

IRISH INSIDER

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BLUE-GOLD GAME



IN WHOSE HANDS?

Everett Golson, Malik Zaire look to break spring deadlock at quarterback



THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Erin Rice and Kevin Song

COMMENTARY

Time to strike for Notre Dame



Alex Carson
Associate Sports Editor

As the sun sets throughout the United State on Jan. 11, 2016, the sports world's eyes will be turned to Glendale, Arizona, where two teams will take the field for the national championship.

We don't know who we'll see on that field in just under nine months. Ohio State, the defending national champions, are clearly a favorite. TCU is the trendy pick. Alabama will always be a contender. Florida State and Oregon have solid chances of making it back to the four-team playoff.

But when millions of people nationwide tune in that Monday night, what's to say they won't be watching the Irish?

Sure, we don't often talk about five-loss teams as having national title aspirations, but last year's Notre Dame squad is far from your normal one.

At times, it looked brilliant. Early in the year, Everett Golson was a Heisman candidate, making plays left and right to lead the Irish to a 6-0 start and a No. 5 ranking.

The defense looked fantastic, too. It didn't surrender more than 17 points to any of its first five opponents, with the hall-mark performance a shutout of Michigan in the series' final scheduled contest.

Then the bottom fell out. A controversial ending to a three-point loss at Florida State gave way to a lackluster performance two weeks later against Navy. Joe Schmidt got hurt, and it spiraled from there, as the Irish lost their last four games of the regular season.

A team that was once in the playoff conversation was now a national afterthought.

Typically if a team's lucky, it gets one chance at immortality. One opportunity together to do something special.

For Notre Dame? That just isn't the case.

Let's start with the offense.

If the old-fashioned folks in the crowd didn't need any more proof, yes, Brian Kelly's Irish teams can run the dang ball.

Just look at the Music City Bowl. With 263 yards on the ground and 37 minutes of possession, Notre Dame controlled the game against LSU — the same Tigers that finished ninth nationally in time of possession.

Only four of those yards — those gained on Cam McDaniel's one carry — leave the program.

The entire receiving corps is back, with Will Fuller primed to make his name known to those in charge of the Biletnikoff Award, since 15 receiving touchdowns isn't apparently enough

to be considered for the award.

When the Irish trot on the field for the first snap of 2015, some combination of Fuller, Chris Brown, Amir Carlisle, C.J. Prosise and Corey Robinson will be standing on the sideline. That's a good spot to be in.

But if Notre Dame contends for a national title, it's because of the defense.

If cornerback KeiVarae Russell returns to the team, Notre Dame will put 11 players on the field to open the year who have starting experience.

That's good, right?

Jaylon Smith might be the best linebacker in America. Joe Schmidt will return from his injury — the one that derailed last season — and might not even start. That's how good the Irish linebackers are.

If it can fully take to Brian VanGorder's defensive scheme this year, the defense could vault into one of college football's 10 best.

The schedule? It's tough but not too tough.

Georgia Tech, Clemson, USC and Stanford will all provide significant challenges, but none of those are too difficult to overcome.

So here we sit.

This is Brian Kelly's most talented and experienced team yet at Notre Dame.

The stage is set.

This is Notre Dame's time to strike.

Contact Alex Carson at acarson1@nd.edu

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

RECRUITING

Okwara pledge brings 2016 commitments to five

By **BRIAN PLAMONDON**
Sports Writer

When offering scholarships to high schoolers, Notre Dame coaches like to stress how their team is one big family.

On Tuesday, Notre Dame added family, literally and figuratively, when it landed four-star defensive end Julian Okwara. Julian's older brother, Romeo, is a senior defensive lineman who started twelve games for the Irish last fall.

The Charlotte, North Carolina-native Okwara, who checks in at No. 179 in the Rivals250, is Notre Dame's fifth commitment in the class of 2016. At 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds he is listed as a linebacker but projects more as a defensive end.

"He's long, [but] he's going to take some time to develop," Irish recruiting expert Andrew Ivins said. "But he's the type of kid you can't pass up on in the South, with schools like Clemson and Georgia coming after him."

