

IRISH INSIDER

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Photo Illustration by ANDREA ARCHER

COMMENTARY

Peaks and valleys define four years

Four seasons ago, Notre Dame was ranked as the second-best team in the country. Brady Quinn, Travis Thomas and Tom Zbikowski were on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

The Irish were a true national championship contender, had the Heisman frontrunner under center and a top-tier recruiter and play-caller on the sidelines.

Four seasons later, the Notre Dame football experience has been nothing we thought it would be. This senior class has been through a whirlwind of improbable successes and sudden failures, and we've learned to take nothing for granted.

Our first home game was a 41-17 stomping of No. 19 Penn State. This followed a shaky opener at Georgia Tech, but after routing Joe Pa and the Nittany Lions, the title talk was reignited — only to be doused by Michigan a week later.

And even though 2006 was largely a disappointment, we took for granted everything that was good about that team. Sure, we were dismantled by our two biggest rivals and against LSU in the Sugar Bowl, but we were ranked in the top-10 all year.

We had the comeback at Michigan State in the rain and, subsequently, a celebration in Stonehenge. We enjoyed a last-second win against UCLA and yelled "Beat SC" for half an hour after an unbelievable senior class played its last game in green at Notre Dame Stadium.

And more than anything, we had hope and optimism. We were 19-6 and in BCS bowls during two seasons with Charlie Weis, and while we would definitely take a step back with Brady, Samardzija and Co. leaving, our junior and senior years looked to be full of promise.

But our sophomore year, we fell a lot further than expected. We were humiliated by our biggest rivals and became a national punch line. We lost to Navy for the first time in 44 games, and we couldn't keep the game close at home against Air Force. Our coach suddenly seemed a little lost and confused, but we still had some hope left. So we blamed it on the poor recruiting of the last coach.

At least we had talented young players, we thought, and as gifted a quarterback as anyone in the nation. It looked like we would start to

put it all together again, and prove sophomore year was a fluke on the way back to prominence. There was a win over Michigan for the first time, and a 4-1 start to begin that junior campaign.

Everything quickly went downhill again, though, beginning with small disappointments in the close losses to North Carolina and Pittsburgh, and ended with the Senior Day loss in the snow to Syracuse and yet another crushing at the hands of the Trojans.

Then, suddenly three years had flown by. For this group, and for us students, it was the last try. The last home opener, last chances at beating Boston College and USC and now the final home game in these seats — although I'm not discounting sneaking back in the student section the next few years.

This season again hasn't been what we expected, but I think by now we're starting to get used to a little disappointment. A program like Notre Dame should have higher standards than its performance over our four years and

the last decade, but we're a new generation of students.

The last year Notre Dame won a national championship was the same year many of us were born. We shouldn't tolerate low-

ering the standards of the greatest college football program and tradition in the country, but we've grown to accept that that was long ago, and we're a long way away from the days where we expected to compete for titles every year.

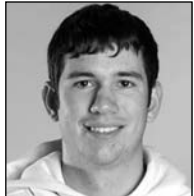
Instead of looking back at this season in frustration and calling it another failure, I want to remember the great parts of Notre Dame football we were a part of. We saw two of the greatest quarterbacks at a school with a history of great quarterbacks. We had numerous last-second wins and have seen some of the most phenomenal receivers in program history.

And really, in the end, I just want this one to end on a good note. One of the worst parts about the Syracuse loss was thinking how terrible it would be for the seniors that were on the field and in the stands to have that be their last home game as students.

This could be the last home game for a few players that aren't seniors, too, and I hope as a team they just get this one. As a gift for the seniors playing their last game on that field, and for the seniors standing together one last time.

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

Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu



Michael Bryan

Associate Sports Editor

This senior class has been through a whirlwind of improbable successes and sudden failures, and we've learned to take nothing for granted.

FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Prater, Ferguson make official visits

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

Notre Dame will host a pair of highly touted recruits — wide receiver Kyle Prater and defensive tackle J.R. Ferguson — for Saturday's game against Connecticut, but high school players with an interest in the Irish will have their eyes and ears tuned in to South Bend this weekend. And that may have as much to do with the product on the field as the media circus off it surrounding Charlie Weis' future at the school.

"It would be foolish to say that recruits don't hear the speculation, but the coaches have to do their best job of explaining the situation," said Mike Frank, an Irish recruiting analyst who runs the ESPN-affiliated site irishsportsdaily.com. "At the end of the day, I think recruits should choose a school because of the school, the players. Obviously coaching plays a huge part, but coaches come and go, and assistant coaches especially come and go all the time. It's more about selling the Notre Dame program, tradition and academics."

Frank said while winning games is a program's best recruiting tool, the close nature of Notre Dame's four losses — which have come by a combined 18 points — allows the Irish coaches to tell recruits just how close they believe the program is to achieving greater success.

"They get on the phone and just say 'Hey, we need you. If we get a few of these players, we

get over the hump,'" Frank said. "That's really the message you can sell at this point — that you've done a lot of good, bad bounces and things not quite going our way, but we're close in every game."

Notre Dame hopes to take one step closer to securing commitments from both of its guests this weekend. Prater and Ferguson are both 4-star prospects by ESPN.com's rankings.

The 6-foot-6 Prater is one of the top receivers in his class. The Proviso West H.S. product out of Hillside, Ill., has issued a verbal commitment to USC, but after coming to Notre Dame for the Irish-Trojans matchup, he decided to take an official visit to South Bend.

"I think he'd like to stay closer to home if he could, but at the same time, I think he likes a lot about USC and their offense," Frank said. "That's something that really intrigues him. It's a nice environment out there as well."

"He's always been involved with Notre Dame, and they have always liked him," Frank said. "It's all about the offense and how he's going to fit in there. And more importantly, if he likes hanging out with the Notre Dame players, and the environment, what he thinks about

that."

Unlike Prater, Ferguson has yet to declare a leader in his recruiting search. ESPN lists Miami, LSU, Oklahoma and Maryland as schools the Frederick, Md., product is considering in addition to Notre Dame.

"He's an athletic guy that can move," Frank said. "He's got a lot of offers and there's good reason for it. Guys that big usually don't move like he does."

At 6-foot-3, 275 pounds, Ferguson is already a physical force. But Frank said schools are even more excited about his potential to add muscle with a college strength and conditioning program.

"He's just scratching the surface of his real potential," Frank said. "He's got great upside. Where other guys might come in as a polished project, he's got a whole lot to work with. That's why so many teams are interested in him."

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank's irishsportsdaily.com.

E-mail Mike at mikefrank18@sbcglobal.net and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu

"It would be foolish to say that recruits don't hear the speculation, but the coaches have to do their best job of explaining the situation."

Mike Frank
Irish recruiting analyst

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ERIC OLSEN

Olsen holds down offensive line as captain

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

As one of Notre Dame's four co-captains — and as the “quarterback of the offensive line,” as Irish coach Charlie Weis put it — center Eric Olsen has been doing a lot of talking in his senior season.

Not that it's a problem for the Staten Island, N.Y., native. “I'm a New York guy and I've got a big mouth anyway,” Olsen said. “The position suits me, being able to make the calls for the offensive line. And as a captain, I'm a vocal guy on the team anyway. I'm not afraid to let my voice be heard, so it's something I've excelled in.”

Olsen made the move from guard, where he had started 19 straight games entering the season — the last 13 on the left side, the first six on the right — over to center after the arrival of first-year offensive line coach Frank Verducci following the 2008 season.

“When he went through winter workouts, just watching him move and then looking at his body type, just in my eye, he looked like he had center qualities,” Verducci said. “One of the things we thought we could upgrade at the time was the push in the middle at the center position, and he's done a nice job of that.”

Olsen said he embraced the position switch right away and enjoyed learning the intricate differences between guard and center. And the fact that Verducci, with eight years of NFL coaching experience, was there to guide him will only help Olsen as he prepares for a professional career.

“Someone with that kind of knowledge, I try to pick his brain all the time and use that as a tool for myself in a selfish

way,” Olsen said. “To get his advice and use his experiences is definitely to my benefit.”

It also hasn't hurt that his new role has allowed him — forced him, even — to keep on talking.

“I've really embraced it and tried to have as much fun as I can with it,” Olsen said. “I feel like I've been doing a solid job helping the other guys. It really fits my personality, being in the middle of all the action, making the calls.”

As a captain Olsen plays a similar role for the team as a whole. While he said he had been one of the team's more vocal players in the past, serving as a captain has given a new perspective and a new set of responsibilities.

“I've got to keep my cool a lot more. I can't let my emotions get the best of me in certain situations,” Olsen said. “I just have to see the big picture as a leader of the team and make sure I stay open-minded throughout the course of the game and in practice.”

The additional responsibilities bestowed upon Olsen this season are ones he's proud to have earned — and that will keep him talking for some time.

“Being voted a captain at Notre Dame is something that's going to stay with me for the rest of my life. It's something I'll always be proud of and will tell my grandkids and so on,” Olsen said. “That responsibility is something I wanted to be put on my shoulders, and I embraced the role of being a captain. I've tried to have as much fun as I can with it.”

Weis said his team's choice of Olsen as one of its four co-captains was one he supported, both because of the center's role on the field and Olsen's personality off of it.

“He's a tough guy and people kind of gravitate to him,” Weis



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior center Eric Olsen has played in 32 games in his Irish career, starting 19. He has started every game for Notre Dame over the past two seasons.

said. “I think that's why the team voted him as one of the co-captains. He happens to be one of my personal favorites, too. A little of that Northeast bias.”

Olsen said the relationship with his head coach goes both ways. He initially took a liking to Weis, a New Jersey native, because of their similar backgrounds. But Olsen said he quickly got to know, and like, his coach for other reasons.

“We have real similar personalities in many ways, just our whole outlook on life,” Olsen said. “We kind of clicked over the past few years and obviously got a chance to get to know each other a lot better. Our relationship just grew from there.”

The same could be said for Olsen's relationships with his fellow offensive linemen. A naturally tight-knit group, the fact that the offensive line includes fifth-year senior tackle Paul Duncan and three other seniors who regularly see playing time — tackle Sam

Young and guards Chris Stewart and Dan Wenger — makes for a good time, Olsen said.

“We've got some real characters in our group. Everyone's got their own personality and brings something different to the table,” Olsen said. “If you sit in on one of our meetings, we have a lot of fun.”

And that's one place where Olsen certainly isn't the only one doing the talking.

“Everyone's pretty much a talker, but everyone can be quiet at times too,” Olsen said of his fellow linemen. “We've got really good personalities across the board. We have fun with each other and give each other a hard time, but we're a really close-knit group.”

In some respect, Olsen said they have had to be over the last few years, during which the line shouldered some of the blame for an inconsistent offense.

“These guys work hard and have a lot of pride,” Olsen said. “We've taken the whippings around here for the last few years, but it hasn't really stopped any of us from showing up to work every day and busting our butts.”

That hard work is gratified, Olsen said, when the line can partake in the successes of the offense as a whole. With stars like Jimmy Clausen and Golden Tate, there have been plenty of spectacular plays to celebrate this season. But one that comes to mind for Olsen — and one that illustrates his role as one of Notre Dame's most important leaders — doesn't include either of those guys.

After Dayne Crist through his first career touchdown pass, a 64-yard strike during the 40-14 Irish win over Washington State, the sophomore quarterback looked almost too excited to celebrate — at least in the way Clausen does, by running over to Olsen, who lifts his quarterback toward the sky.

“When I was a freshman, I was running out there like that too, looking for something to do. It took the older guys to kind of reel me in,” said Olsen, who eventually found Crist and

completed the touchdown celebration ritual. “It's funny how things go full-circle and now I'm one of those guys. But being a veteran and being around here for so long, I know how things work and now it's my turn to teach it to the younger guys.”

That is especially true this week, as Weis Tuesday told the media that he had informed his seniors that this was “your week.” Weis said he'd have his veterans address the team after each practice during the week, and there's no doubt Olsen would be one of those guys.

“I think it's a compliment to the seniors and the leaders on the team that he can trust putting it on our shoulders to lead the team this week,” Olsen said. “That's what we have to do.”

With that in mind, Olsen said he thinks back to last year, and specifically, the week leading up to Notre Dame's Senior Day game against Syracuse. That week, Olsen said, then-Irish tackle Mike Turkovich addressed all the offensive linemen and explained what playing for Notre Dame meant to him while offering advice to those who still had some time left to strap on that gold helmet.

“He still wishes he was part of the team now, and he's still texting me like he is on the team,” Olsen said. “I can see how much guys like that do miss it. When you're a senior and your time is winding down, it really starts to hit home.”

So what is that message that Olsen received last year and will pass on this week?

“Cherish it,” Olsen said. “Whether you're a freshman or a senior walking out the door, you're not going to have football forever. You're not going to be at this place forever. Just cherish every moment. Injuries can happen any time and you never know what can happen in your football career. So just cherish every game, every practice, and make the most of every opportunity.”

Contact Matt Gamber at
mgamber@nd.edu



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Olsen moved from guard to center prior to the 2009 season, and has served as a solid anchor for an experienced Irish offensive line.

MARTIN QUINTANA

Parents encourage defensive lineman to keep trying out

By MICHAEL BLASCO
Sports Writer

The motto of St. Joseph High School, where Martin Quintana suited up for the Chargers, is *Vincit Qui Laborat* — “victory belongs to those who work.” No statement describes the senior defensive lineman better.

“I take a lot of pride in coming in every day and working my butt off,” Quintana said. “You’re waking up at 5:30 a.m. and not getting back until 8 at night. It’s challenging and it’s tough, but this has prepared me for anything that life will throw at me.”

In Quintana’s three years suiting up for the Irish, he has given the program everything he could, knowing that it would give him everything back in spades. Quintana, a Berwyn, Ill., native, is a walk-on senior with three seasons of experience at defensive line for Notre Dame.

Quintana, formerly of Stanford and then Duncan Hall, came to Notre Dame after attending St. Joseph High School in Westchester, Ill., on the west side of Chicago. He was drawn to South Bend by the same qualities that have called Domers for decades.

“There’s something special here. It’s something you want to be a part of,” Quintana said. “You come here, and you have an identity and a culture right away. It’s the community and the atmosphere. It’s so different than anywhere else.”

Quintana tried out for the

Irish as a freshman, but was cut.

“I was decent in high school, and I tried out freshman year,” Quintana said. “I got cut and didn’t make it. The coaches, even though I got cut, said they liked me and wanted me to keep working hard at it.”

Despite the encouragement from the coaching staff, Quintana needed a little boost to keep going, which came in the form of his father.

“My dad really pushed me for it,” Quintana said. “He encouraged me to keep working hard. He kept my head up when I got cut, and he was the first guy that brought me back up from how I felt.”

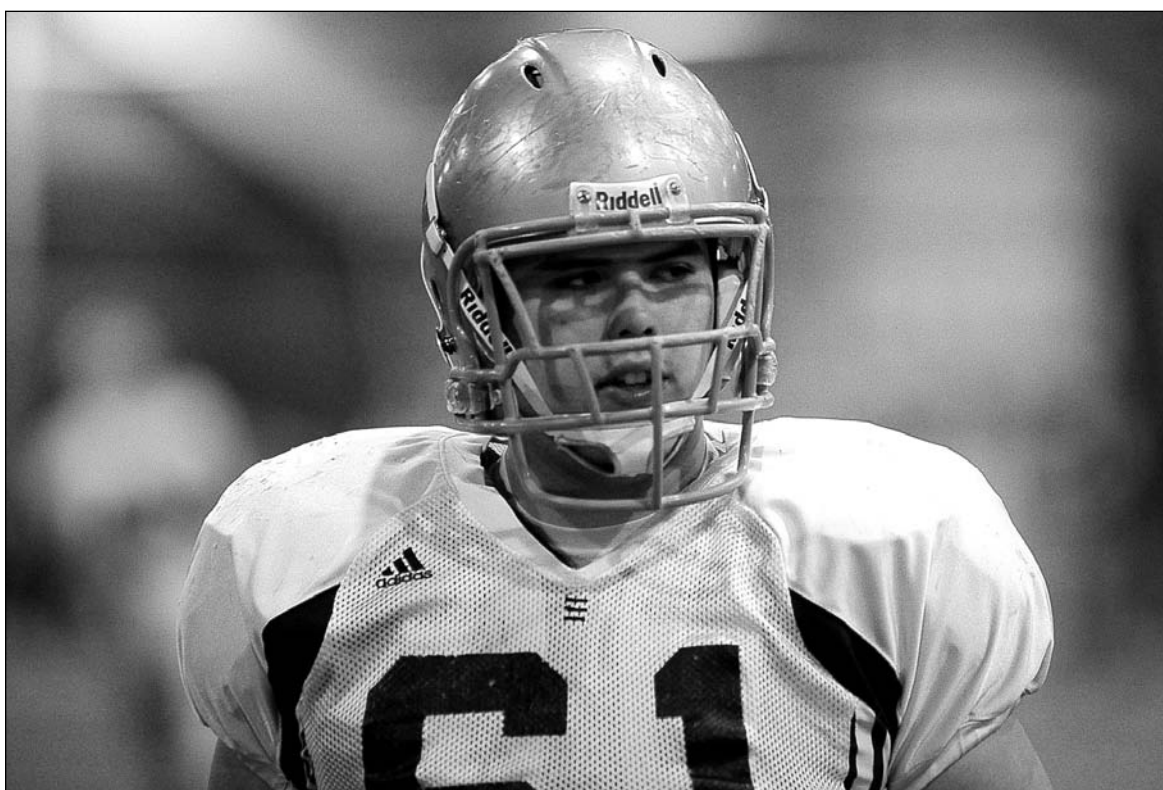
Quintana brought his work ethic to the interhall fields as a freshman, playing for Stanford. The 6-foot-1, 250-pound lineman was part of a dominant Griffins defense that surrendered only seven points in seven games, going 7-0 en route to a victory over Keenan in the Interhall Championship in Notre Dame Stadium.

With a season on the gridiron under his belt — and a taste of playing in the House That Rockne Built — Quintana took another shot at trying out for the varsity. This time, his tenacity and effort earned him a spot as a walk-on.

Who was happiest? Quintana’s parents, naturally.

“He was ecstatic,” Quintana said. “My mom was going around to everyone at work, saying how her son was playing for Notre Dame. They were so excited.”

Although he had played football at a high level for a long



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior defensive lineman Martin Quintana was persuaded to by his mother and father to keep working out, keep his head up and to try out again.

time, playing for the Irish was something different entirely. Quintana said being around guys like Pat Kuntz and other defensive linemen was surreal.

“I had heard a lot of stories about Pat Kuntz and some of the other guys,” Quintana said. “They were very intimidating guys. But they’re so fun, and I had so much fun around them. I tried to soak it all in.”

Quintana has spent his time playing for the Notre Dame scout team trying to soak in as

much as possible, calling it an honor to be around the likes of defensive line coach Randy Hart and graduate assistant and four-time NFL all-pro Bryant Young.

“[Hart’s] been coaching for 40-plus and to hear all the knowledge and expertise that he brings to the table is incredible,” Quintana said. “Bryant has very high expectations, and he brings the best of you. He coaches me directly on the scout team, and getting coached along by a future NFL Hall of Famer is amazing.”

Still, Quintana said just putting on the uniform was the best part of his time at Notre Dame.

“It’s such a unique experience that only a few people get to be a part of,” Quintana said. “It’s a great feeling to say that I represent the University of Notre Dame football team.”

Quintana is a finance major and plans to work in that capacity after graduation.

Contact Michael Blasco at mblasco@nd.edu

MORRICE RICHARDSON

Richardson eyes success in the business world

By DOUGLAS FARMER
News Writer

Short-term glory might be fun, but senior defensive end Morrice Richardson has eyed long-term success since the day he decided to come to Notre Dame.

The Atlanta native always dreamed of playing football in the Southeastern Conference, for a powerhouse like LSU or Georgia, but opted to come north for one reason.

“The thing that won me over about Notre Dame was the academics,” Richardson said.

In letting academics determine his decision of where to play football, Richardson’s time in college was not going to be gauged only by his success on the field, but also his progression in class.

“The academic aspect has been really good. I can’t complain about that,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot and met a lot of people. One day when I decide to go into the business world I’ll have a leg up coming from the number two business program in the country.”

He will need a leg up to reach his goals, which are just as lofty off the field as they ever have been on the field.

“After football I want to try to work for one of the top four private consulting firms,”



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior defensive end Morrice Richardson came to Notre Dame because of its academic prestige.

Richardson said. “Hopefully one day, I’ll be able to branch off and start my own consulting company.”

Richardson said football has helped prepare himself for the elite business world.

“A lot of the things you come across in the real world I came across playing football here as well, a lot of situations you have

to be strong to deal with,” he said.

One of those football situations has been his scarce playing time, even through relative success on the field. Richardson has seen action in all four of his years, but has never started a game, and through his first three years with the Irish had recorded 18 tackles, including

11 in 2008.

“It has been frustrating, being able to make plays but still not getting much [playing time],” he said.

Dealing with his frustration, Richardson gained a work ethic that should attract offers from big businesses.

“Even though I haven’t been playing, I still have prepared like I was playing,” he said. “It is that type of position where when you get on you have to produce right away.”

That preparation has carried right back to the classroom as well, where Richardson will graduate with a management-consulting degree from the Mendoza College of Business in May.

“There were some times after an accounting final — notice I keep saying accounting — we’d be walking out of Jordan Hall wanting to cry thinking, ‘What did I just do?’” he said. “It’s worth it, definitely worth it.”

Richardson said all the work he has put in at Notre Dame is worth it because he knows what rewards he will reap in the future.

“Some people say that college is the best time of your life and it’s the time to party,” he said. “I think those are the people that don’t go to Notre Dame. Every day we have to struggle, but after here, when you have a

degree and a job, every other day is a party.”

But Richardson isn’t done thinking about football. He has been coached for four years by a coach with NFL experience, and Richardson relished every lesson Charlie Weis dispensed.

“[Weis] knows what he’s talking about,” Richardson said. “So whenever he yelled at me it didn’t really bother me. I would disregard the tone and listened to the words.”

In listening to the words, Richardson’s NFL dreams live on, as after listening to stories from Weis and other Irish players from the NFL, he has learned sometimes it is the player you don’t expect who makes it in the next level.

“There are a lot of guys that left a college program who played every snap but didn’t play any snaps at the next level,” he said. “And there are a lot of guys who didn’t play in college but made it in the next level.”

Not that Richardson is overly concerned about making it in the NFL. He knows Notre Dame has prepared him for long-term success as well as possible short-term glory.

“Whatever is for me, I have a good degree and have a good

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu

ROBBY PARRIS

Parris catches everything thrown his way

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

Not many players on the Irish roster can say that they've also been a YouTube superstar.

Robby Parris can.

This past spring, Parris, along with junior running back Armando Allen, senior running back James Aldridge and then-senior defensive lineman Pat Kuntz, recorded a music video titled "Bend but Don't Break." The video garnered some notable, if only fleeting, Internet fame.

"We had a couple thousand views within like five hours," Parris said. "But then we had to take it down."

Even though his career as an Internet celebrity may have been short-lived, Parris' time on the gridiron has not. Coming out of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, Parris played in six games his freshman year, catching one pass for seven yards in Notre Dame's loss to Michigan.

Despite the limited playing time in his first season, Parris knew that a college football career was more about the long haul.

"In high school, you're the man and then you come in and want to be the man in college," Parris said. "When things don't go your way, it's definitely a little wrinkle in your plans, but just sticking it out and staying confident for four years and you'll get your chance."

Parris got that chance in 2007, his sophomore season. With the graduation of Jeff Samardzija and Rhema McKnight, Parris was one of only three receivers on the Irish roster that had registered a catch the previous season.

Even though the Irish struggled to a 3-9 record in 2007, Parris flourished, finishing third on the team with 29 catches and second with 361 receiving yards.

The sophomore saw the first

meaningful action of his Irish career in the season opener against Georgia Tech, and caught three passes for 30 yards. Two weeks later, Parris recorded his first career start at Michigan Stadium against the Wolverines. Parris also scored the first touchdown of his Notre Dame career that season against Boston College.

His junior season, Parris was forced to compete with five-star freshman Michael Floyd for playing time. While Parris was still an effective receiver for the Irish, he also learned to take on a mentor role to Floyd and then-sophomore wide receiver Golden Tate.

"You definitely get into more of a teaching role, because when these guys come in you know there's something special about them," Parris said. "I could tell when they came in that these guys were going to play. So just being a little bit older, being on the field, seeing a little bit more than they've seen, you just kind of turn into more of a teacher role for them."

Wide receivers coach Rob Ianello said Parris has been invaluable in the film room helping the younger receivers develop.

"Robby asks good questions," Ianello said. "And a lot of times he might ask questions for other guys as opposed to himself. He asks good questions when looking at the film, and he's a very heady player."

Parris caught nine passes for 50 yards in 2008, and, like the rest of the Irish squad, enjoyed a trip to Hawaii at the end of the season for the Sheraton Hawaii Bowl. He added that the team's struggles the season before made the trip to paradise — and Notre Dame's 49-21 victory over Hawaii — just a little bit sweeter.

"It does taste a little bit better. We didn't even get to go to a bowl game the year



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Senior wide receiver Robby Parris is the most experienced receiver on the Irish roster. Parris was one of the players who came up big when sophomore Michael Floyd went down because of an injury earlier this season.

before that, and then the next year we're in Hawaii living it up. We had fun down in Hawaii and then had a big game, kind of laid it on them really good."

Parris said the win over the Warriors, as well as Notre Dame's dominating 35-0 shutout of Nevada to open 2009, helped the Irish get the ball rolling in a positive direction.

"When we do put it all together and have big wins like that, it does get your confidence going and get your morale up a little bit," he said.

Heading into the 2009 season, Parris said he knew his role on the team as a complement to the All-American skills of Floyd and Tate.

"I'm not going to go out there and have 200-yard receiving games like these guys [Floyd and Tate]," Parris said. "These guys are miraculous at how they could do that. I'm just going to go out

there and make sure I do everything mentally right."

Parris said he considered his hands to be his biggest attribute as a receiver, and so far those hands have caught 22 passes for 210 yards and a touchdown this season.

"When a ball's thrown to me, I have confidence in myself that I'll catch it if it's anywhere near me," Parris said. "I take a lot of pride in that because I'm obviously not the fastest guy, but if the ball's thrown to me, I can catch it, and that's a good thing."

Many of those catches came when Floyd suffered a broken collarbone in the third game of the season against Michigan State. In the five games Floyd missed, Parris caught 13 passes for 156 yards, even though Parris himself missed the majority of two games due to injury.

