mike Golic, Jr., is the son of one of Notre Dame's most visible football alumni, Mike Golic, Sr.

"[McDonald's father and Mike Golic, Sr.] get along fine; they never really argue about it because my dad knows when he comes out here it's Notre Dame territory, so there's not much he can say," McDonald said. "I'm sure if it was the opposite, and

[if] they were out at Southern Cal it would be a little different."

One of McDonald's other roommates is senior quarterback Dayne Crist, a fellow Californian and former high school classmate.

"We actually played against each other in Pop Warner when we were eight years old, and then we were kind of the big guys on the teams, so we kind of knew each other ever since then," McDonald said. "We started going to school together, and we've been great friends ever since."

While McDonald is very close with his teammates, especially those in his recruiting class, he did not limit his social circle to the football team.

"I still live with my roommate from freshman year," McDonald said. "His name is Tomás Kenney. Freshman summer, Dayne and I were roommates because we were there for the summer and they put the football players together. Dayne and I found our roommates on Facebook and we were like 'Oh God, how is this guy going to be?' Me and my roommate hit it off, and we've been best friends ever since, so I've had a great time with him and we still live together."

McDonald said that his friendship with Kenney gave him a lot of respect for non-athletes.

"A lot of us football players talk about regular students: 'They have so much free time, what are they doing with their lives here?' But I've just been really impressed by how much work he puts into school. Sometimes he'll get back later than me because he'll be studying all day,

so just seeing his work ethic and how much he cares about school — he's been a really influential person."

Not every surprise was as positive as his freshman roommate, namely South Bend winters.

"I remember the first day when it started snowing freshman year, I ran outside with a couple of the other guys from California and we were like, 'Oh, this is so cool,' because we'd never seen snow fall before ... And then it snowed for six months straight," McDonald said. "Freshman year I tore my ACL, so I had to crutch around in the snow. I remember the first day after surgery I was crutching and I slipped and I thought, 'Oh God, I'm going to have to put up with this for the next four years.'"

McDonald's injuries did not end with the torn ACL. During his sophomore year, he was blindsided by a member of the Washington special teams, leaving him concussed and unsure of which way to run. (The play became an instant You Tube hit when he got to his feet and took off for the wrong end zone.) During his junior year, he was again limited by a knee injury.

"It's hard having an injury," McDonald said. "Any time you get injured, it's hard to go through the process of sitting out, but I always think back to what my dad told me: 'It's a tough sport for tough players.' If you're not tough, you shouldn't be playing this game, so you fight through it, you come back and you learn from your injuries and you get better."

After sitting out all of his fresh-

man year, McDonald has seen game action in each of the last three seasons. One of the highlights of McDonald's career came last season in the Sun Bowl, when he played most of the second half in place of an injured Manti Te'o.

"The Sun Bowl was a little different because it was freezing," McDonald said. "I came in after half and hadn't been doing anything, so I was kind of cold and really stiff because I hadn't been in the game, but I it was a great atmosphere and the fans that were there got everyone really energized."

McDonald's signature play came against Michigan State during his junior year.

"It was third-and-short and I ran and jumped over the pile and tackled the quarterback for no gain," McDonald said. "They ended up converting the fourth down, but I don't like to tell people that part."

While there's nothing like the adrenaline that comes on game day, McDonald said that he'll most miss the camaraderie of his classmates after graduation.

"Our whole class is a really tight-knit group and we've been together for four years-plus now. Obviously we're all going to be separated at some point," McDonald said. "I'm pretty sure I'll keep in touch with most of the guys that I'm really close with, but it's not going to be the same because we're not going to see each other every day and be out there shedding blood, sweat and tears with each other every day."

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MATT MULVEY

'Red Army' leader earns fame due to sideline role

By SARAH MERVOSH
Managing Editor

He may not start on Saturdays, but he gets more camera time than most.

When the Irish are on offense and the camera zooms in on Irish coach Brian Kelly, keep an eye out for senior walk-on quarterback Matt Mulvey — he's hard to miss.

Wearing the signature red quarterback cap, Mulvey sticks close to Kelly during games and can be seen waving, tapping and gesturing as he sends in play signals each down.

"I feel more like a coach now and I've really fully dived into this role," he said. "It has been such a treat to be more a part of the offense, to be more a part of the team and try to help out as much as I can."

But it's not an easy job. As the leader of the "Red Army," Mulvey is responsible for remembering over 300 signals and communicating them to the quarterback on the field during what is often a fast-paced offense.

"We practice it so much that it really is muscle memory and second nature to us," he said. "I love when we're moving fast because I know that we have to get on what my part of the job is and I have to stay mentally sharp."

The Del Mar, Calif., native arrived at Notre Dame as a freshman with the opportunity to try out for the football team, but with no guarantees of success.

On his first day of classes, Mulvey was told he made the team.

"[I] went into the locker rooms for the first time and felt that sense of fraternity and felt that sense of team," he said. "Coming out from San Diego, it's coming a long way out here to South Bend. It was just nice to have 105 other guys, and it was just so much fun right off the bat."

Three years later, the walk-on has found himself a niche as the leader of the "Red Army" and stumbled upon a little bit of fame in the process.

The "Red Army" began during Mulvey's sophomore year as a sort of "quarterback fraternity" named after the red jerseys quarterbacks wear in practice. The group has taken off since then, acquiring a bit of a fan club.

"I think one of the funniest things was last year during Halloween when four girls dressed up like [us.] That was pretty funny," Mulvey said. "And then one of my friends was me for Halloween that year too."

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Mulvey created his own "cult and fan club with the red hat brigade."

"His impact is that, you know, he understands our offense very well," Kelly said. "He's part of our signaling crew, and he just has a great personality that fits in with what we're doing on a day-to-day basis. We ask him to do a lot of preparation during the week to help in all of our offensive play calling,



TOM LA/The Observer

Senior quarterback Matt Mulvey signals in a play during Notre Dame's 56-14 win over Navy on Oct. 29. Mulvey is the leader of the so-called "Red Army" of quarterbacks.

and he's done a great job."

Part of that preparation includes helping to think of new play signals. Mulvey, whose favorite signal is the awkward turtle hand motion, said he takes an entertainment approach when coming up with signals.

"We get them from movies. We get them from funny gestures, funny things," he said.

The position also allows Mulvey to get to know his head coach on a personal level.

"Me and coach Kelly have a really great relationship," he said. "I'm the closest one to him every single game. We really do

get to talk to each other a lot and get to know each other."

Mulvey, whose mother was in the first graduating class of women at Notre Dame, said his family will be in attendance for Saturday's game against Boston College. The walk-on said he would love the opportunity to switch roles and be the quarterback on the field receiving the play signals.

"To get out there and have a meaningful snap [would be the] culmination of my four years here," he said.

But Mulvey has always put the team's success over his own.

"Anything I can do to help the team, that's absolutely what I'm going to do," he said.

After graduation, Mulvey will bring his talents to investment banking and begin working for FT Partners. However, he hopes to leave the legacy of the Red Army with the football program.

"I hope it's something that sticks around for a while because it does support that fraternity atmosphere and the team atmosphere," he said. "That's really what it's about."

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BRANDON NEWMAN

'Trick Shot Mondays' just one way Newman leaves mark



TOM LA/The Observer

Senior defensive lineman Brandon Newman lines up during spring practice. Newman is the driving force behind the popular 'Trick Shot Monday' videos found online.

By CONOR KELLY
Sports Writer

In 2007, when former Irish defensive coordinator Corwin Brown approached Brandon Newman about taking an unofficial visit to Notre Dame, the defensive tackle first balked at the idea.

"I said, 'Coach, I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to South Bend,' Newman said. "Then he said, 'You don't think you can make it to Indiana?' So of course I said, 'Notre Dame's in Indiana?'"

Given Newman's uncertainty about Notre Dame's geographic location, his commitment was a recruiting victory for the Irish,

who beat out Stanford for the services of the 6-0, 300-pound defensive lineman from Pleasure Ridge Park High School in Louisville, Ky. While Newman can now point out South Bend on a map, his impact on Notre Dame and its football program can be seen in his leadership and mentorship of younger players, as well as his contributions to a close-knit locker room and stalwart play as a reserve lineman.

Newman has appeared in two games during his Notre Dame career, playing defensive tackle against Washington State in 2009 and against Navy in 2011.

Newman arrived on campus among the 2008 recruiting class headlined by names like Dayne

Crist, Michael Floyd and Kyle Rudolph. In his first two years, Newman witnessed the tumultuous seasons of 2008 and 2009, during which the Irish posted disappointing six-loss records, testing the unity of his class.