It was along the offensive line, however, where Notre Dame scored its first commitment for 2016. Ohioan Tommy Kraemer, a 6-foot-5, 310-pounder, pledged to the Irish in October. Rivals' 31st overall prospect and second-ranked offensive tackle, Kraemer is the gem of the Irish class thus far. Looking to fill a need at offensive tackle, the Irish certainly aren't content with just Kraemer, Ivins said.

"If you pair him up with

a Ben Bredeson or a Liam Eichenberg, that's your two future tackles," said Ivins, who is an analyst for the Rivals-affiliated Blue & Gold Illustrated. Bredeson and Eichenberg are two top Irish targets, ranked as the No. 3 and No. 37 offensive tackles by Rivals, respectively. Both players were on campus this past weekend.

After Kraemer, Notre Dame didn't secure a commitment for the next five months. Junior Day in March got the ball rolling quickly, however, with three commitments in a matter of two days. Three-star defensive back Julian Love, a 5-foot-11, 175-pounder, pledged March 21. Love, who hails from LaGrange Park, Illinois, is currently the No. 30 cornerback in the nation, per Rivals. Love provides versatility for a secondary that Ivins said may see up to five new faces in this class seeing as it's the biggest position of need.

"He can play all three positions in the secondary," Ivins said. "He might not be the biggest physical specimen, but he has great instincts. He's quick when he needs to be, and he can make a hit."

Pledging along with Love on March 21 was Illinois native and two-star center John Shannon, who is widely considered the top long snapper in the class. The 6-foot-2, 235-pound Shannon has Notre Dame in his blood, with his grandfather and father both having

sued up for the Irish. With current long snapper Scott Daly holding two more years of eligibility, the plan will be for Shannon to redshirt in 2016 before taking over the starting job in 2017, Ivins said.

After Love and Shannon pledged on March 21, the Irish secured a commitment from Florida running back Tony Jones the day after. At 6-foot-1, 212 pounds, Rivals rates Jones the 29th best back.

"What Notre Dame likes about him is he's a different type of back," Ivins said. "He's a powerful back ... [He] lost some weight, so he's put on a little bit of speed. They like him because he can do a lot of things — he's really good in pass protection, [and] he can catch the ball out of the backfield."

With those five in the fold, the Irish really only have room for another dozen or so prospects, Ivins said. This gives Notre Dame the opportunity to be extremely selective with the rest of its spots as the coaches get back into recruiting mode with the spring evaluation period opening this past Wednesday.

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 Brian Plamondon at bplamond@nd.edu

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READY TO TAKE OVER

5

By **MARY GREEN**
Assistant Managing Editor

Football is a game of numbers.

Touchdowns, field goals, safeties, turnovers, yards per game, carries, receptions — these all have values that can be added and subtracted, and they lead to the total tallies in the win and loss columns.

For Notre Dame, a team with hopes each year of keeping that loss column clean, the quarterback duel has become more than a choice between two simple numbers, 5 and 8.

It's come down to something of a science.

"What we're doing is quantifying it as much as we can, the competition," offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mike Sanford said April 1. "Statistically, they're getting graded on every rep. We want those guys to feel like there's accountability for every rep that they take."

The Irish coaches expect their players to keep their grades up in the classroom, and now they want their starters to make the cut on the field as well this spring — even though head coach Brian Kelly said the final decision probably won't be made until fall camp.

Sanford explained that the system essentially rewards or penalizes quarterbacks on if they did their job on a play and said he hopes the new system will keep the competition from turning into a controversy between graduate student Everett Golson and junior Malik Zaire.

"There's not going to be any guesswork," he said. "You know obviously we're going to go, when we make that decision, whenever that may be, as a staff, we'll have

the backing of the data. Empirical data obviously provides great feedback for them as they go along."

Zaire said moving past just film and looking at the numbers — "something that sticks with you a little bit more" — help him and his teammates figure out where they need to improve.

"I think that's a step up from what we didn't do last year," he said. "I think it gives us a visual of our actual performance of how we did efficiency-wise and consistency-wise after practice."

While Irish coaches have developed a more complex way to gauge the quarterback competition, they've also decided to get back to basics to develop both their signal callers as much as possible during Sanford's first year at Notre Dame.

"When [Chuck] Martin was running the offense, there was a real focus on the quarterbacks and protections and really being cognizant of how to protect themselves. ... With [Matt] LaFleur, it was concepts, concepts, concepts. ... Those two things they are really good at," Kelly said. "Some of the fundamentals, which we saw were exposed last year, are the areas that Mike Sanford is really strong at."