"When [Floyd] went down, we just knew it was time to pick it up," Parris said. "I mean, Michael's probably one of the top five receivers in the country, so when he got hurt, it left a lot of opportunities for me and the other receivers to step up."

Parris had his biggest game of the season, and his Irish career, against USC. Despite catching nine passes for 92 yards, Parris was quick to downplay his performance.

"It was cool, I guess," he said. "I really didn't even think of it like a 'breakout game' because I just did what I had to do. They threw it to me and I caught it. I didn't do anything spectacular."

The biggest catch of the nine was undoubtedly a 13-yard grab Parris made on a fourth-and-10 pass from quarterback Jimmy Clausen on Notre Dame's final drive. The play gave the Irish a first down and drove them down to USC's 16-yard line.

"I knew it was fourth down, so all I was trying to think about was holding on to the ball," Parris said.

After he caught the ball, Parris' leg got twisted in the turf, and he was drilled by Trojans safety Taylor Mays.

"At the time, I didn't even know that he came in from behind and hit me in the head

because my leg got so twisted up. I thought I had torn my ACL because my leg got so twisted. I was in excruciating pain in my leg."

Despite the pain, Parris said his main goal was just to not let go of the ball.

"I mean, my leg literally just bent backwards and then I got drilled in the back of head," he said. "But it was fourth down, do or die, so I just had to hold on to it."

Ianello, though, wasn't surprised by Parris' tenacity.

"I think Robby has been a guy with us for four years that's been a real steady guy, a guy we can count on," Ianello said. "He's really shown some great toughness, mentally and physically here."

As his collegiate football career comes to a close, Parris said he'll remember the off-field moments more than anything that happened on the gridiron.

"The best thing about playing is just hanging out with these guys in the locker room, just screwing around," Parris said. "That's better than anything that's happened on the field."

Parris said he wants to give professional football a try, but that he has a backup plan ready.

"Maybe this football thing will work out, maybe it won't," Parris said. "I'm not going to put all my eggs in that basket, though."

Parris has continued his music endeavors, recording songs with teammates as well as local musician and Notre Dame senior Pat McKillen. He said former Notre Dame receiver David Grimes also helped out with his music.

"Grimes is the man," Parris said. "He's always around. He's like wisdom. Everything that comes out of his mouth, you want to listen to it because he's just so helpful in anything you've got."

One thing is for sure, though. Parris' career as an Internet personality has come to a close.

"We always screw around with it," Parris joked. "But no more YouTube videos for us."

Contact Sam Werner at
swerner@nd.edu



TOM LA/The Observer

Parris goes out of bounds close to the end zone after catching a pass on a fake field goal during Notre Dame's 34-27 loss to USC on Oct. 17.

JOSHUA STULL

Dillon player overcomes injury to make team

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Writer

For most who compete at Riehle Field on Sundays representing their hall, the thought of donning a gold-painted helmet, touching the “Play Like a Champion Today” sign and running out of the tunnel to the cheers of more than 80,000 fans on a Saturday afternoon is nothing more than a pipe dream.

For Dillon Hall’s Joshua Stull, however, that dream became a reality.

Stull, a 5-foot-8, 189-pound cornerback from Brownsburg, Ind., wears the number 43 for Coach Weis’ team now, but his path to the home sideline of Notre Dame Stadium was not, by any means, a straight one.

Stull played on the Big Red Interhall team his freshman year at Notre Dame and was poised to do so again during his sophomore year when he broke his leg, ruining any chance of his playing for Dillon Hall that year.

In the spring, however, Stull tried out for the varsity team but failed to make the roster, as he was still not fully recovered from his injury. He doggedly

continued to work out in hopes of making the team, waking up at 4:45 a.m. for months to work out despite his injuries.

“I was in Rolfs working out with a broken leg,” he said. Despite his earlier setbacks, Stull again tried out for the team last spring, making the cut in time to be on the roster for this season, his senior year.

“My favorite memory has to be running out of the tunnel for Nevada,” he said. “It was just an unbelievable experience.”

To Stull, that moment represented the culmination of all of the hard work he had put in over his time at Notre Dame and toward his ultimate goal of putting on the blue and gold on Saturdays. He had fought through injuries and rejection to finally make the team for one year, and entering the Stadium showed him the value of his perseverance and what he was able to achieve.

“Everybody wants to do this,” he said. “To actually be able to do it, that’s a really special thing.”

Though he is small by most football standards, Stull enjoys being a part of the football team.

“Yeah, I’m definitely one of the smallest guys in the locker room,” he said with a laugh.

“After two years, I finally got a chance on my last opportunity.”

Joshua Stull
senior linebacker



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior linebacker Joshua Stull started his college football career on the Dillon Hall squad but made the varsity team in his senior year.

“It’s actually one of the first things my mom noticed about the team.”

He also vividly remembers the opportunities he has had during practice — the first time he heard “Stull, get in there!” during the first week of practice was a “wow” moment, he said.

Stull was appreciative that the coaches made an effort to see what the walk-ons had to offer the team, though they may not be in the same physical category as the four- and five-star

recruits.

“It’s a little intimidating being around all these Division I athletes,” he said. “It’s definitely a humbling experience. In high school I was one of the top players on the team, but here, your confidence gets a check and you realize who you are.”

Naturally, Stull’s favorite aspect of the Notre Dame experience is the football games, though of course the academics of the University are important to him as well. He is not just

paying lip service to the idea of studying, however — Stull is a double history and theology major. He plans to work at General Mills in Minnesota after graduation.

“My favorite part of being on the football team,” Stull said, “is just being a part of something so special. After two years, I finally got a chance on my last opportunity.”

Contact Allan Joseph at
ajoseph2@nd.edu

TOM BURKE

Walk-on linebacker gets starting role against BC

By CHRIS MASOUD
Sports Writer

The stat line of Notre Dame’s victory over Boston College this season featured the numbers Irish fans have come to expect from the star playmakers. What the box score and game notes don’t show is the biggest moment in senior Tom Burke’s career.

Starting on the punt return team for the Irish, Burke stepped onto the field for the first time in a regular season game.

“That was just really surreal,” Burke said. “As a walk-on you’re on the sidelines every week, but that day was my day to contribute and play meaningful time in the game. The first time stepping off that sideline actually onto the field to play a down against an opposing team with the crowd and the intensity of the game, it was really special, and I’ll never forget that.”

A 5-foot-10, 242-pound inside linebacker from New City, N.Y., Burke had the aspiration of suiting up for the Irish implanted at an early age. After putting together

exceptional numbers in high school, including a 14-tackle game, Burke realized his dream could become a reality.

“I always wanted to go to Notre Dame since I was little,” Burke said. “I’m the first in my family to go here, but I always knew it was a special place. It was always a goal going through high school, and I’ve worked hard and was able to come.”

While balancing the workload of a double major in finance and economics and the commitment to the team, Burke says he appreciates his decision to come to Notre Dame each day.

“I’ve met my best friends out here in school, and I’m sure they’ll be my best friends for the rest of my life,” he said. “Notre Dame just brings a lot of people who are very similar together, who have good values and do well in school, but also who like to have a good time.”

A commitment to play football for the Irish is much more than just a season of practices and Saturday afternoon games. The relationships and community Burke has formed with his teammates will last longer than any achievement

on the gridiron.

“Naturally all the walk-ons are really close,” Burke said. “You go through a lot of the same things, you have the same experiences and naturally that binds you pretty tight. It doesn’t really matter who it is, whether it’s Brian Smith at linebacker, a really welcoming guy, or Kerry Neal or John Ryan. They’re all just really good guys and we have a really good team dynamic.”

Unless your name is Rudy, walk-ons usually don’t get the praise and glory attached to scholarship players. Nevertheless, Burke has come to take pride in his role as scout team middle linebacker, pushing himself and his teammates to get better each week.

“It does get pretty intense between the scout team and the offense, and that’s our job, to make it intense,” Burke said. “We’re never going to be able to completely mimic the look that another team is giving on Saturday because naturally we have some limitations, but we bring it as hard as we can and we like to think that we compete pretty hard.”

More so than other football programs, Notre Dame’s legacy commands the unwanted attention of critics and the media that can bring a team down before it even takes the field. Burke says Irish coach Charlie Weis’ mentality, a mentality that he has come to adopt, keeps the team focused every week.

“I’m from New York, but I was born in New Jersey, so



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior linebacker Tom Burke got his first opportunity to start as a specialist against Boston College.

I’m right around from that area where he’s from, and I think I get his attitude,” Burke said. “Playing at Notre Dame is kind of us against the world, and he understands that. He’s always going about for the team and for our players and for the University, and I really respect that.”

With his football days numbered, Burke says he will miss running out of the tunnel and strapping on the gold helmet every day. More importantly, he will never take for granted the opportunity to play for the

Irish.

“I just think being a walk-on especially is going to pay dividends in a lot of ways in the future,” Burke said. “A lot of times, you’re the low man on the totem pole and you have to work just as hard and harder than everyone else to get noticed to earn that kind of respect. The people who can survive as a walk-on have the attributes to be successful in whatever they want to do.”

Contact Chris Masoud at
cmasoud@nd.edu

SAM YOUNG

Stalwart tackle has started since week one, 2006

By MICHAEL BRYAN
Associate Sports Editor

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Sept. 18 edition of The Observer.

While the past four years have been an up-and-down journey of wins, losses, success and failure, the one constant through every Notre Dame game has been offensive tackle Sam Young.

When he takes the field on Saturday, Young will set the Notre Dame record for most career starts by any player, with his 49 straight surpassing former teammates Maurice Crum Jr. and Tom Zbikowski. He is the only offensive lineman in the long and storied history of Irish football to start every game of his career.

"It's been a lot of hard work and a little luck [starting 49 straight]," Young said. "It's really been a rollercoaster ride for this senior class, there's been highs and lows and in-betweens. It's been crazy."

He was there for the comebacks against Michigan State and UCLA in 2006, and there for every painful game of 2007. He's been a starter on a team that went to the Sugar Bowl, a team that finally broke the bowl losing streak in Hawaii and a team that tied for the worst record in school history.

So when it comes to the ups (like a blowout win over Nevada) and downs (like heart-breaking losses to USC, Michigan or Navy) of a season, there's hardly anyone more prepared.

"After that kind of loss, you're upset, and it's OK to be upset, and sometimes a good thing," Young said. "But you have to

forget about it the next day and then go back to work."

Young has come a long way from his freshman season, a year in which he said he relied heavily on his veteran teammates. A consensus five-star recruit coming out of powerhouse high school St. Thomas Aquinas in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., Young became the first true freshman to start a season on Notre Dame's offensive line since freshman became eligible in 1972.

"There were so many guys that helped me out, on the offensive line my guy Ryan Harris, Brady [Quinn], John Sullivan and John Carlson, just a laundry list of guys," Young said.

Teaming with future NFL linemen Harris, Dan Santucci and Sullivan, Young was named a freshman All-American for his part in protecting Quinn and opening up holes for Darius

Walker. Quinn threw for more than 3,000 yards and Walker rushed for more than 1,000 in their final seasons with the Irish.

"I remember, before that first game [at Georgia Tech in 2006], I was fully suited up about ten minutes after we got off the bus, I was

so anxious," Young said. "Looking back, it's crazy to think about where I was then and where I am now."

The 6-foot-8 freshman started every game of that 2006 campaign, experiencing comeback wins over the Bruins and Spartans and disappointing blowouts to rivals Michigan and USC. Those experiences now help Young as he has gained more experience and his role on the team has evolved.

"You go from the student to now I'm the teacher," Young said. "You pass on those same



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior offensive tackle Sam Young, middle, has started every game since Georgia Tech in 2006, his freshman year. Young is on pace to break the Irish record for career starts.

things you learned from the leaders to those younger guys now."

In Young's sophomore year the low points far outnumbered the highs, as the team and offensive line struggled throughout a 0-5 start and 3-9 season. After graduating three seniors, the O-line gave up an NCAA high 58 sacks, including nine in the season opener against Georgia Tech and at Michigan.

The offensive line was at the center of the criticism for the Irish, and Young said it was a tough learning experience.

"You have to learn to push through adversity," Young said. "You've got to go when you lose into the next week and regroup and stop the bleeding and keep plugging it. No one likes to lose."

Young said the performance of the team and offensive line as a unit in 2007 served as a huge point of motivation for 2008.

"We had to work our rear ends off in winter conditioning, in spring ball and in the summer to improve," Young said. "Everyone worked together to

put in a lot of hours and get better."

The offensive line certainly did improve in 2008, with Young playing a large role. The much-maligned unit allowed only 22 sacks in pass protection, although run blocking still proved to be an issue.

"As you play more and more, the game slows down a lot," Young said. "You start seeing little keys you never saw before, tons of things you never noticed."

Entering 2009 the Notre Dame offensive line had 100 career starts from its returning unit, tied for the most in the NCAA. Thirty-eight of those starts came from Young, who has been a leader on the deep and experienced unit.

"He obviously has so much experience on the field, he's been around for so long," sophomore guard Trevor Robinson said. "He has a really good ability to gather information before the snap, and the more information you have the more you expect and less likely you are to be surprised. He uses that help me out, help Eric [Olsen] and Kyle [Rudolph]."

The Irish have allowed 21 sacks this season, but the emphasis and improvement in run blocking has been evident. Behind Young and the offensive line, Notre Dame's running backs are each averaging close to or over five yards per carry, a dramatic improvement from last season.

"I think we've gotten a lot better, we're getting close to where we want to be, but aren't there yet," Young said. "We as an offensive line want the team to be able to rely on us, whether it's that short yardage play where we have to get one yard or whether it's holding up on

third and long to give Jimmy [Clausen] time. We have all the confidence in the world with Armando back there or any running back and in Jimmy, it's just our job to make it happen."

Entering this season, a major change for Young and the offensive line was the addition of coach Frank Verducci to replace John Latina. Young said he definitely feels the line has made strides under Verducci's tutelage and with new blocking schemes.

"He's a technician," Young said of Verducci in the spring. "For me that's a really good thing because I think that's something that I've been lacking is my technique. It's something that I needed to work on. It's a different perspective. There's a lot of stuff he brings to the table that I haven't heard before and a lot of the guys on the line have heard. It's a different perspective. It's a different way of doing things."

Young was named to the Outland Award watch list in the offseason for the nation's best offensive lineman, and on Saturday will take the Notre Dame record for most starts made in a career.

The senior said he attributes his streak of starting games and consistency to his attitude and approach to the game.

"The way I look at myself is I just try and be consistent day in and day out, whether that's coming to work every day or playing on Saturdays. It's gone fast. Freshman year seemed like it took forever, and since then it's just hit high gear and motored along," he said.

"It's gone fast. Freshman year seemed like it took forever, and since then it's just hit high gear and motored along."

**Sam Young
senior offensive tackle**

"We as an offensive line want the team to be able to rely on us, whether it's that short yardage play where we have to get one yard or whether it's holding up on third and long to give Jimmy [Clausen] time."

**Sam Young
senior offensive tackle**



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Young has been the cornerstone of the Irish offensive line from Brady Quinn through Jimmy Clausen, becoming the leader of a deep and experienced unit.

Contact Michael Bryan at
mbryan@nd.edu

BARRY GALLUP, JR.

Wide receiver starts own tradition on the field

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

Those F-18 Super Hornets that buzzed Notre Dame Stadium before the Navy game can put nine times the force of gravity on the pilots during tight turns and loops. Intense, right? Sort of.

Consider: the players on the field below can generate up to 100 times the force of gravity when they hit and tackle each other. The pinnacle of these hits, naturally, occurs on kickoff coverages, when both units sprint as fast as they can directly at one another.

At the center of this maelstrom is wide receiver and return man Barry Gallup, 5-foot-11 and 190 pounds of speed and quickness. It's OK, though, because he's got the mentality for the job.

"It's real violent out there," he said. "I'm a pretty violent person so I don't mind that."

Football isn't the only violent sport Gallup has played. Growing up in Wellesley, Mass., he was a right wing in hockey, which he played year-round. While similarities between a game played on grass and one played on ice are rare, some skills translate, Gallup said.

"I feel like hockey requires a lot of balance, and also you have to play tough to play hockey," he said.

Gallup balanced playing hockey, football and track at Belmont Hill H.S., but when it came time to pursue a sport in college he went with football — and he went against the family. His father, Barry Sr., played football and basketball at Boston College and now is the director of football operations there.

"We definitely have some fun conversations at the dinner table," Gallup said. "Obviously it's a great rivalry. It's a lot of

fun. That game's always circled on my calendar."

Barry Sr. didn't push for his son to attend Boston College, instead leaving it up to him. Gallup said he chose Notre Dame when he fell in love with the school during his official visit.

"Coach [Charlie] Weis, I knew because he was with the [New England] Patriots [as offensive coordinator from 2000-04] and I was a big Patriots fan," Gallup said. "It was a combination of those things and just the feeling I got when I came here, it was something I wanted to be a part of."

Upon arriving in South Bend, Gallup saw the truth behind college football — never-ending hard work.

"You don't realize these guys are working out 6 a.m. every day," he said. "You come in the summer, no one's really on campus, you're working out in the morning and going to classes. It's really a full-time job."

The ends justify the running and lifting and practice and meetings, however.

"I feel all the work is definitely worth it, to put on that helmet and run through the tunnel," he said.

Gallup didn't see the field his freshman year, but played on the special teams units in 2007. In 2008, despite missing four games because of an ankle injury, he made 49 special-teams appearances.

That injury hindered his speed, which he called his biggest asset. He worked out in the offseason with the trainers and strength coaches to build the speed back up.

Gallup plays with some fast guys, but he feels he should be right up there.

"We got some fast guys but I'll never concede that someone's faster than me," he said. "I don't know how many races I've lost but it's not too many."



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Senior wide receiver Barry Gallup, Jr., 21, ran a 52-yard kick return up the middle of the field from the 3-yard line in the third quarter at Michigan.

This season, an early injury to fullback and return man James Aldridge gave Gallup a chance to return kickoffs. Against Michigan, he capitalized. After Michigan threw a touchdown pass to take a 24-20 lead in the third quarter, Gallup caught the ball at the 3-yard line and took off straight up the middle of the field for a 52-yard return.

"I made a big play and I was hoping to spark a big comeback," he said. "I can make people miss in space."

Gallup has run back seven kickoffs this season and averages 22 yards per return. That 52-yard return is the longest for the Irish of the season and the longest since Armando Allen ran a kickoff back 96 yards for a touchdown in Notre Dame's 49-21 Hawaii Bowl victory over Hawaii on Dec. 24, 2008.

That return, and everything he's done on the field this season, come from the hard work he's done while at Notre Dame. Even though the environment was originally not something he was used to, he said he kept working for his chance.

"I came from a school in Massachusetts where they don't produce a lot of big-time football players," he said. "There weren't any Brady Quinns or Jeff Samardzijas at my high school."

"It's been a long time coming, a lot of long hours when you're thinking what am I getting out of this? [But] I've always kept my nose to the grindstone."

Gallup graduated from Notre Dame in three years and was accepted to Notre Dame's graduate MBA program, but deferred it for a year so he could focus on getting on the

field and recovering from his ankle injury. He someday wants to own his own company and said he could see himself going into the business side of sports.

He stays in close touch with his mom, dad and sister, a condition for him going to school far from home, and cherishes the relationships he's formed.

"You create so many special bonds and we have so many great guys on the team that I'm going to miss that," he said.

Mostly, he'll remember the final minutes before game time, after he's put in the work but before he takes those staggering hits, when he runs out of the tunnel onto the field.

"It's unbelievable every time you run out there," he said. "I never take it for granted."

Contact Bill Brink at
wbrink@nd.edu

CHRIS STEWART

Offensive guard enters with unique football perspective

By ERIC PRISTER
Sports Writer

Senior offensive guard Chris Stewart has succeeded both on the field and off since he entered as a freshman in the spring of 2006.

Stewart came to Notre Dame with a unique football perspective. He played high school football in Texas, which he said can be more scrutinizing than playing football under the Dome.

"It's a different culture coming from Texas to Indiana for football," Stewart said. "It's an upgrade, but I guess the society is different. Not that Notre Dame fans aren't die-hard, but it's almost like a cult following down south and in Texas. Little kids from the age of four are indoctrinated into the cult of football and school. It's just a little bit different, and it's hard to explain or pinpoint, it's just the way things are done. Even tailgating, it's just different."

It was both athletics and academics that drew Stewart to Notre Dame from his hometown in Spring, Texas, despite the change in climate that a move to Indiana would entail.

"I expected it to be cold, and I



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior offensive guard Chris Stewart found playing under the Dome a different atmosphere than the one he came from.

was right on that," Stewart said. "It was a mix of academics and football. I was able to have a national spotlight, every week get to be on TV and get a chance to showcase talent in front of everyone in the nation every week. It lived up to my expectations. There were some down times which were hard, but that happens, just like anything else in life."

Stewart has seen both the high

and low of Irish football, and both of these experiences helped shape his Notre Dame experience.

"One of the best memories, even though the game didn't go so well, was going to New Orleans for the Sugar Bowl, to go back down south," Stewart said. "And actually a recent one was going to San Antonio. That was nice to get back down south. I'd say those two are the football memories that stick

out."

After seeing the majority of his sophomore playing time on special teams, Stewart has started all but three games since the beginning of his junior year — the three being games he missed due to injury. Despite his individual success, Stewart still has more he wants to accomplish, both on and off the field.

"Football-wise, I'd like to go undefeated and win a national championship," Stewart said. "But I've gotten a lot of the experience out of it. Academically, I still want something out of grad school, I guess that's something that's left wanting. Other than that, I've had a pretty good experience with people and everything like that. With football, you can always wish things had gone better, but hindsight's 20/20."

Stewart took advantage of the academic opportunities offered by attending Notre Dame, majoring in history and international peace studies, and even creating his own history specialization — Caribbean Studies.

"I kind of made [the Caribbean Studies specialization] up," Stewart said. "So I took a lot of political science classes and I had

to bring in some American Studies classes, so it ended up being pretty cool. Taking Common Human Diseases gave me my first glance into Haiti and Caribbean society, so I wanted to learn the history and backdrop of all that, so that was the reason that I did it."

The doors that were opened for him at Notre Dame have also been a large part of Stewart's off-the-field experience, along with the ability to get to know people that he might not have otherwise gotten a chance to meet.

"I've enjoyed a lot of the people," Stewart said. "Notre Dame has some really down-to-earth people, successful people but still-down-to-earth. It's not unusual to have friends from all over the U.S. and all over the world, being in the top earning bracket in the U.S. and still be down-to-earth, cool people. So, I've really enjoyed that part, getting to know people from different backgrounds. And I've enjoyed the educational side, getting to know professors and counselors and people like that. It's been great. It's been a really good experience."

Contact Eric Prister at
eprister@nd.edu

EVAN SHARPLEY

Unexpected fifth year pays off for Sharpley

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

Usually the players that come back for fifth years at Notre Dame can be predicted well ahead of time. There was one this year though, that came out of left field.

Well, actually first base.

Quarterback Evan Sharpley gave the Irish a boost of unexpected depth at the quarterback position this summer when he announced that he would return for a fifth season. Sharpley, who also plays first on the Irish baseball team, returned to play football after being drafted by the Seattle Mariners in the 50th round of the 2009 Major League Baseball draft.

"Initially, it was just to kind of cover my bases, just in case baseball didn't work out," Sharpley said of coming back. "I didn't have the greatest season I've ever had with baseball, but I still got drafted."

Sharpley was drafted 1,593rd overall, which he said caused mixed emotions.

"It was kind of bittersweet," Sharpley said. "It's still awesome to get drafted, and I wanted an opportunity. I'm still going to remember those 1,592 guys that got drafted in front of me."

After being drafted, Sharpley played summer ball in Peoria, Ill. for the Seattle Mariners' rookie league team.

"I had a great time, had a great summer playing summer," he said. "It was really fun."

After that, it was back to school to complete his education degree and become, in his own words, "the best-looking backup quarterback in college football."

"Adding depth at the quarterback position was great," Sharpley said. "And plus I just love playing football and being competitive."

Even though it was five long years ago, Sharpley said he could still look back and remember his recruitment to Notre Dame in 2004. He said that along with Notre Dame, he was also considering Michigan, Purdue and LSU.

"I wanted to play both sports, and a lot of the places I was looking at they weren't going to let me do that," Sharpley said.

"A couple that were like, 'Well, maybe,' but that's really what it came down to. I knew I was going to get a great degree. I knew I was going to play baseball, I

knew I was going to play football, and compete in both sports."

Sharpley saw little action backing up Brady Quinn in 2005 and 2006, but finally got his shot in 2007.

The junior saw extensive action both backing up then-freshman Jimmy Clausen and starting games against USC and Navy. The game against the Trojans was Sharpley's first career Notre Dame start.

He said he had to walk a fine line that season, both teaching Clausen and fighting for playing time himself.

"At the same time you want to see the team you're playing on and the program you're in be successful, so

whatever I would have to do, I would do," Sharpley said. "I wasn't holding anything back. I wanted to see him do well if he was playing, and hopefully likewise if I was playing he wanted me to do well."

Sharpley said the highlight of his Notre Dame career came earlier in the season, when he relieved Clausen against Purdue.

"My first touchdown pass against Purdue was great, coming in and playing pretty well then," he said.

On the season, Sharpley finished his junior year with 736 passing yards with five touchdowns and three interceptions.

There was one play in 2007, though, that Sharpley said summed up his up-and-down career at Notre Dame.

"We were playing Boston College," he said. "And I came in the second half, played pretty well, threw a couple of touchdown passes."

