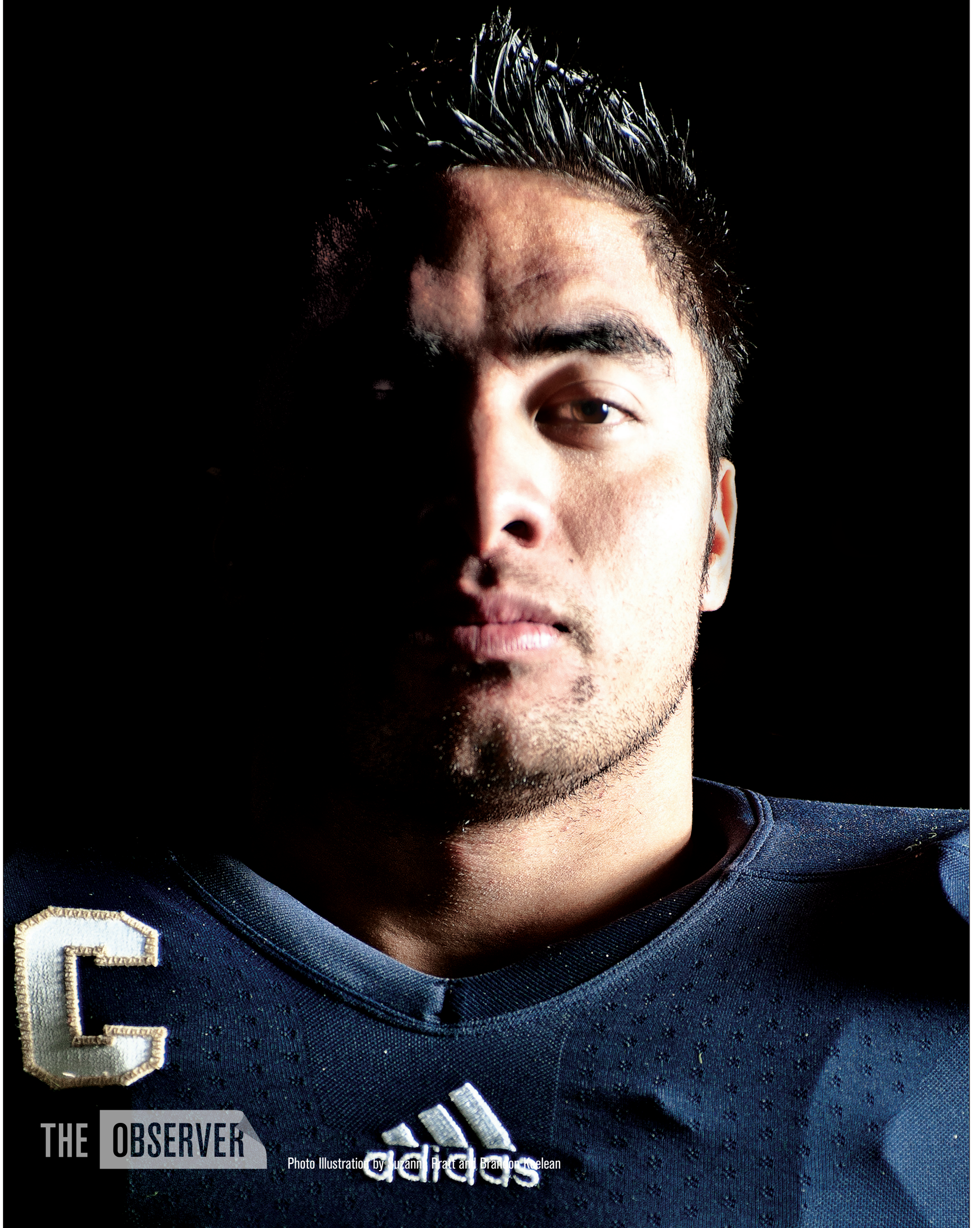


# IRISH INSIDER

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Photo Illustration by Suzann Pratt and Brandon Kielean

# THE LOYAL SON

*Senior linebacker Manti Te'o finishes his Notre Dame journey just as he started it — guided by faith, family and values*

By **ANDREW OWENS**

Assistant Managing Editor

**T**his Saturday, for one last time, Manti Te'o will make his way to the northwest corner of Notre Dame Stadium after the coin toss. As he has done on each home football Saturday, he will look up, gaze at his 8,500 classmates and exhort them to prepare for kickoff.