"... We're seeing that come together at practice. So, where are we with them? I'm seeing them so much more in-tune with the fundamentals of the positions and doing the little things now that I think can accelerate their growth."

Zaire: the learning curve

Football is a game that plays out on the field, between teams whose players have specific training regimens developed for them and

undergo Bod Pod scans to assess their body fat percentage.

But it's also a game in the mind, filled with plays and schemes and quick reads right before the snap.

When it comes to that mental aspect, Kelly indicated Golson might have a leg up.

"Sometimes, [Zaire]'ll check into some things that we're not quite certain as to what he was thinking," Kelly said last Saturday. "Everett, there's no doubt about where his mind is relative to what he's seeing and what he's thinking. Like, 'Why did you go to that, Everett.' Makes total sense. For that, as it relates to Malik, we're still kinda in that process of, 'What were you thinking?'"

Sanford said Zaire was "very coachable and very zealous in wanting to learn and correct everything," but he also admitted Zaire's enthusiasm can be problematic at times.

"It's a double-edged sword because if he makes a ton of progress, then he believes he's the offensive coordinator at the line of scrimmage, or he believes he's the play caller," Sanford said. "We want him to be a great quarterback, get us out of danger problems; when there's an overload pressure, get us the right protection, get us the right concept. ... We don't want to give him full autonomy or really any quarterback full autonomy."

That won't keep Zaire from looking for full autonomy when it comes to getting the first snaps of the season opener against Texas on Sept. 5.

Zaire earned the start in last season's bowl win against LSU, but he and Golson switched off behind center and split time on the final, game-winning drive.

The left-handed gunslinger

said he doesn't want to adopt that game plan this season — it's all or nothing.

"I mean, it's not the ideal situation," he said. "I mean at the end of the day, there's only one Captain Jack Sparrow of the offense. You know, Coach Kelly makes the decisions on the team — like I said, I don't get paid to make decisions; I wish I did — but I just do what I'm supposed to do, and however it plays out, it plays out. I've just got to make the most of my opportunities and go from there."

No matter if he wins the starting job or not, Zaire said his mind is centered around one objective, the same goal he's had during all his time at Notre Dame.

"I came in hungry, still hungry, will always be hungry, continue to get better," he said. "My confidence has never been lower or higher at this point. I think if anything it's maintained the same and continuing to be around my teammates and continuing to focus on that goal of winning that ring. That's all that's on my mind right now."

Golson: fully committed

Rumors swirled after Notre Dame's bowl win that Golson, who had started every game in 2014 before Zaire usurped him in the finale, was considering a transfer next fall.

While Kelly said he wouldn't be surprised by anything a college-age player does, he does not foresee handing the starting job to Zaire based on Golson's absence in South Bend.

"He's had his best spring since he's been here," Kelly said last Saturday of Golson. "He's fully engaged in everything that he's doing. It's the best that I've seen him do the things that we've asked him to do since he's been here. ... But there's no indication that anything that he's done would mean that he's just doing this as a way to go somewhere else. If I sensed it at all, I would've pulled the plug on it myself because we're wasting our time."

Golson himself has remained mum since the bowl game, declining to talk with reporters, but Kelly said he trusts his quarterback's decision.

"He doesn't want to do media and stuff like that because he's focused on his academics and graduating, and I'm OK with that," Kelly said Saturday. "I'm fine with that. He's had his share of living in the bright lights of it."

Sanford said he's noticed that commitment in Golson as well, even in just the few weeks that make up the spring slate.

"The thing about Everett that I've been so appreciative of is his buy-in," Sanford said April 1. "Everett's been outstanding in the meeting room environment. He's

been taking unbelievable good notes, attentive. He's very engaged in the process, very engaged in the mental side of the game, and then at practice he's self-correcting."

Golson has 23 career starts under his belt compared to Zaire's one, but an array of late-season fumbles in 2014 proved he's far from a perfect quarterback. Kelly said Golson's pocket presence has been a point of emphasis this spring.

"I would say that Everett's done a great job in the pocket," Kelly said Wednesday. "He's really progressed in the area's that we've asked him to. ... He's had a really good spring, and I expect him to have a good spring game as well."