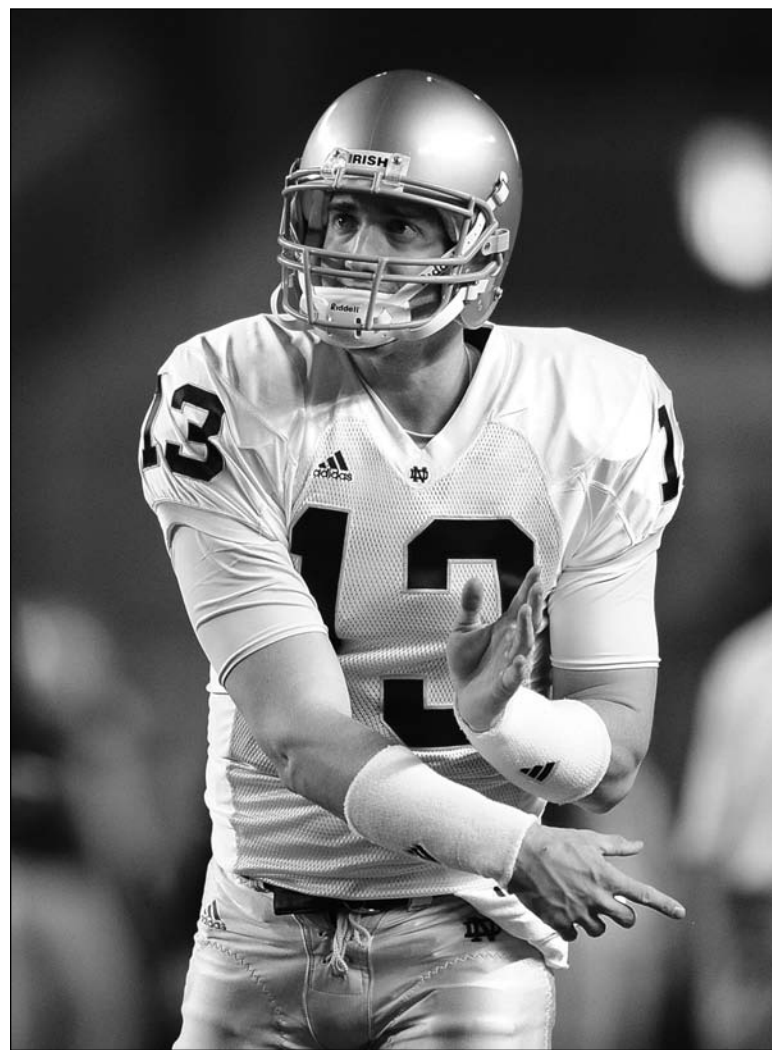
The play was a fourth-and-one from the Eagles' 13-yard line with the Irish trailing 27-14. Sharpley said as he was running out on the field, Irish coach Charlie Weis called him back and changed the play.

"We go with a pop pass, and I throw a touchdown pass," Sharpley said. "It was one of the best feelings ever, then I look over and see a flag on the field. Can I buy a break?"

Irish tackle Mike Turkovich had been called for holding and the Irish couldn't convert after being pushed back 10 yards. Notre Dame ended up losing 27-14.

Clausen seized the starting job in 2008 and hasn't looked back. With the addition of Dayne Crist last season, Sharpley has taken on even more of a teaching role for the young quarterbacks.

"I've kind of always felt like a teacher or a coach, just with my knowledge that I



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Fifth-year quarterback Evan Sharpley provided the Irish a boost of depth at quarterback when he decided to come back this year.

have," Sharpley said.

In fact, when Sharpley was running the scout team as third-string quarterback earlier this season, coaches often raved about how he ran the opposing team's offense better than they did.

"It's a running joke between coach [Jon] Tenuta and I when I'm running the other team's offense, it's, 'Well, better than this guy again,'" Sharpley said.

Sharpley's teaching ability, though, stretches far beyond the football field. Currently a student teacher at Adams High School in South Bend, Sharpley is close to finishing his degree in secondary education from Saint Mary's, in addition to having a history degree from Notre Dame.

"I had to do some twisting and I was on kind of a special program because obviously a football player had never done this before, especially a football/baseball-type guy," he said. "So it was kind of difficult, but ultimately I wanted to get that done now, so if I wanted to in the future I could be a teacher or coach, which is what I want to do eventually."

After he saw his first action of the season against Washington State, Sharpley said he was greeted in class on Monday with cries of "Mr. Sharpley, why wouldn't they let you throw the ball?"

Sharpley said his students have become some of his biggest fans.

"They come in and each week it's like 'Can we sign a petition to coach Weis to let you play?'" Sharpley said.

Sharpley teaches five classes at Adams, two senior government classes and three geography classes. He said that an average day starts at 6:30 a.m., with school until 2:30 p.m. and football until 8 p.m. After that, it's back

home to lesson plan or grade papers.

"It's been a great experience," Sharpley said. "It's difficult at times just because I am splitting time with both. Where I would maybe like to do more with a certain subject, I don't have as much time as the other student teachers to plan those things."

Being a Division I football player, though, has taught Sharpley some useful skills.

"Being here over the past four years has helped me with time management, knowing when I can do something, when I need to sleep, when I need to eat," he said.

Sharpley said his plans after graduation are to try to give pro baseball a shot, but that a teaching degree is a good fallback plan.

"My plans as of now are to go back in the spring for spring training and play great and try and make a name for myself," he said.

As for his time at Notre Dame, though, Sharpley said it's about more than just athletics.

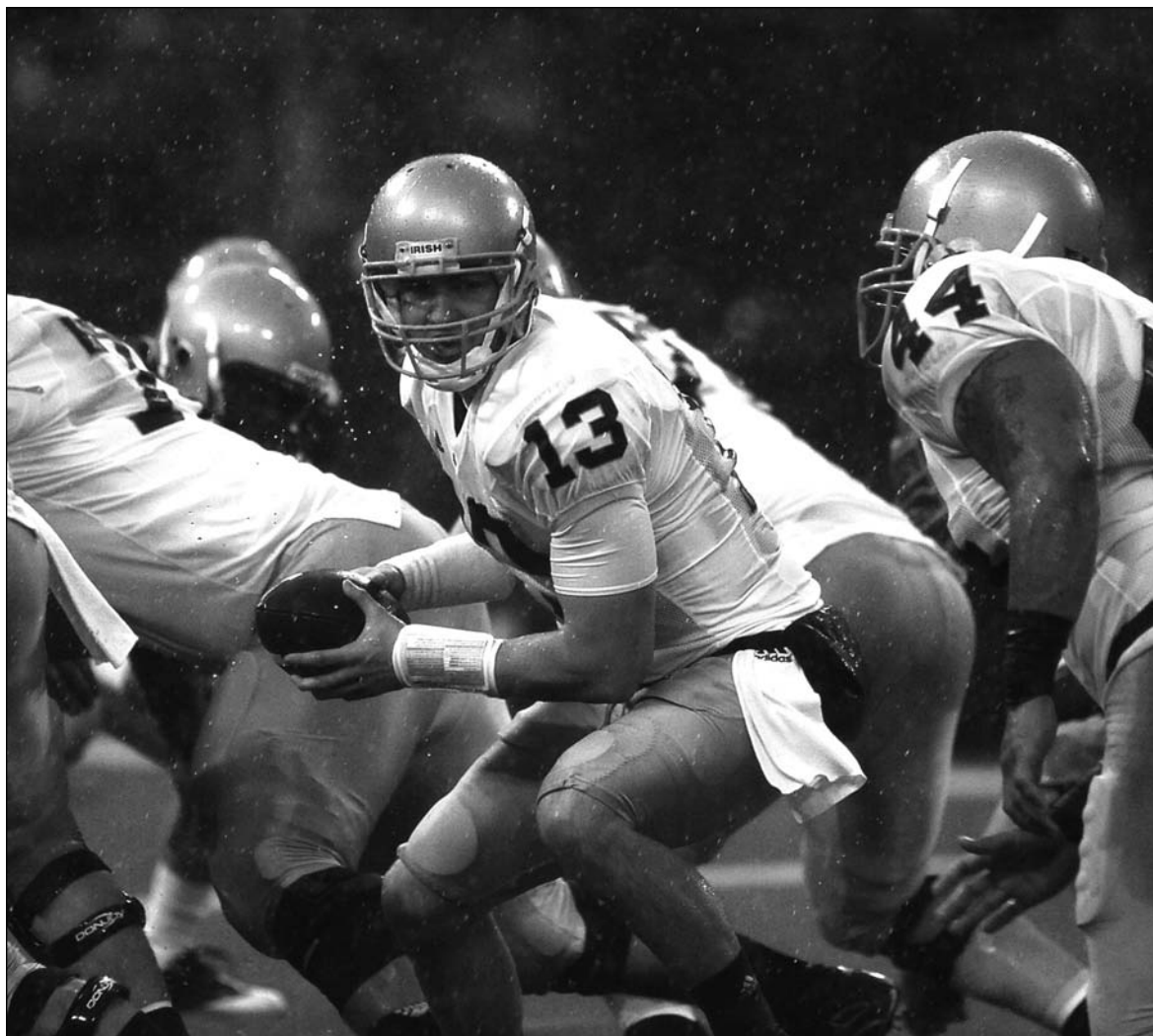
"I've tried to not just be defined as a football player or as a baseball player," he said. "I have several different groups of friends outside of football, which I really think is important because you don't want to get termed as an athlete because there's kind of a negative connotation with that."

Looking back, Sharpley said he couldn't think of anything he would have done differently over the past four years.

"I try not to live like that," he said. "Started dating my girlfriend earlier, I guess."

"It's been a fun time so far, and hopefully it finishes up well, too."

Contact Sam Werner at swerner@nd.edu



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Sharpley, a first baseman on the Irish baseball team, was drafted in the 50th round of the 2009 Major League Baseball draft by the Seattle Mariners.

SAM Vos

Big-time experience inspired ‘Big Body’ walk-on

By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

For walk-on wide receiver Sam Vos, his college football experience has been all about personal growth and making the most of what opportunities he has gotten in life. Being able to have the chance to be around a major college program like Notre Dame has given Vos a deep sense of pride in what he is able to accomplish.

“You hear the cliché that the speed of the game in college is so much different than it is in high school,” Vos said. “And now I really take pride in the fact of how far I have come since I walked on. When I first started everything was going so fast, and now I can actually compete with the guy I am lining up against.”

As a member of the scout team offense and special teams unit since the spring of his freshman year, nothing has come easily for Vos, but nothing means more for him about his walk-on experience than to be a part of team with big-time players and big-name coaches.

“Probably the greatest part of my football experience is just being able to be a part of this team and be around all these guys,” Vos said. “I am a walk-on, I wasn’t really recruited by anyone coming out of high school, so I took a shot at making this team, and once I made it, being around these types of players is special.”

Vos also puts a lot of stock in having played under coach Charlie Weis, as he has taught him life lessons that he will carry with him for the rest of his life.

“Two big things I have gotten out of my relationship with



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Walk-on senior receiver Sam Vos has never seen playing time in a game, but he still hopes to get on the field this season.

Coach Weis is work ethic and time management,” Vos said. “Those two things will definitely be useful going forward.”

Vos grew up in the small town of Burlington, Wis., with his mom and dad and two younger brothers, and that family experience has prepared him for his future life, both as a man and as a football player.

“My mom and dad come to a lot of games and are really supportive of me, they have taught me how to be the man I am today,” Vos said. “My younger brother Max got a scholarship to Northern Michigan after leading our high school to the state championship, and my youngest brother Mitch is a freshman in

high school and just being introduced to football.”

Football was also a big part of his life in high school, as he went to Catholic Central in Burlington, Wis., where he learned a lot about football and life from coach Tom Aldrich.

“It was just the way he created a winning program and taught us life lessons,” Vos said. “He used football as a tool to teach us things we could use the rest of our lives.”

Coming to Notre Dame and walking on to the football team has been tough for Vos, as he has not yet gotten onto the field during a regular game.

“I have not made it onto the field yet, but hopefully I will

get on the field for the Connecticut game,” Vos said. “I will take what I can get, but I have hopes of getting in there as a receiver.”

Beyond the rigors of playing football and practicing every day, it has taken a great deal of effort to be able to balance class, football and having a social life.

“Day to day you are waking up in the morning and doing some kind of workouts,” Vos said. “Sometimes it is as early as six in the morning for workouts. That takes a couple hours and then we have classes until about two. After that its meetings and practices for a couple hours.”

All that work makes it hard to find time to socialize and wind down, but Vos said he believes that it is important to make that kind of time.

“I don’t get to go out and have as much fun with my friends, but you have to set aside some time away from school and football,” Vos said. “I have been able to fit it in.”

Vos has formed some important friendships in his time at Notre Dame, including his fellow receivers and walk-ons.

“All of the receivers are really tight. My other clique is the walk-ons,” Vos said. “It is really a unique experience of what we all went through with the tryouts and what we go through every day.”

One of Vos’ closest friends is fellow walk-on and fullback Mike Narvaez, as they have gone through this journey of being a walk-on together.

“With me and Mikey, the reason we are friends is because we walked on at the same time, and we have been through the whole process together,” Vos said. “As walk-ons we are not always getting the special treatment, so we joke around together and keep

it real. Sometimes off the field we will go out to eat together, stuff like that.”

A result of these relationships with the receiving corps and the walk-ons is his nickname, which refers to his stocky build.

“The other receivers thought I was a kind of a stocky dude, so they started calling me ‘Big Body,’” Vos said.

Vos said he loves it when the receivers get together because he believes they are all a bunch of fun-loving guys.

“When you get the receiving crew together, they are a real bunch of clowns,” Vos said.

When asked what advice he would give to a freshman trying to walk on to the team, Vos responded that he would want them to focus on the positive side of things, not the hard work.

“I would tell them to really look on the positive side,” Vos said. “There are a lot of things that can get you down when you aren’t playing and you aren’t traveling. You really have to look at the big picture and your whole college experience.”

But Vos said what he has gotten out of his experience, from being with the players on this team and the coaches that have taught him, is that you have to make the most out of every opportunity you are given.

“The most valuable thing for the rest of my life is that you get limited opportunities and you have to make the most of every opportunity that you ever get,” Vos said. “Seize things as they come and make the most of them.”

Vos has been the living embodiment of this motto for his entire Notre Dame career.

Contact Jared Jedick at
jjedick@nd.edu

RAY HERRING

Video game addict only plays himself on field

By LAURA MYERS
Sports Writer

Ray Herring spends much more than 20 hours a week on football-related activities. But don’t call the authorities, because he’s not always playing himself.

“I like to play video games, NCAA,” Herring said. “I try to avoid [playing myself]. I feel like that’s kind of weird. I play other people, friends of mine who are at other colleges.”

When he plays the video game, Herring said, Notre Dame “usually” wins.

In real life, though, the fifth-year safety has been around for both ups and downs.

Herring was recruited out of Melbourne, Fla., and began his career in 2005. He played eight games that year, mostly on special teams. He said his favorite memory of college football was the 2005 game against USC in which the Irish lost at the last second.

“I know we lost, but it was a good game,” he said. “I think I’m the only one left who played in that game. It was an

exciting time. Maybe it was because it was my freshman year, but I was amazed.”

In 2006, Herring played all 13 games, again mostly on special teams but starting as strong safety against Stanford when Tom Zbikowski went out with an injury. He recorded 18 tackles that season, which he said was his favorite year.

“It was my first time actually getting a chance to play Division I college football,” Herring said. “I was just having fun. That’s the only way to play, having fun.”

Herring fell to a groin injury four games into the 2007 season and was sidelined for the rest of the year. In his few appearances he made three tackles and two fumble recoveries.

He returned his senior year and was granted a medical redshirt that allowed him to come back for a fifth season as well. Since coming back he has not missed a game, playing all 13 in 2008 and all nine so far this year.

In 2009, he has recorded eight tackles on special teams and one punt return. He also

plays backup to fifth-year senior strong safety Kyle McCarthy.

Herring said he doesn’t prefer one position over the other. “Special teams is fun because that’s where I started off,” he said. “I’ve been doing it my whole career.”

“It doesn’t really matter, as long as I get a chance to help the team win.”

Herring was always ready to help Notre Dame win — though he was recruited by teams such as Georgia Tech and Tennessee, he said he always wanted to play for the Irish.

“I was happy when I got this offer,” he said. “It’s Notre Dame. Who doesn’t want to come here? The degree, the people, the atmosphere, the football aspect, being on NBC every Saturday. If you’re away from home, people can still see you play.”

Five years later, Herring said he is glad he came to Notre Dame and had a lot of fun both on and off the field. He will miss his Irish teammates, but hopes to continue playing football.

“This is the part where



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Senior strong safety Ray Herring has seen consistent action in his Irish career, playing in every game the past two seasons.

you’re looking at the next step,” he said. “I’ll try out for the next level on pro day here.”

Maybe next year he will be

trying to avoid playing himself in the NFL video game.

Contact Laura Myers at
lmyers2@nd.edu

KYLE MCCARTHY

McCarthy stands apart as defensive leader

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Nov. 13 edition of The Observer.

On a Notre Dame defense, and particularly in a secondary, that has shuffled on an almost weekly basis in 2009, one piece of the puzzle has remained intact.

And does it come as a surprise to anyone that that piece is free safety Kyle McCarthy?

"It's been very important [to have him back there]," Irish defensive backs coach Corwin Brown said. "I think what he's done more than anything else is be able to keep the guys fairly settled, no matter who has been in there with him."

Ironically — or appropriately — enough, the same could be said about McCarthy's role in his off-campus home last year, when he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan. In an Oct. 19, 2008, Irish Insider cover story, McCarthy called himself "the dad" of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line.

It's not a perfect analogy — no analogy is — but McCarthy's role on the defense has been comparable this season.

"He understands the bigger picture better, and he's taken on more of a leadership role," Brown said. "He's the older guy back there, and he understands where he's at."

Old Reliable

Whenever the Irish have struggled and have been in

need of a big play, it seems like McCarthy's been there, with game-clinching interceptions in wins against Michigan State and Boston College contributing to his total of five picks for the year.

Often the last line of defense, McCarthy leads the Irish in solo (44) and total (72) tackles this season, and it isn't close. Junior linebacker Brian Smith places second in both categories with 28 and 51, respectively.

And as the captain and unquestioned leader of the Notre Dame defense, it's McCarthy who is often responsible for making defensive calls and arranging his teammates in accordance with offensive formations and audibles.

"He makes a lot of calls. He's really football smart," senior defensive back Darrin Walls said. "That's one thing that we need out there. He directs people, tells them where to go and how to line up. When you have a guy like that who you can trust, that's always good."

McCarthy's persistence in having to wait until 2008 to earn a full-time starting spot make him a good example for younger players to follow as well, Walls said.

"I think the whole process for him, coming here behind [former Irish standout and current Baltimore Ravens safety Tom Zbikowski] and then finally having the chance to play and making the best of it — that's the kind of guy you want leading your team," Walls said.

Family affair

Like any of his fellow fifth-year seniors, McCarthy has



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior safety Kyle McCarthy, 28, captain and defensive leader, has grown into his role on the team as a "lead-by-example" type of player.

been around long enough to see just about everything, from back-to-back BCS berths to the worst two-year run in school history.

McCarthy has even been long around long enough to play two seasons with his younger brother, Dan, who as a sophomore has climbed the depth chart to become his older brother's backup. Looking at their resumes coming out of Cardinal Mooney H.S. in Youngstown, Ohio, it'd be hard to tell the McCarthy brothers apart.

Both were two-way standouts that won state titles as quarterbacks and also posted gaudy statistics at defensive back while gaining state and national recognition for their individual efforts.

After earning all-conferences honors as a junior wide receiver, Kyle became the team's starting quarterback as a senior in 2004. McCarthy passed for 557 yards and five touchdowns and rushed for 1,273 yards and 14 touchdowns on just 135 carries to earn all-state recognition. As a defensive back, he recorded 70 tackles and made five interceptions, returning two for scores — including a record-setting 93-yard pick-six in the state title game to earn the game's MVP award.

McCarthy also displayed his supreme athletic ability on the baseball diamond, where he set a school-record with 20 stolen bases as a senior and also posted seven wins and a sub-4.00 earned run average.

As for younger brother Dan? He was the Gatorade Player of the Year as a senior in 2007, and a finalist for the prestigious Mr. Football award in Ohio, earning second-team All America honors from USA Today, according to und.com. He rushed for over 3,000 yards and 36 touchdowns in two seasons at quarterback while posting 249 tackles and 16 sacks in his final two years on defense.

"It's been great playing with him. He's a real good player," Kyle said of his brother. "The guys on the team all think he's their little brother, too."

But Dan isn't the only brother Kyle sees on a daily basis at Notre Dame. After the

craziness of his house last year, Kyle opted for a more quiet alternative this year, he said.

"I'm living with my older brother, who's also a grad student," Kyle said, referring to his brother Brian, 2006 Notre Dame graduate. "It's definitely been a lot more laid-back. It's been great."

Growing as a leader

Following in the footsteps of NFL-caliber safeties like Zbikowski and David Bruton, a Denver Broncos draft pick last season, McCarthy has improved not only as a player, but as the leader of the defense — a particularly important trait because of his role as a veteran and his position in the defensive backfield.

"Kyle's grown to be a great player and a great leader, and our players notice that," Walls said. "He's taken control in the weight room, in the locker room, and when you have a guy like that you can depend on, it really helps the team."

Walls said McCarthy is more of a "lead-by-example" type but knows the right time to step up and address the team.

"He doesn't always speak much, but when he does speak, people listen to him," Walls said. "They do what he tells them to do. He leads by example and everyone follows behind him."

Brown said the type of person McCarthy is makes him a good leader.

"Kyle is a classy dude, and I think the best thing about Kyle is he's not selfish," Brown said. "He's trying to help out others. I believe when you put others first, when it's not always about you, everybody else appreciates that ... That's why he's played the way he's played this year."

Bouncing back

After Notre Dame's 23-21 loss to Navy, the second straight at home to the Midshipmen, the Irish season reaches a crossroads at Pittsburgh Saturday. And with big-picture questions abounding about the state of the Notre Dame program five years into the Charlie Weis era, one might think McCarthy and his fellow captains would have a tough time keeping their team focused on a talented Panthers team.

That's not the case, McCarthy said.

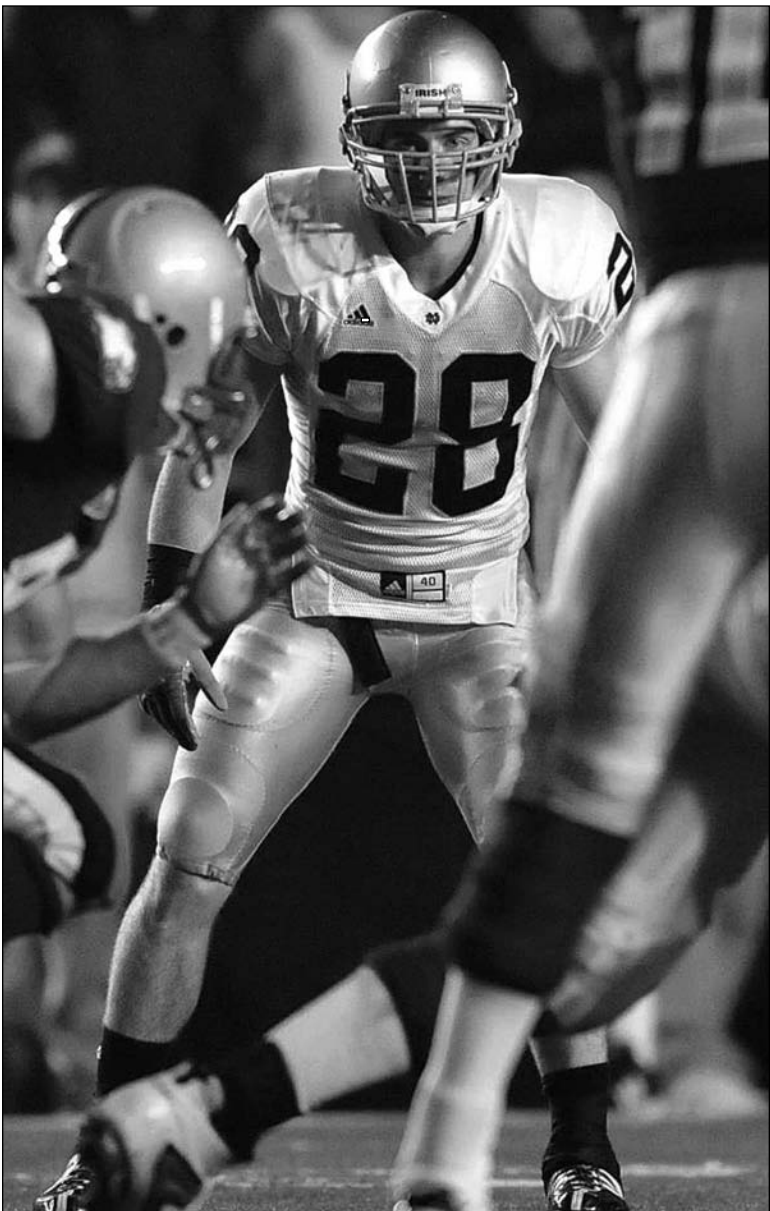
"It has zero effect on how we go about doing things,"

McCarthy said. "That's all going outside the locker room. Inside the locker room, there's no questions or anything like that. We just go out and prepare every day with trust in the guys in this locker room and trust in the coaching staff, and we're excited to play Pitt on Saturday."

Weis declared after the Navy loss that the theme would be "accountability," and McCarthy said after Navy that early in the week — beginning Monday, when the players have the day off but it was reported a larger number than usual came in to work out and watch extra film — the returns were positive.

"As far as preparation and prepping for the game, our guys need to be accountable for the job at hand," McCarthy said. "The coaches are going to put us in the position to make plays, but it's up to the players to go out and execute and make plays. Last week we struggled a little bit, so we just need to maybe prepare a little harder, pay attention to detail, and hopefully get it corrected this Saturday."

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

McCarthy is often responsible for arranging his teammates on the field and making defensive calls.

JOHN RYAN

Brothers, parents inspired Ryan to lead by example

By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

The most important part of defensive end John Ryan's Notre Dame football experience has been the opportunity to be a part of something greater than himself and a part of a meaningful tradition.

"I think just a big thing for me is just being a part of the Notre Dame family," Ryan said. "I like being a part of the whole community, kind of just being a part of something special, with all the tradition and the pregame rituals."

Having spent four years here, Ryan feels that he has been able to become a part of that tradition, something he feels very honored and humbled by. "Yeah, I definitely feel like I am part of the tradition," Ryan said. "Every game you hit the same sign as Jerome Bettis, you walk out of the tunnel and you see the band and the fans."

That kind of love of family and tradition is something that's been a cornerstone for Ryan's entire life — not just at Notre Dame.

Ryan is the oldest brother of three. He said it's his two younger brothers that inspire him to work hard every day.

"My brothers are definitely the inspiration of my life," Ryan said of Patrick, a sophomore at Georgetown, and Michael, a sophomore at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, Ryan's alma mater.

"They have definitely been a huge impact on my life."

Ryan sees his role as the oldest brother in his family as one that comes with important responsibilities, not the least of which is working to provide opportunities and inspiration to his younger brothers.

"The role of being the older brother has always inspired me to work harder to achieve things to give to them, to be the person they look up to," Ryan said. "I want to set the standard and be a role model for them."

Another great inspiration for Ryan has been his parents.

"In terms of my parents, they are biggest reason why I am the person I am today, from morals to work ethic,"

Ryan said. "They have been there through the ups and downs, and they have always been a great asset to me."