At Notre Dame, the students not only feed off Te'o's actions, but the star linebacker finds inspiration in his peers as well.

"[My actions] are my way of giving back to the students," Te'o said. "I think our success as a football team is a direct correlation with our relationship with the students. The more the students love the players, the more support we're going to get and the more support we feel, the better we're going to play."

"I definitely appreciate all the support we get from the students, and I feed off the energy and I know the players do too."

The swelling of mutual admiration between the student body and Te'o exists because the Heisman candidate is one of them. He lived with them, learned with them and faced hardship with them.

"It's been amazing to see the influence he's had on the student body and the tremendous amount of respect the student body has for him," said senior Lee Haruno, who attended Punahou High School with Te'o and has also lived in Dillon Hall during his time at Notre Dame. "It's been kind of a reciprocal thing that has grown the past four years where now he's Superman."

But Te'o, who will suit up for an Irish home game one final time Saturday, found the path to success wasn't always easy — or the one most traveled.

When Te'o's faith led him to commit to Notre Dame in the winter of 2009, he swapped

sandcastles for snow shovels and left the only home he had ever known for northern Indiana. He said the transition tested his resolve.

"I was homesick and I really missed my family," Te'o said. "Freshman year I definitely couldn't have called this place home. It was totally different."

He said he embraced Notre Dame his sophomore year and decided to make the most of his collegiate experience.

"I could call this place home [sophomore year]," he said. "This year solidified the feeling of this place being my home and I'm definitely going to miss it."

His father, Brian Te'o, noticed the change during Christmas break of Manti's sophomore year in Hawaii.

"He came up to my wife (Ottalia) and I, and said, 'I have to get ready to go back home,' and my wife and I are saying to each other, 'You are home,' Brian said. "That's when he started to feel like Notre Dame was home. It was a place of comfort and Notre

Dame has become physically, spiritually and emotionally, his home."

And never did the senior need more comfort than in September, when tragedy hit home, with Manti 5,000 miles away from Hawaii.

On Sept. 12, one heartbreaking phone call followed another merely six hours later. Manti first learned his grandmother, Annette Santiago, had died of natural causes — and then learned his girlfriend, Stanford student Lennay Kekua, had passed away after battling leukemia.

Ottalia's first impulse was to catch the next flight to be with her son, but Brian knew they wouldn't reach Manti until a day later, after what he called the "critical grieving time."

"I [called] Manti, and of course he was distraught," Brian said. "But at the very same time as when he got a call from me, [Irish coach Brian Kelly] was comforting him and I got to listen to the entire conversation with Coach Kelly. I was totally blown away. What he was doing was exactly what I would've done had I been there."

"Everything that had been said about him in the media went out the window for me. All I could see was the man that was comforting my son."

Brian Te'o said the Notre Dame community overwhelmed his family with the outpouring of support for Manti in the following days and weeks.

"I was so grateful that the Notre Dame family rallied

behind Manti and it reminded me how special Notre Dame is," he said. "They did more than my wife or I could've ever done. We were so grateful that he was there and not anywhere else. It's an incredible place."

In a time of hardship, Manti leaned on Notre Dame for support, but also on the foundation

of values his parents had built in Hawaii.

Growing up, he wanted to change his name. His parents named him 'Manti,' which derives from the Book of Mormon, but their eldest son didn't like it.

SARAH O'CONNOR | The Observer



He disliked the spelling and the way it was easy to mispronounce.

"He was pretty much ridiculed as child and he came to me one year when he was 9 or 10 and all in tears saying, 'Dad, I hate my name. People are teasing me,'" Brian said. "We reassured him that everything was okay and that, in joking, we said, 'One day people are going to appreciate who you are because of your name and your name is going to be recognized all over the country.'

"We were just trying to make him feel better ... but it looks like it came true."

Brian and Ottilia emphasized hard work and the value of remembering his identity in Manti, but the message didn't fully sink in until high school.