"No matter who the coaches were, no matter who was in, even when all the freshmen were really struggling when we first got here, we came together as a class and really stuck together," Newman said. "We said we could all get through this together."

Struggles for Newman came in the form of adjusting to college life, being away from home and the grind of being a full-time football player. At times, Newman wondered if he had made

the right choice.

"When I came in, I struggled a lot being away from home. I think the biggest challenge was just getting used to the football and the academics," Newman, who boasted a 3.9 GPA in high school, said. "I wasn't sure if this was the place for me, but all the older upperclassmen just told me to hang in there."

The Stanford Hall resident cites veteran leaders like David Grimes, Maurice Crum, Jr. and Ian Williams for helping him adjust to life and football at Notre Dame, a task he now feels obligated to fulfill with the Irish's young cohort of talented defensive linemen. That group includes freshmen Aaron Lynch and Stephon Tuitt and sophomore Louis Nix.

"I feel that I'm one of the more vocal guys on the team," Newman said. "We have a lot of young guys playing on the defensive line, so we're making sure that their heads are in the game and their assignments are correct. I think I'm seen as a leader just because I'm always there for any questions."

Newman's role in fostering locker room unity can be seen in Notre Dame's most recent foray into social media, "Trick Shot Mondays," a new tradition that is the brainchild of Newman and senior center Mike Golic, Jr. The weakly event features various Irish players shooting a ping-pong ball into a cup filled with water from all different angles and trajectories. Only when the shot is made does the team get to eat dinner. Newman, a Film, Television and Theatre (FTT) major, directs the filming of the

attempts and posts the resulting videos on YouTube.

"They let Trick Shot Mondays be the baby of me and Mike Golic just because we're both FTT majors," Newman said. "We know all about that stuff, what looks good on camera, what to say and what not to say. It's been a lot of fun. We love the fans' input, and getting a view of us outside the helmet is really cool."

Though it looks as though Newman has a promising career ahead of him in television, he looks to continue playing football after this season. Newman plans on applying for a fifth year of eligibility at Notre Dame. If he does not return to the Irish, he plans on taking his last year of eligibility to another school.

For now, Newman is intent on enjoying his time remaining with his teammates.

"These are some of my best friends here on the team and guys I know I'm going to be friends with the rest of my life," Newman said. "We really take for granted being able to see each other on a day-to-day basis, like coming back after beating USC last year — it was five a.m. here, but we were so excited that we didn't want to go to sleep. Those are some of my fondest memories."

For a student that four years ago had barely heard of Notre Dame, Newman has made his mark on the campus and the team in ways that go far beyond the stat sheet — Trick Shot Mondays are just the beginning.

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ANDREW NUSS

Nuss plays important role as lineman, on special teams

By SAM GANS
Sports Writer

When you take a look at 6-foot-5-inch, 303-lb. fifth-year senior guard Andrew Nuss, it's easy to see a player who can take care of himself on the football field.

And yet, it was precisely the fear of injury that led to his father forbidding him to play the game at an early age.

"I only started playing football in my freshman year of high school," Nuss said. "I wanted to play as a little kid but my dad just told me no, because he was afraid I was going to get hurt, so I stuck with baseball for the longest time. And then freshman year, [he let me] try out for the team. I thought I could be a quarterback but that didn't work out so I played tight end and then sophomore year, I was the [varsity] starting left tackle."

It was a good thing Andrew's dad allowed his son to play the sport, as he soon began to receive numerous scholarship offers. The Ashburn, Va. native ultimately went against the grain when he decided to join former Irish coach Charlie Weis at Notre Dame.

"Everyone in my high school usually goes to Virginia Tech," Nuss said. "So for me, I could have gone there to hang out with my friends, but I wanted to do something different and when Notre Dame came and offered me, I checked it out and I fell in love with the place and I knew this could help me out in the long run past football in terms of the

academics."

But with the commitment to Weis came the difficult adjustment to his firing after the 2009 season. Nuss, however, made the transition smoothly.

"It was tough when Coach Weis left because he brought me in," Nuss said. "You develop a relationship with that person and all the coaches around you. And so it was unfortunate, but it's part of the business. We had to change it up and then Coach Kelly came in and he's done a great job and we've responded well."

Nuss performed well enough on the field in his fourth year at Notre Dame last season that Kelly offered him the opportunity to return to the Irish for his fifth and final year of eligibility.

While senior Dayne Crist and sophomore Tommy Rees were in a highly-publicized battle during fall camp for the starting quarterback position, Nuss was engaged in a tough competition himself with junior Chris Watt for the starting left guard spot vacated by the graduated Chris Stewart. The first-stringer was not determined until less than two weeks before the opening game against South Florida, when Kelly named Watt the starter.

Despite the disappointment, Nuss, who has played a key role on special teams and in a rotating spot on the offensive line this season, has maintained focus on helping the team in whatever ways possible.

"I came back with the mindset, 'alright, this is your last opportu-



ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Senior guard Andrew Nuss runs onto the field during the Blue-Gold Game on April 16. Nuss has played multiple positions on the offensive line at Notre Dame.

nity ever'. So I just came out and played the best I could each day," Nuss said. "Watt's a great player, I'm not going to deny that. We're both great players. But for me, [I try] to give him support and to do what the team needs. That's what Coach Kelly instills in us, saying that it's not about individualism, it's about helping the team out and [my goal is] whatever I can do to help the team out."

With his football career soon to be complete, Nuss has thought about his future. The 2011 graduate with a degree in finance is currently in graduate school and wants to continue, but may need

to take some time off before doing so.

"I want to do grad school, but I feel like I want to work first and get some experience and also save up so I can afford it, because my parents aren't going to pay for it, so that's something I have to do," he said. "But I'll probably do grad school after I work for a little bit."

And while the end of football brings about a look toward the future, it also leads to reminiscing of the past. Big wins over USC and Miami during his time at Notre Dame — along with a trip to Hawaii for the Hawaii Bowl — have formed some of Nuss' favor-

ite memories. But what he will miss most is the bond between himself and his teammates.

"[I'll miss] just being with the guys, to be honest," Nuss said. "You do it for so long — and we've had seminars on how to transition — but you do it so long, it's just what you become accustomed to. What you do in life every day basically is just hang out with the guys, doing this, doing that. It's like on a scheduled program. But now, when you're out in the real world, it's by yourself."

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SEAN OXLEY

Oxley cherishes role on WOPU Nation during playing career

By MIKE MONACO
Sports Writer

Many kids grow up watching their favorite team play, and many of those kids dream of playing for that team one day. Only a fraction of them, though, actually get the chance to suit up and make it happen.

Despite growing up in Cleveland among Buckeye fans, senior walk-on linebacker Sean Oxley dreamt of donning blue and gold and playing football for the Irish.

"It's been a dream come true for me," Oxley said. "I grew up watching Notre Dame football. I loved Rudy growing up, so this was the dream."

A love for the Irish runs deep in Oxley's blood. His father played in the Notre Dame Marching Band as a student, and the rest of his father's side of the family grew up as Notre Dame fans.

"I come from just a huge Notre Dame family," Oxley said. "My Grandma was Irish Catholic so she loved Notre Dame. I was getting it from

all angles from a young age."

A three-sport athlete at Avon Lake High School in Ohio, Oxley always knew that football was his top sport. He spurned offers from a host of Football Championship Sub-division (FCS) schools, including Georgetown and many of the Ivy League universities. Although he did not receive a scholarship offer from Notre Dame, the allure of playing for his childhood team was so strong, that Oxley decided to attempt to walk-on.

"Ultimately, I got in here academically and [playing at Notre Dame] was the dream, so I passed up a lot of other opportunities to be here," Oxley said. "I tried to entertain the idea of [playing elsewhere], but at the end of the day I knew where I was going to be."

Oxley was invited to walk-on as a freshman and began practicing with the team on the first day of classes. For the first eight weeks, Oxley endured through a grueling schedule. He participated in two-hour workouts beginning as early as 5 a.m. Afterward, Oxley went to classes before heading out in the afternoon for practice with the team. For an 18-year-old fresh out of high school, the new routine was difficult.

"I'm not going to lie — it was a miserable time," Oxley said. "It was a dream come true [to be on the team], but after a few weeks I was questioning whether I could stick

with it."

Oxley eventually found the support of both his family and his fellow walk-ons. The walk-ons grew particularly close over the course of four years. Part of that intimacy can be attributed to the brotherhood that is WOPU (Walk-On Players Union) Nation, a group of which Oxley is now the president.