Ryan said his biggest hero in life is his father,

Kevin, who has played the same type of role model for him that he said he hopes to play for his younger brothers.

"My biggest hero is probably my dad, just because he has really taught me to be the man that I am," Ryan said. "He has really been an unbelievable role model, in terms of carrying yourself with class and how to act in the classroom and on the field."

This heavy reliance upon the importance of family was what first led him to St. Ignatius High School, and then onwards into Notre Dame.

"I think, obviously, where I went to high school played a big part in my choice to come

here," Ryan said. "It is a Catholic university, a strong football program with a great tradition. I think going to Ignatius had a big part in my coming here."

Ryan said he still remembers being recruited by head coach Charlie Weis.

"The whole process was kind of a whirlwind," Ryan said. "I had to pinch myself every morning because I was deciding to come to Notre Dame. I don't regret it at all because it was one of the best decisions of my life."

The experience of being recruited to Notre Dame, and the family-oriented and at-home feeling that Weis gave off is what really made the process special for Ryan.

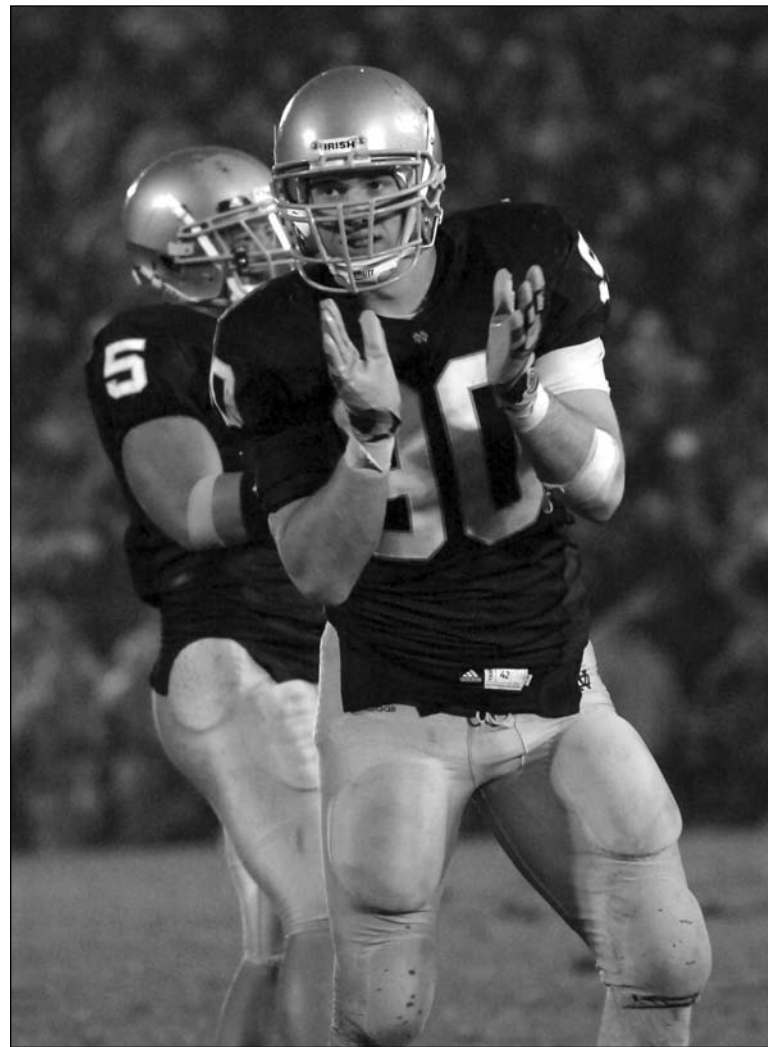
"The whole thing was surreal," Ryan said. "Opening up the mailbox and seeing three letters from Notre Dame, getting my one phone call every month, and having him come make his visit to my house, it was wild. It was something that was obviously a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Ryan's emphasis on sticking together through thick and thin fortified him for a roller-coaster ride of college football career, from the highs of a BCS game to the lows of a 3-9 season.

He said he has no regrets about coming to play at Notre Dame.

"In terms of regrets, that is just how the game goes, you play a game with a ball with edges, and you don't always know which way the ball is going to bounce," Ryan said. "I can't regret anything. I don't regret coming here for a second. Some might look at it as a low point, but it's all a matter of perspective. In terms of maturity and togetherness and work ethic I do not regret anything."

Ryan still remembers well the first time he got on the



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior defensive end John Ryan first saw playing time his freshman season, and has provided depth every season since.

field, freshman year in the win at home against Penn State, 41-17.

"It was unbelievable," Ryan said. "The whole game I was waiting to go in there, the game was close, we were winning by a lot, but not quite enough for my to go in, but when [former defensive back Tom] Zbikowski picked up a fumble and ran it in, they said, alright, you are going in."

Once Ryan got in, he was nervous, but after that everything settled down for him.

"Once I got out there, the first play, I felt butterflies, but once the ball was snapped that all went away," Ryan said.

Ryan said the coaching staff has also had a big impact on his time at Notre Dame, from Weis to defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta and first-year defensive line coach Randy Hart.

"One of the biggest things [Coach Weis] has taught me is dedication, that if you are going to do something you have to put your whole heart into it," Ryan said. "If you want to succeed in life, it really begins with your work ethic, and putting everything you have into your work."

Beyond work ethic, his relationships with Tenuta and Hart have taught him to love the game of football.

"Coach Tenuta has been a huge influence as well, along with coach Hart," Ryan said. "When they came here they really turned my outlook on football around, they put a positive spin on it. You could really tell that they care about their players and how they do."

Ryan said he believes the biggest way in which he has grown as a player while he has been at Notre Dame is in his knowledge of the game.

"I have obviously become

more well-rounded in terms of my knowledge," Ryan said. "When you put an emphasis on studying the game, it really helps out."

Some of Ryan's best friends on the football team have been wide receiver Robby Parris, safety Kyle McCarthy and nose tackle Paddy Mullen, who have all spent a lot of time together.

"With Robby, we can sit and stare at blank walls and have fun. In terms of Kyle it is the same way. Whatever we do we are going to have fun," Ryan said.

Outside of practice and school, Ryan only has a few needs, which involve resting and hanging out with his friends.

"I like sleeping," Ryan said. "Because that is one thing I can definitely say I have not gotten enough of since I have been here. I enjoy sleep and playing a good round of golf with my buddies."

Beyond college, Ryan is not sure what direction he wants to take his life, but he plans to have that figured out as soon as possible.

"I really don't know what I want to do," Ryan said. "I really haven't even sat down to figure it out yet. I am only taking a couple credits next semester, so hopefully I will have plenty of time to figure everything out."

Ryan's biggest message is that he wants to have people know that he did things the right way and has always tried to be good to everyone.

"I always want to be nice to people. I want to be good to people," Ryan said. "I just have tried to do things the right way, good or bad I want to leave with no regrets and do things the right way on and off the field."

Contact Jared Jedick at
jjedick@nd.edu



PHIL HUDELSON/The Observer

Ryan came to Notre Dame in 2006 after Irish coach Charlie Weis recruited him out of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, Ohio. Ryan said the recruiting process was surreal.

KALLEN WADE

Cincinnati native learns new defensive positions

By BARRICK BOLLMAN
Sports Writer

While he might not be as well known as some of his other Fighting Irish teammates, senior Kallen Wade has been just as important of a contributor. The 6-foot-5, 250-pound hybrid defensive end and outside linebacker hails from Cincinnati, Ohio. In his prep career, Wade started at safety before moving to defensive end and defensive tackle.

While in high school, Wade was selected to participate in the prestigious Big 33 Ohio/Pennsylvania All-Star Game, which counts NFL greats like Joe Montana, Jim Kelly, Ben Roethlisberger and Marvin Harrison as alumni. Wade became the fourth recruit in Irish coach Charlie Weis' first full recruiting class.

Wade chose Notre Dame for its location in relation to Cincinnati.

"My mother had health problems, so I wanted to be close enough to home so I could get back if anything happened, but also far enough away to be

able to separate home life from school," Wade said. "Also, Notre Dame offered the best of both worlds when it came to athletics and academics."

Wade has spent most of his Notre Dame career at either defensive end or outside linebacker, changing positions as the Irish switched between the 3-4 and 4-3 defensive fronts.

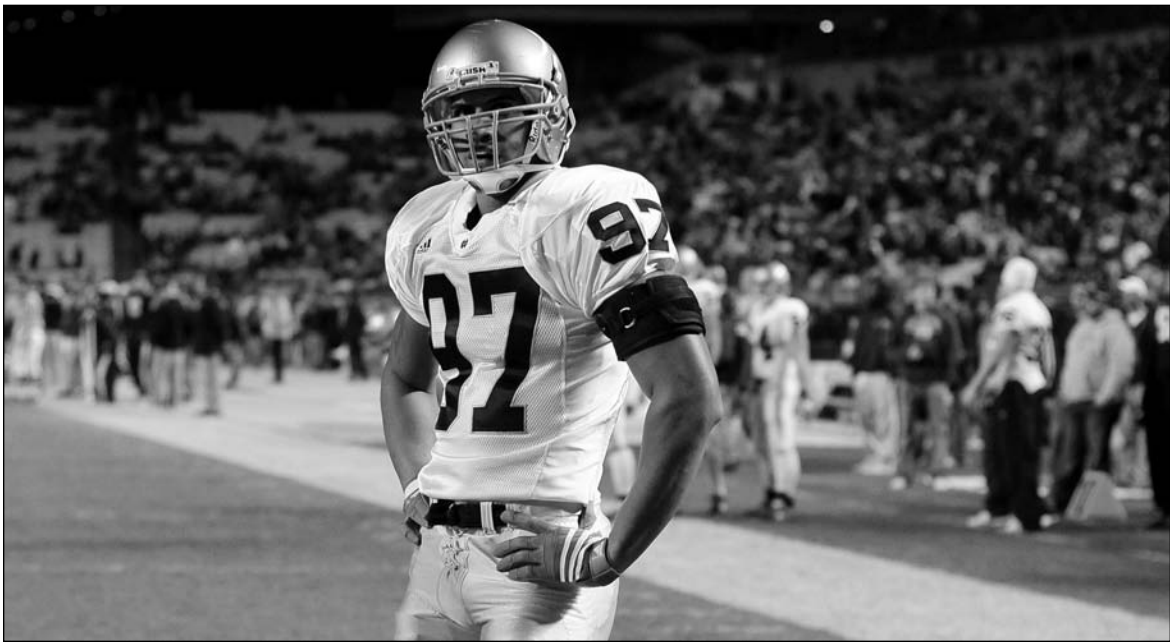
"It was a little awkward at first because I never played linebacker before, but I played sort of defensive end and outside linebacker at the same time," Wade said about his position switch. "I was able to adapt to being in coverage more because of what I did as a sophomore in high school at safety."

After redshirting his freshman year, Wade saw his first playing time against Georgia Tech in 2007. Since then, he has played in reserve roles and on special teams. While his action may be limited on the field, Wade has made an impact on the practice field, preparing the front line players for the week's games.

"My main role is to show a look for the starters, like Sam Young and Paul Duncan,"

"I feel like this has been the most we've ever clicked as a team."

Kallen Wade
senior defensive end



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior defensive end Kallen Wade has played many different roles during his Irish career. He currently plays on the scout team.

Wade said. "Basically, I try to mimic whatever team we are about to play that week and go as hard as I can to try and make them a better player and have the best preparation they can get."

Wade suffered a fracture-dislocation of his ankle during his junior year that required four months of recovery. Through a persistent effort in the recovery process, he was able to participate in the spring game ahead of schedule.

While Wade has many favorite Notre Dame moments, he considers the 2009 season as a whole the best part of his career.

"It has been remarkable how we have come back from where we were two seasons ago to be the team we are today," he said. "It's great to be part of it."

Another one of Wade's favorite parts of his Notre Dame experience has been the camaraderie of the team.

"The whole unity of the team is great," he said. "I feel like this has been the most we've ever clicked as a team."

Even though football is a huge time constraint, Kallen applies himself in the classroom as well. He is a double major in psychology and computer applications. In the spring semester of 2008, he carried a 3.33 GPA.

Contact Barrick Bollman at jbollman@nd.edu

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Each lecture and Q&A is free and open to the public.



"Understanding the Cultural, Religious, and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (18–23 Year Olds)"

Christian Smith
William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology
Department of Sociology



12 Noon
Saturday, November 21, 2009
Annenberg Auditorium
Snite Museum of Art

What happens to the religious and spiritual lives of Catholics youth when they transition from the high school to the college-age years? What does young adult culture look like today? Smith will review major findings from his National Study of Youth and Religion pertaining to Catholic 18–23 year-olds.

SATURDAY SCHOLAR SERIES

FALL 2009 SCHEDULE

- 9.5.09 (vs. Nevada)
"Memorial Mania: Public Art and Public Feelings in America Today"
Erika Doss, Professor and Chairperson, Department of American Studies
- 9.19.09 (vs. Michigan State)
"International Security Studies: What the Eggheads Can Teach the Generals"
Michael Desch, Professor and Chairperson, Department of Political Science
- 10.3.09 (vs. Washington)
"Images That Matter: The U.S. as Seen Through Latin American Eyes"
Thomas F. Anderson, Associate Professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
- 10.17.09 (vs. USC)
"Shakespeare in the 21st Century"
Peter D. Holland, McMeel Family Professor in Shakespeare Studies, Department of Film, Television, and Theatre
Scott Jackson, Executive Director, Shakespeare at Notre Dame
- 10.24.09 (vs. Boston College)
"The French Revolution, or How to Keep Your Head in Turbulent Times"
Julia V. Douthwaite, Professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
- 10.31.09 (vs. Washington State) game in San Antonio; lecture at 10 am, Marriott Rivercenter
"Latinos and the Renewal of American Catholicism"
Virgilio P. Elizondo, Notre Dame Professor of Pastoral and Hispanic Theology, Department of Theology
Daniel G. Groody, CSC, Assistant Professor, Department of Theology
Timothy M. Matovina, Professor, Department of Theology
- 11.7.09 (vs. Navy)
"Going Global: Medical Ethics in the Age of AIDS"
Maura Ryan, John Cardinal O'Hara Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Department of Theology
- 11.21.09 (vs. Connecticut)
"Understanding the Cultural, Religious, and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (18–23 Year Olds)"
Christian Smith, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology

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Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Record: 6-4

AP: NR Coaches: NR BCS: NR



Charlie Weis
head coach



Jon Tenuta
Def. Coordinator
Assistant HC

5th season at
Notre Dame

career record:
35-25
at home:
19-13
against Big East:
2-3



Corwin Brown
Co-Def. Coord.
Associate HC

2009 Schedule

Sept. 5	Nevada — W
Sept. 12	@ Michigan — L
Sept. 19	Michigan St. — W
Sept. 26	@ Purdue — W
Oct. 3	Washington — W
Oct. 17	Southern Cal — L
Oct. 24	Boston College — W
Oct. 31	Washington St. — W
Nov. 7	Navy — L
Nov. 14	@ Pittsburgh — L
Nov. 21	Connecticut
Nov. 28	@ Stanford

Head-to-Head

ND OFFENSE	UCONN DEFENSE
Scoring: 29.30 ppg (46th)	Scoring: 23.56 ppg (58th)
Total: 452.20 (9th)	Total: 366.11 ypg (68th)
Rushing: 130.90 (84th)	Rushing: 134.00 ypg (52nd)
Passing: 321.30 ypg (5th)	Passing: 232.11 ypg (76th)
Turnovers against: 11 (14th)	Turnovers for: 18 (56th)
Fumbles lost: 6 (20th)	Fumbles rec.: 7 (69th)
Interceptions: 5 (16th)	Interceptions: 11 (36th)
Sacks Allowed: 21 (69th)	Sacks: 23(30th)
T.O.P. for: 32:30 (11th)	T.O.P. against: 30:41 (77th)

Statistical Leaders

ND OFFENSE	UCONN DEFENSE
QB JIMMY CLAUSEN 236-350, 3,053 yds., 21 TD	LAWRENCE WILSON 55 solo, 9 TFL, 3 sacks
RB ARMANDO ALLEN 118 rush, 591 yds., 3 TD	GREG LLOYD 47 solo, 3 TFL, 1 sack
RB ROBERT HUGHES 71 rush, 342 yds., 5 TD	LINDSEY WITTEN 20 solo, 11 TFL, 10.5 sacks
WR GOLDEN TATE 74 rec., 1,172 yds., 11 TD	ROBERT VAUGHN 20 solo, 2 TFL, 4 INT
WR MICHAEL FLOYD 30 rec., 606 yds., 6 TD	ROBERT MCCLAIN 32 solo, 3.5 TFL, 4 INT

HEAD TO HEAD

Irish Offense vs. Huskies Defense



IRISH PASSING

Consecutive losses have bursted Jimmy Clausen's Heisman Trophy bubble, but there is no denying the junior gunslinger remains one of the top passers in the country. For the third consecutive week, Clausen will have both of his top receivers — Golden Tate and Michael Floyd — in action, as the pair will try to become the first in

Irish history to each record three straight 100-yard receiving games. The Huskies secondary is statistically mediocre and, like most teams on the Irish schedule, Connecticut cannot match Notre Dame's talent at the skill positions. The Irish offensive line should have better luck than it did against Pittsburgh, which should bode well for Clausen and the time he'll have to stand

and deliver from the pocket. Defensive end Lindsey Witten's 10.5 sacks, however, are some cause for concern. Still, though, the Notre Dame aerial attack has been curiously quiet early in games recently, so it will be interesting to see whether Charlie Weis opts to fire early or if he'll repeat last week's conservative start.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING

Armando Allen returned from injury last week and showed why the Irish ground game missed him so much, as the junior showed speed and power, albeit with limited opportunities (14 carries, 77 yards). Draw plays were especially effective against the aggressive Pittsburgh front. Weis tried to establish the running game early but said he was

forced to abandon it as his team fell behind three scores in the second half. At defensive end opposite Witten is freshman Jesse Joseph, who at 238 pounds could be a target for a power run game — though Weis did praise his athletic ability. The Huskies linebackers are experienced, led by junior strongside backer Scott Lutrus.

Arguably, a lack of commitment has

been the biggest roadblock standing in the way of the Irish ground game's success. With Allen, Robert Hughes and Theo Riddick, Notre Dame has a trio of talented backs who have shown glimpses of explosiveness but generally haven't received enough carries to take over a game. The game plan will likely once again dictate Notre Dame's success running the ball.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

The good: David Ruffer made his first career field goal and Tate returned is first career touchdown for a score last week. The bad: Ruffer had an extra point blocked and Eric Maust averaged just 24.8 yards on his five punts.

Weis said Tuesday the punt-ing job would be wide open between Maust and Ben Turk, and it was unknown whether the injured Nick Tausch could resume his normal placekick-ing duties. With this unit, there's just too much inconsis-tency to forecast.

EDGE: EVEN

Weis said the circumstances of a hostile night game on the road dictated his conservative game plan against Pittsburgh. The Irish will be in the oppo-site situation Saturday on Senior Day. After two straight losses, and with the memory of last year's Syracuse loss still fresh, this team could use a

spark early in the form of an aggressive passing game downfield. The Irish are most successful when they achieve a pass-run balance, but that has been rare of late. Weis needs to just let his team execute.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Our Picks

Think we're crazy

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irishinsider@gmail.com



Bill Brink
Managing
Editor

I don't believe determination, senior day excitement or the hope of hearing the Victory Clog one last time will factor into Saturday's result. Notre Dame needs preparation and execution, two things it hasn't had in recent weeks. Preparation to utilize its weapons and execution to slow a talented UConn run game. Notre Dame has shown itself to be a team that wins ugly. They'll get run on, the offense will splutter and the run game will be under-utilized, but the Irish have too much talent not to click. Golden's a known commodity. Michael Floyd, Armando Allen and Theo Riddick make the difference in this game and the seniors chow down on left-over marshmallows as they celebrate one last win (barely).

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 16, Connecticut 13



Michael Bryan
Associate
Sports Editor

I think it's going to take another fourth-quarter comeback for the Irish to beat Connecticut, but I think this week they pull it off. Notre Dame hasn't looked prepared and had a strong first quarter in weeks, and there's no reason to think it will happen again this week. This game should be a lot like the Boston College game, with the defense selling out against the run and forcing Zach Frazer to beat them in his return to Notre Dame. The Irish defense will give up some big plays, but Clausen and Tate will come up with some highlights of their own at the end. It will be another ugly game, but the Irish are too talented to play to play two bad halves against the Huskies.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 28, Connecticut 24



For more matchups and pregame
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O HEAD

Huskies Offense vs. Irish Defense

Husky Specialists



13 Cullen



13 Cullen



13 Cullen



93 Chard



42 McClain



23 Todman



FS



28 McCarthy
15 McCarthy

SS



31 Brown
26 Slaughter

WILL



5 To'o
58 Smith

MIKE



58 Smith
49 Smith

SAM



45 Fleming
22 Smith

RCB



12 Blanton
2 Walls

RDE



56 Neal
46 Plier

NT



95 Williams
98 Cwynar

DT



9 Johnson
79 Williams

LDE



89 Lewis-Moore
53 Richardson

LCB



4 Gray
8 McNeil

WR



3 Kanuch
1 Oulton

LT



71 Ryan
73 Ryan

LG



60 Kuraczea
66 Olliver

C



57 Petrus
70 Bardzak

RG



78 Hurd
74 LaMagdelaine

RT



79 Hicks
63 Masters

TE



94 Griffin
89 Delahunt

WR



29 Easley
80 Smith

QB



10 Frazer
18 McEntee

FB



49 Sherman
47 Davis

TB



23 Todman
2 Dixon



Former Irish quarterback Zach Frazer has regained the starting spot he previously lost to Cody Endres, and there's no doubt he'll be motivated to beat the team he signed with out of high school. Frazer has a big arm but has thrown seven interceptions compared to four touchdowns, and if the Irish can generate pressure, they should be able to force Frazer into bad decisions.

Connecticut's receivers aren't blessed with nearly the size of Pittsburgh's, though the Huskies do have some playmakers. How much the Huskies throw will likely be determined by the success (or potential lack thereof) of its ground game, which has certainly been its strength this year.

Still, Notre Dame has tended to make average quarterbacks look like All-Americans this season, and Frazer cer-

tainly has the talent to do just that. Pressure will ultimately be the key, and a lack of a pass rush doomed the Irish defense against Pittsburgh. Notre Dame will probably surrender yardage, but if it can create turnovers, a la the Boston College victory, it should be able to thwart the Huskies passing attack.

EDGE: EVEN

Jordan Todman and Andre Dixon have received almost an identical number of carries this season, and each has had games in which he was the feature back. It was Todman's turn last week, as he rushed for 162 yards and four touchdowns on 26 carries in a near-upset of No. 5 Cincinnati. Todman has three 100-yard games this season, and Dixon has posted four of his own — and in two con-

tests, both went over the century mark. Weis said Tuesday "they're interchangeable."

The Huskies are big up front, with four of its five linemen weighing in at more than 315 pounds. That will be a challenge for the Irish front, which played reasonably well against Pittsburgh's talented rushing attack. But the Notre Dame defense will have to avoid giving

up the big play, particularly on the ground. The Irish suffered a pair of highlight-reel, 50-plus-yard runs against the Panthers that ruined an otherwise solid defensive effort. If the Huskies are going to hand Notre Dame its second straight Senior Day loss, it will be because it dominated on the ground.

EDGE: CONNECTICUT

Dave Teggart is 9-for-16 on field goals, including 7-for-10 from within 40 yards. Desi Cullen has dropped 18 of his 43 punts inside the 20-yard line and averages 43.8 yards per kick.

Weis noted Tuesday that the Huskies gain "hidden yardage" on kick and punt returns. Robbie Frey averages 29.5 yards per kick return and has taken one to the house, and Robert McClain averages 15 yards per punt return and has also returned one for a touchdown.

EDGE: CONNECTICUT

Joe Moorhead's offense relies on the run, and with a quarterback who might be a bit over-excited for his return to Notre Dame Stadium, he'll almost surely lean on the ground game, at least early. Rushing success and Frazer's strong arm could cause Jon Tenuta to scale back his

blitzes, particularly after seeing some of Pittsburgh's big plays last Saturday. Notre Dame's defensive performance will, as always, come down to tackling — which is always a concern.

EDGE: CONNECTICUT



Matt Gamber

Sports Editor

In two weeks, it's gone from hard to predict a blowout Irish victory to hard to predict any Irish victory. It was no secret all year that Notre Dame was a flawed team, but since the Navy loss, it seems like those flaws have been exposed at an incredible rate. That being said, I think the last two weeks serve as a wake-up call for a tightly-knit Irish team that wants to send its seniors out on a high note. Notre Dame won't play a perfect game, and chances are both defenses will look clueless against opposing offenses with big-time playmakers. It probably won't be pretty, but for a group of seniors that has had a rough go of it over the last three years, that victory lap around Notre Dame Stadium will be sweet nonetheless.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 34, Connecticut 27



Sam Werner

Associate Sports Editor

Given the recent history of both these teams, this game should be a high-scoring one. Notre Dame will be challenged to stop Connecticut's two-headed rushing attack of Jordan Todman and Andre Dixon. Fortunately, Notre Dame should be able to sell out and stop the run, daring former Irish quarterback Zach Frazer to beat them with his arm. Even though the Notre Dame secondary has struggled this season, Frazer has thrown seven interceptions to only four touchdowns. To win, the Irish will have to get up early and prevent the Huskies from running the ball down their throats. I'm not very confident, but Notre Dame just has too much talent to let this one get away, especially on senior day.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 35, Connecticut 30

Connecticut

Huskies

Record: 4-5, 1-4 Big East

AP: NR Coaches: NR BCS: NR



Randy Edsall
head coach

11th season at
Connecticut

career record:
62-65
at the FBS level:
53-41



Joe Moorhead
Off. Coordinator



Todd Orlando
Def. Coordinator

2009 Schedule

Sept. 5	@ Ohio — W
Sept. 12	North Carolina — L
Sept. 19	@ Baylor — W
Sept. 26	Rhode Island — W
Oct. 10	@ Pittsburgh — L
Oct. 17	Louisville — W
Oct. 24	@ West Virginia — L
Oct. 31	Rutgers — L
Nov. 7	@ Cincinnati — L
Nov. 21	@ Notre Dame
Nov. 28	Syracuse
Dec. 5	South Florida

Head-to-Head

UConn Offense	ND Defense
Scoring: 29.67 ppg (42nd)	Scoring: 23.30 (50th)
Total: 408.89 ypg (38th)	Total: 390.50 ypg (83rd)
Rushing: 167.89 ypg (45th)	Rushing: 153.20 ypg (72nd)
Passing: 241.00 (39th)	Passing: 237.30 ypg (85th)
Turnovers against: 19 (69th)	Turnovers for: 17 (62nd)
Fumbles lost: 8 (49th)	Fumbles rec.: 6 (91st)
Interceptions: 11 (71st)	Interceptions: 11 (36th)
Sacks Allowed: 19 (70th)	Sacks: 18 (68th)
T.O.P. for: 29:19 (77th)	T.O.P. against: 27:30 (11th)

Statistical Leaders

UConn Offense	ND Defense
QB CODY ENDRES 98-154, 1,354 yds., 6 TD	SS KYLE MCCARTHY 47 solo, 2 TFL, 5 INT
QB ZACH FRAZER 62-121, 815 yds., 4 TD	LB BRIAN SMITH 30 solo, 5.5 TFL, 1.5 sacks
RB JORDAN TODMAN 159 rush, 826 yds., 12 TD	LB HARRISON SMITH 33 solo, 5.5 TFL
RB ANDRE DIXON 158 rush, 730 yds., 7 TD	LB DARIUS FLEMING 19 solo, 11.5 TFL, 3 sacks
WR MARCUS EASLEY 26 rec., 559 yds., 5 TD	DE K. LEWIS-MOORE 24 solo, 7 TFL, 2.5 sacks

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DAN WENGER

Lineman transitions from guard to center

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Sports Writer

Most players know how to play one position on the field. A good quarterback may even know what every position's role is on every play, but by no means could he line up anywhere but under center.