As with Zaire, Sanford said he's trying to tone down Golson's eagerness in certain situations.

"I think for Everett, it's just sometimes he gets so excited when there's a wide-open throw — his feet show excitement when you're watching the tape, his body language shows excitement, and basically just taking the offense as it comes and just throw the appropriate throw and don't get so fired up," Sanford said Monday. "He gets jacked up when there's a post open."

A good dilemma

No matter who's under center, the rest of the team won't get caught up in the final decision.

"For us, speaking as a whole, it doesn't really matter to us," graduate student receiver Amir Carlisle said last Friday. "Both guys have done great things. Everett did great last year for us. Malik did a great job finishing last year for us."

"I'm a fan of both of them. Both of them are friends of mine, and I'm glad I don't have to make the decision because both of them are great quarterbacks."

Kelly added the Irish want a leader who will be willing to give his all to collect a win each Saturday.

"They're just looking for somebody that is committed and somebody that is going to help them be successful, so that's all they want from a quarterback," Kelly said Saturday. "So the quarterback here at Notre Dame is gotta be somebody that's 100 percent committed to winning, and both of those kids are, and as long as they are, they're gonna embrace whoever's out on the football field."

Even with a close decision ahead of him and his staff, Kelly said he knows they have enviable talent from both candidates — no matter what the final numbers say.

"In terms of depth, I don't know that anybody has a better situation than we do with the two quarterbacks that we have," he said.

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CAITLYN JORDAN | The Observer

Irish junior quarterback Malik Zaire (8) looks on while graduate student Everett Golson (5) prepares to toss a pass during a drill at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday.

2015 SEASON PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

Editor's Note: This depth chart is based on spring practice observations by Observer beat writers Mary Green, Brian Plamondon, Alex Carson, Greg Hadley and Zach Klonsinski. Only players currently on the team were considered.



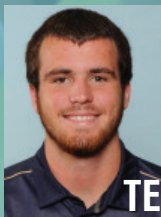
Tyler Newsome
Sophomore



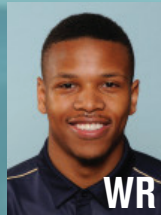
Everett Golson
Graduate Student
Malik Zaire
Junior



Tarean Folston
Junior
Greg Bryant
Junior



Durham Smythe
Junior
Tyler Luatua
Sophomore



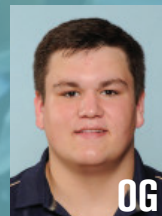
Amir Carlisle
Graduate Student
C.J. Prosise
Senior



Chris Brown
Senior
Torii Hunter Jr.
Junior



Ronnie Stanley
Senior
Hunter Bivin
Junior



Quenton Nelson
Sophomore
Alex Bars
Sophomore



Nick Martin
Graduate Student
Sam Mustipher
Sophomore



Steve Elmer
Junior
John Montelus
Junior



Mike McGlinchey
Junior
Colin McGovern
Junior



Will Fuller
Junior
Corey Robinson
Junior



Greg Hadley
Editor-in-Chief



Mary Green
Assistant Managing Editor



Zach Klonsinski
Sports Editor

There can be little doubt Notre Dame is in prime position for a successful 2015, at least when compared to last year's late-season collapse. Brian Kelly returns too many battle-tested starters to reasonably expect otherwise.

But what should worry Irish fans are the players on the opposing sidelines; Notre Dame's opponents next year are underwhelming, and that could hurt the Irish in the long run. Unlike last year, there is no potential statement game, no Florida State-on-the-road opportunity. The margin for error is razor thin. Lose once, to Clemson on the road or USC at home, and the Irish will be out of the College Football Playoff hunt. And as improved as the team may be, I don't see Notre Dame running the table.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 10-2

For the Irish, the knocks taken in 2014 will translate into a strengthened defense in 2015, which is led by a key group of upperclassmen. However, they are backed by a sophomore corps that has game experience under their belts. That experience will be invaluable — last year's struggles proved that.

The big questions for the Irish are on offense, beginning with the starting quarterback, where there's still no clear front-runner. Up front, the offensive line returns just two starters from last season, which will spell some early-season difficulties.

