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UNFINISHED BUSINESS

More goals to set,
strength to gain

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Wei Lin and Keri O'Mara

RECRUITING

Irish look to add Williams to backfield commits

By **MIKE MONACO**
Senior Sports Writer

Though Notre Dame has lost three of its last four games and dropped out of the national rankings, there hasn't necessarily been a corresponding loss of recruiting momentum, according to Irish recruiting analyst Tom Loy.

"I don't think it's going to play a big factor here," said Loy, who covers Notre Dame recruiting for Blue and Gold Illustrated, part of the 247Sports network. "It does hurt, no doubt about that. ... I don't think it's going to really affect recruiting going forward. If they lose to Louisville and USC, it's going to raise some red flags."

Even before Notre Dame's loss to Northwestern on Saturday, multiple recruits were forced to alter their plans to visit campus. Class of 2015 defensive back Ykili Ross had been scheduled to visit last weekend, but he was unable to catch his flight following his Friday night game, per Loy. The four-star prospect, Loy said, could visit this weekend, but that "remains to be seen."

Class of 2015 three-star athlete Gary Jennings won't be visiting this weekend, Loy said, after Jennings' team won last weekend, setting up a Friday night game. Class of 2015 running back Ronald Jones also won't be in town after his squad advanced as well, according to Loy. Jones, the No. 9 running back and No. 83 overall player in the country, per 247Sports' Composite Rankings, is committed to Oklahoma State.

As part of Notre Dame's continuing search for a second running back to pair with commitment Josh Adams in its class of 2015, the Irish are planning to welcome Miami pledge Dexter Williams to campus this weekend, Loy said. Williams is slotted as the No. 14 running back in the country and gave his verbal commitment to Miami in April.

Notre Dame sent out an offer to class of 2015 running back and Penn State commitment Saquon Barkley on Sunday, according to 247Sports. Barkley checks in as the No. 16 running back nationally.

"At this point they're extending offers to cover their bases [at running back]," Loy said of the flurry of activity at the position.

The Irish have already flipped class of 2015 linebacker Josh Barajas and class of 2015 quarterback Brandon Wimbush from Penn State.

"As of right now, everything [Barkley] says [he] is completely pro-Penn State, 100 percent committed," Loy said. "All you can do is take his word for it."

In any event, Loy described the Whitehall, Pennsylvania native as a very athletic back who can do it all, including receiving out of the backfield. Barkley already decommitted from Rutgers before pledging to the Nittany Lions, and Loy said Notre Dame

knows it's a "long shot" to land him.

Other class of 2015 running back targets include Soso Jamabo, Nick Brossette and Jordan Cronkrite.

In addition to potential visitors Ross and Williams this weekend, Loy said three-star safety Ben Edwards is in line to be on campus for the Louisville game. Loy believes Edwards's recruitment will come down to the Irish and Stanford.

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out BlueAndGold.com. Email Andrew Owens at aowens@blueandgold.com and tell him The Observer sent you.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu



Photo courtesy Blue & Gold Illustrated, 247 Sports

Class of 2015 running back Dexter Williams is scheduled to visit campus this weekend, according to Irish recruiting analyst Tom Loy. Williams is rated the No. 14 running back in the country by 247 Sports.

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“I went after it with everything I had.”

By **SAMANTHA ZUBA**
Assistant Managing Editor

Senior linebacker Joe Schmidt had other offers.

But they weren't from Notre Dame.

Since he was a little kid, Schmidt had wanted to attend Notre Dame and play for the Irish, and he decided not to set that dream aside for scholarship offers from schools like Air Force, Cincinnati and Arizona.

Instead, he decided to walk on for the Irish, not wanting to have any regrets.

“As a kid, my dream was always to play at Notre Dame,” Schmidt said. “It’s something I was passionate about since as long as I can remember. For some people, it’s about playing in the NFL or personal accolades. [For me] it was always about Notre Dame, going to Notre Dame.”

Schmidt hails from Orange, California, decidedly in USC territory, and his dad came from a USC family. But Schmidt says his dad always liked Notre Dame, and once he watched “Rudy” with his family around age five, Schmidt was hooked on the University.

He and his dad used to watch the Irish, rosters in hand, and follow recruiting news. And it didn’t hurt that his sister and now brother-in-law attended Notre Dame starting when Schmidt was 10.

Schmidt saw his sister and her future husband grow during their time at Notre Dame and knew the school would offer him the academic, athletic and personal development opportunities he wanted.

“I thought Notre Dame was going to provide me with the best place to really grow myself into the man I wanted to become, and that was important to me,” Schmidt said.

Schmidt started earning playing time sophomore year with the special teams unit, appearing in 10 games. Things really took off in the game against Miami at Soldier Field on Oct. 6, 2012. Schmidt made a series of tackles on kickoff coverage units, including one resounding hit on a sky kick.

“The [returner] kind of splits

it out, and I’m the safety on the right on this particular play, and I ended up just hitting him really, really hard and making a great tackle right on their sideline,” Schmidt said. “[Irish head] coach [Brian] Kelly saw it, loved it, and after that, coach Kelly put me on every team and told [special teams] coach [Scott] Booker that he wanted me on there.

“That was really my big opportunity, and thank God I was able to capitalize on it.”

Schmidt capitalized on enough opportunities to earn himself a scholarship after his sophomore season. In his junior season, Schmidt appeared in all 13 games and notched 15 total tackles.

As a senior and regular starter this year, Schmidt put together his best season yet as the team’s leading tackler with 65 total through the first seven games. He emerged as a defensive leader from the middle linebacker position as well.

Cornerback and fellow senior Connor Cavalaris and Schmidt have been friends since freshman year when both arrived as preferred walk-ons, and Cavalaris has seen Schmidt grow into his bigger role.

“He’s been, with so many young guys coming in and playing now ... Joe has just been not only a vocal leader, but a leader on the field, and he’s set the example since day one of camp or winter workouts that this is how we’re going to work,” Cavalaris said.

Sophomore linebacker Jaylon Smith said Schmidt also has led the young defense with his instincts for the game.

“Just Joe understanding the full dynamic of the defensive scheme, understanding what everyone has to do, making sure that everyone had everything set and locked and loaded, him being a senior, having that leadership, he’s meant a lot to us,” Smith said.

“All the young guys call him Papa Bear,” he added. Schmidt will be the first one

to admit his need to rely on instincts instead of sheer physicality, although he has worked tirelessly in developing that area.

“I’ve never been the biggest or the fastest,” Schmidt said. “Any physical attributes, I’ve never been the best at anything in that regard.”

Instead, he has led because of how well he understands the game, having played many different positions and in various schemes.

“I’ve played every position on the football field,” Schmidt said. “Everywhere from every offensive line position, quarterback, fullback, running back, tight end, wide receiver, all of them. I kicked. Actually, I’ve never held, but I’ve played corner, safety, all the linebackers, all the defensive linemen.”

“So from a young age, I

the team without you,” Schmidt said. “... It’s like breaking up with your girlfriend and then the next day watching her go out to dinner with someone else and watching that happen every day for a really long time. I don’t know if that’s a good analogy, but it hurts not being out there with my brothers.”

Schmidt’s injury coincided with Notre Dame’s biggest struggles of the season after entertaining playoff hopes. The Irish have lost two straight games, to Arizona State and Northwestern, without Schmidt on the field. But he has invested himself in helping his teammates continue to develop.

“I’ve just tried to do whatever I can to help guys improve and continue to lead from the back seat now,” Schmidt said.

And these toughest times will hardly be the ones Schmidt remembers.

best, he says.

When asked if he has a favorite moment, Schmidt quickly and firmly answers, “Yes.”

He remembers

counts his pass break-on Oct. 19, 2013 against USC in detail, including the defensive package (dime) down (third-eight). Schmidt’s sive play kept the out of field-goal range at the end of game.

“It was one of the best moments for me ever because, just

being from Southern California, my whole family was there, and I remember after the game, seeing all my family; everybody that I loved the most was there,” Schmidt said. “And I remember laying awake that night and thinking about something my dad told me, ‘Really remember the good times because there’s always going to be bad ones in the future. You need to draw on that good experience,’ and that’s one of those experiences I like to draw on. It was by far and away the best day.”

Even with his injury, Schmidt tries to remain as optimistic as possible.

“I try to be the first person to switch my mind and start looking for the positives out of the learning that just happened from whatever experience it was, whether it was losing a game or breaking a leg, trying to see what I can do,” Schmidt said. “Like, hey, my leg’s broken, but my upper body’s going to look great. You know, hey, we lost, but think about all the plays we just saw. Shoot, we’re never going to get beat on this route again.”

Besides, he has many other memories, including the preparation for the 2013 BCS National Championship Game with Cavalaris.

“We woke up the next morning [for the game], and our alarms were both set to the Rudy theme song, like the main title, so we woke up to ‘Doo-doo-doo-doo,’” Schmidt says, singing a rendition. “And I just remember opening my eyes and locking eyes with Connor and being like, ‘Yes.’”

Schmidt, a management-entrepreneurship major, hopes to work in consulting or sales and maybe start his own business.

But before that, Schmidt could have more football left to play.

“I love the locker room that we’re building, and I love the culture that we’re building, and I’m fired up about that, so definitely, I see it as an amazing opportunity if they allow me to come back,” Schmidt said.

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JOSH ATKINSON | CB | STOCKTON, CALIF.

Atkinson competes on field, track for Irish

Observer Staff Report

Senior cornerback Josh Atkinson has done a lot of running in his time at Notre Dame, but his time running out of the tunnel at Notre Dame Stadium will come to a close Saturday, when the Irish take on Louisville.

The Stockton, California, native has split his athletic career at Notre Dame between the football and track and field teams.

On the football field, Atkinson has seen playing time mainly on special teams. In his freshman year, the cornerback played in eight games and recorded two special teams tackles.

The next season, he still competed on special teams plays but also took more snaps at cornerback as well. Atkinson played in all 13 games, including the 2013

BCS National Championship Game, and he totaled five tackles on the year. Three of those came against Boston College on Nov. 10, 2012, marking his career high.

The 5-foot-11.5, 195-pounder picked up three more tackles last season in five appearances, including one during Notre Dame's victory over Rutgers in the Pinstripe Bowl on Dec. 28.

Atkinson has not made an appearance for Notre Dame this season.

On the track, Atkinson competed in sprint events for the Irish. He placed fourth in the 100-meter dash at the 2012 Big East Outdoor Championships his freshman year and finished fifth in the 60-meter dash at the Big East Indoor Championships earlier that year.

After not competing for

Notre Dame track and field his sophomore year, Atkinson took 15th place at the ACC Indoor Championships in the 200-meter dash last spring. At the conference's outdoor championships, he placed fifth in the 100-meter dash and seventh in the 200-meter event and was part of the 4x100-meter relay team, which took second place.

Atkinson's twin brother, George, was a standout on the gridiron, leaving Notre Dame after last season to prepare for the NFL draft. The Oakland Raiders signed George as an undrafted free agent in May, and the running back is currently a member of the team's practice squad. George also competed on the track team his freshman year.

Notre Dame declined to make Atkinson available for an interview.



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

Irish senior cornerback Josh Atkinson prepares for action during Notre Dame's Blue-Gold Game on April 12 at Notre Dame Stadium.

JALEN BROWN | CB | IRVING, TEXAS

Brown sees time on field in secondary

Observer Staff Report

Senior cornerback Jalen Brown had his best year as a sophomore in 2012.

Tall and quick, the 6-foot-2, 202-pound Brown was a well-regarded Texas recruit coming

out of high school as a football and track star at MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas.

Brown didn't play his freshman year at Notre Dame in 2011, but he appeared in seven games his sophomore season

in 2012. Brown recorded his two career unassisted tackles that season, making one each against Purdue on Sept. 8 and Michigan State on Sept. 15.

As a junior in 2013, Brown played against Michigan on

Sept. 7 and against Air Force on Oct. 26 but did not record a tackle.

An assisted tackle and pass breakup against Wake Forest on Nov. 17, 2012, round out Brown's career stats.

He has not played this season.

Brown is enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters as a sociology major.

Notre Dame declined to make him available for an interview.

CONNOR CAVALARIS | CB | LAKE FOREST, ILL.

Cavalaris gains strong friendships, scholarship

By GREG HADLEY
Associate Sports Editor

Connor Cavalaris has never questioned the path he is on, even as it has led him to stranger and stranger places.

While at Lake Forest (Illinois) High School, the senior cornerback drew interest from smaller FBS and Division-II schools. He could have played and possibly started for Ivy League teams. Instead, he chose to walk on at Notre Dame.

"I was on a visit here, and one of the coaches offered me a spot on the team as a walk-on," he said. "It was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up. The academics, the prestige ... the football tradition. It was somewhere I knew I wanted to be, and I couldn't pass that up. It was an easy decision."

Then, when he arrived in South Bend, Cavalaris was assigned, along with three roommates, to Carroll Hall, a 30-minute walk from the team's locker room in the Guglielmino Athletics Complex.

"It was a little chilly on those ... walks to the east side of campus," he said. "My first year, I was in a one-room quad with three other roommates, and you know, you meet guys from all different places around the world. That first

freshman fall, you're extremely busy, and you're out of your comfort zone a little bit, and things are moving really fast."

His entire freshman season, Cavalaris never saw the field. In his sophomore campaign, he registered his first collegiate tackle against BYU on Oct. 20. Then, in his finest moment on the field for the Irish, he collected two of his seven career tackles during Notre Dame's 42-14 loss to Alabama in the 2013 BCS National Championship Game.

In 2012, Calavaris played in 10 of Notre Dame's 12 games on the run to the national championship. As a junior, however, he took the field only three times.

Finally, before the 2014 season started, Irish head coach Brian Kelly extended a scholarship offer to Cavalaris, rewarding the walk-on for three years of dedication.

This season, Cavalaris has seen action in nine of Notre Dame's games as one of four senior cornerbacks for the Irish, and he has recorded one tackle.

"We're going to take each game one at a time," Calavaris said. "We've got a really strong group of seniors and senior leadership. We're going to go out there and make our teammates, our coaches

and our fans proud. We still have a lot to play for."

As a walk-on, Cavalaris said he has developed deep friendships with his fellow non-scholarship players, including former walk-on and senior linebacker Joe Schmidt, he said.

"Joe and I were on the same visit for the spring game of 2011," he said. "We kind of became friends after that, and ever since, we've been really close. We've both had success on the field and off the field, and we live off campus together."

As an accountancy major, Cavalaris has faced the usual struggle to balance athletics and academics but plans to put that major to use right after he leaves college, he said.

"It's all about time management and discipline," he said. "Accounting is a pretty demanding and intense major and being on the football team, you don't exactly have a lot of free time, so you really have to be disciplined."

"I'm definitely interested in working in financial services or an accounting firm. I'm also interested in potentially doing a Master's program in accountancy or business administration."

Through it all, Calavaris has never questioned his decision to



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

Irish senior cornerback Connor Cavalaris gets set for a play during the annual Blue-Gold Game on April 12 at Notre Dame Stadium.

come to Notre Dame. The thought of starting for other schools or attending other academically elite universities does not bother him at all, he said.

"I always knew in high school that I wanted to play college football," Calavaris said. "Notre Dame nation is strong wherever you go, and you dream about being a part of something this amazing."

"Looking back [on my time here], it's been incredible. The

people you meet, the coaching staff ... the teachers, your fellow students, the people in your dorm — it's been incredible. Being on the football team, you meet guys from a lot of different backgrounds, and the relationships you build with coaches and teammates that last a lifetime are the best things to take away. It's just been very rewarding."

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KYLE BRINDZA | K/P | CANTON, MICH.

Brindza beats club foot, kicks into record book

By MIKE MONACO
Senior Sports Writer

Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Oct. 10 edition of The Observer.

"You're made to be a kicker or you're not."

The words of Brandon Kornblue ring true on Notre Dame's campus. Kornblue, the former Michigan kicker and current kicking coach, sees the innate traits in one of his budding pupils, Irish senior kicker Kyle Brindza. Kornblue sees the power, the strength. He sees the confidence, the mental ability.

Brindza agrees.

"Choosing kicking and having all those physical traits and mental traits, I feel like I've been born to be able to do this," Brindza said.

But what happens when the kid born to kick is born, well, not to kick? What happens when the otherwise ready-made kicker is born with clubfoot?

With his next made field goal, Brindza will set the all-time Notre Dame record for most career field goals, breaking a tie with former Irish great and 23-year NFL kicker John Carney. Still, even though as a young peewee soccer player Brindza said he wanted to be an MLS goalie or a "field-goal kicker" when he grew up, it was tough for him to envision it playing out as it has.

"I look back now and I'm like, I never ever would have thought he'd be where he is today," Brindza's mother, Tiffany, said. "But with his determination, this is where he's gotten."

Dennis the Menace

Born with clubfoot that had his right foot turned backward, young Kyle was not like the other kids. Soon after his birth, Tiffany hauled her son to Shriners Hospital for Children in Chicago to be treated.

"You hear the words from the

doctors that he's not gonna be able to play sports, he's always gonna be handicapped, he's not gonna be like the normal kids," she recalled.

But sitting at Shriners, Tiffany soon realized that other kids had it worse. And right then and there, Tiffany made up her mind that she wouldn't let a birth defect stop Kyle.

"I'm not gonna let this affect him and I'm not gonna stop him if he wants to do something, I'm gonna encourage him and help him do what he wants," she said. "That's how I've always felt."

Unable to put any weight on his foot, Kyle was carted to day care in a wagon. Before he even reached seventh grade, Brindza had somewhere between five and eight separate surgeries on his right foot. One even forced him into two different casts for a combined 12 months and sapped the calf muscle from his right leg, a difference still palpable today. Now, roughly 10 years removed from his last operation, the evidence is still convincing. His right foot is etched with stitching and scars the way the brown pigskin he boots is lined with white laces.

Amid the various braces and casts, other kids called him Forrest Gump.

But people also called him Dennis the Menace, as he was always running around the house, even in a cast.

"Having all the odds put against you, not being able to walk and all these stories about this person's life being affected — I threw it out the window," Brindza said.

In sixth grade, for instance, Brindza had surgery in November and was told he probably wouldn't play sports for two years — an eternity for someone who said he grew up playing any sport within an arm's distance. By Christmas break, Brindza had returned to his travel soccer team because, well, it needed its

goalie. It was at that time, Tiffany said, she truly noticed the determination and confidence her son possessed.