Dan Wenger knows how to play three positions on the gridiron, and has started in two of them.

The senior lineman did not see any playing time his freshman season due to various injuries, but he did not need in-game action to show the coaching staff his potential. Wenger received praise throughout the season for giving the first-team defense tough competition in practice. He said this coincided with his goals coming to South Bend.

"Just going from high school to college, the speed of the game [picked up], and now you are playing against guys with everyone on scholarship, so everyone is pretty good," Wenger said. "I definitely saw myself developing into a pretty good football player and working hard and aspiring to play at the next level."

Wenger's sophomore season involved eight games of action, including five starts. His first three starts, against Georgia Tech, Penn State and Michigan, were at right guard. He then started at center against Duke and Stanford, the last two games of Notre Dame's worst season in the histo-

ry of its program. Wenger said the trials of such an experience taught him lessons that carried past the football field.

"Nothing is guaranteed, nothing at all," he said. "You just have to go with the situations that are handed to you every day and go with what is best for the team."

The Florida native started every game at center his junior year, including the Hawaii Bowl. Wenger said the experiences in Hawaii highlighted his four years at Notre Dame. The Irish broke a postseason winless streak that dated back to 1993 by beating Hawaii 49-21.

"Absolutely phenomenal, to be a part of [breaking the losing streak]. [It was] definitely one of my highlights," Wenger said.

In the victory the Irish offense relied on a strong offensive line en route to 413 passing yards and 478 total offensive yards, but it might not have been the success on the field that Wenger remembers best.

"I'm going to move there someday," he said of the island chain. "Weather-wise, I still hate it [in South Bend]. I haven't gotten used to this stuff yet. I still love the Florida sun, going to the beach. I miss it every day."

The weather led to some lighter moments during preparations for the bowl game, including some odd practice techniques, referred to by Wenger as his favorite practice moments.

"Our last practice before the game, it was pat-and-go with the

receivers, but instead of the receivers running it, [Coach Weis] let the offensive and defensive linemen run it so we ran the fade routes and caught the balls," the 300-pound lineman said. "It wasn't about scoring, but I caught a few passes. I might have to drop a little weight and work on my hands a little more [before I can line up out wide]."

After starting all 13 games last season, Wenger reasonably expected to pick up where he left off this season, but new offensive line coach Frank Verducci had a different idea. Verducci wanted to get sophomore right guard Trevor Robinson some playing time, so he moved senior Eric Olsen into Wenger's spot at center, and Wenger found himself on the second team for the first time since his freshman year.

"At first it's pretty disheartening to get that information," Wenger said. "Unfortunately, that is the way football and life go sometimes. You just have to deal with the situation at hand and make the best of it. I wasn't going to be in the dog house or lose any intensity out on the field."

Wenger set about giving the coaches reason to get him back on the field, and before the season even started he was the backup for all three interior line positions.

"There is a sense of self-confidence that comes along [with knowing three positions]," he said. "You can sit there and say to yourself 'Hey, if I'm in there or someone goes down, I have the



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior center Dan Wenger has played all three inside lineman positions during his time at Notre Dame.

confidence in myself and I'm going to show the coaches I'm going to get the job done."

Wenger got that chance after Robinson sprained an ankle against Washington State. The senior played the majority of the game in San Antonio, and made the start against Navy at right guard.

"That definitely made me stronger and motivated me more," he said. "I can tell that I appreciate not only where I am at, but the amount of snaps that I

get, and realize nothing is guaranteed."

There is one guarantee — Dan Wenger can line up on the inside of the offensive line wherever needed, and he will continue to do so as often as asked.

"I think I'm a better person for having gone through this and for having to deal with it," he said. "You learn a lot about football that way too."

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu

ERIC MAUST

Baseball player walks on, wins starting role

By CHRIS MASOUD
Sports Writer

Balancing the work load of a Notre Dame curriculum and an active social life can be quite a challenge for the average Domer. Try balancing that on top of commitments to the varsity football and baseball teams, and you have Eric Maust.

"My social life takes a huge hit, but I balance it," Maust said. "Freshman year the increase in the academic load up from high school and then athletically the increase commitment-wise and time-wise, it was hard to juggle. But I can say that I've found the balance, and the challenges that I went through, that's been the most rewarding thing. If it was easy, then it wouldn't be as special."

A scholarship baseball player and one of the Irish's top pitchers heading into the 2010 season, Maust verbally committed to play baseball out of high school. But after seeing his first game at Notre Dame Stadium, Maust felt he had the skills to be a part of the Notre Dame football tradition.

"I had a couple of offers out of high school to play quarterback at some smaller Division-I AA and Ivy League Schools, but in my mind I was thinking I'm just playing baseball. But in my heart I couldn't let football go,"

Maust said. "So after the game I talked to the baseball coaches, they talked to the football coaches, so I walked-on and made the team."

As the rule goes, walk-ons generally don't see much of the field on Saturday afternoons, especially quarterbacks. Unable to continue at that position, Maust made the transition to punter and placeholder seamlessly. Backing up former Irish punter Geoff Price, Maust learned the intricacies of the position for almost two years before seeing his first game action.

"Being a specialist, it's a tricky position because for the majority of the time you're not playing, but you know you're going to play at some point and you know your role is fairly important," Maust said. "I try to have our special teams period in practice mimic the intensity of the game, so I'm trying to hype myself up every kick. I've never considered myself just a punter, I've always just considered myself an athlete."

Maust's athlete-mentality has come through on more than one occasion for the Irish in key situations in big games. Maust found the end zone following a bad snap during a field goal attempt in the first half against Boston College before the touchdown was called back. His completion to Robby Parris on a fake field goal play against USC,



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior punter Eric Maust originally came to Notre Dame to play baseball but chose to play football as well. The former quarterback has been involved in multiple fakes this season.

however, was not.

"I'm a real competitive guy, so we'd always have during practice throwing competitions," Maust said. "The Thursday before USC week we had game-planned the fake, so everyone was trying to coach me, and Clausen's giving me pointers. But in the game, when we just executed it perfectly, I'm going to be telling that story for a long time. That was game evidence that 'Hey, I'm an athlete.'"

Like many players, Maust has drawn parallels between his experience on the gridiron and his experiences outside of football.

"The thing I like about Coach Weis is he's very goal-oriented," Maust said. "It's always what's the next step, because if you look at everything at a whole and don't chop it up into pieces, it can really seem insurmountable at times. Each week there's a goal, and at the end of the week you get to look back and see if you accomplished that goal, and that resonates with me because that's the way I've structured my life."

Majoring in finance and theology, Maust recognizes the value of a hard-earned education. Upon graduation, he plans on pursuing a professional baseball

career. But wherever he goes, he will never undervalue the impact Notre Dame football has had on his life.

"My favorite moment is to know that my parents are in the stands too," Maust said. "You couldn't pay me any amount of money to exchange the experience I've had. It happens every time I put on the helmet. There's nothing that can replace the feeling you get. Playing football period, cool. Playing for Notre Dame, wow, that's awesome."

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

SERGIO BROWN

Outgoing safety gives Irish a shot of athleticism

By MATT GAMBER

Sports Editor

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Nov. 6 edition of The Observer.

His teammates and coaches call him Notre Dame's best athlete. But just how athletic is senior safety Sergio Brown?

He's been dunking alley-oop passes on the basketball court since early in high school. He says he's never lost a foot race in his hometown of Maywood, Ill.

And he can do back flips — in full pads after playing a football game in front of 80,000-plus. Or in a Notre Dame polo shirt, baggy blue jeans and street shoes, as he did for a photo shoot.

"Me and my brother were always just goofing around in the house. It really started after the movie '3 Ninjas' came out," Brown said. "We just started trying to flip and stuff outside with mattresses. My mom started getting scared, so she said if we're going to do all this flipping, we might as well learn how to do it so we won't hurt ourselves. I've just been flipping since."

Brown's back flips have only recently become a staple of the Irish postgame celebration. But position-wise, he's been flipping since he arrived at Notre Dame.

Until now.

A four-star safety recruit out of Proviso East H.S., Brown made 97 special teams appearances in 11 games as a freshman in 2006, making four tackles in kickoff and punt coverage. The next season was much of the same, as he played in nine games and made seven tackles but saw limited action in the secondary.

Brown emerged as an impact player out of the nickel defense as a junior last season. He made his first career start in the 2008 season-opener against San Diego State and flashed much of the potential that had excited the Irish coaching staff in his first two seasons. Brown made six tackles (one for a loss), broke up two passes and blocked a punt against the Aztecs to set the tone for a solid junior season, highlighted by 28 tackles, six pass

breakups and a pair of blocked punts.

"I just had to be patient and wait for my time to play," Brown said. "A lot of special teams, and then my role got bigger last year playing some nickel. Now I'm on the field a lot, and I'm loving it right now."

His coaches are loving it, too, as Brown's play at safety the past two weeks has allowed the Irish to shuffle its personnel to produce Notre Dame's best consecutive defensive performances of the season the past two weeks.

Brown made his first start at safety for the Irish in their 20-16 win over Boston College, as Notre Dame bumped junior Harrison Smith back to the linebacker spot where he enjoyed success last season. After the Irish thumped Washington State 40-14 last weekend, Brown is slated to make his third straight start at safety — and seventh of the year overall — Saturday against Navy.

"I think he's earned his way into being a full-time player on defense," Irish coach Charlie Weis said. "So just the fact that it's taken some time for him to get there, but he's there now, he's playing on every down. I think that's where he's made the most significant progress."

There's never been a shortage of ability for Brown, who was a long jump state qualifier and, as a high school junior, returned five of his six interceptions for touchdowns. In fact, Brown was showcasing his athleticism long before he suited up at the high school level — and on a much different stage.

He performed with Mr. Ernie's Flip, Flop 'n Fly, a Maywood-based tumbling group, as a grade school student — times he couldn't help but laugh about as he looked back.

"We did parades and shows and all that other stuff," Brown said. "Once I got bigger, it started getting a little harder to flip."

So he started to use his athletic ability in other ways.

"We race a lot in the neighborhood to see who's the fastest," Brown said. "I'm still undefeated."

That's not hard to believe, considering Scout.com listed his



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Senior safety Sergio Brown has earned his reputation as an impact defender with his swaggering, confident attitude.

high school 40-yard dash time at a blazing 4.40 seconds, the kind of speed that can't be taught. He's come a long way from his tumbling days, but he can still flip and fly.

"He's one of the most athletic guys on our team," sophomore defensive lineman Ethan Johnson said. "He can jump through the roof, and he's really fast. He can bring so much to the table at the next level, too. He's definitely a special player."

Brown's teammates say he's a special person as well. His personality and his relationships with his teammates have made his success even more enjoyable for the entire Irish squad.

"He's a guy you can't help but root for," sophomore linebacker Steve Filer said. "He's a great guy. You can't help but just cheer for him and hope he does his best."

So far, so good for Brown, who has looked comfortable in his move back to safety alongside senior captain Kyle McCarthy. He is fifth on the team with 18

solo tackles for the season, but perhaps his greatest contributions have come with the emotional spark he has provided a defense that, at times earlier in the season, lacked the confident swagger and positive attitude he brings.

"You say he's emotional, but really, he's upbeat," Johnson said. "He's a good kind of emotional. It's infectious, and he really brings something else to our team that's going to be hard to replace next year."

It seems no one, not even Weis, can talk about Brown without a chuckle and a smile.

"He's a passionate kid," Weis said. "He's fun to be around. He's a goof ball. But I really like being around Sergio, and so do his teammates. And I think that he's not selfish. He wants to be around the fellas, and he's just one of those heart-and-soul type players that people like being around."

Notre Dame students who have had a class with Brown might know him by something else, since he asks all his teachers to call him by the nickname he picked up from a rap song during his freshman year.

"One of my teachers, it's hilarious," Brown said. "I'm the only football player in there with dreads, so every day he'll look around the class [joking] like, 'Is Splurge here today?'"

The Nelly song by the same name may have faded from memory, but the nickname Splurge seems to have stuck — though some of Brown's teammates may have a new one for him.

"Fake Whoopi Goldberg!" Johnson yelled at Brown as he left Wednesday's media session, no doubt ragging on the safety's patented dreadlocks.

That's the kind of relationship Brown has with his teammates — and the fun goes both ways.

"One time we were in the training room and Jimmy [Clausen] was talking to [former Irish quarterback] Joe Theismann," Brown said. "I really didn't know it was Joe Theismann at the time, and I was just standing behind him, waving and making faces at

Jimmy while they were talking, acting like a fool. Jimmy started to bust down laughing. We just all mess with each other."

But Brown's fun isn't limited to jokes with teammates. Last spring, he filmed a one-minute spot for insidenotredamefootball.com in which he and Jack Swarbrick, Notre Dame's director of athletics, mimicked the popular Geico commercials featuring celebrity spokesmen for "real people." The video idea stemmed from Brown's comedic performance as a presenter at the 2008 OSCARS (Outstanding Student-Athletes Celebrating Achievements and Recognition Showcase), held annually to highlight the achievements of Notre Dame's athletic teams.

Brown said Charmelle Green, senior assistant athletics director for student-athlete welfare and development, approached him with an idea for a video that would air at last spring's OSCARS.

"They asked if I wanted to do a little commercial with Jack Swarbrick, and I was like, OK, sure," Brown said. "They wanted us to be like the Geico commercials, so we set it up and it was hilarious, a lot of fun."

In the video, Brown yells at the camera, dances with a Notre Dame blanket draped over his back and, of course, does a back flip — all while Swarbrick talks about Notre Dame's Monogram Club in a professional office setting.

"They had me do a back flip at least 12 times — way more than you all had me do one," Brown said.

Not that it was a problem for Brown, who will likely be in the north end zone, preparing himself for another back flip after Saturday's game as his teammates gather to sing the alma mater.

"I like to have a lot of fun," he said. "I'm serious when the time is called, but everything's always better when you're having fun."

And that includes the Irish defense, especially with Sergio Brown.



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Brown has shuffled positions in the Irish secondary throughout his career, earning playtime as a nickelback, cornerback, and safety in 2008 and 2009.

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu

RYAN BURKHART

Local kicker always keeps ND close to heart

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

He was just another local kid attending kicking camp the summer before his senior year of high school, but that's when it all started for Ryan Burkhart. A kickoff specialist out of Northwood High School in Wakarusa, Ind., a half-hour away from campus, Burkhart has been living his dream the past four years by wearing the Notre Dame uniform.

"Being so local, growing up everything was Notre Dame football," Burkhart said. "It's an incredible opportunity to actually play for them. But I'm humble about it, I don't take it for granted."

Recruited out of high school, Burkhart knew coming to play for the Irish would be a different experience than any he'd had before. Captain of his high school team senior year, Burkhart recalls memories he had there as some of his most special times. Most exciting was his senior season, where, although they were 3-6 in the regular season, his team was able to battle against the top teams to win it all. His dream job is even going back there and being his high school athletic director.

"I still want to be around sports, I have been my whole

life," Burkhart said. "There's a lot of tradition there and a lot of memories."

The decision to come to Notre Dame was an easy one for Burkhart. The Irish were the first team to offer, and once he knew the Irish were interested Burkhart was quick to accept.

"I knew it wouldn't get any better with the academics, football history and the tradition. I accepted right away," he said.

Coming in as a freshman meant a busy schedule from the start with practices, drills, study hall, classes and team meetings. It made the adjustment process pass by quickly, however, and gave him a chance to meet some of his teammates who would become mentors and lifelong friends, such as J.J. Jansen and Geoff Price.

His decision paid off as he made it on the field in the fourth game of his freshman season after kicker Bobby Renkes was injured against Michigan State. He kicked in the final nine games of the season and made 45 special teams appearances, including in the Sugar Bowl against LSU.

"It was an incredible experience," Burkhart said. "It's an experience in the first place to come to play at Notre Dame and then to play as a

freshman.

"Going to the Sugar Bowl was my favorite memory," he said. "Just the hype and going to a BCS bowl game, and that chance to play for the University."

Burkhart also recalled playing in the Hawaii Bowl, and being part of the team that broke the Irish bowl streak, as being one of his best times on the team.

"Hawaii was great just to say that you're on that team that broke the bowl streak," he said. "It's all about football here, but there it was the first time we all got to hang out and get to know each other better."

His teammates have made Burkhart's experience on the Notre Dame team the one that it has been. Not only does he still keep in contact with former players like Jansen and Price, he also cherishes the relationships he has formed with other specialists, on and off the football field over the past four years.

"We've strengthened our friendships, know more about each other and know what each other has been through. They're a great bunch of guys."

Another mentor Burkhart has found in his time at Notre Dame is special teams coordinator, Brian Polian.

"Coach Polian is a great



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior kicker and Wakarusa, Ind., native Ryan Burkhart grew up in the heart of Irish country.

person to get to know," he said. "He helps you to mature and develop as a player and as a person. He is definitely someone I want to stay in touch with."

As he works on keeping in touch with those he's met here, Burkhart, a management consulting and psychology major, hopes to find a position in either Chicago or Indianapolis for a few years before returning closer to home and, hopefully, working as a high school athletic director, whether at his alma mater or not.

Looking back on his four years at Notre Dame and

wearing the uniform, Burkhart can only describe it as one of his best life experiences.

"I'm going to miss life in the dorm, roommates, walking by the Dome and Touchdown Jesus, little things like that," he said. "It brings chills, I can't even explain it. I've had the chance to be around a great group of guys and coach for four years and the opportunity of playing and wearing that helmet on Saturdays. It's incredible, all for a couple moments."

Contact Meaghan Veselik at mvesel01@saintmarys.edu

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MIKE ANELLO

Scrappy walk-on becomes special teams star

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Sports Writer

Originally Mike Anello saw walk-on tryouts as a way to avoid the freshman 15, not as a way to end up speaking to thousands of fans before the USC game this year.

"At the end of [my senior] season [in high school] I was talking to my football coach, and I decided I'd try walking on the football team [at Notre Dame]," Anello said. "Worse comes to worse it would keep me in shape for another nine months."

The Chicago-suburb native barely even played football in high school, only seeing the field his senior season. Rather, he shined on the wrestling mat, where he learned the skills that helped him work his way onto the Irish football team in the spring of 2006.

"The wrestler mentality of just really pushing yourself so hard and just going beyond your limits helped me out so much," he said. "Everything we have done here has been a lot easier than what I did in high school in wrestling."

Irish coach Charlie Weis agreed with Anello that his wrestling background helped him on the football field.

"[Anello is] a guy from Chicago, came in here a little rugrat wrestler ... Everyone told him he couldn't play football," Weis said. "He comes out, walks out on the team, ends up being a pain in the butt on the scout team, a real nuisance."

While Weis used "rugrat," Anello sees more of a competitive aspect to the matter.

"When I came here I was just like I'll try walking on the team just to see, stay and compete and everything like that," he said. "Once I got out there and started competing, I said, 'You know, I might be able to make some hay with this and actually provide on the field and make some plays.'"

And make plays Anello did, at first only in practice to his coach's frustration, but before long he made it to the field on Saturdays.

"[He's] one of those guys where every time you go around he is blowing up a play then you are getting mad because he is blowing up a play," Weis said. "Next you thing you know you put him

on the punt team ... The one guy making plays was Mike Anello."

After spending 2006 on the sideline, he cracked the depth chart in 2007, and earned notoriety in 2008. Opposing teams had 72 returns in the 12 games Anello played in last season, and he was a part of the tackle on 23 – nearly one-third – of those returns.

In the season opener against San Diego State, the then-anonymous special teams player made four solo tackles. The following week Anello sparked the Irish victory over Michigan with three more tackles, an early forced fumble and the ensuing recovery to set up the Irish to take a 14-0 lead. The play occurred directly in front of the Notre Dame student section, and Anello was no longer an unknown.

"It was incredible. I talked to my mom and dad every week and it seemed like every week we were like, 'Can it get any better?'" Anello said of his instant fame. "The next week it would get better. It was an incredible experience and it literally changed my life."

Again, it was the wrestler showing through in Anello that made him into a special teams stud, as he always looked for the chance to make plays when chasing down a return man.

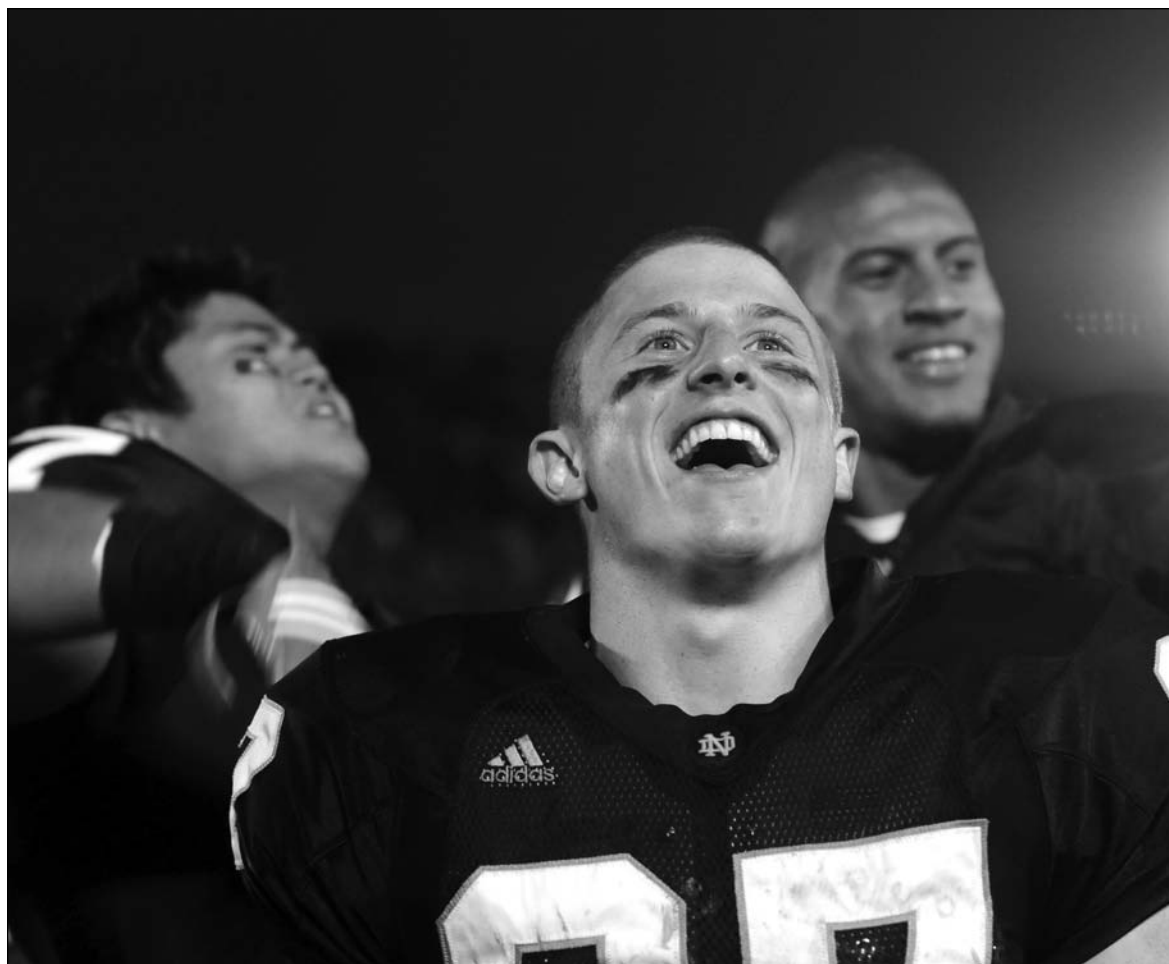
"I just can't wait to get down there [on returns]," he said. "As long as they don't call for a fair catch you are licking your chops getting ready to get after him."

Anello finished last season with 23 total tackles in 12 games. A broken leg suffered on his first play against USC kept him out of the rest of that game as well as the Hawaii Bowl.

Despite not being able to play in Hawaii, Anello still enjoyed everything about the bowl-game experience, especially the first postseason victory for the Irish in its last 10 tries.

"I had a metal rod put in my leg with a screw on top to keep it secured so I couldn't really do too much in Hawaii. ... But just being there with all the guys and getting that big monkey off our back, to finally get people off us, felt good," he said.

After the two games on the sideline, especially the USC game, Anello had two games



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior cornerback Mike Anello spent two years working his way up the depth chart before exploding onto the scene as the Irish's most ferocious special teamer in 2008.

circled on the schedule for this season — Michigan and USC. The week before the USC contest, he was casually talking with Weis about certain aspects of the rivalry and how important it was for the fans to understand the true meaning of it when Weis said Anello should be on his toes during the pep rally that week.

"[Weis and I] had just been talking earlier that week and there were some things that I wanted to make sure everyone knew what was going on with the situation; we had to get the crowd up and there were a few other things I wanted to get across when [the captains] were speaking," Anello said. "He told me not to be surprised if he called me up there, and I was hoping it would happen."