Manti attended Punahou Junior School — an hour-and-a-half drive from the Te'o household — but he missed his friends from his nearby elementary school. On top of that, every day was a grind. Manti would have to wake up by 5:30 a.m. each morning so Brian could drive him to the bus stop by 6:30 a.m. After school, it was another 90 minutes of traveling before he reached home.

"That went on for a while and finally he couldn't take any more of it," Brian said. "He just begged his mom and I to let him go back and be with his friends. We relented and said, 'You know what, this is an opportunity you will regret one day.' He was thinking like a typical eighth-grader wanting to be back with his friends."

Four months into his time at Kahuku High School, Manti realized his mistake. He was flourishing academically with a 4.0 grade-point average, but he

didn't feel as challenged as he did at Punahou.

"He said, 'Dad, I'm worried that when I take the SATs, I'm not going to pass,'" Brian recalled. "I told him, 'What do you mean? You're getting a 4.0.' He said, 'Dad, I need to get back.'"

Chai Reddy, Manti's defensive coordinator at Punahou, said he sees parallels between the decision to return to Punahou and Manti's surprising decision to commit to Notre Dame.

"I think that's one of the things that stands out about him," Reddy said. "He doesn't always take the track that makes sense. Given how much he loved USC growing up, I think going there or BYU made sense. Going to Notre Dame was sort of on the periphery in the same way going to Punahou was something on the periphery."

"There's just this depth with him that you don't get with a lot of 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds, even 20-year-olds. That's one of many things that stand out about him."

After transferring back to Punahou High School his sophomore year, Brian said Manti appreciated the opportunity and learned his lesson the hard way. There was a quiet understanding: No more early-morning struggles to wake up or reach the bus stop. It was a defining moment in Manti's maturation: The best path is not necessarily the easy one.

When Manti was placed in Dillon Hall leading up to his freshman year at Notre Dame, he relished the opportunity to meet new people, regardless of whether they were scholarship

athletes or not.

"It was like having a normal roommate, except that he was a football player," said Long Tran, Manti's roommate for freshman and sophomore years. "He took his religion very seriously. I thought a football player would be partying [all the time], but he didn't do that."

"He helped me out a lot with real-life stuff. I was shy my freshman year, but he introduced me to all his friends. ... He would pick me up when I was down ... and had a very positive impact on my college career."

Manti said it was never an obligation or an extra effort to befriend non-athletes. It's simply who he is.

"I love to make friends," he said. "I love to include people. I don't like people to feel excluded from anything and I have some friends that are still in Dillon who are seniors."

Fr. Paul Doyle, Dillon Hall rector and football team chaplain, said in both roles he witnessed Manti making a difference in people's lives.

"He doesn't even realize what an impact he had," Doyle said. "I know he helped some people make good choices who might've been inclined to be doing things they shouldn't be doing, but Manti was in the midst and they didn't go that way and they're better for it."

Doyle recalled a moment in the locker room after Notre Dame's overtime victory over Stanford in October that exemplified the senior captain's grace and humility.

"We come in after the game and the players are hugging each other," Doyle said. "Manti's over there doing that too, and then he breaks away from the pack and thanks [University President Fr. John Jenkins] for letting him come to school here and gives [Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick] a big hug. That kind of presence is noteworthy."

Although Manti moved off-campus for his senior year, he told Doyle earlier this fall that he misses dorm life.

"[I miss] just seeing people around," Manti said. "Seeing the freshmen wide-eyed, not knowing where to go and stepping out of my room and seeing friends running around. Now that I live off-campus, it's great because I have my own space and my own privacy, but it's just different."

"There are pros and cons to each decision and it just so happened that the downside of living off-campus is that I don't experience that camaraderie like I experienced it inside the dorms."

When Manti told his father about having some regrets, Brian immediately flashed back to when his son transferred away from Punahou.

"He told me, 'Dad, sometimes I wonder why I'm off-campus because I spend as much time on campus anyway. I should've just stayed in the dorms.' It was another moment where I wanted to slap him in the head and say, 'I told you so,'" Brian Te'o said. "There was just so much more to



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experience for him."

Before Manti made the decision to return for his senior season, Brian researched the possibility of Manti declaring for the NFL Draft. When presented with the information, Manti asked his father for advice.

"At his age I was a dad with two kids, so I would've gone [to the NFL]," Brian said. "But I looked him in the eye and said, 'Son, you are not me, and you are not in my position. You're a young man with your whole future ahead of you.'"