"I can't say enough about the walk-ons," Oxley said. "WOPU is huge ... the guys in there are amazing. Being a part of WOPU has been great in addition to being a part of the football team."

Oxley and his fellow walk-ons love to see a member of WOPU get onto the field.

"It's like when one of us gets on the field, all of us get on the field," Oxley said. "Nobody is jealous or anything. Honestly we're proud to see one of our own guys getting a look."

Coming out of spring practice this year, Oxley was slated to play on special teams before tearing his ACL. After

months of rehab, he made it back to full strength and dressed for the USC game.

Throughout his career, Oxley has never ceased believing

that his time on the field will come. However, he still remains focused on fulfilling his lifelong dream — life after Notre Dame football.

The finance major recently accepted a job with the financial services firm Morgan Stanley. After graduating in the spring, Oxley will work in Chicago, where he has

many friends including former Notre Dame receiver Barry Gallup, Jr.

The friendships Oxley has formed in South Bend, as well as all the other tremendous experiences he's had, have resulted in a great four years. Oxley said he has come to fully appreciate just how special Notre Dame football is.

"I knew what I was walking into [when I came here]," Oxley said. "I enjoy feeling like week to week I'm contributing to something bigger [than myself]."

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Observer File Photo

Senior linebacker Sean Oxley tackles Western Michigan quarterback Alex Carder in Notre Dame's 44-20 win in 2010.

ANDREW PLASKA

Balance is the name of the game for biology major

By EMILY SCHRANK
Sports Writer

For Andrew Plaska, life as a Notre Dame football player has been a balancing act, one that he's learned to adjust to.

Plaska, a biology major, said despite the difficulties associated with his major, he has managed to handle all of his responsibilities, both on and off the field.

"Everyone I know at Notre Dame has something else going on too," he said. "When I'm at practice in the afternoon, other people are still in class or are involved with other extracurricular activities."

It's a balance that Plaska said many of his other teammates have worked on too.

"All of the other guys are going to class and doing what they're supposed to," he said. "I'm not the only one with a lot on my plate, and once you figure it out, it's not that bad."

The Michigan native said his decision to come to Notre Dame was an easy one.

"I got into here and one other school [Michigan State], so there was really no debate," he said. "There's something about the place, that intangible Notre Dame spirit everyone talks about."

Plaska said he first began thinking about trying out for the football team when he went home for Christmas break during his freshman year.

"I talked to some guys that I

had played with in high school who were playing at other schools, and it really made me miss it," he said. "I also played for my dorm [Siegfried Hall] during the first semester, but I wanted something more."

When he got back to campus in January, he decided to go for it.

"It was kind of a spontaneous decision," he said. "The worst they could do was say, 'No,' so I figured why not."

Three months later, he was on the team.

"Running on the field and suiting up for the first time was an unbelievable experience — really just amazing," he said.

Plaska, who made the team under former head coach Charlie Weis, said the coaching change did not affect the way he felt about his position on the team.

"You still have to go out there and give it your all, regardless of who's the coach," he said. "You're still expected to do the same thing."

Plaska said some of his favorite football memories include the team's trip to El Paso, Texas, for the 2010 Sun Bowl and the friendships he has formed with other members of WOPU Nation, the Walk-On Players Union.

"It's nice to have those guys you can count on, who don't have a scholarship and had to try out just like you," he said. "When you're having a down day or one of the coaches is



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

Senior cornerback Andrew Plaska pursues the quarterback during Notre Dame's 2011 Blue-Gold spring game. The biology major will be attending medical school next fall.

picking on you, they are there for you."

Although many of the walk-on players Plaska is closest to have graduated, he said a strong camaraderie remains among the group.

"It's nice to be here as the younger guys come in and you get to know them, especially knowing that you used to be one of the new guys," he said.

Plaska added that one of his favorite aspects about his experience at Notre Dame has been life in the residence

halls.

"Just living in the dorms and getting to know the guys in my hall has been one of the best parts," he said. "That community is something that I think is really unique to Notre Dame."

Plaska said he hopes the team will end the season on a high note.

"Of course going to another bowl game will be a great way to finish it off, and getting a chance to actually play in a game would be amazing in it-

self," he said.

Plaska plans to attend medical school next fall and has been accepted to his top choice — the University of Michigan.

"Being on the football team and having that balance between academics and athletics is something that med schools look for," he said. "This experience has really given me that."

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DAVID POSLUZNY

Notre Dame helps linebacker mature into confident adult



KIRBY MCKENNA/The Observer

Senior linebacker David Posluszny lines up for a play during Notre Dame's 2011 Blue-Gold spring game. Posluszny is the younger brother of NFL linebacker Paul Posluszny.

By CORY BERNARD
Sports Writer

As a senior in high school, David Posluszny saw in Notre Dame many of the same qualities his fellow recruits saw, but also harbored some anxiety about the transition to big time football. Now as a senior in college, he can appreciate how Notre Dame's unique qualities transformed that nervous high school kid into the adult he is today.

"I had an opportunity to go to bunch of really good schools, but I really chose here

just because of the tradition," Posluszny said of his decision to commit to the Irish. "It's a great football program, and it gives you an opportunity to play at the most elite level. Then also it's really a faith-based community. I really wanted to go to a place where I could grow my spirituality and grow my religion, which is another reason why I came here."

Though all of the selling points on the recruiting trail sound promising, the reality of becoming a Notre Dame student quickly sets in, according to Posluszny. He said through

hard work and persistence, he was able to overcome the culture shock.

"It was a big jump graduating from high school and then two weeks later being enrolled at Notre Dame," Posluszny said. "Working out and then going to practice and then going to these tough classes — it was definitely a big jump. I was just persistent and all about getting through it."

Another lesson in persistence came during the fall of Posluszny's senior year of high school. The 2007 Irish campaign ended with a 3-9 mark, their worst in decades.

Posluszny said despite the difficulties of that year, he never wavered on his commitment to Notre Dame.

"It was definitely a tough season, but absolutely no regrets," he said. "I've always been taught from a young age to be persistent and just keep pushing through things. I've never thought about transferring or never had any negative thoughts about it. I just keep grinding."

Hailing from Aliquippa, Penn., Posluszny is not even the most well-known athlete in his family of five kids, let alone his town. Older brother Paul twice earned All-American honors while playing linebacker at Penn State and has become a mainstay in the NFL since being drafted in 2007 by the Buffalo Bills.

As fate would have it, the younger Posluszny would become close friends with a fellow freshman in a similar situation. Safety Dan McCarthy saw his older brother Kyle earn a starting job in the Irish secondary and then a spot on the Denver Broncos.

"When I came in in the summer, I really didn't know anybody on the team," Posluszny said. "My roommate was Danny McCarthy, and ever since we met freshman year in the dorms we've had a really good relationship. Ever since, him and I have really been working with each other throughout all these four years. Because we're such good friends, we definitely can lean on each other whenever we need it."

As brothers constantly competing with their older siblings, Posluszny and McCarthy have experienced much of the same pressure to perform. While he has seen only limited action in his career, Posluszny said that he no longer feels the need to prove himself.

"That's one funny thing about Dan and I," Posluszny said of chasing older brothers. "We both have that unique bond and we've definitely talked about that before. I definitely felt pressure when I was younger in high school, but when I moved on to college and when I matured and grew up as a person — even away from football — I didn't really feel that pressure anymore."

With friends like McCarthy, Posluszny said he was able to push through the challenges of having to sit on the sidelines while also maintaining his academics. Through the support of the Irish community, he said he will be ready for his post-football life.

"Just with anything in life, whenever you're going through a big change or any type of adversity, you always lean on your good group of friends," Posluszny said. "It's something I've definitely been fortunate to have here. Because of my experience here playing football, and through the classes and the relationships I have with my professors, I don't really feel much anxiety going into the real world."

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MIKE RAGONE

Tight end stays positive despite multiple injuries

By ERIC PRISTER
Senior Sports Writer

One knee injury can change a career.

Three? That could be devastating.

But for fifth-year tight end Mike Ragone, who has injured his ACL three times since high school, the injuries have not completely taken away from his experience at Notre Dame.

"It's been a tough one," Ragone said. "I've had some tough breaks, but it is what it is. I'm trying to stay positive. I'm trying to keep telling myself that God's got a plan and everything. I'm just going to keep going forward. It's not shoulda', coulda', woulda'. I'm really glad I came here. I met some really great people and made some really good friendships. It's a good place, so I'm happy I came here."