It did happen. After Rocket Ismail had coaxed the crowd into a frenzy with yells of "This is not a game!" and "Let's go get it!" Weis handed the mic to Anello. The walk-on was not fazed by the Notre Dame legend's antics beforehand and topped the pep rally off promising the throngs of Irish fans "a victory lap around campus with the goalposts on our shoulders."

"That was an awesome feeling, looking out over that crowd of people," Anello said a few weeks after the pep rally. "I never could have imagined I'd be in that situation with a chance to speak."

The first time Anello saw the Irish play the Trojans he was certainly not in a position to speak to the Notre Dame masses; he watched the game from the stands with every

other average freshman.

"It's incredible to be in the stands for a game. I was there for the USC game my freshman year when the Bush Push happened, and that was a lot of fun," Anello said. "But running out of the tunnel is really

"I just can't wait to get down there [on returns]. As long as they don't call for a fair catch, you are licking your chops getting ready to get after him."

**Mike Anello
senior cornerback**

so m e t h i n g you'll never understand until you do it. It's an incredible experience."

While Anello repeatedly referred back to sprinting out of the tunnel in front of a full stadium, he has never been satisfied with that alone. In 2006, the season the then-sophomore spent on the sidelines watching the Irish, he only thought about playing in the game, even as a walk-on.

"I would always be out and people would ask if I played for Notre Dame, and I could only reply 'Kinda,'" Anello said. "I wanted to be contributing; I didn't want to just be a part of it."

Yet again, the wrestler inside showed through his pads as Anello turned his sideline status into motivation of the strongest kind.

"I'd walk off the field on Saturdays after not playing and take that to heart and use that as motivation to push myself in the off seasons and during the season to find a way onto the field," he said.

Success on the football field was slow to find Anello, a problem he never had in the classroom, where he earned a 3.937 GPA.

"For me it is basically the student life. I don't really get noticed at all," he said.

Such excellence on and off the field has already earned the walk-on numerous job

offers, which he has narrowed down to two possibilities.

"I might try the pro day depending how everything finishes up for me," Anello said. "But if I don't do that I'm going to head out to Boston to work for a venture capital firm."

Weis said Anello may want to hold off on any plans involving a desk job for a bit longer yet.

"He'll end up in somebody's camp this summer," Weis said. "He'll be one of those pains in the butt to get rid of because he'll be one of those guys on kickoff team and on punt teams that's down there involved in every play."

Weis already sympathized with whoever is debating cutting Anello in the summer, as Weis knows the feeling from a few years ago.

"You going to want to look at him and cut him just by looking at him," he said. "Then about halfway through you are going to say what are we going to do about this guy?"

Summer training camp or Boston desk job, Anello said he'll thank the past five years for much of what he has become.

"The easiest way to put it is life changing," he said. "From day one when I got out there it has just been incredible."

The most incredible part of it all for the seemingly average student, shorter than six feet and weighing less than 200 pounds, has been something that only the far-from-average every get to do, and Mike Anello surely has proven himself to be more than he looks and to be much more than average.

"Running out of the tunnel and seeing 80,000 people filling the Stadium, I still get the mental image in my head," Anello said. "It is an unbelievable experience."

**Contact Douglas Farmer at
dfarmer1@nd.edu**



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Anello attended walk-on tryouts as a way to stay in shape when he first arrived at Notre Dame.

JAMES ALDRIDGE

Aldridge relishes unique college experience

By MIKE GOTIMER
Sports Writer

“Live unique.”
These two words help to exemplify the career of Irish running back James Aldridge during his four years at Notre Dame. Arguably no other senior has taken advantage of the many benefits of playing Notre Dame football both on and off the field, making his experience truly unique.

Aldridge’s Notre Dame career began in a way that was decidedly unique when compared with how most other top recruits enter college. The heavily recruited running back became one of the first recruits under Irish coach Charlie Weis to participate in the early enrollment program. The experience had such a big impact on Aldridge that he still considers it his favorite memory at Notre Dame four years later.

“Moving in, I was an early enrollee, you know, when I was in high school one week and the next week I was in college,” Aldridge said. “So just the transition period and getting acclimated to everything when I first got here was the most expansive memory I have.”

It was an experience Aldridge thought was important for him, and he feels it helped him grow a lot as a person.

“It was a culture shock, but I thought it was a culture shock that I needed,” he said. “As a person I grew up, and I grew to like everything. I mean I love it.”

Aldridge’s road to Notre

Dame began as a high school senior at Merrillville H.S. in Merrillville, Ind., where he finished with 3,803 all-purpose yards in just two years at the school, including 1,433 yards and 21 touchdowns in his senior season. That earned him a spot as one of nine running backs on Parade’s Prep All-America team, and he was also one of 16 candidates for the Parade All-America High School Football Player of the Year award.

Like so many others before him, Aldridge was attracted to Notre Dame because of the University’s prestige.

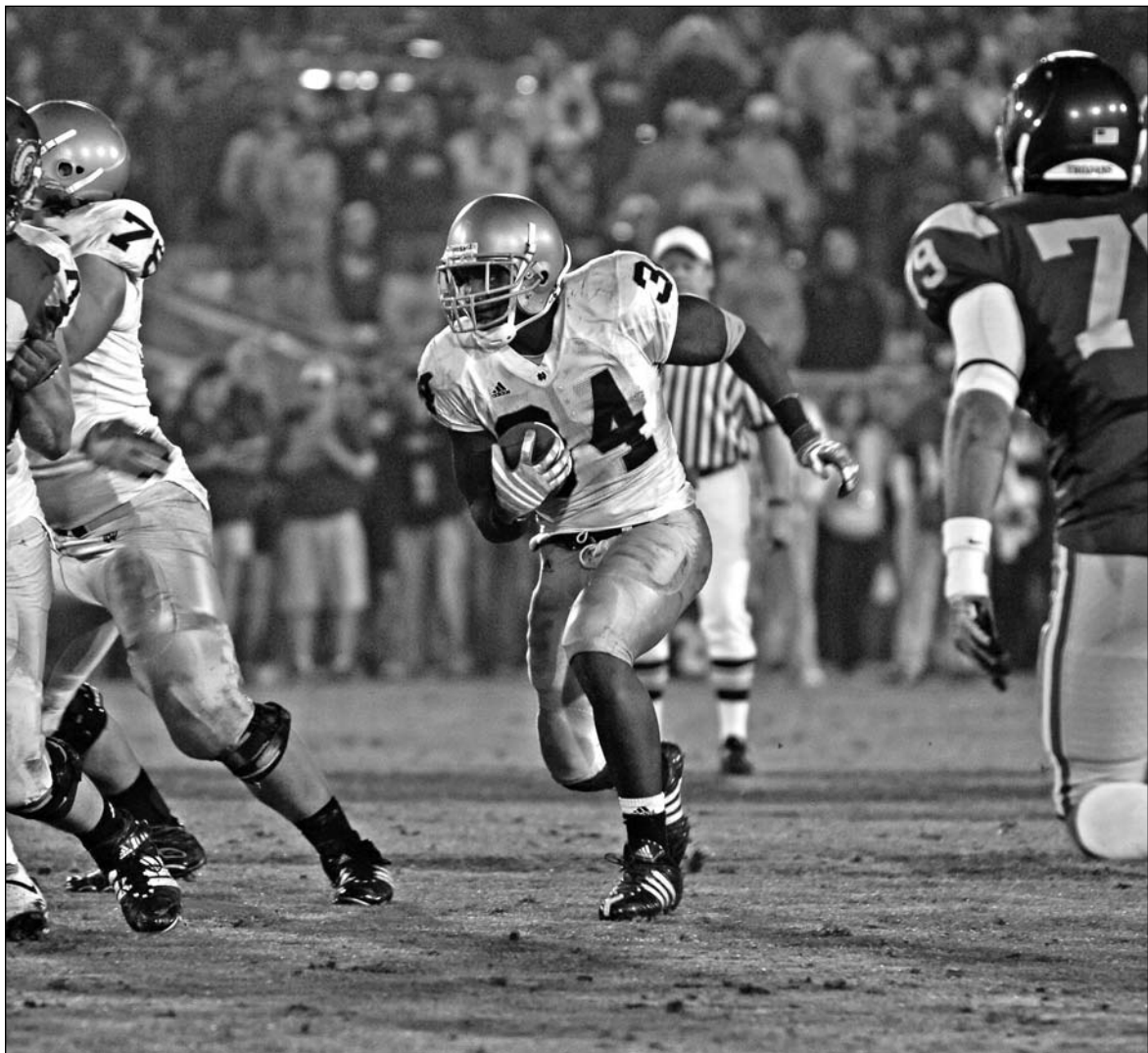
“You come here, you really know about the tradition, and once you get here and see what it’s all about, that’s what really drew me here,” Aldridge said. “They play this recruiting video for all the recruits with all this Notre

Dame stuff, and I was just like ‘alright, I’m coming.’”

Once he got to campus, Aldridge began to make his Notre Dame experience unique almost instantly. He learned to embrace all of the opportunities and special spots on campus — including his favorite place, North Dining Hall.

“You know, spring semester when I first got here and after nights of going out, you know I’d wake up in the morning and go to North [Dining Hall] with my roommates, and I would be sitting in the dining hall for hours on end just looking at girls,” Aldridge said with a laugh. “But it’s just kind of the way I was when I was younger you know.”

Since those early days where he would spend hours



Observer File Photo

Senior running back James Aldridge has taken advantage of everything Notre Dame has to offer both on and off the field during his career with the Irish.

in the dining hall taking it all in, Aldridge has taken advantage of many of the opportunities available on campus, including the football field.

Aldridge came into Notre Dame as a freshman on the talented 2006 team that featured stars like Brady Quinn and Jeff Samardzija. Although he missed the first five games of that season, he played in seven of the team’s final eight games, finishing behind Darius Walker as the team’s second leading rusher with 142 yards on 37 carries.

Aldridge was then one of the bright spots during Notre Dame’s rough 2007 campaign, leading the team with 463 rushing yards. His most memorable start came against Michigan State when he became the first Irish running back since Tony Fisher in 1999 to register more than 100 yards in his first career start with 104 yards on 18 carries. Aldridge’s biggest highlight in that game came when he busted out a 43-yard carry on Notre Dame’s second scoring drive that resulted in only their second offensive touchdown of the season.

He also rushed for a career high 125 yards against Navy.

During his junior season in 2008, Aldridge notched his first career touchdown when he burst through the line of scrimmage from two yards out against North Carolina. Two weeks later at Washington, Aldridge led the team with 84 rushing yards

and registered his first career multi-touchdown game. For the season, Aldridge finished with 357 yards on 91 carries.

In 2009, in the middle of a crowded backfield, Aldridge moved from halfback to fullback. Although injuries have limited the psychology major to only four games this season, Aldridge plans to finish out his career strong.

“I want to continue to embrace what this University is about while I’m here,” Aldridge said.

After this season, Aldridge plans to continue to train, but in his spare time aside from that, he’ll continue to add

the “unique” streak he has with respect to other football players by launching his own clothing line, aptly named “Live Unique.”

“I’m going to continue to train and see how that goes, but I started my own clothing line not too long ago. It’s called ‘Live Unique,’ that’s launching in the spring,” Aldridge said. “It’s something that I spend a lot of my time on you know besides football. I’ve always been interested in fashion, and it’s just something that I’d figured why not start it up now.”

When he leaves here, Aldridge says he’ll miss the locker room and the teammates inside of it the most. He also will miss the more laid back aspects of college life because he realizes that he’s lucky to have had this opportunity.

“I’m having fun, I’m happy, I’ve learned a lot as a person, and I don’t know what else you could ask for.”

James Aldridge
senior running back

“It’s camaraderie,” Aldridge said. “I mean, I don’t have any of the responsibilities. When you think about it, I mean this stuff’s hard, but there’s people my age who are in the war right now. I mean I got to go to college, play ball, I don’t have to pay for anything, you know, you couldn’t ask for much more, and I just appreciate that.”

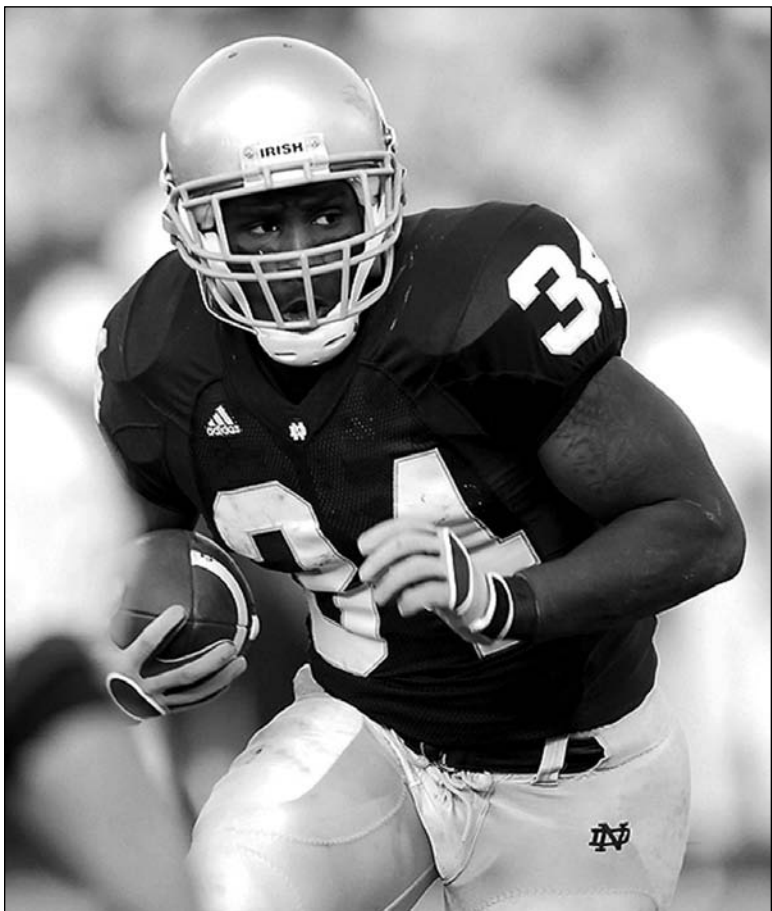
“It really puts things in perspective when you see where you are I guess in comparison to a lot of other people. I’m having fun, I’m happy, I’ve learned a lot as a person, and I don’t know what else you could ask for.”

Ultimately, Aldridge has been extremely pleased by the unique opportunities that have presented themselves to him throughout his time at Notre Dame and has enjoyed his time on campus and clearly thinks that it’s a special place that will continue to help him foster his goal to continue to “live unique.”

“It’s been a great experience,” he said. “Best decision I’ve ever made in my life. I mean, this place in particular is a special university, and I guess in every situation, every student has their unique experience here and mine isn’t any different. You know a lot of our time is invested [in the Gug] and a lot of our time is invested in the books and everything, and there’s things out there that let you embrace what this University’s all about.”

“I got a chance to go to London and travel to the Netherlands, and I’ve never seen that before and it’s things like that [that make Notre Dame special].”

Contact Mike Gotimer at mgotimer@nd.edu



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Participating in Notre Dame’s early enrollee program helped define Aldridge’s college career.

GEORGE WEST

West still treasures 2006 score against Purdue

By CHRIS MICHALSKI
Sports Writer

In 2006, Notre Dame was stocked with talent and headed toward a BCS bowl. It was not surprising to fans then when quarterback Brady Quinn marched his offense 70 yards down the field for a score capped by an 11-yard end-around on the first drive of the game against Purdue.

But to senior wide receiver George West, this play meant much more. He was the receiver who scampered into the end zone for the score, his first and only touchdown of his Notre Dame career. The play was the only time West touched the ball on offense that game, but it was his favorite memory and a moment he said he would never forget.

West had his best production his sophomore year when he tallied 172 receiving yards and 22 return yards. He also notched 271 return yards his freshman year where he started on the kick return team. Although his injuries his junior year have caused his playing time to decrease late in his Notre

Dame career, nothing has taken away from his overall experience as a Irish football player.

"I'm happy to be a part of it. It's something that helps me keep my head up, something to strive for," West said. "I'm not just playing for myself; I'm playing for the story, the University. Wearing that gold helmet means a lot to me."

With all of the special places on Notre Dame's campus that are filled with tradition, the Grotto, Touchdown Jesus and Stonehenge, there are many things that all students can enjoy. But running through the tunnel and onto the field is one thing that is reserved for football players, and something West will never experience after this season.

"[Coming out of the tunnel] is something that you can't compare, something that you can't duplicate," West said. "Coming out of that tunnel is an opportunity that a lot of people don't get, something a lot of people wish they could do. It's something I'm really going to miss."

Although West's favorite place on campus, and what

he calls his second home is the Guglielmino Athletic Complex, his story doesn't end with football. Like many student-athletes at Notre Dame, getting a good education is just as important for West. In fact, the academics of Notre Dame were on par with its tradition as far as what drew West to campus.

"You might see good football somewhere and you might see good academics somewhere but you don't see both at many schools, and the combination of both is really what brought me here," he said.

West is currently enrolled in the Mendoza College of Business as a finance major.

"I love numbers, and it kind of gave me the opportunity in the big picture to work with numbers and work with people."

He said both his parents are the main contributors in getting him to where he is today.

"They helped me with my work ethic and they taught me what it means to be a hard-working guy, a stand-up guy," West said.

What has really made West's experience unforgettable is the people he experienced it with. He said his favorite things about Irish football are his teammates and getting to know people in general.

"There are a lot of guys



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior receiver George West scored his first touchdown against Purdue his freshman year on an end-around run.

that since I've been here have become my best friends," West said "They are friends for life, friends that I will never forget."

Specifically, West is closest with his roommates, running back James Aldridge and linebacker Toryan Smith.

"They are guys I'm with every day," he said. "Guys I knew since I've been here, when I came early with them.

We've been in this relationship together for about four years now and it should just keep going from there."

Already proving this point true, West paused halfway through talking to laugh and say goodbye to a friend, a teammate, as he left the Guglielmino.

**Contact Chris Michalski at
jmichal2@nd.edu**

MIKE NARVAEZ

View from the stands not good enough for walk-on

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

A walk-on from Ridgewood, N.J., fullback Mike Narvaez sees being a part of the Notre Dame team as a dream come true. After growing up watching the Irish on TV, and visiting the University during high school, he knew it was the place for him.

However, he had never been to a Notre Dame home football game until the fall of his freshman year, and the experience was life-changing.

"My first game was Penn State freshman year," Narvaez said. "It was an unreal experience."

After standing in the student section throughout the 2006 season, however, Narvaez knew he wanted

more and decided to try-out in the spring of his freshman year.

"I thought I'd give it a try," he said. "The opportunity was there, and I didn't want to have any regrets while I was here, and I'm very fortunate with how it turned out."

For Narvaez, football was not part of his life until freshman year of high school — he was too big for the Pee-Wee leagues when he was younger.

Starting off at fullback, Narvaez volunteered to play left tackle to help his team out.

His team went on to win state in both his sophomore and junior seasons, but Narvaez tore his ACL his sophomore year.

"It was tough being hurt watching them play in a giant stadium," he said. "But my senior season I came back and had a lot of motivation, a lot of energy, and that was a lot of the reason I tried out [at Notre Dame]. I felt like I had some unfinished business."

His "unfinished business" turned into a strict schedule he imposed on himself the spring of his freshman year. "Everything was so regimented trying out, I went to bed at 9:30 and had to be up at 4:30 for practice."

The results are evident — a walk-on spot on one of the nation's most legendary college football teams and a whole new group of close

friends for Narvaez.

"It gives you a new perspective running out of the tunnel," he said. "I'm still on cloud nine."

"It takes up a lot of time and is different from my fall of freshman year, but some of my best friends are on this team," Narvaez said. "Once you hang out and get to know these guys, they're not just football players. You get to know them behind the scenes and they're really good guys."

Not only are his teammates part of Narvaez's favorite things about being on the team, but the tradition of Notre Dame football is also very important. "It's being able to go back to my home town and say, 'I play Notre Dame football,'" he said. "It's an accomplishment and I gave it my best shot."

One of his favorite memories of the past three years on the team? Traveling to Hawaii and breaking the bowl streak.

"It was like a fully paid vacation. We had a lot of free time, and spent it hanging out with the team. I got to know a lot more about some of my teammates and make Notre Dame history."

Being part of a varsity team does have its time commitments, but Narvaez has retained his strong ties to his dorm, Morrissey, and the friends he made there freshman year, living with two Morrissey friends off-campus this year.

However, without football

as part of his spring schedule, he plans on making the most of his free time, and is excited for the new opportunities presented to him.

"Life without football — I'm going to take ballroom dancing, piano lessons and do things I haven't been able to do. I don't regret football; I just want to take advantage of the opportunities. Notre Dame is a great school all-around, and I don't want to take anything for granted."

After graduation, Narvaez's busy schedule will most likely start all over again as he has plans to go to medical school. This time, though, he's hoping to stay closer to home, looking at schools in New York and along the East Coast with hopes of becoming an orthopedist or sports medicine doctor.

Wherever he goes, it looks like his football roots will stick with him. Reflecting on his four years at Notre Dame and three seasons on the team, Narvaez couldn't help but keep a big smile off his face.

"I wanted to have no regrets," he said once more. "The opportunity was there, and I tried to take advantage. I've learned a lot of lessons and made a lot of friends. I wanted to make the most of it."

From the excited look on his face, it seems like he did.

**Contact Meaghan Veselik at
mvesel01@saintmarys.edu**



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior walk-on fullback Mike Narvaez knew after watching only one game from the stands that he wanted to be on the field.

PAUL DUNCAN

Duncan eager to leave Notre Dame with a win

By ALEX BARKER
Sports Writer

From the time he stepped on campus back in 2005, fifth-year offensive tackle Paul Duncan has been in the mix on the Irish offensive line. The Dallas, Ga. native played just a few snaps during his very first game in a Notre Dame uniform but it was an experience he said he would never forget.

"I wouldn't say I was surprised to be out there," Duncan said. "I was just really anxious to get in there and play. There were so many emotions going on at one time that it's hard to pick out just one feeling."

In that game, Notre Dame clobbered Pittsburgh 42-21 on the road in Charlie Weis' Irish coaching debut on Sept. 3, 2005. Duncan said he wants nothing more than to achieve that same result in his final home game against Connecticut Saturday.

"You don't want to think about the last time you played in Notre Dame Stadium as a loss," he said. "It's never an appealing thought to anybody. A lot of the younger guys are going to come out hard trying to get a win for the seniors and fifth-year guys and it means a lot that they respect us like that."

The biggest surprise for Duncan came during his first

home game when he walked onto the field for the first time in front of a sell-out crowd against Michigan State on Sept. 17, 2005.

"Running out there, I had been used to a high school stadium, expecting to be able to hear my family screaming," Duncan said. "But obviously you're not going to be able to do that here."

After playing as a reserve lineman throughout his sophomore year behind then-freshman Sam Young, Duncan stepped into a starting role his junior year and experienced Notre Dame's horrific 3-9 season first hand. Duncan acknowledged that he has grown to become a much better player since that season.

"I feel that from my standpoint, I'm more prepared now going in to each game physically and mentally," he said. "It's just a different feeling and attitude going in to each game that I didn't feel then."

After suffering a hip injury that forced him to sit out all of last season, Duncan was granted an extra year of eligibility and returned to the starting lineup at the left tackle position this season.

"I think [having an extra year] helped me out a lot," Duncan said. "When [Mike Turkovich] was leaving last year, I was thinking that could have been me sitting right there next to him. I was thinking about

where I was and that I wasn't ready to go yet physically or mentally. I just wasn't ready to go and it was just a blessing being able to come back for another season."

Despite being granted the extra year of eligibility, Duncan said his years at Notre Dame have gone by all too fast.

"It's weird. I remember coming up here freshman summer and going through all the stuff," he said. "There's ups and downs along the way, but its crazy to believe that the end's right here for me as a Notre Dame football player."

As for next year, Duncan has his eyes set on continuing his football career at the next level. He plans to keep training and enter the 2010 NFL Draft next April. After playing in NFL he hopes to follow in his father's footsteps in the construction industry. But whichever way it turns out, he credited football and Notre Dame for preparing him so well for any scenario in the future.

"My parents have always talked about how sports teaches life lessons," he said. "There are so many things that you learn like adversity. Our season didn't really go how we wanted it to, but life goes on and you still have to keep pushing and trying to improve and get better."

While Saturday's game will have a much different feeling for Duncan, he said that he isn't going to be making any changes



DAN JACOBS/The Observer

Despite the ups and downs that his class has seen during their careers, senior tackle Paul Duncan remains focused on winning.

in the way of game preparation.

"I've never been that vocal," he said. "I just try to do things by example because you can't have too many guys saying stuff or it just all gets lost in the mix. So I'm just going to try to lead by example."

With that in mind, winning is still the focus for Duncan and

his fellow seniors who have experienced a number of ups and downs during their Irish careers. And Saturday marks the final time that they will be able to accomplish that goal within the friendly confines of

**Contact Alex Barker at
abarker@nd.edu**

TORYAN SMITH

Linebacker credits family for helping him succeed

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

As Toryan Smith stood in the hallway of the athletics facility, talking about how important his family was to him, his phone rang. He took a look and chuckled.

"That's my mom, calling right now," he said.

The linebacker, a self-described homebody, said he talks to his family every day.

"That's real important, to keep in touch with my family," he said. "They keep your head straight."

When Smith says the four years he's spent here seemed to have taken only a year to complete, keeping one's head on straight may be harder than it looks.

Smith was no stranger to the spotlight of Notre Dame. By playing his high school ball in Rome, Ga., he experienced the importance of southern high school football.

"You go to a game, you seen 10,000 people," he said. "It's real big, there are a lot of big rivalries, lots of big-time players, lots of big-time football."

Smith's father, Charles, played offensive line at Georgia. Smith said his dad

wanted him to play the line, but Smith ended up at linebacker instead.

"It was a real smooth transition," he said.

The academics and the prestige of Notre Dame attracted Smith to South Bend, but once he got here, he said he realized how tough the college game was.

"It just went real fast," he said.

During his freshman year, Smith played in nine games and had nine tackles. He said keeping himself in shape and maintaining his strength and speed were important to adjusting to college.

"The main thing was just to make sure to get yourself in good condition, good shape," he said. "The game's a lot faster, the players are a lot stronger. You got to come in and work a little extra hard."

His sophomore season, he played in 11 games and started two of them. He made 14 tackles and also played on special teams. In 2008, his junior season, he played in 10 games and started two. Against Navy, when starting linebacker Brian Smith was sidelined because of an injury, he stepped up. Smith recorded 10 tackles and returned a blocked punt for a touchdown.