"He looked at me and said, 'Dad, I want to stay. I want to experience my last year at Notre Dame.' Given the presentation of a secure future for himself and his family, he went deeper and made a decision that was much more fulfilling: to complete his goal and get a degree from Notre Dame."

Brian said Manti, a design major, has fully immersed himself in his academic and athletic crafts this year in ways he hadn't always before.

"This year was a lot about personal redemption for him," Brian said. "He committed himself to the little things, like saying prayers, going to church meetings down the street in Mishawaka, attending all the practices and film studies on time and going to the studio to

finish [an academic] project, even if it took him until 3 a.m."

"That kind of stuff he never really applied himself fully. Before he'd come home at 10:30 and have a group project to do, but he'd say, 'I'm too tired. I'm going to sleep. Now I'll call him at 12:30 [a.m.] and he's still in the studio working.'"

Manti said the realization of impending graduation and a farewell to Notre Dame has helped motivate him.

"I try to embrace everything, experience everything and not count my days and try to make my days count and live every day like it's my last," he said. "I think, as a young guy, you don't understand that because you see you have four years and you think it's such a long time and I can postpone things and lounge around."

"When you know you have less than two months left, it puts a fire under your butt to stay involved and try to experience as much as you can because it's going to be over."

Kelly said Manti's example permeates the program as young players watch the star's every move.

"I think it's important Manti understood [the importance of education]," he said. "Hopefully he can be the guy that says,

## Te'o

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'Look, you can be a great player. You can still lead your team and have a degree, and have a degree from a place like Notre Dame. ... I think it's a great case in point of a guy that understands and recognizes the value of a life versus a career.

"His life is set up because he's got a degree from Notre Dame."

Beyond the academics that drew him to the University, Manti said his faith has deepened—even as a man of Mormon faith at the world's most famous Catholic university.

"People will be shocked to know it doesn't matter what faith you belong to, the Notre Dame community does a tremendous job of helping everyone to build their faith, no matter what they believe in, whether it be Catholicism or Buddhism or whatever," Manti said. "It's a very special place and has helped me to grow."

Doyle said Manti understands his beliefs so deeply and admires

Notre Dame's spiritual aspect so much that he dovetailed the two.

"He has his way of growing spiritually as we hope all do at this age and place, but he certainly took it seriously and not everybody is addressing those opportunities in his college years," Doyle said. "He has done a good job of that and was never about proselytizing or anything like that, nor did anyone try to dissuade him from what he believes.

"I didn't sense that it was a chore because all the props around here suggest that people take their faith seriously whatever it is, so I don't think he had any challenges to wrestle with."

Part of Manti's character development has manifested in his motivation to positively influence children. Micaela Kauhane can attest to that.

When Manti starred on the football field as a senior at Punahou, 9-year-old Kauhane was one of No. 5's biggest fans. She asked him for his gloves, and Manti made a promise that impacts both of them to this day.

"It's not like college where you

get new gloves every week, so I said, 'If you come to the state championship game, I will give you my gloves,'" Manti said.

Weeks later, Punahou won the state championship. As Manti was walking off the field, he spotted Kauhane in a crowd of 25,000 and remembered his promise.

"I ran up over there and gave Micaela my gloves," he said. "We have a close relationship to this day. She's like my little sister and I try to drop some McDonald's off for her or something. ... I just try to reach out and make sure she's okay."

Reddy said he has seen Manti influence several young fans like Kauhane.

"Here's this random fourth-grade girl Manti made this friendship with," he said. "They kept the communication on. The stories were of how big that was to her and there are countless other stories like that."

On Saturday, Manti will take the field through the Notre Dame Stadium tunnel as a national icon. It will be his 26th time through that storied tunnel, but it will also be his last. And

the man who has grown with so many ways since the first time he took the field will have his parents by his side — and 40 other family members and friends from Hawaii in the stands.

"I'm not looking forward to that moment," Brian said. "I don't want to let go of the memories we've created and come to the conclusion that this is the last time.

"I hope the cameras don't focus on me, because I guarantee I'm going to be crying like a baby."

Manti's Irish are 10-0 and pursuing a national championship. He said his task is to avoid getting swept up by the Senior Day moment, lest his team pay the price.