'I've always had confidence in myself'

Confidence comes naturally to Brindza. He had never kicked a football until the summer before his freshman year at Plymouth High School in Canton, Michigan. Set to be an outside linebacker on the freshman team, Brindza was called over to give kicking a try.

He connected on a few 40-yarders. Then from more than 50 yards. Soon enough, Brindza was the varsity kicker.

In 2008, Brindza attended his first Kornblue Kicking camp at the University of Michigan.

"We saw a ton of potential in him," said Kornblue, the Florida-based kicking and punting coach who holds camps in more than 20 locations now. "He was a very strong kid for his age. He was just a sophomore in high school but had the leg strength of one of the older guys."

But potential, as Kornblue is quick to note, is a dangerous word. Some lack the drive and determination. Others lack the discipline to stay sharp with weights, nutrition and flexibility.

"That's one of the things that separates Kyle, that drive to be the best and not just being satisfied with being better than most of the people," Kornblue said. "He wants to be as good as he can be. He wants to be better than everybody."

Brindza has always admired his all-time favorite athlete, former New York Yankees closer Mariano Rivera. He loves Rivera's mindset on the mound, the potent knowledge that nobody could touch Rivera's cutter.

In a similar way, Brindza is an avid golf fan and roughly a nine-handicap, even though he just



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior kicker/punter Kyle Brindza punts out of the end zone in Notre Dame's 30-14 win against Purdue on Sept. 13.

began playing two years ago. Brindza, whose favorite golfer is Rickie Fowler, said he sees perfect parallels between kicking and golfing.

"It's the exact same thing," Brindza said, citing similarities not just with the requisite on-your-own mental toughness but also with eye placement, follow-throughs and hip orientation. "I treat my drive like it's my kickoff. I treat my field goals like it's my 9-iron."

'Are you sure?'

Brindza has been too busy to golf of late, naturally. The do-it-all senior handles kickoffs, field goals and punting for Notre Dame.

As a freshman, Brindza handled just kickoff duties, allowing him to "get his feet wet."

As a sophomore, he drilled 23-of-31 field goals. Last year, he only missed six field goals despite adding punting duties.

"I've always had the leg strength," Brindza said. "But it's been accuracy that pushed me to get better."

Brindza has also developed the trust of Irish head coach Brian Kelly. Brindza said he is always in Kelly's ear on the sideline toward the end of drives, prodding Kelly to just "take the three points and get out of here."

"You got this?" Kelly will ask Brindza.

"Yes," Brindza replies.

"Are you sure?" Kelly double-checks, as if Brindza's answer will change.

Brindza says he could hit from 65 yards away in a game with the wind at his back. He says he hit a 74-yarder this past summer with a snap and a hold, not just a

stationary stick.

With his 45-yard field goal in the fourth quarter of Saturday's win over Stanford, Brindza pulled into a tie with Carney for 51 career made field goals.

"This record is a blessing," Brindza said. "John Carney was one of my idols growing up and he still is. He was so accurate, pinpoint accurate. Being able to take that record is a blessing but at the same time I couldn't care less just because I want to be 6-0 rather than have a record."

The 'dilemma'

Brindza still works with Kornblue here and there throughout the summer, now honing multiple crafts. During nearly every session, Brindza and Kornblue will work on all three phases of his game — kickoffs, field goals and punting.

But Kornblue said the pair will soon need to start deciding which area Brindza will focus on. He'll almost assuredly handle kickoffs in his pursuit of the next level, but will he punt or kick field goals?

"It's actually a dilemma that we're in," Kornblue said. "There's nobody in the NFL that does all three."

Brindza is well aware of that. But that's not stopping him from setting his sights high. Indianapolis Colts punter Pat McAfee wants to perform all three, Brindza said. But so far, no one does it.

"If somebody takes a risk on that, it'll be the best risk they'll ever take," Brindza said.

The odds have been stacked against him before.

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JODI LO | The Observer

Irish senior kicker/punter Kyle Brindza kicks off during Notre Dame's 50-43 win against North Carolina on Oct. 11 at Notre Dame Stadium. Brindza has made 11 field goals this season for the Irish.

AMIR CARLISLE | WR | SANTA CLARA, CALIF.

Carlisle helps Irish in various ways after transfer



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish senior receiver Amir Carlisle returns a kickoff during Notre Dame's 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland.

By **KIT LOUGHRAN**
Sports Writer

From USC to Notre Dame, from running back to receiver, Amir Carlisle has switched schools and positions en route to finding his place in the Irish offense.

Carlisle's on-field presence has been made known during his third year at Notre Dame. While he missed his sophomore season due to an ankle injury, Carlisle made his first appearance as running back in 2013. Carlisle played in all 13 games, carrying the ball 47 times for 204 yards with an average of 4.3 yards per carry.

However, the 2013 season ended less advantageously than it began for Carlisle after his fourth-quarter fumble in a close game with Purdue on Sept. 14. The following spring, the decision was made that the Santa Clara, California native would switch positions to receiver — a decision that would transform his career.

"It's been a learning experience, definitely," Carlisle said. "A new position is a new perspective. But it has been a cool position switch, and it's a learning experience each and every day. We are getting better as a unit, and I'm getting better as an individual.

Even for a talented player like Carlisle, switching from a familiar running back position to an new slot receiver role did not come without extra practice and focus.

"I met with [Irish offensive coordinator] coach Mike Denbrock in the spring time

after practices to get the concepts down and to learn the more minute details of the position," Carlisle said.

His dedication has certainly paid off. Through 10 games, Carlisle has recorded 273 yards on 19 receptions for three touchdowns, averaging 14.4 yards per catch. In Notre Dame's 55-31 loss to Arizona State on Nov. 8, Carlisle made a 32-yard catch midway through the third quarter, tying his season-long catch against Rice on Aug. 30. By the end of that same third quarter, Carlisle beat his 32-yard stat with a 35-yard catch.

He didn't stop there. Carlisle caught a 25-yard pass from senior quarterback Everett Golson for his third touchdown of the season and a total of 92 yards on the game to bring the Irish within three points of the Sun Devils, 34-31.

Earlier this season, Carlisle had a breakout game against Michigan on Sept. 6. The converted receiver posted his first two career touchdowns for the Irish, with seven receptions for 61 yards. His successful completion of a screen on his second touchdown speaks to Carlisle's ability to transition his running back traits to those moments when he gets the ball in space, as he put the Irish up 28-0.

"Performance-wise, [I would consider] the Michigan game this year [one of my best games]," Carlisle said. "But hopefully, God has bigger and better things in plan.

"My ultimate goal is to

help the team win in whatever way I can. I'm not a guy who's really focused on statistics, but whether it says 'W' at the end of the day in the win column."

Carlisle isn't only helping the Irish on their road to victory in his new slot receiver position. He has also become an important asset on kick returns.

He leads the Irish on the season with 491 yards on 23 kick returns, averaging 21.3 yards per return. Carlisle recorded a career-long 47-yard return off the opening kickoff against Purdue on Sept. 13, which marked the longest Notre Dame kickoff return since former Irish running back George Atkinson's 47-yard return against Purdue last season. Against Arizona State alone, Carlisle had four kickoff returns for 102 yards.

"Kick return has always been fun for me," Carlisle said. "It's always an opportunity to make a play, and it's really a team unit because it takes all 11 guys on the field in order to have success.

"So, it's definitely been fun, [and] it's been a blessing that the coaches have trusted me to this position. The best is yet to come for our kick return."

However, Carlisle's journey has not been all smooth as it may appear on paper. Since leaving USC after the 2011 season, Carlisle has suffered from ankle, collarbone and MCL injuries. For most, sitting out an entire season due to injury as Carlisle did his sophomore year would demotivate, as would the MCL injury that

knocked the 5-foot-10, 190-lb. receiver out early during the Purdue game this season. But Carlisle said he has continued to keep his head up and his focus as strong as ever.

"It's just about leaning on God and my relationship with God as a Christian as well as staying mentally strong with God as a healer," Carlisle said. "It's about trusting in God and trusting in my training staff to get me back on the field.

"Unfortunately, I've spent a good amount of my career with our training staff, and they've done a great job throughout my career."

Carlisle said he will continue his football career next year at Notre Dame, as he still has one year of eligibility left. While his ultimate goal of reaching the NFL remained steady during his transfer from USC to Notre Dame, Carlisle said he was grateful for the opportunity to shed USC's cardinal and gold for the Irish blue and gold — despite trading in the Southern California sunshine for the South Bend winters.

"Notre Dame was always a dream out of high school, especially when Notre Dame was recruiting me," he said. "It's such a prestigious school, with all its tradition — academically and athletically.

"The opportunity presented itself while I was at USC, and it was kind of a God-send that I couldn't pass up the opportunity, so I decided to come here. The weather is obviously an adjustment, but otherwise my experience here has been a very solid experience."

As the senior helps the Irish close out their regular season, Carlisle expressed humility for his on-field success, attributing his achievements to the support provided by teammates, faith and especially his family.

"I have two great Christian parents who have really raised me well, and I just want to thank them for all they've done and for getting me to the position that I'm at today," Carlisle said.

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WEI LIN | The Observer

Irish senior receiver Amir Carlisle marches downfield during Notre Dame's 48-17 win against Rice on Aug. 30.

AUSTIN COLLINSWORTH | S | FORT THOMAS, KY.

Collinsworth captains team through injuries

By ALEX CARSON
Sports Writer

As far as the Brian Kelly era at Notre Dame goes, graduate student safety Austin Collinsworth has been a mainstay.

When the Fort Thomas, Kentucky, native committed to Notre Dame less than a week after Kelly was hired, he became the coach's first commit at his new job.

"I always loved Brian Kelly when he was the coach at Cincinnati," Collinsworth said. "I just didn't really want to go there because I wanted to go to a school with great academic prestige ... so when he moved and went to Notre Dame, for me, it was a no brainer. A coach I loved and a school I loved — it was just easy."

Of course, with that academic prestige comes a lot of work — especially when juggling the class load with the football load.

"It's been tough," Collinsworth said. "Certain times more than others, but you've got to do what you've got to do. ... It's hard at any level at this school, but certainly with the time requirements, you've got to sacrifice

sleep and get the work done and just find a way."

Collinsworth's career did not start out at his familiar safety role. When he first came to campus in 2010, he was viewed as a receiver before quickly switching over to the defensive side of the ball.

"[It was] a whole lot of working, a whole lot of time in the film room," Collinsworth said. "You know, one year I'm learning route combinations, and the next year, I'm learning how to cover them. But it does all kind of fit in ... so it did help me out."

Last Saturday against Northwestern, Collinsworth recorded his first career touchdown on just his second play back from injury, scooping up a Wildcat fumble and running it in for the score.

"It was my first college touchdown, so it was pretty cool; I'm not gonna lie," Collinsworth said.

However, for the safety, the moment is not clear-cut as his best in an Irish uniform. In each of the final three games of last season — BYU, Stanford and the Pinstripe Bowl against Rutgers — Collinsworth recorded an interception, becoming the



Observer File Photo

Austin Collinsworth pressures Michigan graduate student quarterback Devin Gardner during Notre Dame's 41-30 loss to the Wolverines on Sept. 7, 2013 at Michigan Stadium.

first Irish player to notch an interception in three straight games since Kyle McCarthy did it in 2009. Not to mention that his trio of interceptions started the Irish defense's streak of 13 straight games with one, the nation's second longest active streak entering this weekend.

"They're both great moments," Collinsworth said. "It's hard to put one over the other."

Prior to the season, Collinsworth was named one of four team captains, along with senior running back Cam McDaniel, senior offensive lineman Nick Martin and junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day.

"They named Sheldon first, and I obviously knew that there were only two defensive captains, so I got a little nervous, you know, I was hoping to be captain," Collinsworth said. "I wasn't sure, but then it ended up happening, and it was a pretty awesome surprise."

While not necessarily making it a goal to be named one, Collinsworth said he had experiences from past mistakes that he wanted to share with the team as a captain.

"I always wanted to lead the guys and have them look up to me," Collinsworth said. "I'm an older guy. I think I have a lot of wisdom from over the years, screwing a lot of things up, so it's nice to be able to pass that down and have it recognized."

But thanks to a pair of injuries, Collinsworth has played in only three of Notre Dame's 10 games this season and has had to take on more of a coach-type role to carry on his captain duties.

"I spend time watching film with the guys, getting them ready for games, coaching them on the sidelines," Collinsworth said. "It's not the most glamorous job in the world, but that's kind of what I signed up for, and I think it's what everyone expects out of me as a captain — just doing whatever I can whenever I can."

Despite his experience this season with watching film

and coaching his teammates on the sidelines, Collinsworth said he has no interest in going into coaching — at least not immediately.

"Right now, I would say there's no way I'm going into coaching," Collinsworth said. "Now, that could change. I've just been so immersed in football for so long, I think it's going to be nice to take a break, get away from it for a little while."

Collinsworth, who is currently enrolled in the MBA program, said he is still unsure about his path after graduation.

"I graduate in May, so if I decide to pursue the NFL Draft, I'll be training all spring, but if I decide to go somewhere else, I'll be doing job interviews to get ready for the next step," Collinsworth said.

As Kelly's first commit nearly five years ago, Collinsworth has been around for the entire evolution of the program under the head coach and said he thinks the program has transformed dramatically during Kelly's tenure.

"The culture of this program has changed 180 degrees," Collinsworth said. "When I first got here, it was all about, 'How do I get to the NFL?' — people didn't care that much about the team; it was a lot more individual-based, and every year, it's taken a step towards more of a team, more of a team. And this year, you hardly hear about an individual goal from anybody ... and that's a championship-caliber program, and I think that's what we built here."

"I really hope that, going forward, this is continued and built on until we are back in our former glory."

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EMMET FARNAN | The Observer

Irish graduate student safety Austin Collinsworth returns a recovered fumble for a touchdown during Notre Dame's 43-40 overtime loss to Northwestern on Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium.

BEN COUNCELL | LB | ASHEVILLE, N.C.

Council feels at home in unlikely place

By MANNY DE JESUS

Sports Writer

More than 600 miles away from his hometown in Asheville, North Carolina, senior linebacker Ben Council is convinced that Notre Dame has become a second home for him.

"I've never really heard of anything on Notre Dame previously to being recruited for football," Council said. "I watched Rudy, and that was really the only thing I've ever really known about Notre Dame, so when they came up and they started recruiting me, it was strange. But then all I had to do was come up for a visit with my dad, and I was sold."

Ranked in Rivals.com's top 100 players in the class of 2011, Council was an all-state linebacker at A.C. Reynolds High School and an ESPN four-star recruit. He received interest from Auburn, Georgia Tech, North Carolina, North Carolina State and South Carolina, and Notre Dame was the only school outside of his region that he received interest from. Council said his only concern about attending Notre Dame was how far from home it was.

"Compared to all the other schools, it was a different culture here," Council said. "It was orderly, the coaching staff here was really interested in creating a family, and the academics here is next to none. It was really weird for me because I was a homebody. I grew up in North Carolina, and I didn't like leaving home, so coming here was a huge step for me."

Council entered the program as an outside linebacker who looked to fit well in Bob Diaco's 3-4 defense. However, he redshirted his freshman year behind a defense led by former Irish linebacker Manti Te'o, defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore and safety Harrison Smith. Despite not playing, Council said he learned more than he could imagine watching and practicing with a defense that would go on to lead the Irish to a national championship run the next year.

"I learned a lot that year," Council said. "At the time, I don't think we understood how good we really were, but now looking back, it's easy to see that we were a good team. It was cool being able to play with them and learn a lot from them, and of course, going to the national championship game was surreal."

Council had won a state title in the 4A North Carolina football division in 2009, but to go on to play in the BCS National Championship Game was unbelievable, he said. Although he was a part of the team's run to a title appearance, Council was still limited on the field, appearing in all 12 games and backing up former Irish linebacker

Prince Shembo and defensive lineman Ishaq Williams.

Last season, Council was primed to have his best year at Notre Dame, rotating in the starting outside linebacker position with Williams and then-freshman Jaylon Smith. He played in nine games before injuring his left ACL against Navy on Nov. 2, 2013.

Council was having a career game against the Midshipmen, tallying five tackles, a tackle for loss and a pass breakup before his untimely injury. Council said it wasn't easy for him to accept the significance of the injury, which sidelined him for the rest of the season.

Before talking about his injury, Council stood quietly for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out a way to describe an incident he wishes he could have avoided.

"It was definitely a big setback," Council said with a sigh. "I was finally getting comfortable with the defense, getting playing time and starting for a starting job. From Air Force going into Navy, I had two big games, and getting hurt was just tough, but it is what it is."

Council admitted that there was a silver lining following his season-ending injury. His roommate, senior linebacker Jarrett Grace, suffered a broken tibia and fibula in a win over Arizona State a few weeks before his injury. As both of them recovered from their respective injuries, their friendship grew by spending much of their time together. Council said they called themselves the "cripple crew."

"We were always together with our crutches and scooters walking around campus, so the injury had its good and bad," he said.

A season removed from the ACL injury, Council said he still doesn't think he is 100 percent back to full recovery. Coming into a new 4-3 defensive scheme under new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder, Council had to learn a new defense and play a different role than he did in the last three years.

"I'm not going to use it as an excuse, but I definitely don't feel the same as I did before," Council said.

Despite the changes and return from injury, Council said he believes his role is still important on the team. With Jaylon Smith in his second year as a starter, Council puts it on himself to help develop Smith and other young players that have had to contribute early. As a mentor for others, Council said he feels like the locker room atmosphere is only getting better as the players around him continue to grow, on and off the field.

"My biggest takeaway from this season is the camaraderie," Council said. "I love being with



ZACHARY LLORENS | The Observer

Irish senior linebacker Ben Council readies himself for an upcoming play during Notre Dame's 50-43 victory against North Carolina on Oct. 11 at Notre Dame Stadium.

these guys and watching the young guys coming in and develop real quick. I try my best to help them with the pressure and help them learn, but kicking back with them is probably the thing I'm going to miss the most."

Despite not wanting to get away from home as a senior in high school, Council said he

feels like he built another home here. Still undecided about whether he will return next season, Council said he knows he has left his mark on Notre Dame's football program and will not forget the memories he created during his four years here.

"[Ben Council] will be

remembered for going out and pushing it 100 percent of the time," Council said. "Pushing through pain and going out there every single day, giving it my all, is what I hope to be remembered for."