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Senior linebacker Toryan Smith has tried to make the most of his opportunities on the field throughout his career with the Irish.

"Any time you're on the field you have to try to make the best opportunity of it," he said. "I was ready to go."

This season, he's played in all 10 games and started two. Freshman Manti Te'o has taken over Smith's linebacker role as the season progressed; Smith said the season has taken some unexpected turns.

"It's a lot of ups and downs. A lot of change, a lot of different things going on," he said. "It's been a ride."

That hasn't stopped him from working.

"I'm going to try to keep

playing football as long as I have the opportunity," he said.

Thanks to his coursework, he'll have the opportunity to try. He will graduate this December with a double major in sociology and computer applications and will train for the NFL Combine.

"We'll see what happens," he said.

Whatever happens, Smith said the community he experienced at Notre Dame will stick with him.

"It's an instant connection," he said. "You really feel it."

Even more than that, he said, the bonds he's formed with his teammates supersede everything else from his time here.

"I think really just meeting these guys that I've played with," he said when asked what he'd remember. "You can talk about all these big games, big stadiums, parties, whatever you want to talk about, but when it really comes down to it ... [it's] the friends that I'll have the rest of my life."

**Contact Bill Brink at
wbrink@nd.edu**

BRIAN COUGHLIN

Being on team fills void for wide receiver

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

From the start of his freshman year at Notre Dame, Brian Coughlin knew something was missing, something was just not right about being away at school and not being a part of the football team.

So he turned down Division III offers in the hopes of suiting up for the Irish.

Now he's a senior wide receiver.

As a senior at Brother Rice High School outside Chicago, he had the opportunity to talk to a few different college coaches about the prospect of playing football at the college level. But Coughlin had different plans.

"I had some Division III coaches talk to me, they would come out to the school, and we could talk to them," Coughlin said. "But more specifically, I wanted to come to Notre Dame so I didn't pursue playing in college."

Coughlin and his younger brother, Patrick who is also a walk-on wide receiver at Notre Dame, went to a few games when they were younger and both fell in love with campus and with the fighting Irish. He remembers one of his first games in South Bend clearly, a rainy game against Navy.

"I still have a picture in my basement of my brother, my grandpa, my dad, and me at Notre Dame from that game, and we all look so excited," Coughlin said. "It was so long ago, but I remember being so happy."

These early memories helped Coughlin decide that attending Notre Dame as a non-athlete ruled over the prospect of being recruited to play football at a different school.

"Seeing Notre Dame football on television and hearing about their academics made me want to come here," Coughlin said. "I realized I had a chance to get in when I was a sophomore in high school, I applied, and I decided to come to Notre Dame."

During his freshman and sophomore years, Coughlin played Interhall football for Dillon Hall, but was not satisfied and began tossing around the idea of playing on the varsity football team. After discussing the walk-on tryouts with his roommate who had gone through the process, Coughlin decided to prepare himself physically and give it a try.

"I talked to some of the other guys and they told me, and at the time when I made it after the first cut where they cut a lot of people," Coughlin said. "I was really nervous at the first cut, but then it kind of sunk in that I had a really good chance at making it."

Upon surviving all the cuts and maintaining consistency in practice and workouts, Coughlin was picked to be a member of the Notre Dame football team.

"The first time running out of the tunnel was just amazing," Coughlin said. "We ran out of the tunnel for the Blue and Gold game, but it just wasn't the same."

Coughlin walked on the team

during the spring of his sophomore year, which has allowed him to be on the football roster for his junior and senior year seasons.

"It's really like a 180-degree turn," Coughlin said of the necessary changes in transferring from a regular full-time student to a Division-I athlete.

"The brotherhood you have with your teammates is definitely something I'm going to miss after graduating," Coughlin said.

The term brotherhood on the football team has a more literal meaning to Coughlin in particular, as his younger brother Patrick also decided to come to Notre Dame and walk on the football team.

"It was fun to know that we both made it on our own," Coughlin said. "Without having me helping him, he knows that he made it himself."

An important part of team structure that Coughlin noticed is the bond that the coaches have formed with all players by stressing the importance of every member of the team.

"I got to sit next to coach Weis in meetings this year, so I got to know him better, which was cool because you wouldn't really expect the head football coach to have a good relationship with even the walk-ons of the team," Coughlin said. "He and all the other coaches want to make even the walk-ons feel like they are valuable players."

After graduating in the spring with a major in accounting, Coughlin will be interning at



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Walk-on wide receiver Coughlin turned down offers from Division III schools in hopes of one day playing for the Irish.

Deloitte Accounting and Consulting Firm. He then intends to return to Notre Dame for a fifth-year masters of accounting program and hopes to find a job as an accountant.

"Accounting gives me the best options down the road," Coughlin said. "I learned a lot in my sophomore year accounting class, and I knew I wanted to be in the business school."

This week's final home game

against Connecticut marks Coughlin's last football game, and next semester, his last as an undergraduate at Notre Dame.

"I am definitely going to miss the fact that at Notre Dame you have a community of 8,000 peers and people your age all around you," Coughlin said. "I am going to miss the people the most."

Contact Molly Sammon at msammon@nd.edu

PADDY MULLEN

Irish Catholic nose tackle cherishes his time at ND

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Sports Writer

When your first career sack comes in the second half of your senior season, you tend to treasure the moment. Fortunately, Paddy Mullen has been treasuring his time at Notre Dame since he was first recruited to play for the Irish.

The senior was recruited out of DeSmet Jesuit H.S. in St. Louis as a defensive end who could play some tight end as well by recruiting coordinator and receivers coach Rob Ianello.

"It was pretty cool," Mullen said

of the recruiting experience. "It was a lifelong dream. Growing up Irish Catholic I've always been an Irish fan."

Once he arrived on campus and saw some of his teammates, Mullen's dream was in for a reality check.

"It was a bit of a shock. There is a change from high school, from being the man and coming here where everybody was the man," he said. "Everybody could play."

The blue-collar Irish Catholic side of Mullen showed through quickly in how he approached the competition.

"[The competition within the team] is kind of a blessing at the

same time," he said. "You push yourself even harder to stand out from the crowd."

Mullen did not see any game action in 2006, but in his sophomore campaign he played in three games. Mullen recorded a tackle in his first game on the field against Georgia Tech. By then he played exclusively on the defensive side of the ball, and last season the nose tackle played in 12 games as a large — literally and figuratively — part of Notre Dame's goal line defense.

"You have to be ready at all times [when seeing limited playing time]," Mullen said. "You kind of deal with it, fulfill your role and do what you can to be ready whenever the coach calls upon you."

This season Mullen's role has not changed much. He provides some depth on the Irish defensive line, and is ready whenever defensive line coach Randy Hart tells him to get in the game. Mullen played in the closing moments of Notre Dame's 40-14 victory over Washington State, and the former Morrissey Manor resident made the biggest play of his career on the final play of the game, sacking the Cougars quarterback for the first of his Irish career.

"[The sack] was pretty cool," he said. "It was another surreal moment. Everything moved so slow. I just kept thinking, 'Just tackle him. Just tackle him. Don't miss him.'"

Mullen's teammates knew the significance of the moment, and paid him his due.

"I just soaked it up a bit," he

said. "It was the last play, time ran out as I did it, so most of the guys were on the field. They congratulated me and I did my dance."

Mullen may have received some tips on dancing on the team's trip to Hawaii last December. More importantly, Mullen grew closer to teammates he now compares to brothers during the work-vacation.

"We practiced hard and we got to visit a few sites in Hawaii while we were there," he said. "It was a great bonding experience. I learned a lot about a lot of the guys on the team."

Not only did the Irish bond, but they broke a not-so-favorable bowl streak that had been hounding them for some time.

"Winning that game was a great thing," Mullen said. "Getting that bowl streak out of the way was pretty cool."

Though Hawaii was a good memory, other parts this senior class' tenure were not: Mullen and his classmates saw the Irish finish the year 3-9 in the 2007 season. Mullen possibly took as much away from that season as he did during the more pleasant 2008 season.

"As my father always told me, you never get too low when you're down, and you never get too high

when you're up," Mullen said. "You just keep a level head and keep on plugging."

Mullen said plugging away for four years has benefited him already, and the four years aren't even over yet.

"You learn from anything. This whole experience, in the past four years, I have learned so much about myself ... You have to take things away from it for life afterwards."

As that life afterwards approaches quickly, Mullen knows he will miss his teammates when this season finally ends.

"Oh yeah, [I'll miss] the locker room and the camaraderie as a team. I've grown to be pretty much brothers with some of the guys. It's going to be hard."

The familial feel extends past the locker room for this Irish Catholic though. He said he knows what separates Notre Dame from every other school, and knows he'll miss it more than anything else.

"It's the Notre Dame family, the tradition, the classmates. Just all the people and the family feel of this place."

Paddy Mullen senior nose tackle

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu



COLEMAN COLLINS/The Observer

Senior nose tackle Paddy Mullen saw coming to Notre Dame as fulfilling a lifelong dream.

SCOTT SMITH

Fifth-year linebacker becomes mentor on field

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

Not many players can say the first person they tackled in their college career was Steve Breaston.

Scott Smith has that distinction. In his first game as a freshman, he tracked down the former Michigan wideout and kick returner, who now plays for the Arizona Cardinals and had more than 1,000 yards receiving last season, on a reverse.

“One of those situations everybody has when it seems like things are moving so fast, you really don’t have a chance to kind of get your bearings. I guess,” Smith said. “That’s definitely something that’ll probably be one of the ‘tell my grandkids’ stories. ‘This was grandpa’s first play, first tackle,’ probably be a way to build myself up in the future.”

He doesn’t have to build himself up now, though. The fifth-year senior acts as a coach on the field, the man who distills defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta’s schemes for the younger players and someone who portrays consistency and character.

“He’s just a regular guy. Goes to class, goes to work,” fellow senior linebacker Toryan Smith said. “Does everything he’s supposed to do. He’s a great student. He’s a really good guy.”

Smith’s skills at linebacker developed late. Due to weight restrictions in middle school, Smith played on the offensive and defensive lines. At Highland Park High School in Highland Park, Ill., he played defensive end and tight end, but at the beginning of his sophomore year, coach Kurt

Weinburg told him he’d be playing middle linebacker.

“I ended up just sticking there for the next three years and playing a bunch of different positions on offense,” he said. “I guess I was able to make a pretty good impression on some people.”

Smith said he liked getting off the line of scrimmage and working in space rather than pounding around in the trenches.

“I think [the coaches] tried to make it as easy for me as possible. Just find the ball and go tackle someone,” he said. “As I got more comfortable and as I got more used to playing the position my responsibilities kind of increased.”

Aside from the combination of academics and big-time football that Notre Dame offered, Smith said the size of the school attracted him and he liked the opportunity to be more than a number.

“Smaller classes, [having] an opportunity to interact with professors and build relationships,” Smith said. “Those relationships too are something that will help me in the future looking for jobs and getting references and things like that.”

As a freshman, Smith played behind linebacker Corey Mays, who graduated in 2006 and now plays for the Kansas City Chiefs. In a way, Mays was to Smith as Smith now is to the younger linebackers.

“He seemed like that old guy who knew everything and was the best guy to go to for advice and always had a good answer,” Smith said. “I really appreciate him taking me under his wing. I’m sure I got a little annoying with all the questions. I’m sure I look like that old guy to a lot of the



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

Smith was taken under the wing of linebacker Corey Mays as a freshman, and now similarly tries to be a mentor to his younger linebackers.

freshman now, so I’m trying to return the favor, I guess, with them.”

Now Smith answers questions for younger linebackers like Manti Te’o, Carlo Calabrese and Dan Fox.

“It’s kind of weird how it’s come full circle,” he said. “One day you’re this wide-eyed freshman, the next you’re kind of like this wise old veteran. It’s pretty neat.”

Smith didn’t play his sophomore year, but appeared in every game in his junior and senior years. He made 18 tackles, seven solo, during his junior season.

Smith said the biggest improvement in his game is his ability to shed blocks. In high school, he said, he could blow by the blockers, but now he needs to use his hands. This is especially true since he’s moved from middle linebacker to outside linebacker at Notre Dame, where he faces the tight end on a regular basis.

“Obviously they’re a threat as a receiver playing man cover-

age,” he said. “It’s a little bit different just because of the athletic difference, but some of these linemen who are 315 pounds, you don’t expect them to move what they do, but they can get you too.”

For the past two seasons, Smith has played under defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta. He’s acted as an intermediary between Tenuta and the players.

“He’s like JT in that he’ll get JT’s message across very well,” associate head coach Corwin Brown said of Smith. “He cuts through the fat.”

Toryan Smith agreed.

“He’s really taken on the player-coach role. He’s the coach when the coach is not there,” Toryan said. “I feel like he really accepted the leadership role on the team. He wasn’t asked to do it.”

Smith said playing under Tenuta not only gives him an opportunity not many other players get but a chance to learn lessons for a potential future in coaching.

“To have the opportunity to have one of the best defensive coordinators in the country as your position coach is not something a lot of guys can say,” he said. “The way that he talks to us, and the way that he helps us, and the way he critiques our play is all geared toward us becoming better football players and us being better prepared to help the team win. It’s kind of nice to get that view of being almost in his head, because everything he sees gets transferred right to us.

“In the future possibly wanting to coach, having that perspective on how to approach different types of opponents.”

Being a fifth-year senior gives Smith more time to relax, something that previously eluded him. He said he enjoys

sleeping and spending time with roommates Paul Duncan and Bartley Webb. He’s also got his TV schedule dialed up every week — on this particular Wednesday, Law and Order: SVU awaited him.

“Probably the greatest show ever made on TV,” he said.

Smith is currently taking graduate classes, but as an undergrad he finished with a 3.65 grade point average. Time management helped him, he said — as did playing to his strengths.

“I’ll be honest, I didn’t do all the reading for class,” he said. “You kind of pick and choose your spots where you think you can be successful. It’s a factor of knowing my strengths and weaknesses and applying effort where it was needed.”

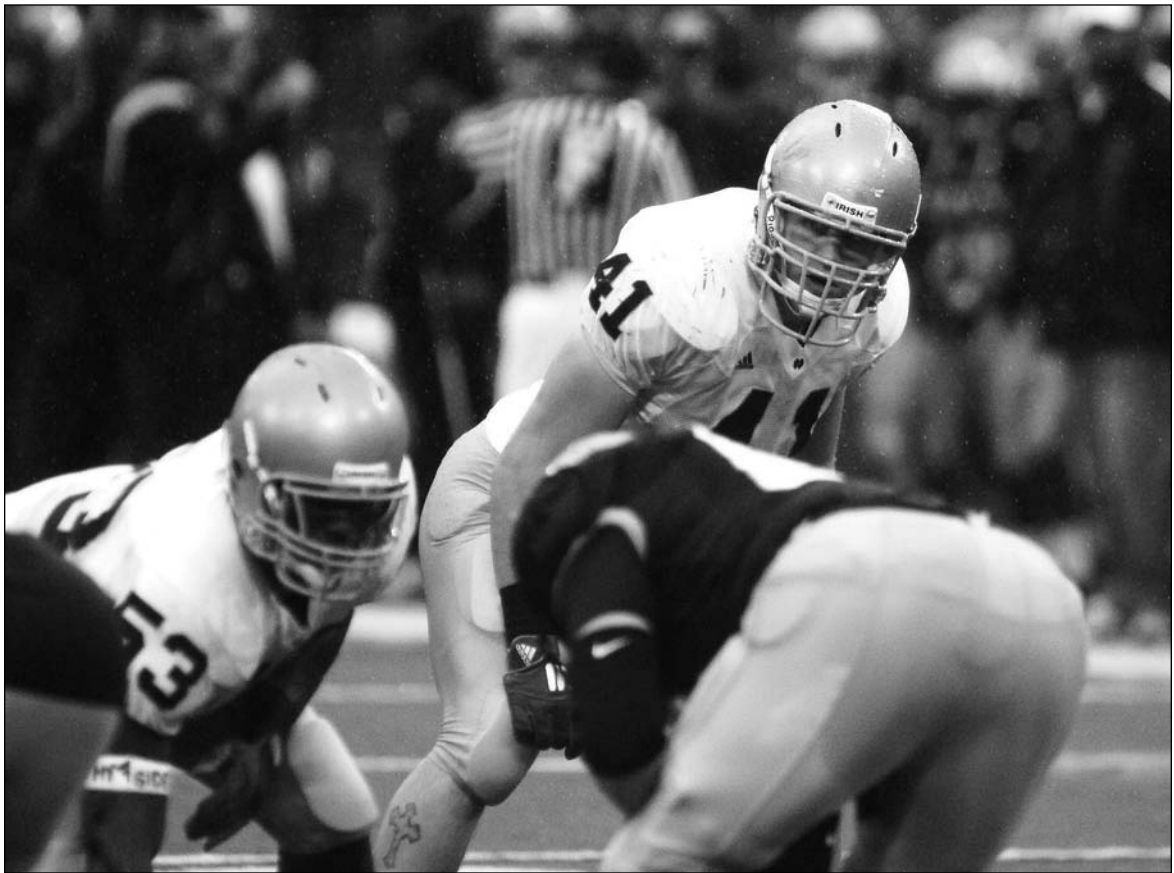
In the same way a defense has moving parts, Smith wants to be part of a business with a lot of moving parts and change. He said he’d like to work in business problem solving and possibly re-enter the sports world.

“I wouldn’t mind doing something in sports, obviously, just because that’s where the majority of my life has been spent,” he said.

Whether it’s football, course work, a future job or dealing with his family, Smith said he strives for consistency and character.

“As a person the most important thing for me is to be consistent, to be approachable and be that guy that you know has a real good character,” he said. “You hear a lot of people say character is what you do when no one else is watching. That’s what I try to be, the same person all the time. Just know the people in my life, like my friends in family, they know what they’re going to get. I’m just going to be me.”

Contact Bill Brink at wbrink@nd.edu



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Fifth-year senior linebacker Scott Smith, 41, uses his years of experience to help direct and coordinate his teammates during defensive plays on the field.

RAESHON MCNEIL

Once a pupil, Irish cornerback becomes a teacher

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

Just because Raeshon McNeil is a starting cornerback on a Division I football team doesn't mean he doesn't feel the same about his college experience as most students.

"It seems like it's flown by," McNeil said. "These four years have just really flown by."

From his role as a special teams player in 2006 to his full-time starting role now, McNeil said that the anticipation for games in the fall, and looking forward to football season in the spring made his four years at Notre Dame speed by.

It's easy for McNeil to look back at his recruitment during high school — after all, it feels like just yesterday to him. He said that Notre Dame's academic prestige, as well as the camaraderie of the team, attracted him to the Irish.

"Meeting some of the other guys, Darius Walker and Chinedum [Ndukwe], I just felt like it was a good fit for me," McNeil said.

Once he got to South Bend, McNeil said that those same players helped him get acclimated with the program and began his career as a college cornerback.

"Ndukwe was one of the guys that really attracted me to this place, one of the guys I could really see myself hanging out with," McNeil said. "I really got to be great friends with Tommy Zbikowski, and we still text and talk all the time. Also, Mike Richardson, I liked the way he played, the instincts that he had."

His freshman year, McNeil played in 11 games for the Irish, and totaled four tackles in mostly special teams duty.

He said that while some

players have trouble adjusting to being a role player early in their college career, he was ready for the transition.

"It really wasn't that bad for me," McNeil said of his adjustment to college. "I'm really not a bigheaded type of guy. I understood what I had to do, I understood paying my dues."

While McNeil's sophomore season, in which the Irish went 3-9, may have been forgettable for most fans, it did have some bright spots of the young cornerback. McNeil

recorded the first start of his career at Purdue, and notched his first sack against Stanford.

On a whole, though, he said the season was disappointing, but that it motivated himself, and the rest of the team, to work harder for every win from that point forward.

"Like a lot of guys, I had never been on a team that lost

that many games," McNeil said. Really going through it and seeing that other side, it really made every win that we had in 2008 and this year [2009] that much more special."

McNeil finally broke out in 2008, his junior season. He started all 13 games for the Irish and had a number of career highlights.

In fact, McNeil said that the most memorable moment of his Irish career came in a 23-7 loss to Michigan State in East Lansing. Early in the game, with the Irish trailing by only three, McNeil broke up an attempted deep pass from Spartan's quarterback Brian Hoyer to receiver B.J. Cunningham.

"They ran a little combination route, where basically I had to push and help the backside corner and what happened was there was a little breakdown in the coverage and the backside corner was-



QUENTIN STENGER/The Observer

Senior cornerback Raeshon McNeil started 13 games in a breakout 2008 season, finishing with 41 tackles and two interceptions.

n't there, so there I was left on his guy," McNeil said. "I end up making a play on a deep ball in the end zone, which was probably one of the bigger plays of my career."

Later that season, McNeil got to experience another memorable moment, when the Irish played at North Carolina, the Cooleemee, N.C., native got to play a college football game just two hours from his hometown.

Prior to the game, McNeil said that there was some competition between himself and fellow Tar Heel state residents Robert Blanton and Kerry Neal for who could get tickets for their friends and family in attendance. McNeil said he had to start planning in the summer in order to get enough tickets for the more than 20 friends and family members that would be in attendance.

"Blanton actually got a pretty good deal," McNeil told The Observer last season. "He got

most of the freshman class. He swooped them up real quick."

While he said the experience was great, McNeil was fast to admit the game, which the Irish lost 29-24 to North Carolina, could have gone better.

"It was great. It was horrible that we lost, but it was great for me to go back there," McNeil said.

At the same time, McNeil said he would always remember the experience for getting to play in front of his friends and family.

"I had a lot of family in town," he said. "A lot of people that aren't able to make it up here to see my play. My grandmother was in the stands, all my brothers and my aunts were in the stands. It was great being able to go back there and them being able to see me play again."

McNeil set another career high in his homecoming game, notching a then-career high six tackles.

Later in the season, the junior notched his first two career interceptions in Notre Dame's quadruple-overtime loss to Pittsburgh.

Now, McNeil is one of the more experienced players in the defensive backfield. He said that over the past four years he's become close with the other upperclassmen in the secondary. He finished the season seventh on the team with 41 total tackles.

"I've gotten really close to a lot of the DBs," he said. "Me, Sergio [Brown], Leonard [Gordon] and Darrin [Walls]. We've been really tight since we've been here."

With the experience, though, comes an added responsibility. McNeil said that he's had to take on the role of mentor to the younger defensive backs, like sophomores Robert Blanton and Jamoris Slaughter. To McNeil, though, being a teacher is no big deal.

"I just like helping people," he said. "Being in this role for

me is natural, trying to coach up some of the younger guys, keeping them focused during games and stuff. All that stuff just comes naturally to me. It feels good to be in this position."

So far this season, McNeil has notched eight total tackles while playing in all 10 games to date. After the Irish wrap up their season in two weeks against Stanford, McNeil hopes that it won't be the last regular season football game he plays in.

"I'm going to give this football thing a shot," he said of his post-graduation plans. "God willing, I'll still be playing. So hopefully my last game won't be Stanford."

While professional football is still the primary goal, the industrial design major said he has a good backup plan ready.

"[Pro football is] the plan, but if that doesn't work out, I'm getting some things going with industrial design," he said. "I plan on working on my portfolio in the spring, and sending out my portfolio and my résumé, try and get things rolling."

Either way, McNeil said he's a much more mature person now than he was four years ago, both as a football player and as a person. That personal growth has also paid off on the field, McNeil said.

"I just think that I've not only matured as a player, but as a person," he said. "I feel like that's only helped my game. Over these past four years, the game has really slowed down, and I think that comes from maturity, being able to see things, being able to understand the game more."

Things may have slowed down for McNeil on the field, but the past four years have still gone by more quickly than he ever could have imagined.

Contact Sam Werner at swerner@nd.edu



IAN GAVLICK/The Observer

McNeil has relished the opportunity to mentor younger defensive backs like sophomores Robert Blanton and Jamoris Slaughter.

DAN FRANCO

Notre Dame obvious choice for South Bend WR

By CHRIS MASOUD
Sports Writer

Coming out of high school, the decision of choosing the right college can be a stressful process. But for South Bend native Dan Franco, the decision to come to Notre Dame couldn't have been easier.

"It just seemed to be the perfect fit for me," Franco said. "I was raised in South Bend since I was 8 months old, and I've been immersed in the whole tradition and everything, and I just loved it since the beginning."

A graduate of nearby Clay H.S., Franco compiled some impressive numbers at the wide receiver position. Coupling that with the desire to play for the Irish instilled at an early age, Franco walked onto the team as a freshman.

Franco learned early on that coming to play for the Irish is much more than just a commitment to the football program. He knows his Notre Dame experience will be defined by more than simply his accomplishments on the field.

"The student body, just the character of kids that are here, it's just a special group that I'm really proud to be a part of," Franco said. "Just about anybody I run into on campus, the professors, there's been a number of extraordinary people that I've been fortunate to meet through football, outside of football. Just

about everybody I've met through here has been special."

Grinding through the daily routine of a football season is more than just preseason workouts and a three-month schedule. Franco says the relationships he has developed with his 108 teammates, and especially within the wide receiver unit, has become an important part of his career.

"I feel close to all my teammates, but just being around the guys in your same position, I mean they're so funny," Franco said. "They know how to focus, but they know how to not take themselves too seriously at the same time. There's a lot of laughter that goes on from a real deep place."

One of those moments came in practice at the end of last season as the team prepared to travel to the Sheraton Hawaii Bowl. During a one-on-one drill between wide receivers and cornerbacks, Franco was the last receiver picked for the drill. His opponent was starting senior cornerback Raeshon McNeil.

"I went and scored a touchdown, and it was so unassuming and it came out of nowhere," Franco said. "It was pretty nice and everybody just swarmed me. It was a blast. He let me get the best of him that one time, that one time."

Franco says he owes a lot of his improvement and overall development as a player to wide receivers coach Rob Ianello, who has taken on more than just the

role of a position coach.