Coming out of high school, Ragone was ranked as the No. 3 tight end according to Rivals.com and the No. 2 tight end on ESPN's 150 list. He was recruited nationally, but in the end he said it came down to Notre Dame and USC.

"It came down to here and USC basically," he said. "This was my ultimate decision because I just fell in love with this place. My family was all about it, and I fell in love with it from the start, and my love for this place has just grown as the years have gone.

"The recruiting process was fun. It was a great time. [I liked] the fans. I came for the spring game and it was pretty cool, pretty intense. I had never been around that environment, and it was pret-

ty sick, all the autographs, and just the love that they showed you — just the love for Notre Dame. Just to be a part of this place is really cool."

When asked what he liked about USC, Ragone just laughed.

"Nothing," he said.

Ragone was also one of the top wrestlers in the nation in high school. He finished 37-0 during his junior year heading into the New Jersey state semifinals, but experienced two firsts during that match — his first loss of the season and his first knee injury.

"About a minute in, a guy grabbed my ankle when I was on the ground, jumped out and that was it," he said.

Ragone missed his senior season in both football and wrestling but was still recruited and signed on to play for the Irish. As a freshman, Ragone played mainly on special teams during games, but as a tight end was able to play next to and learn from John Carlson, now an NFL tight end for the Seattle Seahawks.

"As a freshman, lining up against John Carlson was crazy," Ragone said. "[He] just [taught me] character things, things I grasped from him, [like] how to present yourself on the field and off the field. He was a really good person. He had like a 3.8 GPA — history major and second round draft pick. He was a great guy. You just want to study him in all facets."

But a knee injury struck again during training camp of Ragone's sophomore season, and he was forced to sit out the entirety of the 2008 campaign. Ragone said the



TOM LA/The Observer

Senior tight end Mike Ragone catches a pass during practice in 2010. Ragone has suffered three knee injuries at Notre Dame and may apply for a sixth year of eligibility.

feeling of a second injury was far more devastating than the first, but that he found he could serve another role on the team.

"It's indescribable," he said. "It sucks, it hurts, but I just wanted to be around the team, just talk to guys, just be an example. Not always just talking, just being present, just so they know that this guy can walk around and manage his life with a positive outlook after going through so much. Being an All-American and everything and then have this stuff happen — it just gives people encouragement."

Minnesota Vikings tight end Kyle Rudolph, who came to Notre

Dame one year after Ragone, is one player who said he learned from the fifth-year tight end.

"Mike was always there for me freshman year, showing me different things — where a class was, how to do a lift in the weight room," Rudolph said. "Any questions I had, he was there to answer."

Rudolph and Ragone said they still keep in touch, and Rudolph said he texted Ragone after he suffered his third season-ending knee injury earlier this year against Michigan.

"I told him to just stay positive, because it's not the bad things that

define you, but how you deal with them that make you a good person," he said.

When asked if he will apply to the NCAA for a sixth year of eligibility, Ragone said he was unsure of his future.

"Right now it sucks," he said. "Right now I'm just trying to look for positive things, and it's tough to find them. But I hope everything will fall into place. To play another year under the gold helmet with coach Kelly would be a dream come true."

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CHRIS SALVI

Special teams play earns walk-on captaincy for Navy game



GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

Senior safety Chris Salvi lines up for a play during Notre Dame's 56-14 win over Navy on Oct. 29. Salvi was named the gameday captain for the contest against Navy.

By CORY BERNARD
Sports Writer

Like many Notre Dame athletes, senior safety Chris Salvi acknowledges the academic rigors of the University and the importance of earning a degree. Make no mistake, though. Salvi came to South Bend to play football.

"The whole reasoning behind it was I just grew up watching Notre Dame football," Salvi said. "I idolized the people playing it, so I thought I'd give it a try. The biggest motivation [to come to Notre Dame] was

football, but obviously the academics here are the best."

A transfer from Butler who walked on to the football team, Salvi does not fit the prototypical description of an Irish star. He has nonetheless made his presence felt this season, appearing in all 10 games and recording nine tackles on special teams. Though he lacks the physical attributes necessary for a scholarship, Salvi said he never made making the practice squad his ultimate goal. He always expected to play.

"My goal from the beginning was always to play spe-

cial teams," he said. "I knew that there would always be something to build on after my first year. That year I did scout team and all that stuff and then my second year I was playing special teams and this year even more so."

As a full-time special teams player, Salvi has had time to pick up on the intricacies of his various positions. According to Salvi, the individual studying he puts in to improve his play is a luxury many other special teams contributors do not have.

"You don't practice as much

on special teams during the week because you focus so much on the other aspects of the game," he said. "The info during that is a lot larger so you have to take every rep seriously in special teams to get the most out of it and improve every week. The other aspect of special teams that a lot of people overlook is watching film on the other teams."

"Because there's such an emphasis on offense and defense, guys that do both usually worry about their offensive or defensive position more. You can take advantage when you are more of a special teamer to watch film and get to know the tendencies of the other teams."

The work Salvi puts in on and off the field has produced some tangible results this season. In Notre Dame's first victory of the season, Salvi made a key block on a kick return that took out two Michigan State players and helped spring freshman returner George Atkinson for a touchdown. Though he made a standout play, Salvi credits the praise he received after the game to others.

"A little bit part of it was luck," he said. "The [television] announcer singled me out during the replay so people realized that I made the block. I could give myself credit and say it was just me, but there were a lot of guys that made that play and it just so happened mine stood out."

Before Notre Dame's contest against Navy, Salvi was again recognized for his efforts. Irish coach Brian Kelly

named the walk-on a gameday captain against the Midshipmen. Though Salvi said he felt honored after being named captain, the lifelong Irish fan maintained his focus on improvement.

"[Being named captain] was something that was a pretty big accomplishment for me, but at the same time you don't stop there," Salvi said. "Being a captain, it's different than any statistical things you can achieve. But regardless, you don't stop at your goals."

"You keep going whether it's being a better leader every day or making more tackles on kickoff. You're always trying to better the team and yourself."

Because of this desire to constantly improve, Salvi has been able to realize a lifelong dream of donning the blue and gold. Although he likely won't be collecting a paycheck for his athletic skills after graduation, he said his experience playing football at Notre Dame would continue to help him succeed.

"This is one of the largest stages on earth," Salvi said. "College football — especially at Notre Dame — we're always in the limelight. Whether it's praise or criticism, people are always looking at us."

"Being part of such a large organization and being with a bunch of high profile people, it prepares you for anything you may face later on in your career or in life in general."

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TREVOR ROBINSON

Robinson keeps things loose

Nebraska native leaves home to attend Notre Dame and start for four consecutive years

By MATTHEW DEFRANKS
Sports Writer

When the competition on the field finishes, Irish senior right guard Trevor Robinson needs something to fill the void. So what does he turn to?

His Nintendo-64, of course. "The offensive line is pretty solid at Super Smash Brothers," Robinson said. "We play quite a bit of that. We play some Mario Kart but no one can really hang with me."

The business management major, who plays as Fox in the video game, has excelled on the football field as well, starting in each of his four seasons with the Irish.

The Elkhorn, Neb. native was one of the top recruits in the heralded 2008 recruiting class that included tight end Kyle Rudolph, receiver Michael Floyd and cornerback Robert Blanton. Robinson — the top-rated guard in the country by Rivals — was originally committed to Nebraska before switching to Notre Dame late in the recruiting process.

Robinson said there was a lot of outside pressure from home to attend Nebraska.

"That's pretty much all there is in Nebraska," Robinson said of the outside pressure. "When I decommitted, I got a lot of hate mail. For a lot of people, it's kind of a sore subject back at home."

Just a month after he committed to Notre Dame, Robinson enrolled early in the spring to get a jump on the offense.

"Spring ball is big," Robinson said. "The first winter of conditioning and strength training was big and learning the offense. When the rest of the class

got here for camp, I was already a leg up on the playbook."

The extra practice helped Robinson become one of just five Irish players ever to start on the offensive line as a freshman, joining Sam Young and Ryan Harris as recent players to achieve the feat.

"It's exciting especially at a school like Notre Dame that's been playing for so long," Robinson said. "Anytime you can get mentioned in something like that, it's cool."

When former head coach Charlie Weis was fired in 2009, Robinson said he — and the rest of the team — just had to roll with it.

"There are some growing pains and you see that in the first year," Robinson said. "It feels like you're a freshman again learning everything over."

Despite the change to Irish coach Brian Kelly's up-tempo spread offense, Robinson still started all 13 games for the Irish in 2010.