Once the line and the eventual quarterback find their groove, a tough three-game stretch in October against Clemson, Navy and USC could strike at the wrong time to ruin Notre Dame's plans for the College Football Playoff.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 9-3

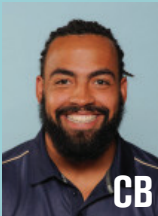
While all eyes are on the quarterback, the biggest key for Notre Dame is its defensive health.

Linebacker is the deepest position on the defensive side of the ball, and the defensive line is experienced at the top of the depth chart, but a loss or two here will spell trouble. A question mark remains over the secondary as well.

Notre Dame is too deep offensively to struggle regardless of who is in the gun.

Between Texas and Clemson, I foresee the Irish letting one slip away, but circle the Oct. 17 revenge date with the Trojans as the season-definer. A win and the Irish are in at least a New Year's Day bowl, but if they lose, there's no strength of schedule to fall back on.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 10-2



Matthias Farley
Graduate Student
Nick Watkins
Sophomore

CB



Romeo Okwara
Senior
Grant Blankenship
Sophomore

DE



Jaylon Smith
Junior
Nyles Morgan
Sophomore

OLB



Sheldon Day
Senior
Jay Hayes
Sophomore

DT



Joe Schmidt
Graduate Student
Jarrett Grace
Graduate Student

MLB



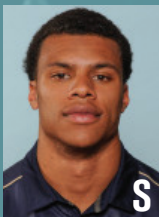
Jarron Jones
Senior
Jerry Tillery
Freshman

DT



Elijah Shumate
Senior
Nicky Baratti
Senior

S



Max Redfield
Junior
Drue Tranquill
Sophomore

S



Isaac Rochell
Junior
Andrew Trumbetti
Sophomore

DE



James Onwualu
Junior
Greer Martini
Sophomore

OLB



Cole Luke
Junior
Devin Butler
Junior

CB

ERIN RICE and CAITLYN JORDAN | The Observer



Alex Carson
Associate Sports Editor

Notre Dame's success will be defined by a five-game stretch. In a game that seemingly everyone forgets about, Georgia Tech visits Sep. 19. The Irish have struggled in the past with Navy's triple-option offense; Tech's is better. Then after a chance to rest up against lowly UMass, Notre Dame will head to Death Valley on Oct. 3 for its toughest road test, Clemson. From there, perennial rivals Navy and USC — the best team on the schedule — come to town. Remember that Brian Kelly's teams have won just once the week after playing Navy. If they make it through that stretch, the Irish will have Pittsburgh and Boston College salivating at the thought of ruining a perfect campaign. This is Brian Kelly's most talented team yet. But I'm not convinced they can avoid last year's fatal mistakes.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 10-2



Brian Plamondon
Sports Writer

Redemption will be the mantra this season. Notre Dame returns every important piece from last year's disappointing finish but has the 31-28 bowl win to build on. In order to have success, Brian Kelly must settle on either Everett Golson or Malik Zaire as the starter rather quickly in fall camp; nevertheless, expect both to see time. Whoever is running the show will have a talented offensive line in front of him and one of the deepest receiving corps in the nation. The defense will be much improved, although the secondary is still a question mark. The Irish are lucky they first face Texas, which should find its groove later in the season. If they can squeeze by, they should be undefeated until the gauntlet in October that includes Clemson and USC. This team is better than 2012's, but the Irish will get tripped up at least once along the way.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 11-1

BLUE-GOLD GAME SCORING

OFFENSE

- 3 Points - Field Goal
- 6 Points - Touchdown
- 1 Point - Extra Point
- 2 Points - Two-Point Conversion
- 2 Points - Big Chunk Pass (25+ Yards)
- 2 Points - Big Chunk Run (20+ Yards)

DEFENSE

- 6 Points - Touchdown
- 2 Points - Safety
- 1 Point - Sack
- 4 Points - Turnover forced before 50-yard line
- 2 Points - Turnover forced after 50-yard line
- 2 Points - Defensive stop before 50-yard line
- 1 Point - Defensive stop after 50-yard line

Loaded linebacking group leads Irish defense



KAT ROBINSON | The Observer

Junior linebackers James Onwualu (17) and Jaylon Smith, along with junior defensive lineman Isaac Rochell (90), try to break past the Irish offensive line to reach graduate student quarterback Everett Golson (in red) during one of Notre Dame's spring practices April 8 at Loftus Sports Center.