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MATTHIAS FARLEY | CB | CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Farley finds success with position change

By ISAAC LORTON
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Nov. 14 edition of The Observer.

Whatever may change on the field, Matthias Farley remains the same.

"Sweet beard pic," Farley said as he wrapped up his photo shoot Wednesday.

Farley's facial follicles are a talent of his, he noted.

"Every time I have had a beard since I started playing football, I have played better than if I shave my face, historically," Farley said.

The easy-going, self-assured Charlotte, North Carolina, native said it is this nature that allows him to weather the chaos of Notre Dame football.

"I have been the exact same way since I've got here," Farley said. "When you're going through change, if you're grounded and find out who you are as a person outside of football — because there's so many things that can change on a whim in this game — you can't be serious all of the time. So I think it has helped me because I like to goof around and have a good time. Just keeping that in mind and understanding that there's a lot of things at stake in the game of football [is important], but just remembering to enjoy it and understand it's a blessing to be able to play it period, especially to be able to play it here, [is also important]"

Farley has played four different positions in an Irish uniform

and started at three of them. As a freshman, Farley was on the practice squad as a redshirt receiver who often watched away games from his dorm, Carroll Hall. As a sophomore, Farley was asked to play safety, and shortly thereafter, he was thrown into a starting role after injuries to former Irish safety Jamoris Slaughter and graduate student safety Austin Collinsworth. Farley excelled in his new role with 49 tackles, an interception and a crucial seven-yard tackle-for-loss against Stanford in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's 20-13 win in October 2012. As a junior, much was expected from Farley, but he did not quite live up to those high expectations throughout the season. Farley said he placed these lofty expectations on himself as well, but such thoughts were hindrances at times.

"I think I had to grow up a lot," Farley said of his play last season. "When you get put in a situation where you do well and then you come back and things are expected of you and you don't do as well or don't live up to it, it's easy to take it hard on yourself and harp on things that you should probably let go."

As a senior, Farley was asked to play the nickelback corner position under new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder. The position was much more complex compared to the nickel corner in former defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's system, and after watching a lot of film, VanGorder asked Farley to take on that role. Used to changing positions, Farley said he took it



KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Irish senior cornerback Matthias Farley chases down Stanford senior receiver Devon Cajuste during Notre Dame's 17-14 win over the Cardinal on Oct. 4 at Notre Dame Stadium.

all in stride.

"I saw it as a way to start over," Farley said of his position change. "It's a new coordinator, a new system. It's kind of been the story of my career: starting over. I had no reservations about when he said he wanted to move me. I was on board 100 percent."

Farley said he was much more prepared for his senior year because he put his time at Notre Dame into perspective. His even-keeled demeanor has contributed to his play this season, which has included 32 tackles, 3.5 sacks, 6.5 tackles-for-loss and three interceptions.

"I came in [this season] with a different mindset that I was just going to enjoy this because there's somebody somewhere — probably thousands of people — who would trade with me in a day — and trade with any of us, not just myself. It goes so fast. ... I feel like I just got here. So really I just enjoy every day, give my all every day and try to encourage everybody else around me."

It is through all of his trials and experiences that Farley has become a calming source and advisor for his young teammates and new starters on the Irish defense, he said.

"I feel like I have gone through a lot of things that they have gone through," Farley said. "My sophomore year, I got thrown in due to an injury, and last year, I had a lot of ups and downs. So having gone through that, and seeing guys when they get done, it's really easy for me to pick up on it because I was right there really not too long ago at all."

Farley remains rooted in and inspired by the lessons his family has taught him, he said. His memories cover his left arm, chest and back in the form of tattoos. On his bicep, his very first tattoo, which reads "Farley Sempre," or "Farley Forever," surrounded by the outline of North Carolina reminds him of his family and home. The number "7" on his elbow represents his seven siblings. Coming off the "7," a staircase climbs into the clouds of heaven in remembrance of his deceased brother, Titus. The poem, "Invictus," on his back tells him he "is the master of [his] fate" and the "captain of [his] soul," while the large Icarus on his shoulder reminds him to be humble and grounded, he said. These images map out how Farley became who he is as a person, he said.

"I think tattoos are the story of my life on my arm," Farley said. "And it's a constant reminder of people and things that have had huge impacts on my life. Just in a visual form ... it is a great reminder to pull me back to home base of what I have gone through, where I have been and where I want to go, and the people who have helped me get there."

The tattoos add to Farley's unique style, something about which his teammates make frequent comments.

"I think it's kind of comical because I wear the same things every day," Farley said. "Every once in a while, I throw a curveball and wear some cowboy boots."

"There's not too much variety. I just own it. I just rock it."

With his style comes his music. Farley has a great affinity for

music, one he has been trying to express by learning the ukulele from sophomore receiver Corey Robinson.

"I love music," Farley said. "I don't think the world should exist if there wasn't music in it. I have never been musically gifted — I am not very good at the ukulele — but I really enjoy playing. I think music is applicable to anything and everything in life, whether it is good or bad."

Learning the ukulele has not been as easy as changing a position, Farley said.

"It's honestly a frustration because Corey Robinson is still so much better at it than me," Farley said. "I always wanted to play an instrument. I joke around all the time and say I'm really good at the kazoo, which I actually am, but that doesn't take too much talent. It's been cool to learn something new, pick something up."

Music connects to all things, even football, Farley said.

"When you're playing a game like football, [music] definitely adds to it, even if it is just a pre-game soundtrack," Farley said. "If you hear it every time before you go out, it kind of gets your mind set right, adds consistency."

The consistency and uniqueness that define Farley as a person have shown up on the field this season, as he has consistently made the big play when most needed. Farley summed up his personality and play in his description of his beard.

"If you have a gift, you should share it."



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Matthias Farley celebrates his first of four interceptions this season during Notre Dame's 48-17 win against Rice on Aug. 30.

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CHARLIE FIESSINGER | QB | MASON, OHIO

Fiessinger makes most of experience as walk-on

By **RENEE GRIFFIN**
Sports Writer

Senior Charlie Fiessinger has at least one thing in common with athletes like Brady Quinn, Joe Theismann and Joe Montana: he played quarterback at Notre Dame.

After deciding in his first semester at Notre Dame that “watching from the stands just wasn’t quite cutting it,” Fiessinger walked on to the team in the spring semester of his freshman year as a backup quarterback.

Fiessinger sat behind former Irish quarterback Tommy Rees and current senior quarterback Everett Golson during his career. The Mason, Ohio, native said getting to know such prominent players was one of the highlights of his time here.

“It was really cool to go from watching those guys to all of a sudden being teammates with them,” Fiessinger said. “But I think my favorite part of the whole thing was that ... Notre Dame football players kind of have this aura about them, but you learn that they’re just regular guys like the rest of the students. Having both the experience of being a fan as a student and then being on the team, it’s been interesting comparing the two.”

Fiessinger’s main responsibility in games is to signal the play calls to the Notre Dame offense. As a result, his understanding

of the game really grew over his three years on the roster, he said.

“My main role is to be the signal guy who signals in the plays to the offense from the sidelines,” Fiessinger said. “It’s kind of all I’ve ever known and all I’ve ever done. I’ve certainly grown up a little bit through that and learned the offense a little bit better. Now being a senior, one of the older guys, I’ve been able to help out the younger guys along the way as well.”

Signaling the plays can be a more difficult task than one might expect, Fiessinger said, especially when a crucial game is on the line.

“In a game, emotions can run high,” Fiessinger said. “You get really high, you get really low during a game. You have to keep an even head. It doesn’t matter if it’s fourth-and-goal against Florida State or the opening play of the game against Rice — the play’s got to be signaled in, and you’ve got to do your job.”

Fiessinger also said Irish head coach Brian Kelly’s reputation as a quarterback specialist is well-deserved, as he owes much of his development and improved understanding of the offense to Kelly.

“He’s an unbelievable teacher,” Fiessinger said. “His offense is very deep, very complex, but he does a great job of breaking it down step-by-step and explaining it to you. There’s nothing that

we do that doesn’t have a reason behind it, and he’s very good at seeing the big picture and explaining to us where everything fits in.”

Fiessinger has taken snaps in a game just once in his career: in a 38-0 shutout of Wake Forest during Notre Dame’s 2012 run to the BCS Championship Game when he was a sophomore. He described it as his favorite memory as an Irish football player.

“It was a game that we won pretty handily, and I had a ton of family in town,” Fiessinger said. “It was the one game that I got into in my career. I got in, and then later on in the night, Kansas State lost and Baylor lost, and we became the No. 1 team in the country. That was an experience that I’ll always remember.”

Fiessinger emphasized that the lessons and experiences he has received as a member of the team would stick with him far past graduation.

“I was in a job interview earlier this year, and one of the descriptions of the job was ‘teamwork under pressure,’” Fiessinger said. “It asked, ‘Do you have any experience in that?’ and yeah, of course. Teamwork under pressure in the fourth quarter of a football game isn’t the same as the kind of pressure you’re going to have in a conference room at a job, but I think that adversity is similar, whether it be on or off the field. This team is very used



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior quarterback Charlie Fiessinger takes a snap during the Blue-Gold Game on April 12 at Notre Dame Stadium.

to dealing with all the noise and channeling that out and focusing on our jobs.”

While playing football has given Fiessinger a host of unforgettable experiences, he said his love for Notre Dame centered not around football, but around the overall culture of the University: academically, athletically and otherwise.

“I love that regardless of what I’m doing, I’m always around people that are better than me,” Fiessinger said. “Football, I’m around a lot of people that are a lot, lot better than me, but it doesn’t matter what I’m doing.

If I’m in classes, I’m around people who are academically better than me. If I’m at Mass, I’m around people who are spiritually better than I am. I’m around people who are better in community service than I am. Being around people who are better than me kind of challenges me, and I think it makes me a better person, too.

“The experiences I’ve had, the memories I’ll be able to look back on the rest of my life, it’s been unbelievable.”

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EILAR HARDY | S | REYNOLDSBURG, OHIO

Investigation mars Hardy’s senior season

By **BRIAN HARTNETT**
Managing Editor

Notre Dame senior safety Eilar Hardy’s time at the University has been characterized by waiting.

Hardy waited to get his shot at playing time in his first two seasons, during which he didn’t see the field. After a junior season in which he became a contributor in the secondary, he again had to wait during his senior season

— this time, it was to find out if he would return after he was held out as part of an investigation into “suspected academic dishonesty.”

Hardy was cleared by the NCAA to participate in competition

Nov. 7, and he made his season debut the following day against Arizona State. Hardy recorded his only tackle of the season to date against the Sun Devils.

Hardy did not see any playing time during his first two seasons.

He appeared in 10 games last season, starting against Pitt and BYU.

Hardy made 26 tackles, including one tackle for loss, last season. He accounted for 15 tackles in his two starts, recording a career-high eight tackles against BYU and seven stops against Pitt.

A Reynoldsburg, Ohio native, the 5-foot-11.5, 202-pound Hardy comes from an athletic background. His father, Bill Hardy, played baseball for Youngstown State, and his brother, Terrance Brown, played receiver at Michigan State from 1998 to 2001. Another brother, Eisen Hardy, played cornerback and safety at Ohio Dominican from 2009 to 2012.

Hardy was named to the Associated Press Ohio Division I all-state first-team as a defensive back for Pickerington Central High School in 2010. He recorded 63 tackles, six pass breakups and four interceptions during his senior season.

Hardy is enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters, majoring in sociology.

Notre Dame declined to make Hardy available for an interview.

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CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

Irish senior safety Eilar Hardy, right, was cleared by the NCAA to participate in competition Nov. 7, and he debuted for Notre Dame the next day against Arizona State. Hardy tallied 26 tackles as a junior last season.

EVERETT GOLSON | QB | MYRTLE BEACH, S.C.

Golson makes anticipated return after suspension



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson tries to sneak past Rice redshirt sophomore linebacker Tabari McGaskey during Notre Dame's season-opening, 48-17 victory against the Owls on Aug. 30.

By **MARY GREEN**
Sports Editor

Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Aug. 29 edition of The Observer.

"Am I having too much fun?"

Everett Golson can't help but laugh as photo after photo is snapped of him. Strapping up his helmet, tugging on the faceguard, staring into the lens like he's focusing on a receiver on 3rd-and-long — and then Golson even wants a few pictures for himself, smiling the whole time.

It's clear a career in modeling — at least one that requires keeping a straight face — might not be in the cards for the senior quarterback.

But this Everett Golson — the one who is trying to stifle a chuckle but can't help it — is leaps and bounds from the one he was a year ago.

That Golson spent Saturdays on the couch, watching his teammates struggle at times from afar while he was suspended from the team and the university for poor academic judgement.

"It was extremely difficult," Golson said. "A lot of the times, just me being the guy I am, I kind of put that on myself immediately."

This Saturday against Rice, Golson will take the starting snaps and put on that familiar gold helmet again — this time for 80,000 fans, not just for the camera.

A lot has improved for him in the span of a year. And even more has changed for him from his breakout season two years ago.

season came in the BCS National Championship Game.

Golson was as important to the offense as the team's other No. 5 was to the defense.

But he wasn't a leader.

Irish head coach Brian Kelly said Golson was "spotty" in attendance and occasionally late for meetings.

In his first year seeing playing time for Notre Dame, Golson was the starting quarterback on the depth chart. But he had that privilege taken away in a game against Miami on Oct. 6, 2012, for being late to practice.

"He wasn't doing the things leaders do," Kelly said at the team's media day Aug. 19.

In Golson's defense, the 2012 squad wasn't lacking leadership, with leaders that included Heisman Trophy runner-up Manti Te'o and two-time captain Zack Martin.

"I think 2012 was a little different," Golson said. "I was a redshirt freshman. We had Manti; we had Zack; we had guys that were in that leadership role."

This year, the quarterback said he saw a hole and decided to fill it.

"For the simple fact that we don't have as many guys — all those seniors that are now gone," he said Aug. 19. "I look up now, and I'm the senior, so I have to be the leader of this team."

Kelly said Golson emerged as a leader for other reasons.

"He said it, he didn't want the suspension to define who he was," Kelly said. "He wanted this opportunity to show that he was much more than that, and I think he's going to get that opportunity."

Irish junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day, one of Golson's best friends on the team, said he has

seen Golson take a more proactive approach to his game.

"His ability to study film and to see where he made his mistakes to make sure he doesn't make them again," Day said of what makes Golson so hard to stop. "He's always asking us, 'What did you do here, what did you do there?' to make sure he doesn't make them again."

It's a big step from Golson's game in 2012, when he tended to rely on his mobility rather than a thorough knowledge of the playbook to pick up first downs.

Day said that dedication is now part of Golson's demeanor, both on the field, where he's most visible, and in the classroom, where his original mistake occurred.

"He's committed to everything," Day said. "He's always putting his heart into everything he does now, so if it's school, he's focused on school; if it's football, he's putting his all into football."

With his tardiness and irresponsibility in the past, Golson said he now sees the value of the game he loves.

"I think it means a lot more now," he said. "I've had time to evaluate. I've had time to see different things, being away from the game."

And he readily shares his appreciation to learn and compete at Notre Dame once more.

"I'm so grateful for just the opportunity to be back here because it could have been another way," he said.

In 2012, Everett Golson had a 131.0 quarterback rating.

He averaged more than 200 yards through the air each game.

But according to his coach, he wasn't as good of a quarterback as he is now.

"He's definitely made some strides," Kelly said March 3 after Golson's first practice back from his suspension. "I think there must have been some real good teaching there that has allowed him that opportunity to come in here and have a better sense of everything."

That teaching came at the hands of George Whitfield Jr., the "quarterback guru" who made sure Golson stayed sharp in his absence.

Whitfield has worked with some of the NFL's finest quarterbacks, such as Ben Roethlisberger and Andrew Luck, and with him, Golson was able to fine-tune his skills out in California.

That's allowed him to take on a more complex offense this season, which will utilize his speed and that of his receivers.

"It's tremendously fast," Golson said. "Two years ago, we didn't run at as near a fast pace. It was more conservative, in a sense — slow the ball down, run the ball, that type of thing. Now, we want to be really aggressive on the offensive side."

That improvement has helped the Irish as a whole, Day said.

"He definitely took over the role as a leader on the offense and built them to be a better unit, and he shows that through

his vocal skills and his playing," Day said.

But Day said Golson's natural abilities may be his greatest strength.

"His ability to make a play last longer than it should, especially him being able to be mobile," Day said when asked about Golson's best feature on offense.

With a small and select resume — a few videos of him working out with Whitfield, footage from this past spring and his 2012 stats — Golson has found himself on the watch lists for the Maxwell, Davey O'Brien and Walter Camp awards this season.

On Saturday, Golson's teammates, coaches and Irish fans will get their first chance to see if his much-anticipated return and much-discussed improvement will live up to the hype.

As for Golson himself?

He'll be living in the moment that he's waited for so long to happen.

"It's going to be crazy for sure," he said. "Things like that, they last for maybe 30 seconds to a minute and then you have to dial in on what's the task at hand. That's what I'm trying to prepare myself for most is just understanding that the crowd is there but also dialing myself in and performing my task at hand."

Contact Mary Green at mgreen8@nd.edu



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson looks downfield during Notre Dame's 30-14 win against Purdue on Sept. 13.

JARRETT GRACE | LB | CINCINNATI

Now-healthy Grace hopes to come back strong

By ZACH KLONSINSKI
Sports Writer

To put it simply, the 2014 season did not unfold the way linebacker Jarrett Grace planned for his senior year.

After sitting his freshman campaign and seeing mostly special teams action his sophomore season, the Cincinnati native began come into his own last season, filling the void left by former Irish linebacker and All-American Manti Te'o. He saw the field in every game to start the season, making his first start in the win over Michigan State on Sept. 21, 2013, and proceeding to start the following two games against Oklahoma and Arizona State. By the time the Arizona State game rolled around, Grace found himself tied for the team lead in tackles with 40.

"I was definitely feeling good, getting into a groove," the 6-foot-2.5, 253-pounder said. "It builds your confidence when you have success, when you're able to fly around. That was the big thing for me, if I was able to fly around, that was my game, and that means I was confident and relaxed out there. ... Just get to play ball, use your instincts, so that's huge if you can do that."

Then came a Sun Devil run around the right edge and an offensive lineman landing on his right leg.