"It's quite a bit different," Robinson said. "The structure and the calls are different but for offensive lineman, it just comes down to blocking people."

Because of his early experience as a freshman, Robinson has had the opportunity to play with many different offensive line units. He says, however, this year's group is the best one yet.

"The product we put on the field will probably say that we're the best group that I've played with," Robinson said. "Obviously, there have been players that come and go that have been

good guys and still play in the NFL. I don't think it was ever a lack of talent that led to lack of production. I think this is the most productive group, I don't think that will be much of an argument."

The Irish offensive line has paved the way for 23 rushing touchdowns this year while averaging nearly 180 yards per game on the ground. The unit went five entire games this season without a allowing a sack, a streak that Robinson attributes to a total team effort.

"It's a team effort," Robinson said. "It involves running backs and the quarterbacks making the checks and obviously us up front get a lot of credit for it but there's a lot that goes into it as far as coaching and preparing during the week."

While Robinson has found success as an offensive lineman, it was not always that way for the 6-foot-5, 311-pound senior.

"I started out playing skill positions and then I got too fat to keep doing that," Robinson said with a laugh. "It was never a choice. Nobody ever chooses to play offensive guard."

Robinson's size helped him snatch a spot on the 2010 Outland Trophy preseason watch list. The Outland Trophy is annually awarded to the nation's top interior lineman.

"I like to think physical like any offensive lineman," Robinson said. "I like to be the guy that makes the calls and does the mental part too."

Robinson's strong 2010 campaign and leadership qualities led to a special privilege: being named a gameday captain for Notre Dame's 2011 season opener against South Florida.

"It was exciting, the season opener, there's a lot of buzz around campus and a lot of buzz around the pep rally," Robinson said. "That's the kickoff to the year so it's definitely cool to do that."



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior offensive guard Trevor Robinson pass-blocks during Notre Dame's 15-12 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 24.

Since dropping the first two games of the season this year, Notre Dame has rebounded to rip off seven wins in eight games. Robinson believes this team still has more left to prove in their final two games against Boston College and Stanford.

"We've seen that we can compete with anybody," Robinson said. "If we compete well, we can beat anybody we play."

Robinson has started each game for the Irish this season, adding to his growing total of 45 career games played for Notre Dame. One game, however, sticks out to Robinson: his first career game, when the Irish topped Michigan in 2008.

"It was at home, against Michigan, second game of the year," Robinson said. "[Former Irish guard] Chris Stewart was hurt and wasn't going to play. It was raining and we ended up winning that game."

Robinson had not played in the season-opening win against San Diego State and sat out the first half against the Wolverines. While Robinson recalls that moment as a great football memory, he remembers the trip to Hawaii for the Hawaii Bowl in 2008 as an excellent off-the-field moment.

"Looking back, it was with a lot of guys I don't see any more and it's time I got to spend with them," Robinson said. "We got to do some things outside of football so it was fun."

The Hawaii Bowl also marked a landmark in Robinson's ap-

pearance. Robinson shaved the long hair he had grown — inspired by former Ohio State and current Green Bay linebacker A.J. Hawk — since his freshman year of high school.

"It was pretty ugly, pretty long," Robinson said of his hair at the time.

After his football career is over, Robinson — who now sports short hair and a full beard — said he would like to own his own business, possibly with his brother, who just opened up a gym.

Robinson described his Notre Dame experience as one about the people he met.

"It's a lot of good people," Robinson said of Notre Dame.

"That was something I kind of took for granted when I was a freshman. I've come to appreciate all the things you get to experience and all the people you meet. One of my biggest regrets is that

I didn't take advantage of all the resources and all the great people that are here."

When he graduates, Robinson will leave a legacy of a four-year starter on the offensive line behind.

"[I want to be remembered as] somebody that led by example," Robinson said. "Don't really talk too much on the field or do anything like that but always being there trying to do the right thing."

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GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

Senior offensive guard Trevor Robinson, left, and senior offensive tackle Taylor Dever celebrate after a touchdown during Notre Dame's 56-14 victory over Navy on Oct. 29.

DAVID RUFFER

Waiting game pays off

Ruffer earns scholarship and comes back for one more year of kicking

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Editor-in-Chief

Just like David Ruffer always wanted to attend Notre Dame, he always wanted to stay for a fifth year. But without a scholarship, the graduated kicker spent the spring interviewing for jobs, assuming his career with the Irish had concluded.

"It was a question if I could get a scholarship or not," said Ruffer, now a graduate student. "Because I was graduating, there wasn't really an academic reason to come back, and I had career opportunities available to me."

Those career opportunities were in hot pursuit when Ruffer's phone rang with good news last February. He was at an interview over lunch when he learned a scholarship would be available for him in the fall of 2011.

"Despite the fact I was having lunch with some potential employers, it was just something that was a culmination of a lot of work," Ruffer said Tuesday. "They knew my situation, they were fully informed of what I was going through. They were as happy for me as I was."

Nonetheless, the rest of the meal did have a sense of awkward pointlessness to it.

"Hey, there's something I have to do first," Ruffer remembers telling the businessmen. "I have some business to attend to back at school, and then I'll talk to you guys."

Playing the waiting game

Waiting on the scholarship was a piece of cake compared to Ruffer's original path to Notre Dame. Both his father

and grandfather graduated from Notre Dame, as did a few of his uncles and his older sister. Yet when Ruffer received what should have been his acceptance letter, it instead read as a denial.

"I grew up loving Notre Dame," Ruffer said during a 2010 interview. "I didn't get in as a freshman, and that was

probably the best thing that ever happened to me. It made me realize you have to work really hard for the things you want."

Ruffer headed to William & Mary, walked on

to the football team as a field goal kicker and worked hard enough in class to gain admittance to Notre Dame his sophomore year.

From the William & Mary fields, Ruffer moved to the fields outside Stepan Center as the kicker for the Siegfried interhall football team. He played for an even shorter time with the Ramblers than he did out east with the Tribe, hitting one field goal in interhall competition.

Next up, with less than two seasons of kicking experience under his belt, Ruffer walked on with the Irish, completing his rapid rise.

Perfection can't last

A walk-on serving as kicker is story enough to attract attention, but then Ruffer did a few things never before done at Notre Dame. He hit 23 consecutive field goals, including 18 straight to open 2010. His .947 conversion rate last season stands alone as the top field goal percentage in Irish

history.

Time and time again he would be asked if he would ever miss a field goal. After all, he hit his only interhall attempt, does not remember missing any during his walk-on tryouts, and began his Notre Dame career 23-for-23.

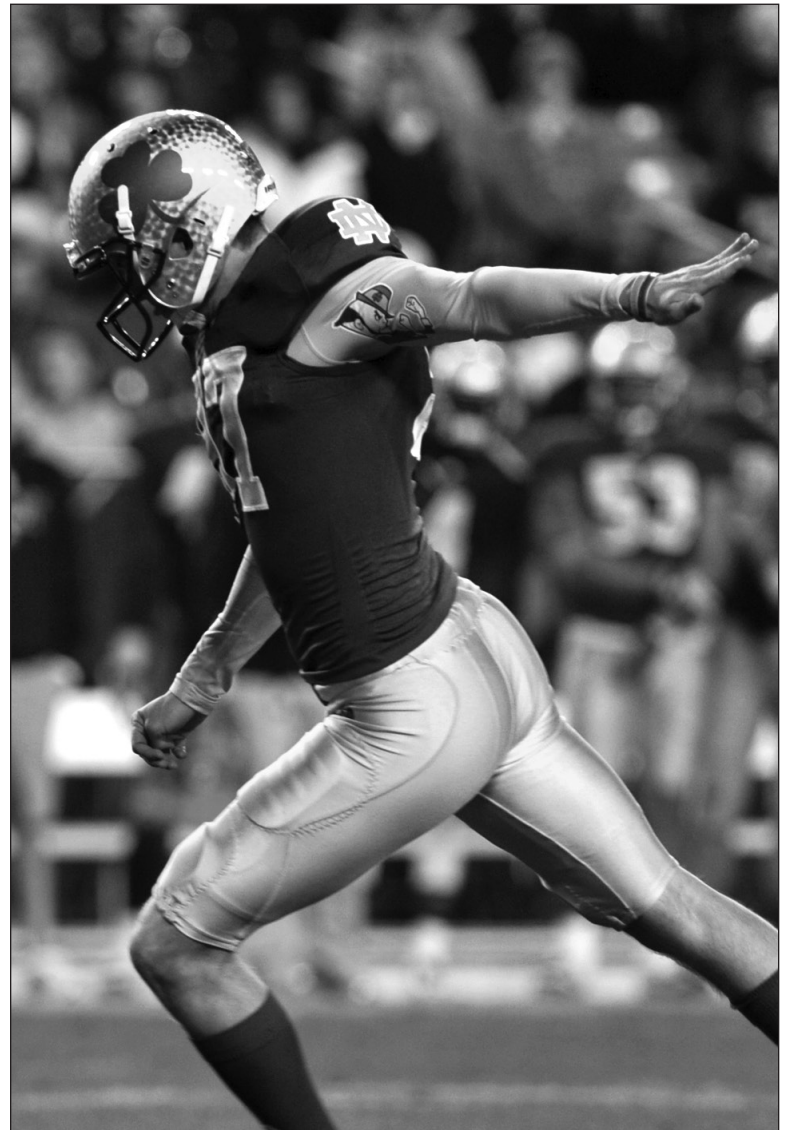
"You can only learn from mistakes," he said last year, in what would turn into a mantra. "You can't make every single one, so it will happen eventually. The trick will be how I bounce back from that. It will happen, but I feel like I have a pretty strong head, so I'll be okay."