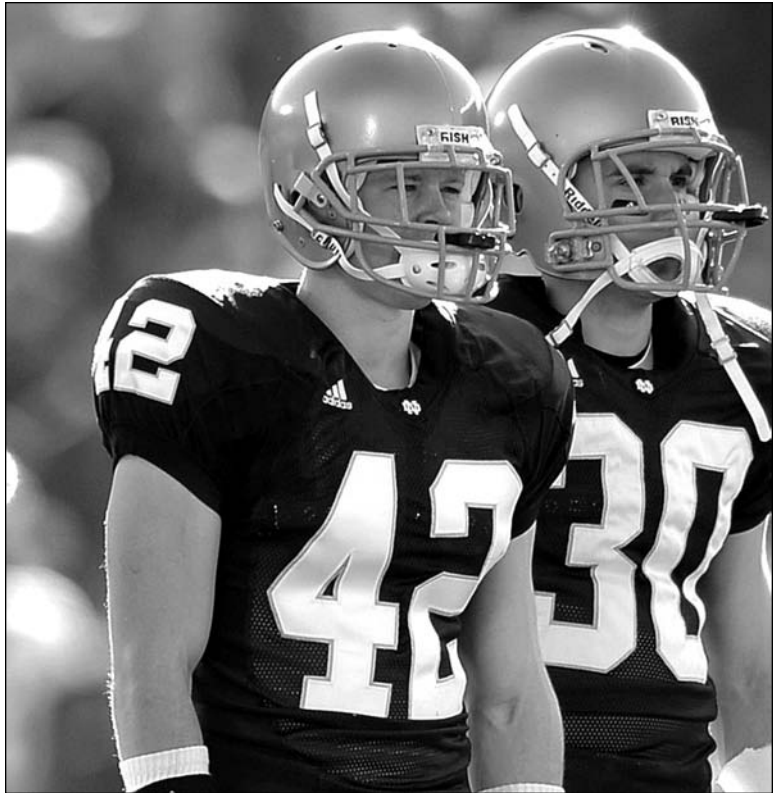
"He's on all of us about the small things that we do right, the small things we do wrong," Franco said. "He's always paying attention to us and taking notes, so it's really in the small details that he won't let us get away with. Maybe we'll notice, maybe we won't, but he'll notice them and make sure that they get corrected. Every coach is sort of like a father figure because it's not always about football."

Franco has never started a game for the Irish, but he has come to understand his role as a valuable member of the offense and taken it upon himself to make his teammates better.

"As a walk-on, you know that you're not going to be playing in any games but when the freshmen first get here, they're learning from everybody, the ropes and things like that," Franco said. "Especially during the summer when we do seven-on-seven stuff, just helping them get along with the plays, the tempo of practice, how things are and even just talking to them about everyday life."

Conversely, Franco's teammates have made him a better player through their efforts to compete for a job, and none more than junior cornerback Nick Lezynski, a fellow walk-on.

"We both share the same number, and we're constantly competing," Franco said. "Oh you made this play, what did you do today, who's the real 42?" We're joking



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

South Bend native and wide receiver Dan Franco never wavered in his decision to go to Notre Dame.

around in good fun, but we're on each other's coattails, just getting after one another, making sure we're both doing our jobs."

Without a doubt, Franco realizes that when he graduates this spring, his teammates and the relationships he has developed will be missed the most.

"It sort of just happens,"

Franco said. "You just get really close with the guys day in and day out, with early morning lifts or just in the middle of practice. The memories and the stories that you get to carry with you, that's what I treasure most."

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

LEONARD GORDON

Fifth-year builds relationships with teammates

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Writer

Leonard Gordon passed up a chance to achieve the dream of most Southern football players by bypassing the Southeastern Conference to flock North to Notre Dame.

The fifth-year senior from Clarksville, Tenn., chose the Irish over Vanderbilt and LSU, and he hasn't looked back.

"I definitely made the right decision," he said.

For the 5-foot-11, 189-pound safety who dons the No. 24, the Notre Dame football team reflects what he considers the defining characteristic of the University as a whole: a vibrant community atmosphere defined by strong relationships.

"My favorite part of Notre Dame is the people and the relationships that I've built," he said. "Everyone from classmates to professors to teammates to coaches."

That attitude extends into what he loves about being on the football team. At Notre Dame, he said, the coaches and players have a true community, which is what drew him to South Bend over Baton Rouge and Nashville in the first place.

At other schools, he said, the football teams often broke up into small groups and players rarely spent time with teammates outside of their small social circle. To Gordon, that simply isn't the case here at Notre Dame. "I can hang with any of the guys on the team," Gordon said. "I obviously hang out with the defensive backs the most, but I can really hang with any of the guys on the team."

The former Dillon Hall resident has been around football his entire life, he said, and the team atmosphere has always been very central to his football experience,

which is one of the reasons why he loves Notre Dame so much. He said there is a true team atmosphere here both on and off the field, which means a lot to him.

Gordon's favorite football memory is of the UCLA-Notre Dame game in 2006 when Brady Quinn threw a 45-yard pass to Jeff Samardzija with less than a minute left in the game to cap a come-from-behind victory. Though he was redshirted that year, Gordon said it was an unbelievable experience during his first year on campus.

"As a freshman, that really stands out in my mind," he said. "The Stadium was so



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior safety Leonard Gordon chose Notre Dame over southern schools like Vanderbilt and LSU and says he does not regret it.

loud."

Gordon began seeing action on special teams during his second year of eligibility and earned increased game repetitions as the years progressed, as well as seeing some action as a safety last year.

Gordon says that he has done a lot of maturing from the time he entered as a freshman to now. Coming in as a freshman, he was not as mature as he needed to be — but that's no longer the case. "I've really become a man here," he said.

Although he may have done

some of this "growing up" at other programs, Gordon believes that Notre Dame was the best place for him to learn to become an adult.

Though the community aspect of Notre Dame and the football team was enticing to Gordon, the academics of the University were also extremely attractive. He is both a political science and preprofessional studies major and after graduation, plans on attending Baylor University in Texas to attend physical therapy school through the Army-Baylor doctoral program. After graduation from this

program, he will serve in the United States Army as a physical therapist.

Vanderbilt had the academics, and LSU had the high-caliber football — and they both play in the famed SEC — but when looking back, the product of the South is glad he didn't attend either of those schools.

"You can't get better than this, athletically or academically," he said. "There's nothing like playing football at Notre Dame."

Contact Allan Joseph at ajoseph2@nd.edu

CHRIS BATHON

Division III transfer found right atmosphere at ND

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

Defensive back Chris Bathon's path to Notre Dame wasn't a direct one from his hometown of Pleasantville, N.Y. But after playing football at Division III Carnegie Mellon as a college freshman, Bathon knew transferring to Notre Dame and trying out for the Irish squad was right for him.

"Football was a big deal in high school, and it wasn't too different at Carnegie Mellon," Bathon said. "I wanted to take a chance and come here, try out and I don't regret it. I don't know what I'd do without football."

In high school, Bathon played both quarterback and safety, starting three of his four years. Close with his teammates and from a small town, many of his former teammates, coaches, friends and neighbors still kept tabs on him, first at Carnegie Mellon and now at Notre Dame.

"It's a big deal in my town to play Division I at a school," Bathon said. "Everyone from home follows me, will send me e-mails. I have four younger siblings and they're always telling me of someone asking them about me or just keep[ing] up with Notre Dame football. It's been a great experience."

Coming from a small school to a much larger university was an adjustment, but not a difficult one for Bathon. Playing in a stadium like Notre Dame's was a difference, though, he said.

"There is nothing like that in size at Carnegie Mellon," Bathon said.

However, his experience playing there prepared him well to try out for the Irish team.

"I was not intimidated," he said. "Playing at Carnegie Mellon got rid of any nerves that I had. It was a big adjustment but nothing that I couldn't handle. I was pretty confident coming from Carnegie Mellon and found I stacked up well athletically."

The walk-on process did not phase Bathon much, either. Coming in as a sophomore, he found himself no more nervous than he would have been had he been at Notre Dame a year earlier, he said.

"Football is something I've played my whole life," he said.

Bathon said the goal of donning the Irish blue and gold was a lifelong dream.

"I've always been driven to play Notre Dame football, and this was my chance," Bathon said.

And when the time came sophomore year, Bathon was ready to take whatever the tryouts threw at him. The

results are clear as he stands smiling after another grueling Notre Dame practice, but still can joke around with his teammates walking by.

"I thought I'd have to kick it into another gear at practice, to show myself to the other guys, but it wasn't like that," he said. "Everyone treats you just as well. You earn your respect from the other players and they earn yours. Everyone starts to realize who you are and that you can play."

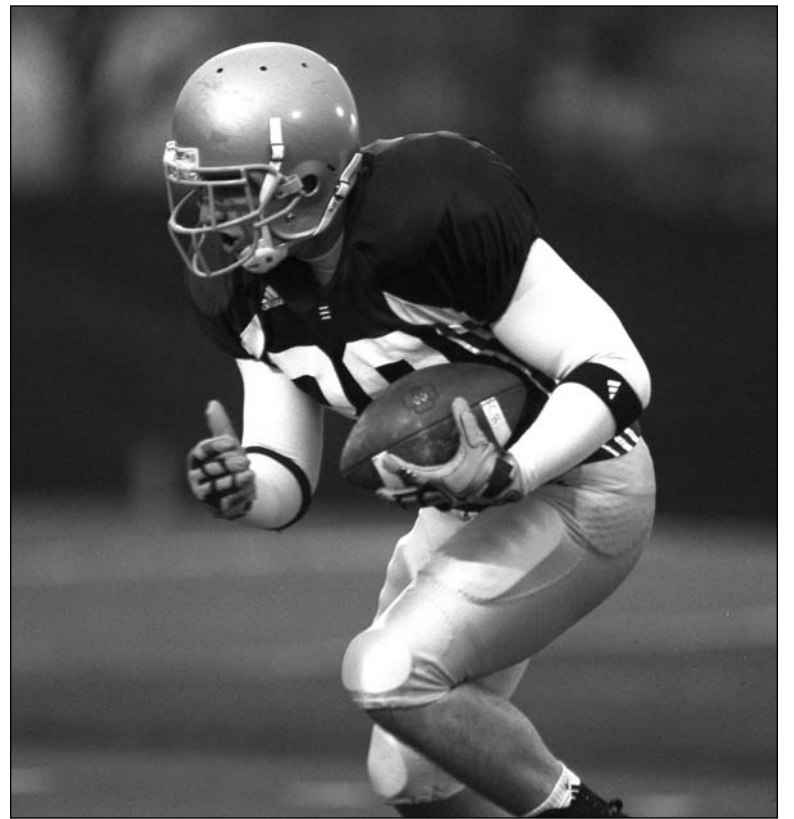
Although he is a walk-on, Bathon has found that the friendships made on the Irish team are some of his most valuable.

"Everyone here is my best friend," he said. "Scholarship, recruit, walk-on — doesn't matter. These guys are my closest friends."

When faced with the question of what his life will be once the season closes, Bathon could only shake his head in wonder.

"I don't know what life will be like without football," he said. "I'm happy things worked out the way they did. It's just football. At the end of the day, I realize I'm playing Notre Dame football and it's a dream come true."

His plans for when he leaves the familiar grounds of Notre Dame are working in the trading field closer to home and to his family. But he will take his



VANESSA GEMPIS/The Observer

Senior defensive back Chris Bathon began his college career at Carnegie Mellon before transferring to Notre Dame.

three years at Notre Dame, and two seasons on the team, as well as the friends he has made, with him for the rest of his life.

"It's been an experience I'm never going to forget," Bathon said. "Sometimes I have to stop and get it back in my head that I've done this. I'm

going to remember all the friends I've made here, the ones I see every day. The guys I've built up a relationship with, the ones I go out with and hang out with. It's been a dream come true."

Contact Meaghan Veselik at mvesel01@saintmarys.edu



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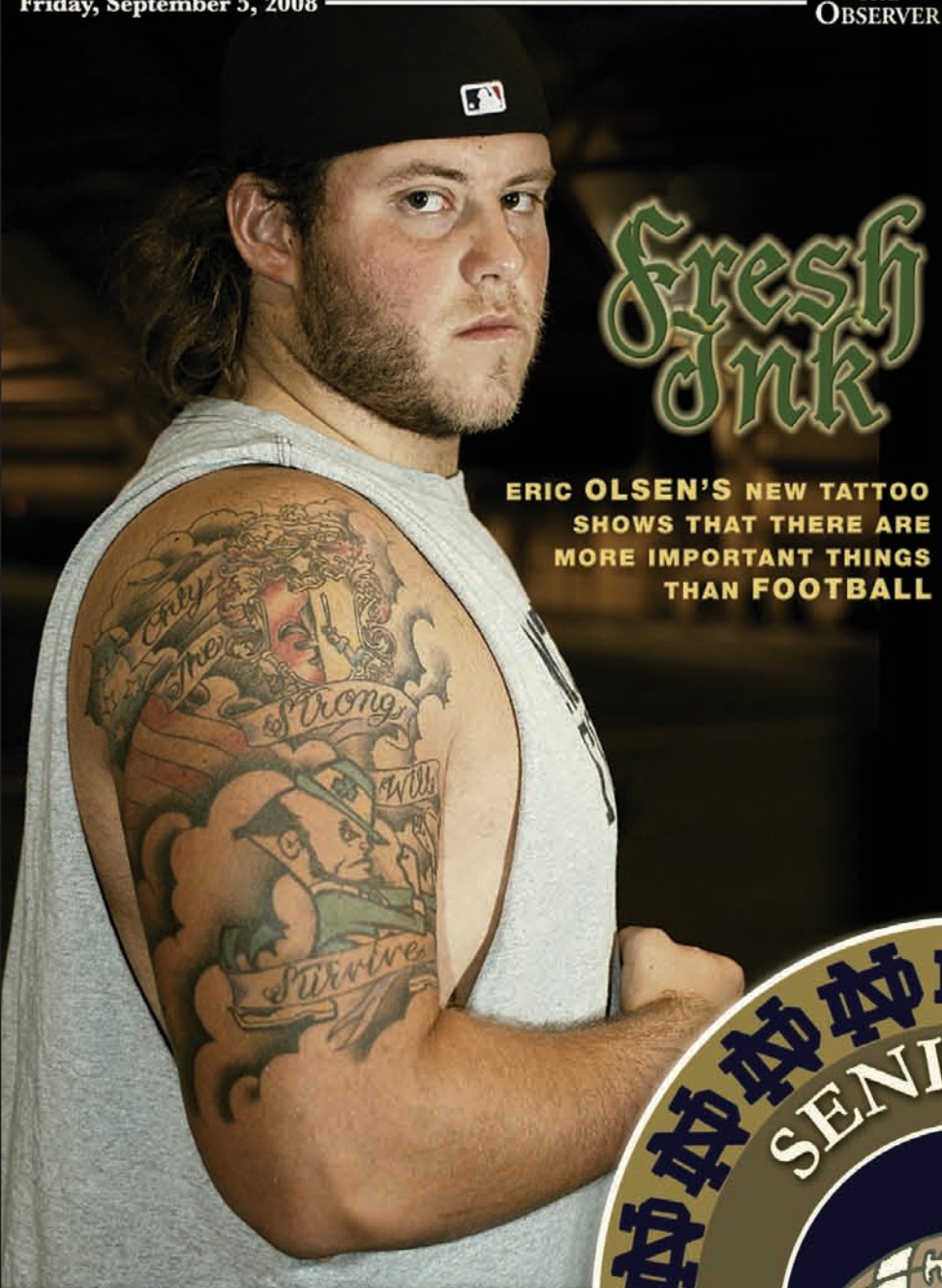


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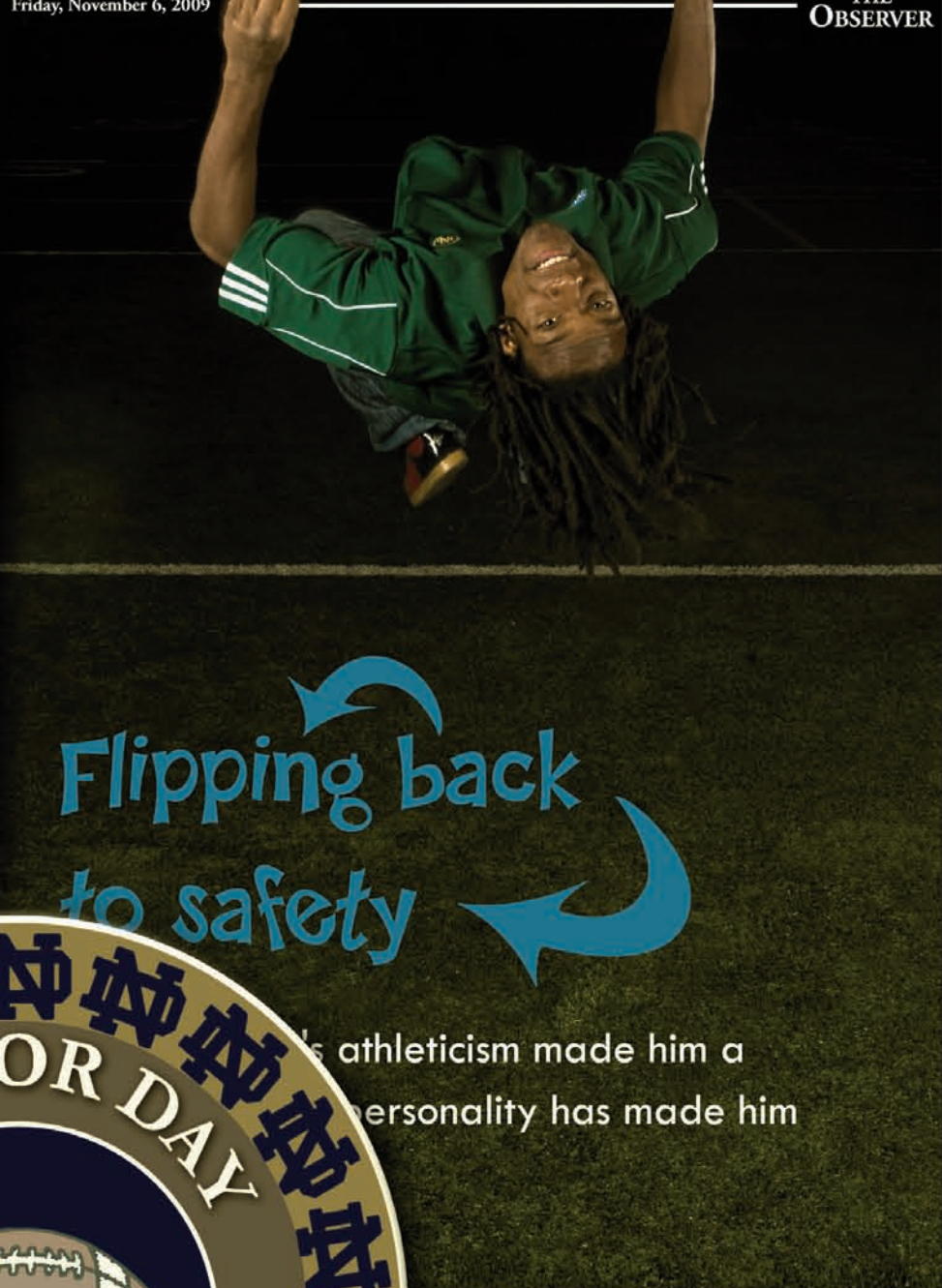
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SHOWS THAT THERE ARE
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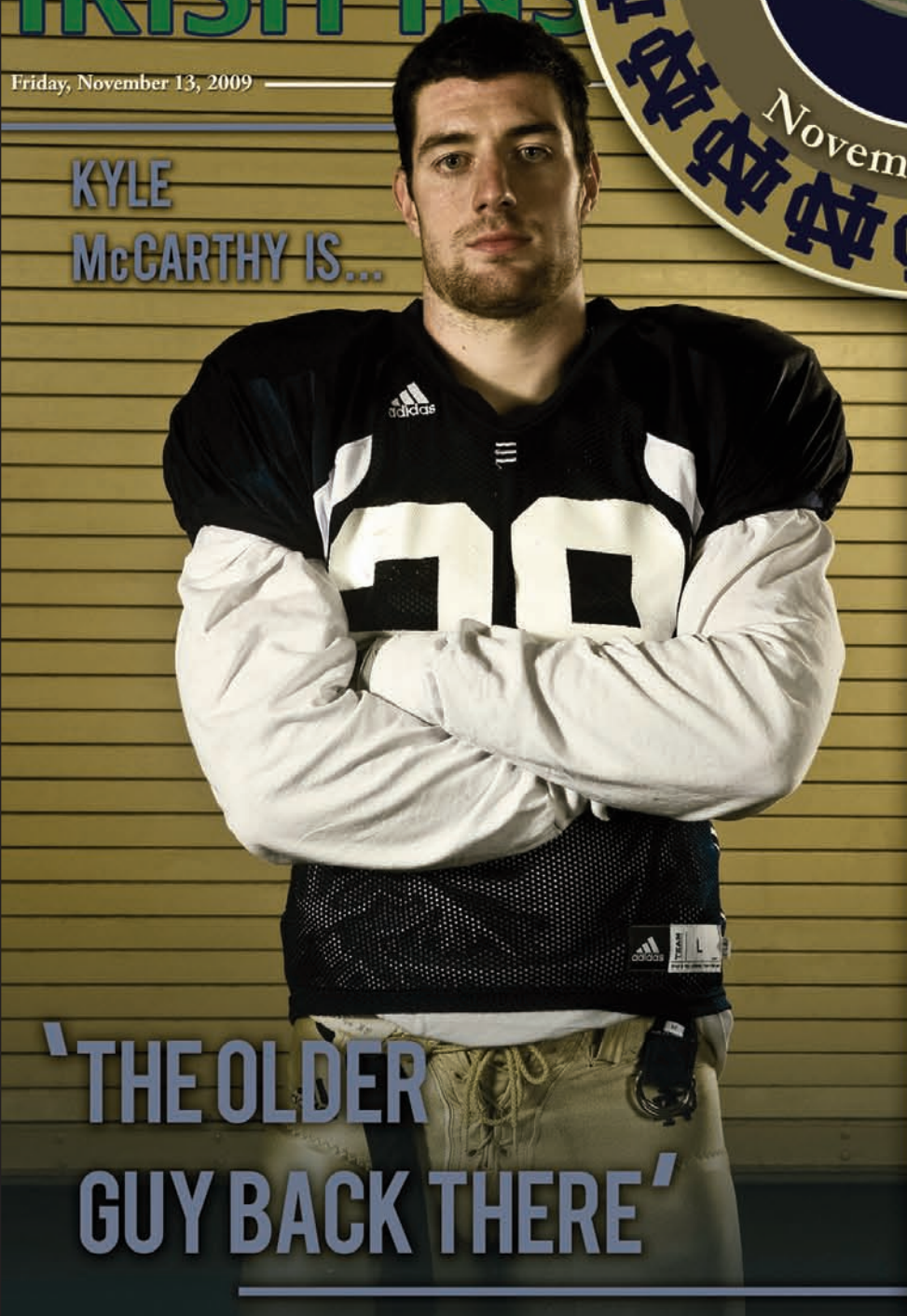
Flipping back to safety

His athleticism made him a
personality has made him

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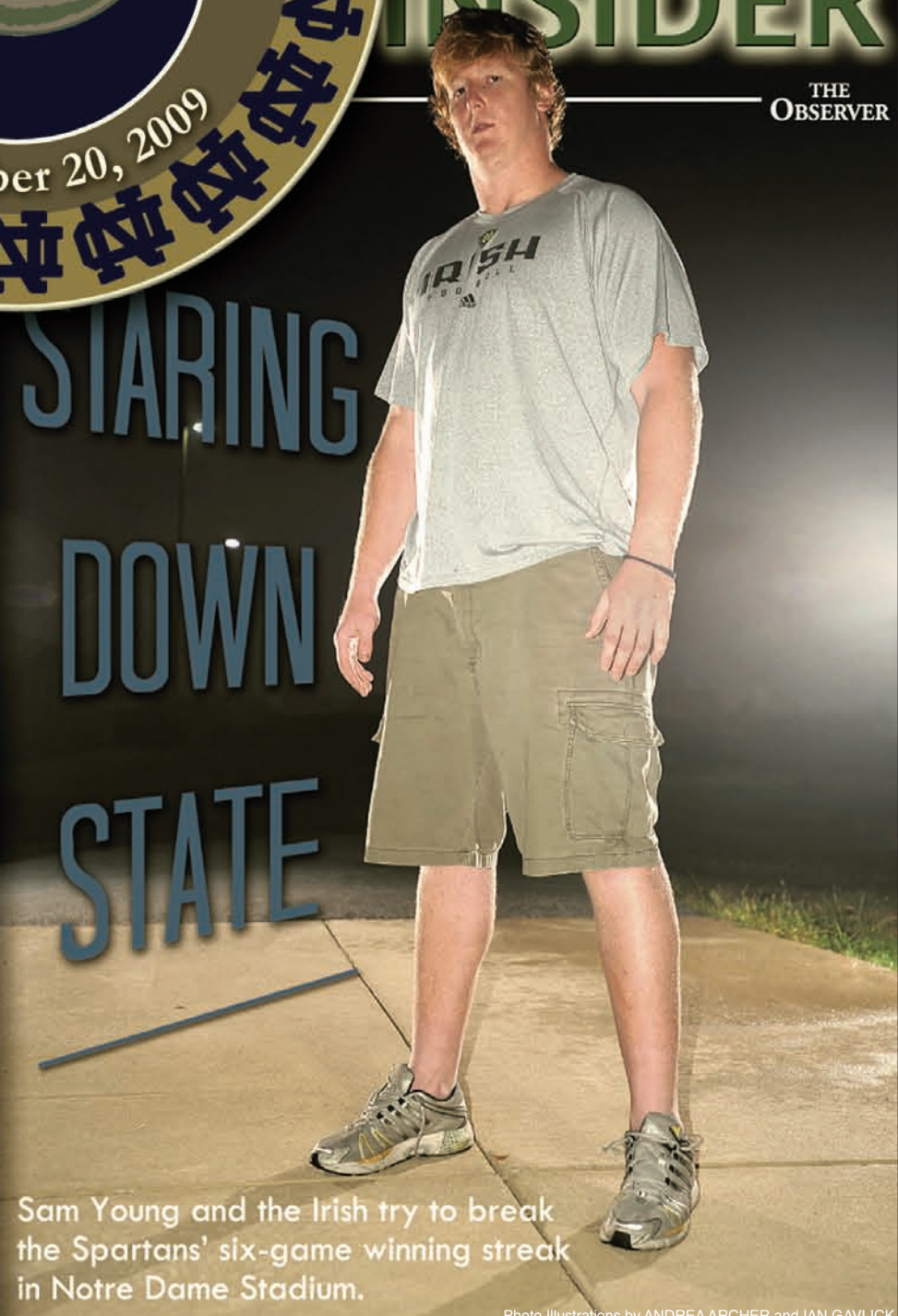


'THE OLDER GUY BACK THERE'



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STARING DOWN STATE

Sam Young and the Irish try to break
the Spartans' six-game winning streak
in Notre Dame Stadium.