By ZACH KLONSINSKI
Sports Editor

Entering the 2015 season, Notre Dame finds itself in a refreshing situation: It might just have too many bodies at linebacker.

After a year in which graduate student linebackers Jarrett Grace and Joe Schmidt missed all or significant parts of the season with injuries, the Irish entered spring ball with three starting spots and seven potential bodies to fill them.

In the absence of Grace and Schmidt last season, junior linebacker Jaylon Smith was thrust into running the defense, while classmate James Onwualu and sophomores Greer Martini and Nyles Morgan all saw

significant time on the field. The inexperience showed.

Over the final five games of the regular season — beginning with Navy, when Schmidt went down — Notre Dame allowed an average of 43.4 points per game and went 1-4. Until that point, the defense had surrendered only 19.1 points per game while leading the Irish to a shutout win over Michigan and a 6-0 start to the season before the loss at Florida State.

However, the younger players gained valuable experience on the field.

“Not really a bad taste, just a learning experience,” Smith said March 18 of last season. “We kind of had our defining moment, playing LSU and just understanding

what the key was, and it's everybody buying in and playing together, playing selfless.”

On the down side, in Notre Dame's scheme, only three linebackers are on the field at once, and with the addition of freshman early enrollee Te'von Coney, the Irish are now two-deep plus one this spring, creating a log-jam particularly stuck at middle linebacker.

“I think that Nyles gained experience last year, so going into his second year, we feel much better with him,” Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder said March 23. “... I expect all three of them [Grace, Schmidt and Morgan] to play a lot.”

Although it's year two playing in VanGorder's defense, the linebacker group is now headed by Mike Elston, who is in his first year at the position after leading the defensive line since 2010. The transition to Elston from former Irish assistant Bob Elliott, who moved to an off-field role as special assistant to the head coach this year, has been a smooth one by all accounts.

“The exciting thing for me is that it allows me to focus more on the whole part of the defense, from run defense to coverage, and that's exciting,” Elston said March 23. “I'm familiar with that, and I've played that, and I've coached that role before.”

“... We have a great group of guys to work with, so that transition has been pretty easy.”

Smith said he agreed from a player's perspective.

“The comfort is definitely there,” Smith said of VanGorder's defense. “We have experienced guys now. We're getting healthy again. We still love the defense.

There's so many tools.

“... [Elston] was my recruiting coordinator, so I always had that close relationship, but I'm happy for him being able to expand his role and try out something he hasn't done since, I believe, Central Michigan.”

VanGorder began spring practices by working with Elston and the linebackers, the group he coached last season, to help smooth the transition.

However, as time has gone on he said he has started walking around to visit the other defensive groups as Elston settled in to his new position.

As to how to clear the gridlock inside, VanGorder has also discussed cross-training Smith and Schmidt beyond the middle linebacker

position.

During last Saturday's scrimmage, Morgan (Mike), Onwualu (Sam) and Smith (Will) took the first team reps, while Grace, Martini and Coney made up the second rotation, respectively. Schmidt, a natural Mike, was cleared for non-contact drills last Saturday, though it remains to be seen where VanGorder and Elston throw him into the mix as well.

“We'll work Jaylon around. Of course, Joe Schmidt will cross-train. He knows all the positions of linebacker,” VanGorder said. “Probably midway through [spring], three-quarters of the way through, we'll cross-train Jaylon a little bit.”

Contact Zach Klonsinski at
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AMY ACKERMANN | The Observer

Irish junior linebacker Jaylon Smith participates in a drill during Notre Dame's March 27 practice at Loftus Sports Center.

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Secondary all but solidified after spring

By **GREG HADLEY**
Editor-in-Chief

It was the big question mark in the back. The one area where Notre Dame's defense was constantly lacking, injured or both. The place where the Irish were exposed again and again last season. The secondary.

A year after being shredded for 22 passing touchdowns and 2,878 yards through the air, though, the Irish end spring practice with clear favorites to start at the cornerback and safety positions.

Junior Max Redfield and senior Elijah Shumate both started at least 10 games at safety last year, but both also saw the bench in some of the final games of the year as they struggled to adjust

to defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder's complex defense.

"The scheme that he wanted to run was more than we had ever seen," Redfield said. "And then the amount of time we had to learn it and install it was obviously shorter than what was comfortable for us. Obviously, it's a process learning anything new."