Ruffer's first miss came in his last 2010 attempt, in the Sun Bowl against Miami late in the third quarter. He then had nine months to stew over the miss before missing again in the 2011 season-opener against South Florida. A week later, Ruffer connected from 38 yards against Michigan, and now stands at 7-of-11 this season, and 30-of-35 for his career.

"It happened. Everybody misses," he said. "That's part of it. It was weird because it hadn't happened before, but it had to happen eventually. No matter how good you're kicking, it happens."

"You have to take what you can from the missed kick, process the information from that and focus on the next one. You definitely can't consciously think about missing the last one."

When Notre Dame traveled to the Washington, D.C. area to play Maryland at FedEx Field last Saturday, Ruffer was kicking less than 11 miles from his high school, Gonzaga College High School in Oakton, Va. During the 45-21 Irish victory, the D.C. native came within one yard of tying the record for longest field goal in Notre Dame history. His 52-yard conversion made him 5-for-5 in a span stretching six games.



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Fifth-year kicker David Ruffer approaches a kick during Notre Dame's 45-21 win over Maryland on Nov. 12.

The record of 53 yards, set by Dave Reeve in 1976, will not be safe until Ruffer has left Notre Dame, as Irish special teams coach Mike Elston has said he sees Ruffer hit 53-yards on a daily basis.

But he will be gone

This year, Ruffer knows he will not be back next year, though he has not ruled out more football.

"I'll see if the NFL thing works out, but I'm not holding my breath on that," Ruffer said. "I have to give it a try at this point. If it doesn't work out, I'll go find a job somewhere in the finance industry."

Don't be surprised if Ruffer is setting up luncheon interviews sooner than you may expect. Not because he does not have the skill set to cut it in the NFL, but because a year ago this same kicker — who at that point had never missed a competitive field goal — admitted wholeheartedly the NFL would not be a career path filled with longevity.

"NFL stands for Not For Long, right?" he joked.

For now, Ruffer will focus on three more games, knowing they are his last in a Notre Dame uniform. Last year, he hoped the end of 2010 would not be the end at Notre Dame, and his hopes turned into reality.

"I think [this senior day] will definitely be more emotional, because I know there isn't a

chance for next year," he said. "There will be emotion, but I'll try not to get emotional. I don't want that to get in the way of the job I have to do."

"When Utah came in last year, I was definitely having the same feeling that this could be the last time. I took the victory lap just trying to take it all in, and I'll do that again ... I wish this didn't have to happen, but all good things have to come to an end."

This good thing ending is better than it never having begun, which was what Ruffer once faced. If you had told him four years ago he would end up with a scholarship as a graduate student, he said he likely

would have doubted you.

"I probably would have said, 'Really?' I'd have been skeptical," he said. "I never imagined any of this happening. To be honest, I was just really lucky to make the team the way it all happened."

David Ruffer
fifth-year kicker

"I never imagined any of this happening. To be honest, I was just really lucky to make the team the way it all happened."



Observer File Photo

Fifth-year kicker David Ruffer kicks an extra point during Notre Dame's 20-16 victory over USC on Nov. 27, 2010. Ruffer made 18 of his 19 field goal attempts during the 2010 season.

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RYAN SHARPLEY

Sharpley overcomes injuries to play two sports

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Editor-in-Chief

Typically, a walk-on needs to impress the Irish coaching staff from the outset in order to make the team. Ryan Sharpley's first few minutes on the field were far from impressive, yet the pitcher-turned-receiver still made the cut.

"The first day of practice, we were actually going through stretching lines. The very first stretching line I was jogging down and I fell," Sharpley said. "It was my first time wearing football cleats in five years."

"Everybody in my line noticed, along with some of the coaches. At that point, I was just like, 'What am I doing?' That was my first day."

Sharpley's inability to run with football cleats stems from his natural ability to do so in baseball cleats, which have much shorter spikes. He originally came to Notre Dame in 2007 as a starting pitcher after the Chicago White Sox drafted the right-hander in the 34th round of the 2007 Major League Draft. During his freshman season, Sharpley threw 32.2 innings and struck out 31 batters while tallying an ERA of 3.03.

His stellar stats were no match for a torn right labrum, though, and Sharpley underwent surgery his sophomore year. In his junior season, he struck out more than a batter per inning before transferring to Point Loma Nazarene in San

Diego.

Out west, Sharpley could not escape the injury bug, as he tore his right labrum again, further damaging his pitching arm. At that point, he hung up his baseball cleats and made a decision.

"I wanted to get my degree from one of the most prestigious universities in the country," Sharpley said. "In doing so, I thought I could benefit the football team with my experience."

By "experience," Sharpley more refers to his time in athletics than he does his football experience, as his last time on the gridiron was his junior year of high school.

"It was a lot different than I expected, in a positive manner," the sociology and computer applications double major said. "Coming in you don't really know what to expect. Going from baseball to football, the mentality is a lot more intense." When Sharpley first told his friends and family — including former Notre Dame quarterback and older brother Evan Sharpley — of his football aspirations, the response was encouraging.

"When I told my brother, he said, 'Why not? You have nothing to lose. If you make the team, people will be really impressed. If you don't, so what, you gave it a try,' Ryan said. "More than anything he was just really proud of me."

Many of Sharpley's former baseball teammates had some



JULIE HERDER/The Observer

Senior receiver Ryan Sharpley delivers a pitch for the Irish in 2010. Sharpley walked-on to the football team this fall after a torn right labrum ended his pitching career.

trouble believing he had successfully made the football team, though. Then again, so did Sharpley.

"They kept asking me, 'Are you on the team?'" he said. "I'd say I wasn't sure. I'm practicing. I have a locker and a number, but I don't know if I'm really on the team."

"When my picture was in the program, I thought, 'Wow, I'm on the team.'"

A few days later he was catching passes from Irish quarterbacks Dayne Crist and Tommy Rees.

"To me, for some reason, it didn't really resonate initially,"

Sharpley said. "Then I realized, 'Wow, so many people would die to be out here doing what I'm doing.' It hit me what I was doing."

A few weeks later, he stood in the tunnel at Notre Dame Stadium with the number 85 on his back and 82,000 people in front of him. That crowd was quite a bit larger than any he ever pitched in front of. It was also a crowd quite a bit larger than the one watching when he fell over on the first day of fall camp.

"Standing in the tunnel, looking out there, hearing the band and seeing the crowd, it's

a real moment you can't put into words," Sharpley said. "I had chills going down my back, but I was also hoping I wouldn't fall down as I ran onto the field like I did in the first day of camp."

Sharpley didn't fall, and though he injured his right knee the week before the Irish played Air Force, he realizes he beat the odds playing two sports at Notre Dame.

"This was special. This was something I didn't take for granted."

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RYAN SHEEHAN

Walk-on Sheehan chooses football over track scholarship

By NICK BOYLE
Sports Writer

It's not every day you find someone athletic enough to play Division I sports. It's even rarer that you find someone athletically talented enough to play two.

After spending his freshman year running for the track team, fifth-year senior cornerback Ryan Sheehan decided to drop track and try-out for the football team, one of the best decisions Sheehan said he has ever made.

"While I got recruited to run track here, football was and al-

ways has been my passion. I couldn't imagine my life without it now," Sheehan said.

Coming out of high school, Sheehan, a four-time varsity letter winner in both track and football, received interest from many smaller schools to play football. While football was always his first choice and favorite sport, Sheehan could not ignore the track and field interest he received from many larger Division I schools, including heavy interest from Notre Dame.