"I don't know what it will feel like, honestly," he said. "I know it's going to be emotional ... so I'm trying not to be too distracted."

But if he struggles to accomplish that, another in an endless list of feats, all he has to do is look up at his brothers and sisters, 8,500 strong, and know that he's among family.

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## MANTI TE'O CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- » 2012 BEDNARIK (TOP DEFENSIVE PLAYER), BUTKUS (TOP LINEBACKER) AND MAXWELL (PLAYER OF THE YEAR) SEMIFINALIST
- » 46 CAREER STARTS
- » THIRD PLAYER IN NOTRE DAME HISTORY WITH 400 TACKLES
- » 3RD ON NOTRE DAME ALL-TIME TACKLES LIST (416)
- » 8.5 CAREER SACKS
- » 34 CAREER TACKLES FOR A LOSS
- » SIX CAREER INTERCEPTIONS (ALL IN 2012)
- » CAREER HIGH 21 TACKLES VS. STANFORD IN 2010
- » 4,278 MILES FROM LAIE, HAWAII, TO SOUTH BEND, IND.

TACKLES	TOTAL
2009	63
2010	133
2011	128
2012	92
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>416</b>

# Amidst heartbreak, Te'o comforts grieving family



**Andrew Owens**  
Assistant Managing Editor

Two months ago, while Manti Te'o and his family grieved their personal loss, another family was in pain. Another family's reality was about to come to a screeching halt.

Te'o is a 255-pound linebacker set to play professional football in a matter of months. Bridget Smith was a 12-year-old girl fighting a battle few can comprehend.

Their faith in God and their love of Notre Dame connected them in the worst of times.

After fighting a rare brain tumor for more than three years, "Bridget the Brave," as her mother calls her, passed away Oct. 5.

"I don't think I ever heard her complain once during the whole time," said Saint Mary's freshman Catherine Smith, Bridget's older sister. "She's just so special."

At Notre Dame, Te'o was three weeks removed from the worst day of his life, when both his grandmother and girlfriend passed away on the same day. His inspiration helped motivate the Irish to a 4-0 start and the team was busy preparing for its next opponent, Miami.

But Te'o felt compelled to write to Bridget and her family.

"We received a letter from him the day we pulled Bridget off the ventilator," said Louise Smith, Bridget's mother. "It was a bright spot in the saddest day of our

lives."

A family friend of Bridget's who works at Notre Dame had written to Te'o about Bridget, as he was her favorite player on her favorite team. As Notre Dame beat Michigan 13-6 on Sept. 22, Bridget watched from a University of Michigan Hospital bed wearing a lei to support her favorite player during his time of need.

"She was treated at Michigan, but she never rooted for Michigan. Not once," Catherine said. "Ever since he was a freshman, she just loved him. She even named a stuffed monkey after him."

When Te'o learned of Bridget's fight, he felt compelled to touch the life of a little girl whom he had never met.

"Originally, he wanted to meet her, but it was at the beginning of the hospitalization [in Ann Arbor, Mich.,] so [the family friend] kept him in the loop on what was happening," Louise said.

With Te'o still experiencing his losses, he poured his soul into the two-page letter to the Smith family.

"It's something that hit me with what I was experiencing at the time ... so I was going through a lot," Te'o said. "When I was presented with that situation, I felt compelled to reach out and let them know everything's going to be okay and that we may not understand things right now, but God has a purpose.

"The Heavenly Father has a plan for us and we just got to have faith and know that someday we'll see all of our loved ones again."

Although Bridget was not conscious when the family read the letter to her, they believe she could hear Te'o's heartfelt message.

"The complete outpouring of himself and the amount of compassion and kindness and ability to give himself to someone he didn't know was definitely what Notre Dame is," Catherine said. "I felt like I could get up and face the day knowing that he had gone through something similar and had enough compassion to write to someone going through a hard time."

With Notre Dame sitting at No. 3 in the national rankings with a 10-0 record and still in the hunt for a national championship, Catherine said she can't help but think Bridget is in heaven helping her Irish.

"Before she passed away, I said, 'Bridget, before I graduate I want a national championship and you might want to get your buddy Manti the Heisman,'" Catherine said. "I think she's watching out for all of us."

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*The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.*



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