"Surreal," Grace said of the moment. "You go from being confident in your abilities, feeling good — school was going good, too, that was a huge part of it. Everything in life just seemed to be falling in all the right places."

Grace's tibia fractured in four places, and he was carted off the field to a local hospital, where he underwent surgery while the rest of the team flew back to South Bend.

"I was confined to a hospital room for a month," Grace said. "I actually had to experience my 21st birthday in Texas, all alone, so that was pretty [unfortunate]. Then being this guy who's limping to every class for almost a year. Your confidence kind of goes down the drain, but you find those times, you find those people who bring you back up. You rely on your faith and things that lift you up, and know that there's so much more to life other than just being a good football player."

The rumor going around at the time of Grace's injury was that he would probably miss the rest of the season but be ready to return at the start of this year. The severity of the injury and subsequent surgeries and procedures to help speed up the healing process have kept him off the field all year. That would usually dampen a player's attitude — usually.

Yet Grace has worked hard all year, even if not always on the

field. He is always one of the first at practice and last to leave, and he said he tries to bring a positive atmosphere wherever he goes, as he focuses on helping the growth of the young Irish linebacker corps.

"I definitely had a totally new role this year," Grace said. "I was able to 'see' a lot more out there, and [senior linebacker] Joe [Schmidt] was out there, too. Joe just really stepped into the spotlight this year. Honestly, anyone who knows Joe wasn't surprised by that because he's always been diligent, prepared. He's really intelligent."

"At the same time, with [sophomore linebacker] Jaylon [Smith], all these guys, just trying to take what coach says during the meetings or what our install is and be able to really watch that because it's harder for them out there. They're actually doing the work, running around, so I can just try and remember those fine details and pull them over to the side and say this, or after practice try to share what I saw with them — really in any way I can just to help out."

Six years younger than his older brother, Grace said he was always trying to do what his brother did growing up. That meant strapping on the football pads when he was four and playing pee-wee football for the Northside KFC Rebels and the Colerain Little Cards.

"I didn't know anything," Grace said with a laugh. "I was always the kid who did too many jumping jacks."

Grace played for Colerain High School, where he was first looked at by then-Cincinnati coach Brian Kelly. When Kelly moved to Notre Dame, Grace came with him.

"Leaving Cincinnati was hard just because, being from a big German-Catholic family, family is really important to you. You want to be there," Grace said. "Cincinnati was having a lot of success ... setting records at the school, and I was like, 'Wow. I could be a part of that.'"

"But Notre Dame is just different. People are going to say that to you. Everyone knows that. ... It's a decision that goes beyond just the fun you have playing football — which is great, but I was thinking more about the relationships that I could build that would really just transform my life over the long-term."

"And the challenges that Notre Dame presents as well. Academics stretch my mind, stretch my thinking and then the faith aspect to that as well. ... The diversity of thought. Meeting people from different countries, different coasts. People who had different life experiences than I had, being able to talk with them. I really became a whole, rounded person."



Observer File Photo

Irish senior linebacker Jarrett Grace (59) slaps hands with sophomore linebacker Jaylon Smith during Notre Dame's season-opening 28-6 victory against Temple on Aug. 31, 2013 at Notre Dame Stadium.

While it might have been a setback for this season, Grace said his leg is on a the road to a full recovery.

"It's doing fantastic," Grace said. "I had some X-rays this past week. The bones look great, so that's one part of the puzzle. Just working on the muscular

and the nerves part of it, just get those on board and cooperating. So it looks optimistic."

With one more year of eligibility remaining after sitting out his freshman year, Grace said he will be playing football again in the future.

"Obviously, the coaching

staff decides who they're going to bring back, but I'm definitely going to play some more football in my future," he said. "And I'm going to play some good football. That's my mindset."

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CONOR HANRATTY | OL | NEW CANAAN, CONN.

Hanratty carries on legacy at Notre Dame

By RYAN KLAUS
Sports Writer

Senior offensive lineman Conor Hanratty has always been around Notre Dame.

Long before his career began, Hanratty's father, Terry, was a three-year starting quarterback for the Irish in the late 1960s, winning a national championship in 1966, finishing third in Heisman Trophy voting in 1968 and earning consensus All-America honors in 1968.

"Growing up a Notre Dame fan was great," Hanratty said. "My dad is a great role model for me, and I always knew what Notre Dame had to offer [from] visiting here so much."

Despite the fact that his father's playing days are engrained in Notre Dame lore, Conor Hanratty

said he tried to stay away from that legacy when mulling over offers in his recruiting process.

"I kind of put that aside and visited other schools and took other visits, knowing in mind what Notre Dame was all about," he said. "At the end of the day, it was the best place for me. I visited a bunch of great schools that all had a lot to offer, but I felt like this was the best."

The New Canaan, Connecticut, native started his own Notre Dame career in 2011 in a position much different than that of his father's — on the offensive line. At 6-foot-4 and 310 lb., Hanratty came in as part of head coach Brian Kelly's second recruiting class at Notre Dame.

As a member of some deep offensive line units at Notre Dame, it took some time before Hanratty

saw game action on the field. In his freshman season, he did not play at all; however, as a sophomore in 2012, Hanratty began getting opportunities on special teams.

"It's always good to get out on the field and play when you can," Hanratty said of his early opportunities with special teams.

It appeared that Hanratty was headed for a similar fate during his junior season in 2013. The Irish offensive line was deep again and returned multiple starters from the team that played for the national championship the year before.

For the first half of the 2013 season, Hanratty's work was on special teams, but toward the end of the season, opportunities to play on the line finally began to appear. With two starters — former

offensive lineman Chris Watt and current graduate student Christian Lombard — both battling injuries during the final games for the Irish, Hanratty was frequently called upon to step in and take their place.

"A big part of what coach Kelly teaches us is the 'next man in' mentality — that everyone should be ready to fill a guy's shoes when their number's called," Hanratty said. "That's what happened with me, and I think I did a pretty good job. It's always nice to get out there and play."

Hanratty appeared in each of Notre Dame's final six games during his junior season, starting four times.

Hanratty contributed to what was overall a successful season for the Notre Dame offensive line. As a group, the unit allowed just

eight sacks, which ranked second among FBS teams for fewest sacks allowed.

Building off his performance in 2013, Hanratty came into the 2014 season as a starter for the Irish at left guard. However, the offensive line as a whole did not have near the success at the beginning of 2014 as it had in 2013, and eventually the coaching staff made some changes to the unit.

Following Notre Dame's win over Purdue on Sept. 13, a shake-up resulted in a revamped offensive line for the Irish, which featured four players in new spots. Unfortunately for Hanratty, he was moved to the bench because of the switches, leaving him in a similar spot to the one he was in at the beginning of last season — the role of a backup who will immediately take over if injuries become prevalent.

"It feels as you could imagine," Hanratty said of his move to the sideline. "Not playing kind of sucks, but I'll just do whatever the team needs for me, and whenever I can contribute, I'll contribute. I'll be ready to be play when my number's called, just like last year."

Off the field, Hanratty said he plans to earn his degree from the Mendoza College of Business next spring. Specifically, he is studying management consulting, noting that a big influence in him choosing the major is the variety of potential career paths it opens up.

"I feel like it's a very adaptive major," Hanratty said. "There are a diverse amount of options for having success with it."

When Hanratty looks back on his experiences at Notre Dame, he said he recognizes how special an opportunity playing for the Irish is and how captivating it can be for recruits.

"Part of the appeal of Notre Dame is that you're always on TV, have sold out crowds and [have] all the tradition," Hanratty said. "Being able to run out of the tunnels here is something special. There's nothing like it, and it's just great being a part of that."

Overall, Hanratty said he couldn't single out one moment as his favorite memory in his career.

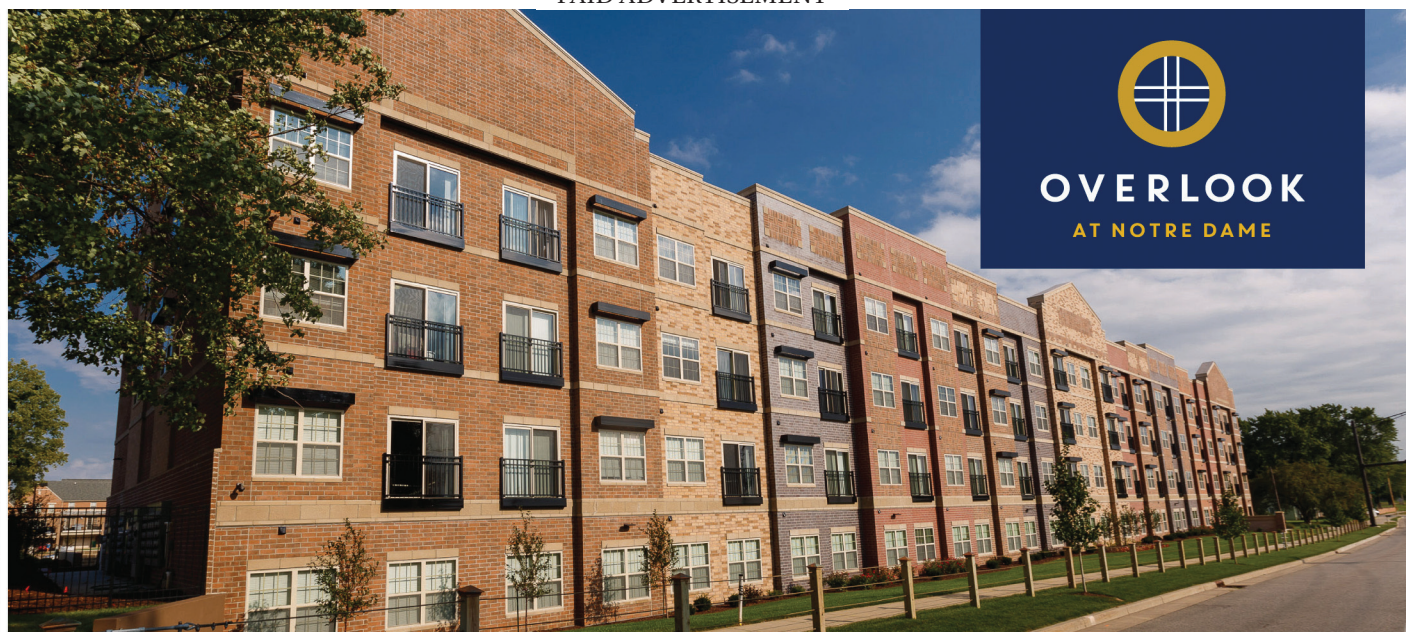
"It's tough to pick a top moment," he said. "All wins that I've been a part of have given me a great feeling in terms of being able to contribute to the team and getting to play with some of my best friends."

Hanratty's last game at Notre Dame Stadium this season will be against Louisville on Saturday, and he said he is looking forward to being able to share some of the last few moments of his career with his former Notre Dame quarterback father and the rest of his family.

"It's just going to be great to have my parents and my family there," he said. "Senior Day is special for me and them."

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JODI LO | The Observer



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

CARDINALS PASSING

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Will Gardner, Louisville's starter in seven of its 10 games, won't play after suffering a knee injury Saturday in the Cardinals' 38-19 win over Boston College. But Louisville has a viable if inconsistent option in freshman quarterback Reggie Bonnafon.

Gardner had injured his knee earlier in the season against FIU, and Bonnafon earned his first career start in the next game against Wake Forest, a 20-10 win for Louisville. Bonnafon also started against Syracuse and Clemson. Bonnafon's best passing performance came against Wake Forest when he threw for 206 yards. He also threw for 174 yards against Syracuse. Bonnafon has thrown for only four touchdowns on the season, and Gardner took over partway through the loss to Clemson.

The Irish secondary has had its struggles this year, but Bonnafon has yet to turn in an eye-opening passing performance.

Senior wide receiver DeVante Parker is the Cardinals' most dangerous receiving threat, as the 6-3, 211-pounder creates matchup problems. Parker has averaged 122.5 yards since returning from a broken foot suffered in the preseason. He could provide Louisville with big yardage plays, but the rest of the Cardinals receivers have not been nearly as productive in terms of yardage.

EDGE: EVEN

CARDINALS RUSHING

Louisville hasn't had a particularly consistent run game this season.

Several running backs have had good games, but the production hasn't come reliably. Redshirt sophomore Brandon Radcliff rushed for 97 yards against Murray State, 129 against Wake Forest and 110 against Syracuse. He has had three multiple touchdown games. Senior running back Michael Dyer posted 134 yards and three touchdowns against Florida State. Freshman running back L.J. Scott rushed for 126 yards and one touchdown against Murray State.

Despite the backs' production, their big games have not coincided or come in streaks.

The Cardinals have the tools. The

question is whether they will execute, and against a depleted Irish defensive line missing junior and captain Sheldon Day, Louisville has the edge.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

CARDINALS OFFENSIVE COACHING

Cardinals offensive coordinator Shawn Watson has guided a high-scoring offense this season. Louisville has an 84.4 percent conversion rate in the red zone and has scored 31.6 points per game. He also has coached two very different quarterbacks with success this season.

Bonnafon has running ability that could give the Irish fits with the right play calls, as happened against Boston College. Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder and Notre Dame's defense haven't been able to pull the right strings to stop similarly mobile quarterbacks this season, and this could turn into a problem Saturday.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

CARDINALS SPECIAL TEAMS

Louisville has performed well on returns, and redshirt junior kicker John Wallace hasn't missed a point-after attempt all season. He has made 13 of 16 field goals with one of his misses coming between 30 and 39 yards and two between 40 and 49.

Notre Dame's coverage units have been solid, however, allowing no punt or kickoff return touchdowns. The Irish will be able to limit the Cardinals' return game and win this part of the matchup.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

CARDINALS SCHEDULE (7-3)

Sept. 1 **Miami (Fl.) (W 31-13)**
Sept. 6 **Murray State (W 66-21)**
Sept. 13 **@ Virginia (L 23-21)**
Sept. 20 **@ FIU (W 34-3)**
Sept. 27 **Wake Forest (W 20-10)**
Oct. 3 **@ Syracuse (W 28-6)**
Oct. 11 **@ Clemson (L 23-17)**
Oct. 18 **NC State (W 30-18)**
Oct. 30 **Florida State (L 42-31)**
Nov. 8 **@ Boston College (W 38-19)**
Nov. 22 **@ Notre Dame**
Nov. 29 **Kentucky**

HEAD T

3:30 P.M.
NOTRE DAME STADIUM
LOUISVILLE



(Sr.) **DeVante Parker** **9** **WR**
(Sr.) Matt Milton 86

(Sr.) **Jamon Brown** **79** **LT**
(Jr.) Aaron Epps 78

(Sr.) **John Miller** **70** **LG**
(So.) Pedro Sibiea 73

(Fr.) **Reggie Bonnafon** **7** **QB** (So.) **Tobijah Hughley** **61** **C**
(R-Fr.) Kyle Bolin 14 (Sr.) Jake Smith 53

(Sr.) **Michael Dyer** **5** **RB** (Sr.) **Jake Smith** **53** **RG**
(So.) Brandon Radcliff 23 (R-Fr.) Skylar Lacy 75

(So.) **Lamar Atkins** **46** **FB** (Jr.) **Aaron Epps** **78** **RT**
(So.) Griffin Uhl 39 (Jr.) Ryan Mack 74

(Sr.) **Gerald Christian** **18** **TE**
(Fr.) Keith Towbridge 89

(Sr.) **Eli Rogers** **6** **WR**
(Sr.) Michael Harris 2

(Sr.) **Matt Milton** **86** **WR**
(So.) James Quick 17



(Sr.) **Terrell Floyd** **19** **CB**
(Sr.) Andrew Johnson 15

(Sr.) **Lorenzo Mauldin** **94** **WLB**
(Jr.) Trevon Young 91

(Jr.) **James Sample** **2** **S**
(So.) Jermaine Reve 27

(Jr.) **Sheldon Rankins** **98** **DE**
(R-Fr.) Kyle Shortridge 95

(Jr.) **James Burgess** **13** **MLB** (Jr.) **DeAngelo Brown** **97** **NT**
(R-Fr.) Stacy Thomas 32 (R-Fr.) Johnny Richardson 90

(So.) **Keith Kelsey** **55** **MLB** (Sr.) **B.J. Dubose** **11** **DE**
(Jr.) Keith Brown 1 (R-Fr.) Kyle Shortridge 95

(Jr.) **Gerod Holliman** **8** **S**
(So.) Jermaine Reve 27

(Sr.) **Deiontrez Mount** **48** **SLB**
(So.) Nick Dawson 52

(Jr.) **Charles Gaines** **3** **CB**
(So.) Devontre Parnell 21



(Jr.) **John Wallace** **45** **PK**
(Jr.) Josh Appleby 40

(Sr.) **Ryan Johnson** **8** **P**
(Jr.) Josh Appleby 40

(Sr.) **Eli Rogers** **6** **PR**
(So.) James Quick 17

(Sr.) **Ryan Johnson** **8** **H**

(Jr.) **Charles Gaines** **3** **KR**
(So.) Brandon Radcliff 23

(Sr.) **Grant Donovan** **33** **LS**



Mike Monaco
Senior Sports Writer

All season long, I've said I can't see Notre Dame losing at home on Senior Day, even though Louisville presents a formidable challenge.

Now, with the Irish reeling and injured and the Cardinals fresh off a bye week, would be the time to flip.

But I still don't see it. Simple statistics tell us Everett Golson and Kyle Brindza should progress to the mean. I'm not as convinced about improvement for Notre Dame's defense, which takes another major hit this week without Sheldon Day.

Still, I expect Golson to play cleanly enough for the defense to not be routinely under siege, and I think Jaylon Smith, Cole Luke, Isaac Rochell and company make enough plays to avoid an explosion by Louisville's offense.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 31, Louisville 28



Brian Hartnett
Managing Editor

My first home game as a Notre Dame student was a 23-20 loss to South Florida in 2011.

That game featured five Irish turnovers and sloppy play.

I expect Saturday's game to feature much of the same.

Do I think Notre Dame has improved since 2011? Certainly.

But does that mean this team doesn't have some of the same issues present in 2011? Nope.

The Irish are in a historically bad stretch defensively, at least by points allowed, and can't keep from hurting themselves offensively.

These shortcomings both spell disaster against a Louisville team that averages more than 31 points per game and leads the nation in passes intercepted.

And it means the result of my final home game will be similar to that of my first home game.