After being invited for a visit and touring the campus, Shee-

han knew that Notre Dame's offer was one he could not refuse.

"I'm not one of those kids who was a Notre Dame fan his entire life, but after visiting I knew there was something special about the school," Sheehan said. "I fell in love with it almost immediately and I knew I would regret it if I went anywhere else."

Although Sheehan accepted Notre Dame's offer to run track, playing football was always in the back of his mind.

"During my freshman year of track I always found myself watching football and wishing I could be a part of the team," Sheehan said. "Myself and [senior] Pat Coughlin would go to track practice and talk all the time about how cool it would be to play on the football team."

Midway through his freshman track season misfortune struck Sheehan as he partially tore his Achilles tendon during a meet. Struggling to get back into top track form, Sheehan took this misfortune as an opportunity for him to drop track and follow his dream of playing football.

Coming from a family of four other football-playing brothers, Sheehan received much support from his friends and family back home.

"My parents understood how unhappy I was when I was doing track and they very much wanted me to have the best college experience that I could. They were very supportive of my choice to try and make the switch," Sheehan said. "My brothers were pumped about it as they're all playing football too."

While making the decision to switch was an easy one for Sheehan, he still had to go through a rigorous tryout process, one that Sheehan described as more mentally than physically grueling. A 4:30 a.m. wake up call every morning for Sheehan was the norm for the tryout process.

"Luckily, since I had been doing track, I was in pretty good shape for tryouts," Sheehan said. "Unfortunately, the tryout workouts weren't workouts designed to get you in shape. They were designed to break your will and really see if you wanted to be on the team."

After suffering through weeks of early workouts, Sheehan made the team, calling it one of the happiest experiences of his life.

While playing football was the ultimate goal for Sheehan, he has also found the relationships formed from doing so are some of the most important he has. Sheehan said he feels the bonds he formed with his fellow walk-ons during the tryout process are some of the strongest he has, while he has also made good friends with his fellow position players such as senior safety Harrison Smith, junior safety Zeke Motta and senior safety Dan McCarthy.

"I feel like the friendships I've made since I've been on the football team are the ones that will last beyond college," Sheehan said.

"They are definitely the most meaningful ones that I have."

A lot of time on football, Sheehan still devotes plenty of time to academics. A fifth-year senior, Sheehan graduated last year with a degree in Accountancy and is now a graduate student enrolled in the MSA program. He feels football is one of the main reasons he has been successful academically.

"When [former Irish coach Charlie] Weis was here walk-ons had to maintain grades to stay on the team. This really motivated me to grind down and learn how to study," Sheehan said. "By junior year I had figured it out [academically] and eventually was accepted into grad school."

Sheehan now has a job lined up with KPMG working on federal tax in Washington, D.C.

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Observer File Photo

Senior cornerback Ryan Sheehan makes a tackle on special teams against Michigan in 2010. The Irish lost the game, 28-24.

JAMORIS SLAUGHTER

Slaughter fills many roles

Senior safety Jamoris Slaughter emerges as versatile and opportunistic defender

By MATTHEW DeFRANKS
Sports Writer

Standing six feet tall and weighing just 198 pounds, Irish senior safety Jamoris Slaughter may not look like he lives up to his last name. But looks can be deceiving.

"They hear Slaughter, they think of football and then they see me in person and they say 'Oh, he's small,'" he said. "Then they see me on the field and they see me hitting and playing with the big boys. I like that name Slaughter."

Slaughter chose Notre Dame — instead of a local Georgia team — because of the opportunity to play big-time college football and receive a great education as well.

"There was a lot of pressure [to go to Georgia]," Slaughter said. "Coaches from my little league and high school were big Georgia fans so I had a lot of pressure to go there. But I chose Notre Dame because I felt like it was best for me."

The hard-hitting safety from Stone Mountain, Ga. was part of the heralded 2008 recruiting class that included fellow senior defensive back Robert Blanton.

"Jamoris is another guy just like Robert [Blanton] where you watch these guys play and say they give you some versatility because you can play them at safety, you can play them at corner, you've got corner cover skills with safety ability, but then you can put them at safety and not limit yourself to just having limited range and just bringing everyone in here that played strong safety," former Irish coach Charlie Weis said on signing day of 2008.

When he arrived at Notre Dame, Slaughter moved to cornerback for his freshman year under Weis. A year later, he moved back to safety and has been used in a variety of roles this year.

"As we've talked about, we

love Jamoris Slaughter and what he can do," Irish coach Brian Kelly said. "He's a playmaker. We've played him at an invert linebacker position against the option teams. He's played nickel for us, and now when we get into games where there's skill on the field, three wides, four wides, we want to match that, and Jamoris gives us the ability to do that, and if you want to run the ball, he's physical enough to stick his nose in there."

In Notre Dame's 24-17 win over Wake Forest, Kelly moved Slaughter into the "dog" linebacker position, replacing sophomore linebacker Prince Shembo. The Irish, who trailed 17-10 at halftime, did not allow a second half point in the comeback victory.

"As you know, we went more nickel in the second half with Jamoris Slaughter going in for Prince," Kelly said after the game. "It wasn't that Prince didn't play well, but they put him in space against skill players."

Slaughter also dropped down to play nickel back and dog linebacker during the 59-33 victory over Air Force. The move paid immediate dividends.

"I came in as a corner and I played some nickel with Coach Weis' staff on scout team," Slaughter said. "I understood it so I picked it up really quick during the spring when they moved me there."

On the Falcons' first play from scrimmage, Air Force running back Asher Clark dashed for 29 yards before Slaughter forced a fumble, giving the ball back to the Irish with a 7-0 lead.

"I go in to every game with the mindset that I need to make plays," Slaughter said. "I was so happy that I made those plays because we needed those especially in the beginning of the game."

But Slaughter was not done yet.

With the Irish up 28-9 in the

second quarter, Air Force quarterback Tim Jefferson dropped back and threw a flare into the flat. Slaughter tipped the ball in the air before making a diving interception to force his second turnover of the game.

"I was just reading the ball," Slaughter said. "I think it was just natural instincts. I'm known at practice for tipping the ball and making acrobatic catches. It's something I do every day. I was just happy I came down with the ball."

The game marked Slaughter's first breakout performance after just six career starts before this year.

Last year, Slaughter earned the starting safety position entering the season. In the opening game against Purdue, however, he injured his foot. The injury plagued Slaughter throughout his junior year.

"That was hard to deal with," Slaughter said of the injury. "It was my first year getting some real playing time and to get hurt that first game, it kind of set me back. I still kept fighting. This year, I've just been pushing and trying to do good every game."

Over his four years at Notre Dame, Slaughter has worked with two different head coaches — including two different defensive schemes as well.

"I took it on pretty good," Slaughter said of the coaching change. "The new coaches that came in were very welcoming. I got along good with [safeties coach Chuck] Martin and [cornerbacks coach Kerry] Cooks and the whole defensive staff. It was a good transition."

Slaughter described Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's defense as one based on teamwork.

"Everybody has to play their role," Slaughter said. "Each person has something that's key to the defense. If each person does their job, everything will flow."

Slaughter credits the sec-



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior safety Jamoris Slaughter returns an interception during a 59-33 victory over Air Force on Oct. 8.

ondary's success this year to a change in mentality.

"We've always had good [defensive backs]," Slaughter said. "It was just a mentality [issue]. Sometimes at [defensive back], if you give up a play, everyone will look at you bad and I think that's what went on in the years before. I think now, we're trying to stay focused and play well."

Slaughter, who describes his game as physical and smart, attributes his play to his own thought process.

"I have that mentality that even though I'm small, I can still lay a big hit," Slaughter said. "I think that has a lot to do with it. A lot of people my size that probably can't do it because they don't have that mentality."

Off the field, the industrial design major has found an entertaining interest: rapping.

Before the Sun Bowl last season, Slaughter rapped at the talent show, dropping lines like "Fighting Irish all the way from Indiana, come to El Paso, drop it like a hammer." He said he wrote the song on the bus ride to the show. Slaughter, however, rapped regularly with former Irish running back Armando Allen and junior running back Cierre Wood.

"We've always been close ever since me and Armando got here and then when Cierre got

here, we've always hung out," Slaughter said. "It was just something that clicked together. We all rapped so we decided to start making songs."

In the spring, Slaughter released a song titled "Skylar Diggins" to commemorate the women's basketball run to the Final Four. The song quickly spread across campus.