However, the time on the field and the lessons learned on the bench left their mark. This spring, Redfield and Shumate have played like veterans and earned the lion's share of the first-team reps.

"They've been real solid so far, both of them; real solid, way more comfortable, way more knowledgeable," VanGorder said. "Not getting

a lot of panicked snaps from them. They're playing much more confident."

Head coach Brian Kelly also said he was pleased with the safeties' play throughout the spring but highlighted an area they still had room to improve upon.

"Defensively, I think we're seeing both of safeties — I would like them to communicate a little bit more demonstratively, more vocally louder — but it's night and day compared to their recognition of what's happen out there and how they're seeing things," Kelly said.

For VanGorder, the importance of being vocal on the field is especially important for safeties, whom he said he considers "the quarterbacks of the defense." Redfield said he has worked on developing

that aspect of his game this spring.

On the right side of the field, junior Cole Luke virtually has one cornerback spot locked down after starting all 13 games last season. While he deferred to the now-graduated Cody Riggs in 2014, Luke has stepped up to lead the cornerback corps.

"Cole's tremendous," new Irish defensive backs coach Todd Lyght said. "Right now, he's our No. 1 corner, doing a great job of showing the other younger players what it takes to be successful. ... The way he goes about everything in his approach — I mean, he's very attentive in meetings; he's a leader in our group during individual periods. ... I really like the way that he's stepping up in a leadership role."

But while Lyght and VanGorder expect players like Redfield to be vocal presences in the center of the field, they said Luke's leadership style is based more on example.

"I think his leadership comes in the way [younger players] know he knows what he's doing," VanGorder said. "He's a quiet communicator, but they trust that he knows the defense well. A very bright player, so he's a different kind of leader for us."

The only uncertainty remaining is the second cornerback spot. KeiVarae Russell, who missed all of last season due to the investigation into academic dishonesty, is expected to return to the Irish in the fall, contingent on his academic work.

But until he does, the Irish have played junior Devin Butler and sophomore Nick Watkins. While Lyght and VanGorder both said they liked the physical skill-sets of each player, they still want to see continual development.

"When I watch Devin and I watch Nick, these are guys with tremendous talent, tremendous playmaking ability, and you see them flash," Lyght said. "But consistently, they don't do it at a high level enough consistently that we could be really, really successful."

The most senior member of the secondary, graduate student Matthias Farley, will fill in wherever needed this season, VanGorder said. Trained at both safety and cornerback, Farley is most likely to see time in the nickel package, a valuable position only a veteran could take on, Lyght said.

"He does a great job of understanding the 2-3 exchanges, which is very difficult for young players, where offenses like to move guys around, and you lose leverage off the 2-3 exchange," Lyght said. "I think he does a good job communicating with the inside linebackers of how they're going to play those 2-3 exchanges, and so I think that he's going to be a really big part of what we're going to do this year."

Despite the trials of last season, Redfield said the secondary has come together as a unit and bought in to the defensive system.

"We're all in it together," Redfield said of his message to younger players. "Everyone has a role that is going to contribute to the team, and if we're not all on the same page, then it's not going to work."

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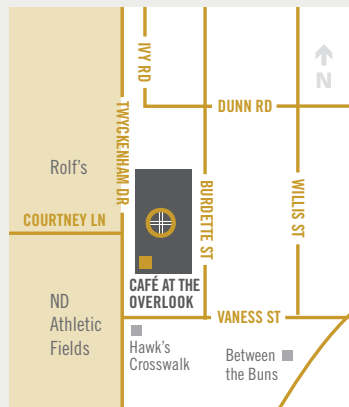
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Sophomore punter/kicker Tyler Newsome follows through on a field-goal attempt at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday.



CAITLYN JORDAN | The Observer

Irish offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mike Sanford watches as junior quarterback Malik Zaire winds up for a pass during Notre Dame's practice last Saturday at LaBar Practice Complex.



CAITLYN JORDAN | The Observer

Junior receiver Torii Hunter Jr. runs forward after grabbing a pass during a drill at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday. Hunter Jr. recorded seven receptions and a touchdown in the 2014 season.



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Irish graduate student quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to junior running back Greg Bryant during a March 27 practice.

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