FINAL SCORE: Louisville 38, Notre Dame 27



Samantha Zuba
Assistant Managing Editor

The loss to Florida State: tough, but the team still had playoff potential.

The loss to Arizona State: tough, but the team still had a shot at an elite bowl game.

The loss to Northwestern: tough, plain and simple.

The Irish are banged up physically without senior linebacker Joe Schmidt and now junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day, and they're also psychologically shaken. Brian Kelly's rationale in going for two against Northwestern, after all, was a lack of confidence in the kicking game.

But Louisville will be missing its starting quarterback. And the Cardinals have lost two of four. And the Irish are playing their final home game. Notre Dame will respond with a win.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 35, Louisville 28

O HEAD

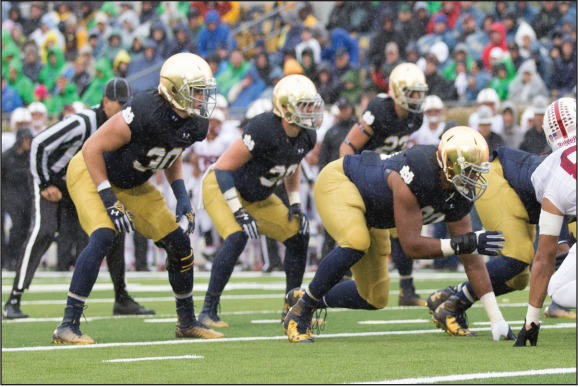


NOTRE DAME

ON NBC



KEVIN SONG | The Observer



KEVIN SONG | The Observer

CB **2** **Cody Riggs** (Gr.)

19 Nick Watkins (Fr.)

WLB **9** **Jaylon Smith** (So.)

48 Greer Martini (Fr.)

DE **45** **Romeo Okwara** (Jr.)

98 Andrew Trumbetti (Fr.)

DT **91** **Sheldon Day** (Jr.)

53 Justin Utupo (Gr.)

DT **94** **Jarron Jones** (Jr.)

75 Daniel Cage (Fr.)

DE **90** **Isaac Rochell** (So.)

92 Grant Blankenship (Fr.)

SLB **17** **James Onwualu** (So.)

31 John Turner (Jr.)

CB **36** **Cole Luke** (So.)

12 Devin Butler (So.)

WR **2** **Chris Brown** (Jr.)

88 Corey Robinson (So.)

WR **3** **Amir Carlisle** (Sr.)

20 C.J. Prosise (Jr.)

RT **74** **Christian Lombard** (Gr.)

68 Mike McGlinchey (So.)

RG **79** **Steve Elmer** (So.)

62 Colin McGovern (So.)

C **77** **Matt Hegarty** (Sr.)

75 Mark Harrell (Jr.)

LG **72** **Nick Martin** (Sr.)

65 Conor Hanratty (Sr.)

LT **78** **Ronnie Stanley** (Jr.)

70 Hunter Bivin (So.)

TE **18** **Ben Koyack** (Sr.)

80 Durham Smythe (So.)

13 Tyler Luatua (Fr.)

WR **7** **Will Fuller** (So.)

16 Torii Hunter Jr. (So.)

KO **27** **Kyle Brindza** (Sr.)

KR **3** **Amir Carlisle** (Sr.)

33 Cam McDaniel (Sr.)

LS **61** **Scott Daly** (Jr.)

PK **27** **Kyle Brindza** (Sr.)

85 Tyler Newsome (Fr.)

P **27** **Kyle Brindza** (Sr.)

85 Tyler Newsome (Fr.)

PR **2** **Cody Riggs** (Gr.)

1 Greg Bryant (So.)



IRISH PASSING

After a four-interception debacle against Arizona State, the Irish offensive line provided Everett Golson with more decision-making room and time against Northwestern. Golson threw one interception against the Wildcats but also threw for 287 yards. And even against Arizona State, he threw for a season-high 446 yards. In four of his last four games, Golson has thrown three touchdown passes, the exception being Arizona State.

At this point, one can feel confident Golson will produce. His lowest-yardage game was a 226-yard performance against Michigan, and he hasn't thrown fewer than two touchdowns in any game.

Louisville leads FBS with 22 interceptions, even better than Northwestern's No. 22 rank with 12 interceptions. If the offensive line does a good job protecting Golson, however, he has a chance to play a clean game and keep miscues from marring his productive numbers. He also has an arsenal of receiving options in wide receivers Will Fuller, Corey Robinson, Chris Brown, C.J. Prosise and Amir Carlisle as well as tight end Ben Koyack. Fuller has amassed 853 yards on the season and has been part of several long plays for the Irish. Notre Dame should win some of the matchups against Louisville's secondary.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING

Sophomore running back Tarean Folston returned to his effective ways last Saturday against Northwestern. He rushed for 106 yards and one touchdown against the Wildcats after a 30-yard performance against Arizona State. Folston has a touchdown in three of the last five games and has rushed for more than 100 yards three times (plus a 98-yard, two-touchdown showing against North Carolina).

But Louisville has allowed just 87.4 rushing yards per game, good for second in FBS. Opponents have managed just 2.80 yards per carry. Folston's talent will prevent him from being shut down, but he likely won't have the kind of big game he has turned in recently. The Irish offensive line hasn't been dominant enough to

overcome a stout Louisville defensive line. Against Arizona State's physical defensive line, Folston ran for just 30 yards although he received fewer carries than he has recently, as Notre Dame played needed to play catchup quickly throughout the game.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING

Other than in the 17-14 win over Stanford, Notre Dame hasn't failed to score a lot of points. Talent and coaching seem to have aligned, as the play-calling has been working for the Irish, the two-point conversion attempt against Northwestern notwithstanding.

There's no reason to believe that will change against Louisville, despite Cardinal's defensive coordinator Todd Grantham leading a defense keeping opponents at an average of 17.8 points per game.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

The kicking unit's woes hurt Notre Dame again versus Northwestern. Senior kicker Kyle Brindza's field goal percentage is now 57.9 percent on the season. He hasn't benefited from sloppy holds and inconsistent blocking on his attempts.

Kelly demonstrated how much the kicking unit has lost confidence when he elected to go for a two-point conversion against Northwestern while the Irish were leading by 11 points.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

IRISH SCHEDULE (7-3)

Aug. 30 **Rice (W 48-17)**
Sept. 6 **Michigan (W 31-0)**
Sept. 13 **vs. Purdue (W 30-14)**
Sept. 27 **Syracuse (W 31-15)**
Oct. 4 **Stanford (W 17-14)**
Oct. 11 **North Carolina (W 50-43)**
Oct. 18 **@ Florida State (L 34-31)**
Nov. 1 **vs. Navy (W 49-39)**
Nov. 8 **@ Arizona State (L 55-31)**
Nov. 15 **Northwestern (L 43-40 OT)**
Nov. 22 **Louisville**
Nov. 29 **@ USC**



Isaac Lorton

Assistant Managing Editor



Mary Green

Sports Editor

Despite the dreary prospect of finishing 7-5 with losses to Louisville and USC to close out the season, I don't think that will happen at home on senior day.

Although the Irish defense is banged up, now with the loss of Sheldon Day, it will do just enough to stop the Louisville offense.

Everett Golson and the rest of the Notre Dame offense will limit its turnovers because that is what the game will come down to: the Irish not shooting themselves in the foot.

The Irish will pull this game for their seniors.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 41, Louisville 38

The Irish will be geared up for Saturday, desperate to bounce back from two consecutive losses and wanting to send their seniors off with a final home victory.

But that's not going to happen.

Notre Dame's turnover problems aren't going to go away overnight and neither will its struggles on special teams.

Louisville's 23 gained turnovers rank 10th in the nation, and it's scored 149 points off opponent miscues. That spells major trouble for the Irish.

Adding insult to injury, Sheldon Day will join Joe Schmidt on the bench, depleting the defense even more than it is already, and Kyle Brindza isn't the kicking machine he was earlier this season.

The seniors' final Alma Mater will be sung with disappointment, not in celebration.

FINAL SCORE: Louisville 37, Notre Dame 28

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MATT HEGARTY | OL | AZTEC, N.M.

Hegarty recovers from stroke, becomes starter

By MIKE GINOCCHIO
Sports Writer

They're the immovable objects in the middle of the chaos.

All things on the football field run through the offensive line, those five men in the middle without whom nothing can happen for the offense. They are constantly fighting and scrapping with no plays off.

No one is in the middle of the action more than the center. It's a colossal burden to shoulder, and it's a job Irish senior Matt Hegarty performs day after day.

It's a responsibility he doesn't take lightly.

"First and foremost, you gotta make sure you get the play started with the snap," Hegarty said. "And then secondly, you got a guy on both sides. And if there's a miscommunication, it falls back to you for not getting everyone on the same page."

There's a notably relaxed nature in how Hegarty describes his job. It's an exhausting position, yet the way he presents it makes it seem like just another everyday routine, like remembering to tie your shoes.

That's because considering what he's overcome, juggling plays and his leadership duties on the line all while handling a cagey defensive lineman in front of roaring fans is a walk in the park.

It was during Boston College week in mid-November 2012 that Hegarty realized something was wrong. While most injuries or ailments for his position are relatively recognizable, this was different.

"We were in the weight room during the walkthrough, and I couldn't talk," Hegarty said. "I was trying to make calls on the line. Basically, the brain was thinking, but the mouth wasn't moving."

His teammates were quick to notice.

"We were about to get ready to go to practice, and I was still trying to talk to them," Hegarty said. "I'm still having trouble with [the words]. But they didn't really know what to think about it, and there they realized, 'Something's wrong with Matt.'"

They notified the coaching staff, and Hegarty was sent to the hospital. By then, Hegarty's speech had returned, and the effects of whatever it was that had hit him were fading away enough for him to think that it was just a fluke. But still, he said he found himself thinking.

"What really scared me most was that I wasn't sure because this is such a wide range of things," Hegarty said. "I was like, 'I'm young, it couldn't be this or that or that.'"

In the middle of his attempts to figure out the problem, a possible diagnosis emerged.

"I've known people who've had strokes, and that was what this reminded me of," Hegarty said. "Especially when I heard them describing trying to make a word."

Did the thought cross his mind? "Slightly," Hegarty said. "But at

the same time, I'm a realist. I'm thinking, 'I'm in my 20s. This has got to be something else.'"

The next morning, Hegarty went for an MRI to determine what had happened. After sitting in there for about an hour and a half ("I remember I had a cough stuck in my throat, and I couldn't get it out. I just had to sit there," he said), Hegarty said he emerged to hear the doctor tell him that he'd gotten off the phone with Matt's mom, and she was flying out to be with him now.

He'd had a stroke.

"I was shocked," Hegarty said. "It was surreal, especially since I was feeling so much better that I thought that whatever it was, it was done, and all I could think about was how soon do I get back out [on the field]. And now, I'm given a scale of just how big the picture was now."

Hegarty's stroke had been brought on by the presence of two small holes in his heart that had existed there, undetected since birth. He underwent surgery Dec. 14 of that year to repair the damage.

With the rest of his season of that year immediately ruled out, Hegarty said he did his best to stay involved with the team. He was always a presence on the sideline and traveled to Florida for the BCS National Championship Game. Of course, now there was more to juggle in addition to being a member of the Irish.

"I was going to team meetings, but I was also doing my rehab," Hegarty said. "I worked out as much as I could, obviously with limitations on what I could and couldn't do as far as pushing my heart."

It was that dedication and commitment that got him to Notre Dame in the first place; it would be that same dedication and commitment that would get him through this. And in the midst of it all, he found an unlikely — but all too fitting — source of inspiration: Tedy Bruschi, retired New England Patriots linebacker.

"Tedy Bruschi is a perfect example," Hegarty said. "He had a stroke when he was playing, and he wrote a book about it. My parents got it for me for that Christmas [after my stroke], and it was really powerful to read. Before I had mine, I had no idea about his, until [former Irish center] Braxton [Cave] said, 'Hey, isn't that what Tedy Bruschi had?' I started looking into it, and was like 'Wow, this is kind of amazing.'"

"The way I looked at it was that it wasn't so much a case of me trying to climb this hill that's impossible; but rather, he did it, and I don't see why I can't."

Less than a year after that scary afternoon in the weight room, Hegarty returned to action in the spring of 2013, in time for the Blue-Gold Game.

"Initially, with spring ball, there were some nerves," Hegarty said. "I remember thinking, 'I'm fine.' But when I was out there, I found myself thinking, 'Am I fine?' I mean, I had thought I was fine before, but..."

At that point, he said the hardest hurdle to clear was in his head.

"I think it was definitely mental because physically, I worked out as much as I could on the side," Hegarty said. "I really wasn't too worried about that, but the mental side was definitely frustrating because as much as you tell yourself you're fine, I found myself having dreams where I'd hit a guy, and I knew something had gone wrong."

"I think really what helped there was the simple act of getting after it in practice."

But nerves or not, Hegarty was back on the field for the Irish and proved everyone who had believed he could make it back was right.

"I sincerely feel like that's one of the biggest things that helped me get through it," Hegarty said. "Teammates here and my family and people back home and people that have had strokes have reached out."

That would be enough of a mountain to climb in and of itself, but several months into the season, injuries to the offensive line forced Hegarty to jump into the role of starter against BYU on Nov. 23. It was the first game Hegarty had ever started.

"That was my first time really jumping in and taking the reins," Hegarty said. "My first concern was, with the wind and the snow blowing, just to get the ball to [former Irish quarterback] Tommy [Rees], and the rest of it kind of worked itself out."



WEI LIN | The Observer

Irish offensive lineman Matt Hegarty blocks a Syracuse defender during Notre Dame's 31-15 victory against the Orange on Sept. 27.

But more importantly, there was something that wasn't on his mind.

"By that point, most of my nerves about my health were gone," Hegarty said. "I had the spring under my belt, and we were three to four months into the season. I didn't have time to be nervous about that. It was just, 'Hey, I just gotta go out and do my job.'"

Now, as Hegarty prepares for the home stretch of season, he said he can look back on just what he's overcome to get to this point and start thinking about the future. Hegarty, a management and consulting major in the Mendoza College of Business, said he knows

that wherever the road takes him, he's been fortunate to be where he is today.

"I think the nice part about being here is that you don't really have to choose [a life without football]," Hegarty said. "Obviously, I would like to play for as long as I can. My goal here is continue to get my education while I get myself the best opportunity to get ready for the next level. I know that in my back pocket, whenever the time comes that my career is over, I can look at a degree from Notre Dame. That's really nice."

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CHASE HOUNSHELL | DL | KIRTLAND, OHIO

Hounshell stays positive despite injuries

By **BENJAMIN HORVATH**
Sports Writer

Most college football players would consider just one shoulder labrum tear a major setback, possibly even a career-ending injury.

Senior defensive lineman Chase Hounshell has experienced this painful injury three times during his career at Notre Dame.

Born and bred in the heart of Big Ten football country, the Kirtland, Ohio, native was one of the state's top players in high school. In 2010, the Lake Catholic High School alum earned AP Ohio Division II co-defensive player of the year

honors.

The versatile lineman entertained offers from Notre Dame and Big Ten schools, like Michigan State, Iowa and Wisconsin. Hounshell surprised many, however, when he committed to Florida.

However, after former Gators head coach Urban Meyer's abruptly retired prior to the 2010 season, Hounshell decommitted from Florida and decided on the Irish.

"You could really feel a family atmosphere here at Notre Dame, and I had great opportunities to connect with teammates and coaches prior to beginning my career,"

Hounshell said. "That's what ultimately drew me to this school."

During his freshman year, Hounshell saw action in seven games for the Irish because of injuries to some key defensive lineman.

"I didn't really expect to play as a freshman, so that came as a surprise to me," he said.

Hounshell first saw game action in front of a sold-out Notre Dame Stadium crowd on an unseasonably warm and sunny Saturday in October, during a contest against Air Force.

"Stepping out onto that field was something I'll probably never forget," Hounshell said. "Being out there with my teammates, hearing the crowd and having my parents and family in the stands, that's something you can't get anywhere else."

The freshman recorded four tackles in his debut, helping the Irish rout the Falcons, 59-33.

Hounshell soon faced his first major setback, however, as just three weeks after his debut, the maturing freshman tore his labrum in a win against Navy.

Demonstrating the resiliency that would become a defining characteristic of his career, the freshman played injured for the remainder of the season, contributing in a limited capacity in six of the final seven games for the Irish.

"You can either choose to quit or put your head down and work

hard," Hounshell said. "I worked too hard up to that point to let one injury define my career."

Hounshell had surgery to repair the torn labrum during the off-season, but in a moment of tragic irony, he reinjured the repaired shoulder again against the Midshipmen to begin the 2012 season. This ended his sophomore campaign.

Bad fortune befell Hounshell yet again during 2013 spring drills, as he reinjured the shoulder once more.

He underwent shoulder and labrum reconstructive surgery following this third injury, and at this point in his career, Hounshell said he began receiving advice from doctors to not play football again.

"It was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life," Hounshell said. "I had teammates asking me if I even wanted to play again, and I even began asking myself if I should play, but I just continued to work hard."

Hounshell has not competed during the 2014 season for the Irish but said he is currently healthy.

"It's hard to believe I've been through all these injuries, but we have such a great staff here that have helped me out along the way, and I just continued to work, and finally, I'm back," he said.

Outside of football, the management consulting major said he plans on pursuing a career

in business or entrepreneurship following his graduation in May but added he will miss the "little things" about student life at Notre Dame.

"I'll miss the overall atmosphere of campus, just being able to walk along South Quad and see so many people you know throughout the day — that's something I'll remember for the rest of my life," Hounshell said.

The senior lineman said it was at first difficult to find the balance between academics and football, but he has developed a sense of enjoyment in completing his daily schedule.

"Coming in to Notre Dame, you always hear academics is so difficult, and on top of that you're going to be so busy with football, and for the most part that is true," Hounshell said. "But you start to realize that you choose your classes and area of study, and football becomes something you enjoy with your brothers and something that you love."

And Hounshell's advice to incoming Notre Dame football players? It's simple: don't be lazy.

"It's hard work — nobody's going to lie to you and tell you it isn't — but it's definitely something that's doable if you put your head down and work hard," he said.

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WEI LIN | The Observer

Irish senior defensive lineman Chase Hounshell sings the Alma Mater after Notre Dame's season-opening victory against Rice on Aug. 30.