"The girls were going to the Final Four, it was a big event for our school and the women's basketball team," Slaughter said. "I might as well make a song about it. It was fun."

Notre Dame's seven wins through 10 games are the most for any Irish team during Slaughter's tenure, a fact that has to do with chemistry, Slaughter said.

"We have a lot more chemistry now within the team, player to player, coach to coach. I think a lot of that really helps when it comes to winning games."

With just two regular season games remaining for the Irish, Slaughter is optimistic about Notre Dame's chances.

"I think we're going to win each game," Slaughter said. "I think we'll only have three losses and go out on top [and] change the culture around here."

"I have that mentality that even though I'm small, I can still lay a big hit. I think that has a lot to do with it. A lot of people my size that probably can't do it because they don't have that mentality."

Jamoris Slaughter
senior safety



COURTNEY ECKERLE/The Observer

Senior safety Jamoris Slaughter chases a ballcarrier during Notre Dame's 59-33 win over Air Force on Oct. 8. Slaughter recorded six tackles and an interception in the victory.

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DEION WALKER

Receiver displays dedication to fight through adversity



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior receiver Deion Walker waves to the crowd during Notre Dame's 45-21 victory over Maryland on Nov. 12. With one year of eligibility remaining, Walker hopes to return to the Irish.

By MEGHAN THOMASSEN
Sports Writer

Next time you crank up David Bedingfield's "Gotta Get Through This," think of Deion Walker making the cold trek from his former dorm, Morrissey, to the Gug.

"I listened to that song the most when I needed to get from point A to point B in the cold winters," Walker said.

But Walker earned his spot as wide receiver with more than just three, long stints in South Bend.

Walker's time with the Irish has been characterized not only by hard work and dedication, but by camaraderie too. Walker meshes seamlessly with the rest of the senior population.

"Just hanging out and being in the receiver room, with [Michael]

Floyd and Golden [Tate] and learning at the same time, you walk away from the meeting and you're like, 'Wow, I really learned something from that,'" Walker said.

As for many of the seniors, the coaching transition was difficult for Walker.

"A lot has changed," Walker said. "I had a bigger role with the old staff, but that's just how it goes sometimes."

Walker and his family were close with former receivers coach Rob Ianello, who is now head football coach at the University of Akron.

"He did a lot of yelling at me," Walker said.

But Walker said the best way to fight through adversity was working hard, and Ianello's approach was part of that learning

process.

The learning continued as Walker and the team acclimated to the new staff.

"They're trying to [teach] you," Walker said. "[They're] trying not to step on anyone's toes, but at the same time they're yelling at you to see how you're going to react in certain situations."

This year has been a bumpy road because the team came in with such high expectations, Walker said. Even though he hasn't had any playing time this year, Walker summarized what he saw this season.

"I wouldn't say that we didn't live up to those expectations, but we didn't perform to the best of our abilities," Walker said.

Walker also noted how the program has remained consistent.

"Both [staffs] pushed for hard

work and striving for excellence," he said.

Walker has tried to match that excellence with initiative on the practice field.

"In my case, it's been tough because I haven't played as much as I would have liked to," Walker said. "Even though I'm not playing, someone needs to get better at practice."

Excellence and hard work were qualities Walker's father encouraged while deciding between Notre Dame and Penn State.

"My dad was a teacher," Walker said. "He pushed academics, and this is probably the best school academically and athletically that you can find in the country."

Walker's father has every reason to be proud.

"I have a job offer at a bank in Kansas," Walker said. "I don't really want to work right now, but I haven't really decided."

"My dad tells me every day, 'That's why you picked it.' He's really excited about me graduating in May."

Walker has one year of eligibility remaining, and will consider staying if the program decides to keep him.

"If they decide to bring me back, I would definitely stay here," he said.

For Walker, smaller amounts of playing time didn't inhibit his instinct to learn as much as he could.

"I've had a blast, I mean, it's cold sometimes, but it's not that bad," he said. "College is what you make it, and I had a good time."

Friendships within the team are stronger than ever, and as he

approaches his last game with his friends, Walker talks about how the seniors will commemorate it.

"I have a Mohawk right now, so we can't shave our heads, but I'm sure we'll think of something," Walker said.

Closeness with his teammates has been a monumental part of Walker's time on the team, both on and off the field. "Jonas [Gray] and [Michael] Floyd — we're the tightest. We always hang out together, everyone hangs out together. It's a blast."

Despite the significance of these last few games, the players have stayed focused. "Everything is team-oriented," Walker said. "[We want to] go to the best bowl game we can go to."

Beyond this season's bowl game, Walker also recognizes the importance of his relationships with his teammates.

"They know everything about me; they probably know me more than my parents know me," Walker said.

Even though Walker now lives off campus, he still enjoys the perks of a college lifestyle.

"I've lived in my new apartment all year, and I haven't cooked yet. I did make scrambled eggs ... once," he said.

Those cold walks may be soon a thing of the past, but Walker maintains the driving dedication he found in David Bedingfield's hit.

"That [song] made me happy and I walked faster," Walker said. "That was a good day when I listened to that song."

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HAFIS WILLIAMS

Difficult college decision pays off for Williams

By WALKER CAREY
Sports Writer

Hafis Williams knew he was going to have a difficult decision to make when it came to his recruitment. The Elizabeth, N.J., native had an early offer from Notre Dame, but he also received early offers from Maryland, Penn State and Rutgers, which would have allowed him to stay closer to home. However, Williams was not the one who ultimately made his college decision.

"It was actually my grandmother who told me where to go," Williams said. "When she told me to go to Notre Dame, I knew I had to listen. She was definitely thinking more about life after football. She has never steered me wrong. It definitely worked out well because once I came to campus, I fell in love with it."

Once Williams got to campus, it soon became clear to him that as a freshman he was going to preserve a year of eligibility. Williams believes that decision was a major factor in his development as a player.

"As it turns out, I am really glad I was held out for that first year," the defensive lineman said. "I got a year to sit back and learn the system. It also allowed me to get faster and stronger in the weight room, which were things I needed to do. It was also a good opportunity to go out there on the show team against the first team every day. Going up against those guys definitely made me a

better player."

During that first year, Williams did not travel with the team to away games. It allowed him to develop a grasp of what being a college student was all about, he said.

"During that year with not traveling to away games, I was able to feel like a regular student," Williams said. "It was a great thing to be able to experience what a regular student does on weekends. I had some great times. It is something I will always remember."

The following season, Williams made his Irish debut late in the season-opening 35-0 victory over Nevada. Despite coming in with a large lead, Williams said he was beyond thrilled to be on the field for the first time.

"It was exciting to just go out there and get on the field for the very first time," Williams said. "It did not matter to me that we were up by a lot. I was obviously glad we were winning. It was awesome to go out there and show how my hard work had paid off. It felt like I had really come far from not playing at all the previous season."

Williams' best opportunity for extended playing time came last season when senior nose guard Ian Williams missed the last five games of the regular season due to a knee injury.

"When Ian went down, it was definitely time for [senior nose guard Sean Cwynar] and I to step up," Williams said. "It was just

awesome. Those last five games were the highlight of my career here. I loved just being able to go out and play some really good football with my teammates. It definitely helped that we were able to get wins in those games. It just felt really good because I felt like the time had finally come for me to prove my skills."

Among those final five games was a road matchup with USC in which the Irish snapped an eight-game losing streak against the Trojans, a moment that stands out in Williams' career, he said.

"The win at USC is definitely the most memorable game of my career," Williams said. "We went there and people were counting us out, but we were able to grind through and win the game at the very end. It was very memorable. Beating them at their house was very special for us because we had not beaten them there or at all for so long. It felt unbelievable to finally get that monkey off our backs."

One of Williams' favorite things about his Notre Dame career has been the camaraderie that has been formed among his teammates on the defensive line.

"We have a bunch of characters on the defensive line, so it is easy to be loose out there," Williams said. "We are all good friends, so it is easy to have a good time with those guys. In the locker room, it is just like a laugh factory. All of the guys on the defensive line have different personalities and it is great



MACKENZIE SAIN/The Observer

Senior nose guard Hafis Williams looks on during Notre Dame's 45-21 win over Maryland in Landover, Md., on Nov. 12.

how we are just able to feed off each other. All of them are great. Those are my guys."

Williams, a sociology major and computer applications minor, said he is still unsure about what the future holds for him.

"I really do not know what I am going to do yet," Williams said.

"It might be time for me to get a job, but having that extra year of eligibility, I may still try to play more football. I am still thinking about it and trying to figure it out."

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