ERIC LEE | WR | WEST DES MOINES, IOWA

Pre-med major finds football, school balance

By **MAREK MAZUREK**
Sports Writer

Eric Lee is the embodiment of a student-athlete.

While the senior receiver spends much of his time practicing and playing for a nationally-ranked program, the science pre-professional major is also preparing to head to medical school after graduation.

During his high school career at Dowling Catholic in West Des Moines, Iowa, Lee maintained a 4.1 GPA while competing as an all-conference athlete in three different sports.

For Lee, though, football quickly became his sport of choice over baseball and basketball as he looked to college.

"I think it was more so the opportunity," Lee said of making the choice to play football. "I didn't have a favorite out of the sports — I liked them all. I played them all pretty well. I think football opened doors here. I could come to camp my freshman year, and that was a big part of it. It was more the doors that [football] opened for me."

After narrowing down his choice of sport to football, the question that remained was where would Lee play.

"I wasn't a huge Notre Dame

fan growing up," he said. "I never really followed them; I never really thought about them until I started coming out of high school wanting to go to a good academic school, and [Notre Dame] definitely popped on the radar. That's when I started thinking about them for school."

The 5-foot-8, 170-pound Lee gained a preferred walk-on status as a freshman and has been part of the team for all four years of his Notre Dame career as a slot receiver. Lee said he considers himself fortunate to have had the opportunity he has had.

"It's been a pretty cool experience," he said. "Coming in as a freshman was a pretty lucky opportunity to get the full four years in — a lot of guys don't get that chance. It's been a long process, but it's definitely been good."

Throughout his career as a Division I athlete, Lee said he still finds time to excel in his studies.

"It's pretty tough, especially as a pre-med major," he said. "That's hard in and of itself, and on top of football, it's a challenge. I have to give up a lot of social time, but other students don't get to run out of the tunnel on Saturdays, so I feel like it's worth it for me. I've learned to manage my time pretty well."

Even Lee's favorite football memory points to his academic excellence. Lee was a member of the "Green Beret" his sophomore and junior years, where he would stand on the sideline and give the signals for the play to his teammates on the field.

"One of my favorite memories was the Green Beret," he said. "It was me, [graduate student running back] Tyler Plantz and [former receiver] Nick Fitzpatrick running signals into the game my sophomore and junior years. ... We had a really good time doing that. I also got in the Rice game, the season opener this year. I was in on Malik's [Zaire] long run and Greg's [Bryant] first touchdown playing slot receiver, so that was also pretty exciting; the whole family was there, so that was pretty cool."

Lee said his post-graduation plans are much different than being part of the Green Beret or lining up as a slot receiver.

"I'm applying to medical school right now, and that's a stressful process," he said. "I have to interview [soon]. It's been a long process, but hopefully I'll get in somewhere by the next couple months."

Looking past college, Lee said he plans to carry his Notre Dame football experience with him



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior wide receiver Eric Lee gathers with his teammates during Notre Dame's Shamrock Series win over Purdue on Sept. 13.

as he goes to med school and beyond.

"Being part of the team is something I'm extremely proud of," he said. "I would never introduce myself as someone who played football at Notre Dame, but I'm sure it will come up at some point. I'd definitely represent and wear some Notre Dame gear at some point. I wouldn't hesitate to tell people I was a part of something this special."

Just like his major, Lee took a scientific approach to answering how he thinks he will feel on his

last game.

"I expect to feel a little colder than usual just because it will be late November," he said

Seriously?

"Well I don't know," he said. "You do something a lot of times, and you start taking it for granted, but I think that [game] will really sink in. I'll really look out there and realize how lucky I've been the past four years and just try to embrace the moment."

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BEN KOYACK | TE | OIL CITY, PA.

Koyack earns membership in 'Tight End U'

By KIT LOUGHRAN
Sports Writer

At Notre Dame, tight end might be considered the program's most consistently talented position. "Tight End U," as the University has come to be known over the last few years, did not fail to disappoint once again, as Ben Koyack stepped up at the position this year.

For the first three seasons of his career, Koyack had been playing in the shadows of former Irish tight ends Tyler Eifert and Troy Niklas, who have both jumped from distinguished careers at Notre Dame to roster spots in the NFL, Eifert with the Bengals and Niklas with the Cardinals.

This season Koyack was no longer the number two guy behind Niklas. It was his turn.

"I've tried to keep [the role] open, to keep a good relationship with all the guys," Koyack said. "It doesn't necessarily feel like a strict kind of environment but more like one where we have different authority, where we still have to do the right thing but can still have some fun with it. I think that helps the guys out a lot."

With that humble approach, Koyack has quietly yet powerfully help lead the Irish on the field. The senior stands fourth in receiving

yards for Notre Dame, with 27 catches for 289 yards and two touchdowns.

Perhaps Koyack's most significant play this season was his game-winning touchdown against Stanford.

The Irish were down 14-10 to Stanford with one minute left on the clock. On fourth-and-11 from the Cardinal 23-yard line, Golson found Koyack in the back of the end zone. Koyack caught the pass on his way out of bounds to clinch Notre Dame's 17-14 victory over Stanford on Oct. 4, keeping a then-undefeated season alive.

"I guess just execute and catch the ball," Koyack said of his thinking on the play. "I knew there was going to be a guy coming who was going to try and knock it out, so I thought [to] just follow the ball, catch the ball and keep my feet up."

The 6-foot-5, 254-pounder made getting behind the Stanford defense look completely effortless. But it's plays like those in which Koyack leaves his mark. His poise and consistency in run blocking and receiving have made him a silent weapon for the Irish this season.

Just one week later, it was Koyack again, securing Notre Dame's slim-margin 50-43 win over North Carolina on Oct. 11, when he recovered a Tar Heel on-side kick with 47 seconds



JODI LO | The Observer

Senior tight end Ben Koyack lunges down the field during Notre Dame's 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland. Koyack scored a touchdown in the Irish win.

on the clock. Earlier, he had a catch for nine yards during Notre Dame's drive that ended with a touchdown by sophomore running back Greg Bryant to put the Irish up 21-14.

"I'd also say the North Carolina game was one of my favorite game experiences," Koyack said. "Seeing everyone keep their heads up and play strong the whole entire game. Every game this season, there is always a scenario where we all come together, so I enjoy that with every single game."

In addition to the team coming together, Koyack and his quarterback, fellow senior Everett Golson, have continued to find their rhythm throughout the season. Between run blocking and receptions, Koyack and Golson have worked together throughout the season.

"It's definitely a good [receiving relationship with Golson]," Koyack said. "We spent multiple times after practice working on stuff so that we could get on the same page. He's been throwing the ball to me since my freshman year, so I've had a lot of time with him before, and we are on the same page now."

With Golson returning this season and Niklas gone to the NFL, Koyack said he has seen a change in the dynamic of his position from last season to now.

"This year, I do a lot more of single tight-end things," Koyack said. "I run some more routes and do some blocking, but at the end of the day, it's doing what [Irish head] coach [Brian] Kelly wants you to do."

"My goal heading into this

season was to improve in all areas. I couldn't focus on one exact thing because then I'd lose focus of everything else ... so it's just about being well-rounded and being able to be counted on for however many snaps. I can always improve. I'll always be working to be the best I can possibly be."

The starting tight end will continue to strive to be "the best that he can possibly be" as Notre Dame closes out the regular season with games against Louisville on Saturday and USC on Nov. 29. As his time at Notre Dame comes to a close, Koyack reflected on the time he has spent at the University, including the experiences that stretched beyond walking out the tunnel into Notre Dame Stadium.

"It went fast," Koyack said. "It was hectic, but it was fun, and it feels like I was walking in the dorm freshman year, not knowing what I was doing, just yesterday. It's been interesting, and it's been a fun transition to go from my head swimming to now, knowing the entire offensive unit. It's been something I will never forget."

"It's been a great opportunity and privilege to go here, to walk away with a degree from here. I've met a lot of great people. Notre Dame is something I'm really happy to have been a part of."

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KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Ben Koyack celebrates his game-winning touchdown during Notre Dame's 17-14 victory against Stanford on Oct. 4 at Notre Dame Stadium. Koyack caught a 23-yard pass from Everett Golson for the score.

CHRISTIAN LOMBARD | OL | INVERNESS, ILL.

Lombard builds upon consistency on O-line

By **BENJAMIN HORVATH**
Sports Writer

As a leader of one of the most oft-overlooked offensive units, graduate student offensive lineman Christian Lombard fits the bill: quiet, unassuming and hardworking.

Lombard has built an impressive résumé in his five years at Notre Dame. Entering Saturday's game, Lombard has played in 42 games for the Irish, including the first national championship game appearance for the Irish since 1989.

Lombard, the starting right tackle in his fifth year of eligibility, was one of former Irish head coach Charlie Weis's earliest commitments for the 2010 recruiting class.

Weis was let go following the 2009 season, but despite the coaching change prior to Lombard's arrival in South Bend, he said he never thought to de-commit from Notre Dame.

"I never reconsidered my choice because I told myself I committed to a school, not to one particular coach," he said.

As a senior at Fremd High School in Palatine, Illinois, Lombard received a number of national honors, being named a USA Today first-team prep All-American, EA Sports first-team All-American and the Gatorade Player of the Year for Illinois.

The 6-foot-5, 311-lb. lineman certainly had a number of offers, including several from Big 10 schools, but he said Notre Dame was different from the others.

"I saw a place here that holds you to high academic and moral standards," Lombard said. "I knew I wanted to be a part of that."

But just as many freshmen are expected to work to earn the respect of their players and coaches, offensive linemen must work perhaps even harder to find a starting slot in the highly cohesive unit of the offensive line.

Lombard said he understood this going into his first year, in which did not see game action, but he also said he was committed to a positive mindset at the year's beginning.

"Traditionally, offensive linemen don't play as freshmen, so I understood that going in," he said. "I knew that it was a process, so I just committed to taking all the steps necessary."

The next step in that process would come the following 2011 season, when Lombard saw action in all 13 of the Irish contests, playing on the special teams unit.

Although not yet a starter on the offensive line, Lombard said this special teams role contributed to his preparation for earning a top spot on the depth chart.

"I played punt coverage and field goal protection, and those guys take a lot of beating," Lombard said. "From the standpoint of physicality, it got me prepared for those next couple of years."

And his first two years of hard work would come to fruition in Notre Dame's undefeated 2012 season, highlighted by an appearance in the BCS



EMMET FARNAN | The Observer

Irish graduate student offensive lineman Christian Lombard blocks Northwestern junior defensive lineman Dean Lowry during Notre Dame's 43-40 loss to the Wildcats on Saturday at Notre Dame Stadium.

National Championship Game. Lombard, then a junior, started at right tackle in all 13 contests.

Perhaps the team's most impressive stat from that season came from Lombard's unit: the Irish started the same five linemen in each contest, a rarity for a position as physical as the lineman spot.

Lombard said this helped the offense find a rhythm and consistency, as the line developed a tight-knit relationship during the championship run.

"That type of relationship is necessary for a successful line, and the ability to protect and block for the guys behind us," he said.

In a year with a number of close victories that came in the games' final minutes, Lombard said his favorite memory was Notre Dame's come-from-behind, triple-overtime 29-26 victory against Pittsburgh on Nov. 3, 2012, which kept the undefeated season intact at 9-0.

"We ran a crazy amount of plays, like 110 or something, and afterward, we were all so exhausted, but we just kept believing and blocking play after play," Lombard said.

However, as most Irish fans remember, the magic of the season would come to a screeching halt in the BCS National Championship Game, when Alabama convincingly claimed its second straight championship in a 42-14 rout over the Irish.

Although a difficult loss, Lombard said it served as a

motivator for the Irish before they kicked off the next season.

"We really had a great off-season, and I think we all felt like we really had so much more to prove to the world and to ourselves and to our fans," Lombard said. "It was definitely a motivation."

In the 2013 campaign, Lombard made the switch from right tackle to right guard, a difference that may seem insignificant but has noticeable nuances for any lineman.

Despite this transition, Lombard, and the offensive line as a whole, excelled in 2013, something Lombard attributes to the Irish coaching staff.

"The transition was difficult from the standpoint that I had never played the guard position before, but we don't necessarily teach different fundamentals specific to each lineman position, so it was fairly easy to catch on," Lombard said.

The 2013 offensive line was, statistically speaking, one of the best in the nation. The Irish were second in the country in fewest sacks allowed, and no other team attempted more passes and allowed fewer sacks than Notre Dame, which gave up only eight sacks on 429 passes.

Lombard's season was cut short, however, because of a back injury that had been aggravating him since the previous summer. In the seventh game of the season against USC, Lombard re-aggravated the injury, which required immediate surgery.

Just as the Alabama loss served to motivate Lombard, the back injury inspired the then-senior to rehab and return the following season.

"It was tough sitting out and having to watch the guys that you play with for two years from the sideline," he said.

Following the long rehabilitation during this past off-season, Lombard experienced another setback when he unexpectedly injured his wrist during spring practice.

"It was definitely a kick in the stomach, and I kind of felt like I couldn't catch a break," Lombard said. "But you just have to try and stay positive."

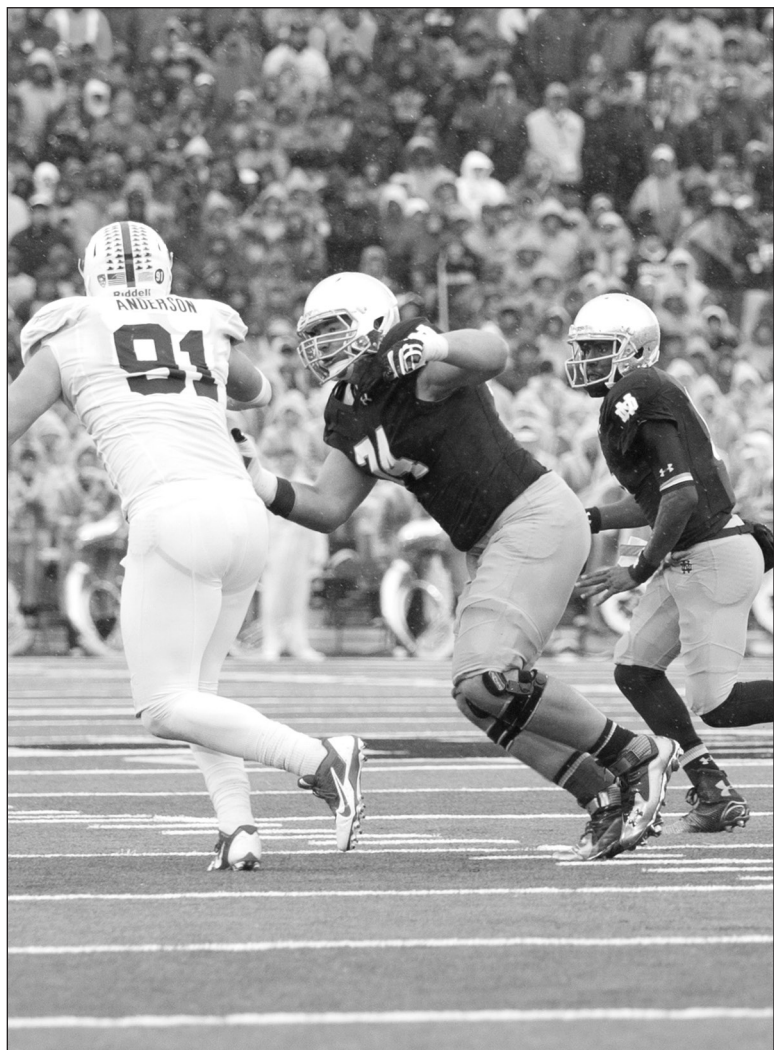
And again, the lineman exhibited the toughness that has been a defining characteristic of his career at Notre Dame, as he fought through the wrist injury to prepare for the 2014 opener against Rice.

Currently building on an already impressive career this season, Lombard could be a mid-round pick in the upcoming NFL Draft, according to DraftCountdown.com analyst Scott Wright.

However, when asked about hearing his name called in the draft, Lombard remained expressionless and remained razor-focused on his team's upcoming opponents.

"That's been the mindset going into the year, and all throughout it," he said. "I'll worry about that when it's time to worry about that."

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JODI LO | The Observer

Christian Lombard moves to make a block for senior quarterback Everett Golson during a 17-14 win against Stanford on Oct. 4.

NICK MARTIN | OL | INDIANAPOLIS

Martin follows in brother's footsteps as captain

By GREG HADLEY
Associate Sports Editor

For most of their childhood, senior offensive lineman Nick Martin and his brother Zack just couldn't get along. They bickered and fought constantly, with Zack often getting the better of his little brother.

"I hated him," Nick joked. "Well, no, I never hated him. We definitely fought a lot when we were younger though."

Things changed quickly, however, when Nick joined Zack on the offensive line of Bishop Chatard High School's football team in Indianapolis. Through football, the brothers found common ground and became so close that when Zack left for Notre Dame, Nick followed two years later.

"We don't have [a sibling rivalry]," Nick said. "The day I started playing high school football it really just clicked. ... He's why I came here."

Together, Nick and Zack helped anchor the offensive line for the Irish in 2013, starting the first 11 games of the season at center and left tackle, respectively.

Nowadays, things have changed. Zack departed Notre Dame at the end of last season and was picked in the first round of the NFL Draft by the Dallas Cowboys, where he now starts at right guard.

"It's definitely weird, not having him around," Nick said. "But it's also great. He's doing great things. I'm proud of him. I knew the whole time how good he was."

Meanwhile, Nick has stepped up, not only to fill his brother's spot in the lineup, but also to take on a leadership role for an offensive line that lost three of last year's starters and went through a midseason shuffle that changed almost everyone's role along the line.

That leadership role for the offensive line expanded at the beginning of the season when Irish head coach Brian Kelly announced that Martin would serve as one of the team's four captains.

"During summer practices, I just sort of became the leader of the O-line," Martin said. "[I] just started running drills, and that snowballed into me becoming a captain and a leader for the whole team."

Three games into the 2014 campaign, Kelly overhauled the line, which had allowed six sacks, including four to Purdue on Sept. 13. He shuffled four players into new positions and brought in a new center while Martin switched to left guard.

While the move was difficult for Martin, it is something he said he has learned to take in stride. After sitting out his freshman season, the 6-foot-4, 295-pounder spent his sophomore year mostly playing

special teams while backing up the tackle positions. A year later, he shifted to starting center for the first time in his career.

"It's actually a great experience," Martin said. "You want to be able to play as many positions as possible. I had never played center before last year ... and I fell in love with it immediately. But you've got to move around. You've got to put what's best for the team first, and I'm playing guard, and I'm starting to get the hang of that. So it's nice to play multiple positions."

The Irish have also had to acclimate to the return of senior Everett Golson to the quarterback role. While Golson missed the 2013 season, the offensive line worked with the now-graduated Tommy Rees, who tended to stay in the pocket, Martin said.

"It's definitely different," he said. "They each have their strengths, and we just need to adapt to them. The biggest difference is the play extension. You're blocking all seven, your man takes off and gets behind you, Everett is going to extend the play. You just block for him, because he's going to make a big play."

Despite the numerous changes, the line remains close as a unit, Martin said.

"We're the tightest group on the team," he said. "We're always with each other and doing stuff together inside of football, outside of football, whatever. A lot of food is involved. I live in a house with [senior offensive linemen Matt Hegarty and Conor Hanratty], and we're always bringing over the younger guys and just hanging out, barbecuing, really anything."

Most of Martin's leadership style comes from what he learned from Zack when he was



CAROLINE GENCO | The Observer

Irish senior offensive lineman Nick Martin prepares to snap the ball during Notre Dame's 31-0 shutout victory against Michigan on Sept. 6 at Notre Dame Stadium.

an underclassman adjusting to college life, he said. Apart from helping him adapt to the speed of college football, Zack also provided Nick with an example of the strong friendships the team can build, he said.

"Just going off to college and having family there made the transition unbelievable," Nick said. "I became friends with all of his friends. ... Leadership-wise, he also taught me a lot of things: consistency, how to lead by example, when to speak up and when not to. [I] just really watched him."

Together, Nick and Zack are just the second pair of brothers to both be named captains in program history. That, combined with the year they spent starting together, is an experience Nick said he still does not fully appreciate yet.

"[Starting alongside him] was unbelievable," Nick said. "That's one of those things that probably won't hit me until we're older, especially now that I got the chance to be a captain. That, too, probably won't hit us until we're older."

The similarities between Nick

and Zack do not end there. With an extra year of eligibility remaining, Nick said he plans to return for another year at Notre Dame. If he is named captain again, he will join Zack in the elite group of two-time captains.

After college, Nick said he plans to once again follow Zack, this time into the NFL. Is another reunion along the same offensive line in the cards for the two?

"That's the dream."

Contact Greg Hadley at ghadley@nd.edu

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CAM MCDANIEL | RB | COPPELL, TEXAS

McDaniel's dedication stands out on field

By **MIKE GINOCCHIO**
Sports Writer

He runs angry.

It's the first thing you notice about Irish senior running back Cam McDaniel as soon as he receives the handoff. He runs straight into the breach with an audacious approach. Rather than dance away from contact or attempt to outrun an opponent, he seems to actively seek defenders out, almost as if he is daring someone to bring him down. It's less like watching a running back and more like watching a cannonball fire. And even then, it's hardly a victory for the defender to make the tackle: McDaniel might have been brought down, but he will have made you regret it.

"I've just always tried to be aggressive when I run the football," McDaniel said. "I mean, early on, I used to watch old highlights of [NFL Hall of Fame running back] Earl Campbell because I was a big Texas fan."

Has he ever been told of his running style?

"I've had a few people tell me that before," McDaniel said with a smile.

Still, it can be jarring to watch the 5-foot-10, 205-pounder launch himself into the fray, absorbing contact with a terrific crack, doing whatever he can to get a few yards for the Irish and wear the defense down at the same time. Yet those who know him know that that's just how he's always been — full speed ahead.

"My family and friends, I think they have a deep

understanding and appreciation of my passion for the game," McDaniel said. "And they just try to support that in whatever way possible. I know that my mom and my wife in particular get a little bit nervous watching me play, but you're always going to have that."

For the longest time, it looked like McDaniel was going to carve a comfortable niche in the Irish program as a dependable power running back. Then a funny thing happened during his junior year: he got famous.

The first moment was captured on video. The camera focused on the Irish running back corps as they prepared to run through the "gauntlet," the machine used by running backs during fall preseason practice. The "gauntlet" is an ominous-looking station with rubberized pads, intended to simulate defenders' arms swatting at the ball in close quarters. It looks more like a painter's scaffolding than a running back drill, yet it is something that running backs like McDaniel have gone through countless times in their careers.

But there was one problem as McDaniel prepared to run through this one. It was set up backwards.

"We were in the middle of fall camp, [and] it's really hot, it's humid, and I'm the first one up in line," McDaniel said, a grin slowly forming on his face at the memory. "I didn't even notice [that it was backwards]. You can't really tell unless you look at it close."

The coaching staff made the

call for McDaniel to begin the drill, and he ran forward.

"I've never really run through one that only goes one way," McDaniel said. "So I go to run in it, and access denied."

"Next thing you know, you're an Internet sensation."

McDaniel's teammates immediately worried whether he was all right. Once it was clear that he was fine, if slightly dazed, they started laughing. McDaniel, true to form, simply shook it off and got back to work ("Now we have one that goes both ways," he later said). But his bout with Internet fame wasn't quite finished yet.

The second moment occurred during the USC game on Oct. 19, 2013. Though the Irish won the game 14-10, what everyone remembers is a particular photo. There is McDaniel in mid-carry, holding the ball in tight to his chest as he hops over a pile of bodies behind him. A Trojan defender is trying to bring him down. His helmet has been knocked off, and instead of catching a grimace of concentration, the photographer captured a most inexplicably perfect shot. McDaniel's hair is slightly tousled, and on his face is a slight smirk. He looks less like a Division I running back and more like a Calvin Klein model.

Thus, the "Ridiculously Photogenic Running Back" meme was born.

"I got [the photo] right after the game," McDaniel said. "The original photographer forwarded it to me and was like, 'Look at this awesome shot I got



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish senior running back Cam McDaniel rushes through a hole in the Stanford defense during a 17-14 win against the Cardinal on Oct. 4.

during the game.' I didn't think anything of it, really. I kind of looked at it for a second to make sure that it was real, and then I showed it to my mom and dad, and they were like, 'That's really funny.'"

Little did McDaniel know, things were about to explode.

"My friends and family started getting calls from everybody," McDaniel said. "Just random places and news broadcasters from all over the world, wondering, 'Who is this kid?' And it just ended up being a freak thing. Gained like 10,000 followers on Twitter."

Through it all, McDaniel keeps a relaxed approach to the fact that he will be remembered, in addition to his play on the field, for what amounts to lightning striking twice. After all, what are the odds of becoming an Internet sensation twice in one season?

"It doesn't bother me; it's just part of the experience," McDaniel said. "I always told people that hopefully I'll make a SportsCenter highlight reel where it's not having to do with something that's absolutely outlandish. It may not be here; we'll see."

But all of these things that happened to McDaniel last year pale in comparison to one very important moment in his life this past offseason: he got married.

"I met Stephani going into my senior year of high school, that summer," McDaniel said of his now-wife. "She was ... she was just an amazing girl. We were friends at first, and soon after that, I realized that she was something special. She went to Texas A&M, so we did long distance for two-and-a-half years. Then after I proposed to her,

which was May 18, 2013, she ended up transferring to Bethel College, which is like 10 minutes away [from Notre Dame.] She finished there in three years. We got married May 17, 2014, back in Dallas.

McDaniel said he looks to the future with anticipation. Off the field, he and Stephani are expecting their first child. Considering the fearless way he has approached life so far and the success he has found, it is little surprise that he continues to dream on the field.

"I'm looking to extend my football career and go on to play in the NFL," McDaniel said. "At least to give it a shot and see how it turns out. And so that is taking precedence for me right now."

Attending Notre Dame as a student is hard enough. Balancing that with being a member of the football team is harder. Juggling that in addition to being married and soon to be a father is almost more than one can fathom handling.

It isn't something McDaniel said he takes lightly.

"It's sometimes overwhelming," McDaniel said. "But you kinda just take it as it comes, and when you sign up to be a student-athlete at Notre Dame, you sign up for a huge obligation. Sometimes you don't realize just how big an obligation that is when you get into it. But you figure that one out pretty quick. And I did. There were times that were really tough, you know? But it's just something that takes a lot of diligence and discipline, and if you stick to it, it's possible."

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KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Cam McDaniel tries to leap over a Syracuse defender during Notre Dame's 31-15 win against the Orange on Sept. 27 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

TYLER PLANTZ | RB | FRANKFORT, ILL.

Plantz lives out dream, earns scholarship

By **DANIEL O'BOYLE**
Sports Writer

From the very start, Tyler Plantz's dream was playing for Notre Dame.

As the son of former Irish offensive lineman Ron Plantz, the graduate student running back said his father made sure that he would grow up supporting the Irish.

"We started coming to games at a young age, and from there, we were wearing the jerseys, and we'd watch the game every Saturday," Plantz said. "We always just kind of grew up a Notre Dame family, and I always had the goal of going to Notre Dame"

Plantz received offers from multiple Ivy League schools and one school in the Mid-American Conference, but he said he always knew that he'd rather fulfill his ultimate goal by walking on at Notre Dame.

"The one thing in the back of my mind for everything I did was trying to get to Notre Dame," he said.

And when the time came for him to make his first appearance for the Irish, Plantz said the experience was something he couldn't believe.

"It was pretty surreal," he said. "Actually, the first play I don't remember — I was so

excited and the adrenaline was pumping so fast, but really it was the pinnacle of a dream come true. Finally getting on the field was one of the coolest, if not the coolest, experience of my life."

Plantz's commitment to Notre Dame goes far beyond his appearances on the football field, having made appearances for the Irish club rugby team and in interhall football as well as reaching the quarterfinals of Bengal Bouts in 2013.

"I've always had the mentality my whole life, of not just playing Notre Dame football, but an overall love of Notre Dame," he said. "Just my whole life, I've had this undying love for the University, so being involved in things outside of football has opened up my experience here, and I've been able to meet some amazing people."

Having spent most of his high school career playing linebacker, a position in which he registered 287 tackles in his final two years at Providence Catholic High School in Illinois, Plantz needed some time to adjust to playing running back. However, he said it has made him a better player in the long term.

"It was a lot tougher at first, being on the opposite side of the ball," he said. "I always

loved playing linebacker, trying to make tackles, but it's actually pretty exciting getting to run with the ball in your hand and play on the opposite side, scoring touchdowns.

"There's definitely a different feel for the game, but it really helped me to understand both sides of the ball, and it could become the next step, where if I want to become a coach, I have a feel for how to play defense, how to play offense and how to bring those skills together."

After three years as a walk-on, Plantz was awarded a scholarship for this season in August, as part of the last announcement of scholarship players, and he said this experience was another of his highlights at Notre Dame.

"When the coach got up and announced my name for a scholarship, it was one of the coolest things in the whole world," he said. "Not only that the coaches were excited and that they recognized me, but most importantly, my teammates did. I got a huge roar from the guys. They were all giving me hugs and high-fives."

Plantz said his time as a walk-on had allowed him to understand the experience of some of the younger walk-on players and that he hoped he could act as a leader to them.



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish graduate student running back Tyler Plantz watches during warmups before a 43-40 loss to Northwestern last Saturday.

"These guys definitely don't get the recognition of a lot of people — a lot of them aren't traveling to the games on Saturday, but they have that mentality every day that they're going to work hard every single day, and seeing these guys progress, not only in football, but in what they do after football, is one of the coolest things about being here," Plantz said.

Plantz said his future remains open, and although he is studying finance, he still hopes that

he might be able to find a career related to football.

"Honestly, I love playing football, and I love being around football, so I can definitely see myself taking the coaching route," Plantz said. "But also, as a finance major, I can see myself also taking financial consulting or something in that direction. Honestly, the doors are still open."

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ANTHONY RABASA | DL | MIAMI

Rabasa grows into leadership role on defense



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior defensive lineman Anthony Rabasa takes a break between plays during Notre Dame's 48-17 win over Rice on Aug. 30.

By **SEAN KILMER**
Sports Writer

The life of a freshman football player at Notre Dame is hectic. Luckily for senior defensive lineman Anthony Rabasa, the older players looked out for him when he was a freshman.

"[Former Irish linebackers] Dan Fox and Carlo Calabrese are two guys I'm still pretty close with," he said. "They showed me as a freshman what to do and what to

expect."

Now Rabasa said his role has shifted.

"It's funny, now that I'm a senior, I can tell which [freshman] are struggling, having a hard time and all that kind of stuff," Rabasa said.

In appreciation of what older players did for him, Rabasa said he has become a mentor to some of the younger players.

"I'm just trying to help out the younger guys, especially off the field," he said. "I mean, on the field,

these kids are ballers. They're all ballers. But for off-the-field stuff, like when they have to handle school and football and being away from home, some of the guys come up to me, and I talk to them. It feels good to be that helping hand."

On a defense with so many young players, his presence both on and off the field is valued. Rabasa said he lets the whole team know anyone can talk to him anytime, and they take advantage of his generosity. Rabasa said his outgoing personality helps him maintain his off-the-field presence.

"I can blend with any group, and there's not one type of group that I hang out with the most," Rabasa said. "I know them all, and I get along with all of them pretty well, so I would say I'm pretty good off the field with that."

So far this season, the defense has played better than many expected, and Rabasa said he attributes the unit's performance to its commitment.

"We're just a committed group and we want to win, and we know what it takes to win," he said. "We don't have a lot of veterans, and we're a very young team. But we just have that drive, and our entire team just has that motivation to go chase it. We want to play. We love to play fast, hard and aggressive, and that's what we do every weekend. We can do it week in and

week out, and we're just having a great season so far."

After his freshman season ended prematurely with a shoulder injury, Rabasa struggled to find a position in former Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco's 3-4 scheme. Rabasa said he knew he had a clean slate when Diaco left this offseason for the head-coaching job at Connecticut. New defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder's 4-3 scheme further improved his chances of enlarging his role.

Rabasa said he has felt a difference this year compared to the last three.

"You definitely feel a change like in the culture with what the coach expects of you and stuff like that," he said. "There's been front-office moves, and it feels good. Definitely feels good."

In VanGorder's 4-3 scheme, Rabasa can play his natural position of pass-rushing defensive end.

"[Pass rushing] is what I do," he said. "It's what they have me doing here, and it's what I'm supposed to do on the defense."

A former standout at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami, Rabasa had a lot of options for college. He chose Notre Dame, and for him, it wasn't a tough decision.

"The education you get here is

one in a million, and the opportunity to come here doesn't happen to everybody," he said. "If you're one of the lucky few chosen ones to get a scholarship to come play football here, then you're a fool if you let that opportunity go to waste and go somewhere else. So it was definitely a no-brainer once Notre Dame came and offered me."

Looking back, he said he does not regret his decision to come to Notre Dame and that he feels "like it's prepared me more than any other university could have that gave me an opportunity."

Whatever he does after his time here, Rabasa said he will never forget the memories he has created, especially during the game at Florida State.

"Florida State, oh my goodness, that was insane," he said. "The atmosphere there — you could feel it. It was so live, and you felt everybody's breath, and everybody chanting and all that stuff. That was nuts."

"[Attending Notre Dame] is a once-in-a-lifetime experience," he added. "Everywhere you play is a national spotlight. I will never forget walking through that tunnel and playing amazing games on that field in front of 80,000 people."

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CODY RIGGS | CB | FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.

Riggs makes immediate impact in first year

By ISAAC LORTON
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Sept. 26 edition of The Observer.

A fiery red-headed boy, dressed in Notre Dame gear ran up to Cody Riggs outside the Main Building on Wednesday afternoon and yelled, "High five!" With his hand extended above his head, he leapt to meet the hand of the chuckling graduate student cornerback.

"It's a lot of fun," Riggs said. "So many young fans here at the games, especially when you go through the [player] walk. [There are] a lot of little kids and a lot of really loyal fans here. They have been a part of this community for a long time, and it's a great fan tradition."

The graduate student himself was once that little kid, coming to Notre Dame to watch his uncle, former Irish receiver Bobby Brown, play in Notre Dame Stadium against Michigan State in 1997. Since then, Riggs has had no issue fitting into the Irish defense or the Notre Dame community, despite his four years at a different university.

"It means a lot to me to be a part of [this community]," Riggs said. "I have kind of been a part of it since my uncle came here. I used to come to games. I almost came here but now I am finally officially a part of the community, and it feels great."

Riggs's story is not one of finally fulfilling a family dream, following in his uncle's footsteps, he said, but rather a story of him learning and doing what was best for his future, while continuing to play football at a high level. Riggs originally visited Notre Dame in 2010 on his first recruiting trip, with his uncle at his side. Many speculated he would end up at Notre Dame, but eventually the Fort Lauderdale, Fla. native

decided to stay in state and attend Florida to play football under then-head coach Urban Meyer and then-defensive coordinator Charlie Strong.

"[My uncle] never really pressured me into coming here," Riggs said. "He just explained the good things that come with going to Notre Dame. He always let it be my decision. He was really happy the second time around. First time around, I'm sure he was upset."

"But like I've said before ... Florida was the perfect fit for me. Urban Meyer knew my family from before; it was close to home, and I had a really good relationship with Charlie Strong. Those were the reasons I went there."

Brown said that he never pushed Riggs towards attending Notre Dame and that he felt Florida was best for his nephew at that time. He said that Riggs picked up on things around him and always came to his own informed decisions.

"Throughout the process I wanted to be sure to let him know [what] the positives were about Notre Dame," Brown said. "But overall, I wanted to make sure I didn't pressure him. I wanted him to make his own decision."

"I think his decision [to attend Notre Dame] was for all of the right reasons," Brown said. "It shows how mature he is. He understood the opportunity to get a Master's [degree] was something that he shouldn't take lightly."

At Florida, Riggs earned his degree in family, youth and community sciences. Riggs had one more year of eligibility after he missed most of the 2012 season with a foot injury, and he said he wanted to continue his education with a Master's program for his remaining year. Riggs said Notre Dame was the best fit for his final season.

"It was an opportunity for me—before I even knew I was coming to Notre Dame—to do my fifth

year elsewhere. I had been in [the Florida] program for four years. I thought about leaving and going into the [NFL] draft last year, but I said, 'I'm gonna go somewhere else and do my fifth year and get a Master's somewhere else, and finish my college career.'"

Riggs is studying business management at Notre Dame, with the aspirations of possibly starting or working for a non-profit organization, he said.

"I wanted to either own a non-profit one day, hopefully, if I'm playing that long," Riggs said. "Or I wouldn't mind working for one, whether it be in a position of operations or programming."

Riggs said it was not easy for him to leave Florida, but he made the decision with his life after football in mind.

"I wouldn't say I had regrets leaving Florida, but I have always felt bad about it," Riggs said. "Just the fact that I had to leave a situation where I was a starter and the coaching staff was depending on me to be a leader. Of course I feel bad about that, but I explained to them that this decision was best for me. Some people may look at it as a selfish decision, but it was something that was the best for my future."

"[My Master's degree] is very important. It allows me to have something to do after football. I always like staying busy, and it means a lot to have something to fall back on after I'm done playing football."

Although Riggs will only be at Notre Dame for a single year, Irish secondary coach Kerry Cooks said he was eager to have an experienced defensive back among the young Irish secondary.

"[Riggs] was one of the best free-agent pickups that I've been associated with," Cooks said at Notre Dame's Media Day on Aug. 19. "You got a guy who has experience playing in the SEC, he's got experience playing corner, he's got experience playing safety,



ZACH LLORENS | The Observer

Irish graduate student cornerback Cody Riggs tries to cut around a Michigan offensive lineman during a 31-0 win on Sept. 6.

he's got experience playing in big games, so he's got a great feel and understanding for the game."

When it was announced Riggs would be attending Notre Dame in February, Irish head coach Brian Kelly praised Riggs's football knowledge and work ethic.

"Cody Riggs is an outstanding player," said Kelly in a Feb. 19 press release. "He played a ton of football at Florida, having started at both safety and cornerback. Cody definitely brings veteran leadership and versatility to our team and defense."

"He will help us immediately but, more importantly, Cody is a great kid with a tremendous focus on both football and academics."

Kelly proved to be correct in saying the Irish would need Riggs's knowledge and leadership immediately, as junior cornerback KeiVarae Russell was withheld as part of an investigation into suspected academic dishonesty and graduate student safety and captain Austin Collinworth was injured for the team's first three games. Riggs has been a steady and solid presence in the Irish secondary with these absences. He has seven tackles and one interception through the team's first three games. Riggs said the transition into the Irish defense was a relatively smooth one because it played a similar style to Florida.

"The defense is very similar to where I came from," Riggs said. "Corners are very aggressive in this defense, which is something I was used to at Florida and which is why I fit so well into this scheme."

However, Riggs said he does not get by on talent and tenacity; he watches as much film as he can in order to prepare.

"I put in a lot of work," Riggs

said. "Even though I'm studying all of the time [for my Master's], I still find time to study for football, and I always have questions for the coaches. I try to be a step ahead of everything."

"I watch a lot of film throughout the week. I try and see what they do in certain situations especially on third downs, because teams have go-to plays. I try to study those and anticipate those. I try to take guessing out of it."

Brown said he and Riggs often have conversations about the "nemesis" relationship between receivers and corners, which Riggs said helps his play. Brown added that his nephew has a great intelligence and unyielding approach when it comes to football.

"I remember at 11-years-old, he was well beyond his years in terms of his football IQ," Brown said. "He continues [to be] a very smart football player. ... He can go into any situation one-on-one presnap, knowing what the receiver is thinking and then in the midst [of the] route knowing what a receiver is trying to do against him. It's a game of chess out there."

That mental ability has helped key Riggs's play on the perimeter through the first quarter of the season, helping him integrate seamlessly into the Irish secondary. Looking at his transition from the big-picture perspective, Riggs said it might have been inevitable that he ended up in South Bend.

"Looking at it now, I fit in pretty well here," Riggs said. "Especially with the coaching staff, the players and the environment here. Maybe I was meant to be here. Maybe it was going to happen eventually."

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KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Cody Riggs chases after a loose ball during Notre Dame's 17-14 win over the Cardinal on Oct. 4 at Notre Dame Stadium. In his first year with the Irish, Riggs has amassed 32 tackles and one interception.

ERNIE SOTO | S | DAVIE, FLA.

Soto leaps from interhall to varsity football

By MICHAEL IVEY
Sports Writer

Ernie Soto is no stranger to being on big-name, nationally ranked football teams.

He attended St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. During his four years at St. Thomas Aquinas, his team went undefeated three times and won a state championship and two conference and regional titles. During his senior year, the Raiders were ranked No. 1 in the country.

But when Soto graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas in 2011 with a 4.8 GPA, it wasn't Notre Dame's legendary football program that made him want to attend the University.

"I've always been a Catholic boy," Soto said. "I've gone to St. Gregory for middle school and St. Thomas for high school, so it was kind of another step for me. It's also far from south Florida, so it was a new place for me to go to."

During his freshman year in fall 2011, Soto played interhall football for Keenan, a team he said also has a winning tradition when it comes to football.

"Being a part of that Keenan team was a lot of fun," Soto said. "I think Keenan is one of the best dorms to play football for.

The year I was on the team they were contenders, and the year after that and the year after that they've been contenders for the championship, so it was really cool to be a part of that team. They also have pride to it, and that's the sort of thing you want to be around, especially when it comes to stuff like sports."

It was during his freshman year when Soto realized he wanted something more. So he called his former high school coach, George Smith, from St. Thomas Aquinas.

"I talked to him and told him I want something more than just an academic part in Notre Dame, and he told me he would call someone, and that call opened the door to how I could show the Notre Dame coaches my film," Soto said. "So having a connection like that really helped out a lot."

Soto said he knew that being a walk-on wouldn't be easy.

"I heard stories of how guys had to wake up at five o'clock in the morning and come in when it's super cold outside and run drills, and there were hundreds of guys doing it, and it was kind of a crapshoot who gets a spot, so I kind of got lucky," he said.

Soto said his most memorable moment during his time on the

football team was the 2012 game against Stanford, which Notre Dame won in overtime. But he also said being on the Notre Dame campus during summer practices has been one of his favorite memories.

"When you're with all your teammates here in the summer, it's a cool experience," Soto said. "Being here and just going about your day, working out and then hanging around with your teammates during a nice summer day, it's pretty memorable."

Soto said he credits current Irish defensive coordinator Brian Van Gorder and former defensive coordinator Bob Diaco and the culture they created during their tenures as having the biggest impact on him during his time with the team.

"Being able to play football for them has been absolutely incredible," Soto said. "They go about their day being a man about every way you can possibly be, and it makes you want to try to achieve to be that professional. They have that determination that rubs off on you, and they try to shove it down your throat."

"You can't be a good football team without a good culture and a strong foundation, and that's what they build every



EMILY McCONVILLE | The Observer

Irish senior safety Ernie Soto trots onto the field before Notre Dame's season opener against Rice, a 48-17 win, on Aug. 30.

single day, even if it's something like a simple meeting for special teams or something like that."

Soto said they also helped push him to be a better form of himself.

"It's not just about being the best kid on the field; it's about being the best kid in the classroom," he said. "An interesting point they made to me was it's not just even that, it's being the best brother you could be, being the best boyfriend you can be, anything you can possibly be you always have to be on

your toes and you always want to do it better than you did the day before. Because it ultimately comes down to either you're going to get better or you're going to get worse, and if you go about your day doing that, and trusting the other 10 guys around you, you'll be fine."

Soto is enrolled in the College of Engineering as a chemical engineering major. He is currently applying to medical school.

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TONY SPRINGMANN | DL | FORT WAYNE, IND.

Springmann transitions from player to coach

By DANIEL O'BOYLE
Sports Writer

During the summer of 2014, before a down of football had been played, Tony Springmann found out that his days playing for Notre Dame were over.

However, Springmann was able to hold on to his scholarship

as a medical hardship player and has adapted to a new role helping to coach the defensive line.

The former defensive lineman said he had previously hoped that his recurring knee injuries, which had also ruled him out for the entire 2013 season, were over. However, when he realized he would not be able to play this

year, he said he found himself able to accept it and move into his coaching position.

"Over the past summer, things just started to turn south, and I knew it was time," Springmann said. "It just gave me a different challenge, that's all."

Although he said he had to spend some time adapting to coaching instead of playing, Springmann said he now feels confident in his new role.

"It was a little weird at first," he said. "At first, it was sort of awkward to get over at the beginning of the season, but now it's fluid, there's a rhythm to it, and there's an expectation every day you have to live up to, but it's a lot of fun."

Springmann also said recent experience with the team gives him a new perspective and that he feels he can use this to help some of the younger players.

"My goal this season is to get our defensive line, where we have a lot of young guys, to be the best that they possibly can be by being a mentor, a role model and just whatever I have to do," Springmann said.

"It's been rewarding because I can't physically be playing, so seeing some of the other guys learn and work on obstacles that I used to on a daily basis has been really rewarding," he added. "It's refreshing."

Springmann arrived at Notre

Dame in 2011 from Bishop Dwenger High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which had already produced players for the Irish in previous seasons — tight end Tyler Eifert, who was a junior when Springmann arrived, and receiver John Goodman, who was a senior. Springmann said he felt that knowing some players before he arrived helped him when he was starting out.

"The guys I knew at Bishop Dwenger ... really made a difference in my coming here," Springmann said. "They were definitely an influence, and they were close friends of mine."

From there, after not seeing any game action in his freshman year, Springmann was able to play a part in all 13 games of Notre Dame's 2012 run to the BCS National Championship Game. Over the course of the 2012 season, Springmann recorded 11 tackles, along with sacking former Michigan State quarterback Andrew Maxwell.

Springmann said he looks back fondly upon 2012 and enjoyed being able to play a part in such a successful season.

"It was a lot of fun," he said. "Like any season, it has its ups and downs, but the season on the whole was a lot of fun, and the guys made it a lot better."

Springmann said that after this season, he hopes to give something back to the

community by working with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) and teaching in under-resourced schools before he will consider his long-term plans.

"I was admitted into the ACE teaching program, so I'll be teaching for two years, and then from that point, I'm still not sure, but I have a couple of different options," he said.

Currently, though, Springmann said he is enjoying being able to continue his involvement with the team even after discovering he would no longer play. In particular, Springmann said being able to continue to work with the players and everyone involved with the program has been a highlight of his year.

"My favorite thing about Notre Dame and about Notre Dame football is the people," he said. "The people really make this program what it is."

"I was close to a lot of older guys here when I was a freshman and a sophomore. Guys like [former Irish receiver] Robby Toma, [safety] Zeke Motta and [defensive lineman] Kapron-Lewis Moore," Springmann added. "Now, I've really been enjoying working with [defensive lineman] Andrew Trumbetti, one of the freshmen — that's been a lot of fun."

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Observer File Photo

Irish senior Tony Springmann pushes a USC offensive lineman during a 22-13 win against the Trojans on Nov. 24, 2012.

JUSTIN UTUPO | DL | LAKEWOOD, CALIF.

‘Grandpa’ Utupo earns increased playing time

By RYAN KLAUS
Sports Writer

For graduate senior defensive lineman Justin Utupo, coming back for a fifth year at Notre Dame had always been the plan.

“I just always knew I was going to come back,” Utupo said. “As soon as I didn’t play my freshman year, I knew I would have an extra year of eligibility, and I knew I would use it to come back and play because this is where I committed. I wasn’t going to go anywhere else.”

His final season marks the culmination of an up-and-down career for Utupo. Since arriving at Notre Dame in 2010, the Lakewood, California, native hasn’t regularly been a part of Notre Dame’s defensive rotations. Although he has gotten consistent special teams playing time since his sophomore season in 2011, it was not until 2013 that Utupo registered his first tackle.

One of the big challenges of Utupo’s career has been being able to find a steady position on defense, he said. Utupo came out of high school as an accomplished defensive lineman but was smaller than the typical Notre Dame defensive lineman. Utupo switched to the linebacker position during

his sophomore and junior seasons.

Though Utupo was open to the change, he said his preference has always been to play on the defensive line.

“I like standing up and trying something new, but if you haven’t played linebacker in your high school years, it’s hard trying to pick it up at the next level, especially when it requires you to cover fast and good receivers,” Utupo said. “I liked it, but my natural position is always having my hand on the ground.”

In addition to the challenges of working to earn playing time and having to switch positions, Utupo dealt with a suspension for violating team rules at the beginning of the 2012 season.

“It definitely hurt,” he said. “I lost the chance to be in the two-deep at the beginning of the year. I bounced back though, which is what you have to do when you take a step back.”

After switching back to defensive line before the 2013 season, Utupo saw an increase in playing time that resulted in him registering the first seven tackles of his career. In particular, he was given more opportunities when fellow defensive linemen Sheldon Day, Louis Nix and Ishaq Williams

battled injuries late in the season.

“Last year, I was kind of an as-needed guy,” he said. “When they went down, it’s the next man up. That’s what they preach here. There can’t be any drop-off between the first guy and the next guy that comes in. You have to produce at that same level.”

Though Utupo has still not been the beneficiary of consistent opportunities on the defensive line in the 2014 season, his playing time overall has increased, highlighted by his first career start against Navy on Nov. 1.

In a 49-39 win over the Midshipmen, he recorded the first interception of his career. Among other highlights for Utupo this season was his performance in Notre Dame’s 31-0 victory over Michigan on Sept. 6, which included his first career sack.

Outside of his own performance on the field, Utupo said he has recognized the importance of being a leader, which results from being one of the few graduate students on the team.

“I feel like the grandpa of the group,” he said. “I’ve experienced the last four years, and I know what everyone else is going through and what they’re going to go through. It’s just nice for me being there



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish graduate student defensive lineman Justin Utupo waits for the next play during Notre Dame’s 48-17 win against Rice on Aug. 30.

with experience that I can help the younger guys and everything that they do, whether it’s on the field or off the field. I embrace being that grandpa figure.”

Away from the football field, Utupo received his undergraduate degree in anthropology last May. He currently is taking three graduate classes and said he hopes to be accepted into and receive his Master’s degree through the Alliance for Catholic

Education.

When asked what he would consider his favorite moment of his career in a Notre Dame uniform, Utupo thought back to the 2011 season when he got on the field for the first time against Michigan.

“I’ll never forget that,” he said. “It was at the Big House; it was loud, and [overall] was such a big game.”

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John Duffy, The O’Malley Director of the University Writing Program; Associate Professor, Department of English

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JODI LO | The Observer

Irish senior linebacker Ben Councell (30) and freshman safety Drue Tranquill (23) attempt to block a punt by Stanford fifth-year senior Ben Rhyne during Notre Dame's 17-14 win Oct. 4.



MICHAEL YU | The Observer

Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to senior running back Cam McDaniel in a victory against Rice on Aug. 30.

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COMMENTARY

Pondering the ‘what-ifs’ of class of 2011 recruits



Brian Hartnett
Managing Editor

Irish head coach Brian Kelly spoke Tuesday about the “fine line” that exists in college football, one that has his team either seven points away from a 9-1 record or 10 points away from a 5-5 record, depending on how you view the proverbial glass.

Kelly’s statement about how the fine line makes college football such a high-stakes game also translates to recruiting classes, which can turn from a group brimming with potential and the hope of being the team’s next leaders to an unremarkable unit, with just a few injuries,

defections or struggles on the field.

Of course, Kelly also said such scenarios can be mitigated by consistency in recruiting across all classes. And for the most part, the Irish have done that — their recruiting classes during Kelly’s tenure have been ranked Nos. 18, 9, 18, 5 and 11, respectively, according to 247 Sports.

But the high school class of 2011, made up of 13 team members who will celebrate their Senior Day on Saturday, doesn’t bear much resemblance to the ninth-ranked, 23-member class that was widely seen as a good haul — Kelly’s first full-scale recruiting class since he was hired near the tail end of the

recruiting cycle for the class of 2010.

The class of 2011 in many ways illustrates Kelly’s point about the fine line that exists in big-time college football.

Granted, the class has had plenty of successes. Three of its members — Stephon Tuitt, Troy Niklas and George Atkinson III — are currently in the NFL, Tuitt with the Steelers, Niklas with the Cardinals and Atkinson with the Raiders. Their college careers didn’t necessarily go according to plan — Niklas transitioned from outside linebacker to tight end before his sophomore year and Atkinson bounced around from running back to receiver to kick returner, never really

finding a true home, but they for the most part lived up to expectations.

Then there are the current team contributors — Everett Golson, Kyle Brindza, Matthias Farley, Ben Koyack and Matt Hegarty come to mind. This group also includes two team captains in Nick Martin and Cam McDaniel. And it must be noted that one of the biggest influences in the class is a guy who wasn’t awarded a scholarship upon high school graduation — Joe Schmidt, who was a preferred walk-on, if you haven’t already heard.

While many in this group have been beset by injury, turnovers or struggles recently, they still form the

backbone of the class, players who stayed the course and will most likely leave Notre Dame with a degree in hand and a wealth of football memories and experiences.

And these experiences have been important to the Irish because so many others in the class did not fully get to complete the path that these players have.

Aaron Lynch, the highest-rated Notre Dame commitment in the class of 2011 per 247 Sports, left for South Florida after his freshman year and now plays for the 49ers.

DaVaris Daniels, Ishaq Williams and Eilar Hardy were held out following an investigation into “suspected academic dishonesty” earlier this year — Hardy has returned to the team, but the other two players will not play this season and the future of their Notre Dame careers is still up in the air.

The injury bug heavily bit some players from the class — injuries forced Brad Carrico to retire even before stepping on the field and caused Tony Springmann to hang up his cleats after his sophomore season.

Likewise, injuries have been a constantly recurring theme in the college careers of players like Jarrett Grace, Ben Counsell and Chase Hounshell.

And for varying reasons, some due to depth, others due to scheme, some players just haven’t found their particular niche within the class and have struggled to see the field — Josh Atkinson, Jalen Brown and Anthony Rabasa come to mind.

In short, Notre Dame’s high school class of 2011 is probably what fans of a major college football program should expect to see — I’m sure the senior classes at Alabama or Ohio State have also been hit hard by players leaving early, injuries and some underperformance.

But it also is interesting to play the “what-if” game and wonder what the stakes could have been Saturday had guys like Lynch and Tuitt stayed all four years or Daniels and Williams played this season or Springmann and Grace remained healthy.

Those few factors might have been enough to put Notre Dame on the right side of that fine line, the one between legitimate championship contender and playoff also-ran.

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

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