Peaks and valleys define four years

Four seasons ago, Notre Dame football experienced nothing we thought it would be like we would start to as anyone in the nation. It and as gifted a quarterback young players, we thought, to begin that junior campaign. Everything quickly went downhill again, though, beginning with small disappoiments in the close losses to North Carolina and Pittsburgh, and ended with the Senior Bowl loss in the snow to Syracuse and yet another crumbling at the hands of Texas in the title game. Then, suddenly three years had flown by. For this group, and for us students, it was the last try. The last home opener, last chance at beating Boston College and USC and now the final home game in these seats — although I’m not disappoing sneaking back in the student section the next few years. This season again hasn’t been what we wanted, but I think by now we’re starting to get used to a little disappoiment. A program like Notre Dame should have higher performace our four years and the last decade, but we’re a new generaton of students. The last year, Notre Dame won a national championship was the same year many of us were born. We shouldn’t be too disappoited with how his real potential,” Frank said. ‘It’s all about the offense and there’s no such thing as being a polished project, he’s got a whirlwind of improbable successes and sudden failures, and we’ve learned to take nothing for granted.”

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

By MATT GAMBER

Notre Dame will host a pair of highly touted recruits — wide receiver Kyle Prater and defensive tackle J.R. Ferguson for Saturday’s game against Connecticut, but high school players players with an interest in the Irish will have their eyes and ears tuned in to South Bend this weekend. And that may as much to do with the product on the field as the media circus off it surrounding Charlie Weis’ future at the school. “It would be foolish to say that recruits don’t hear the speculation, but the coaches have to do their best job of explaining the situation,” said Mike Frank, an Irish recruiting analyst who runs the ESPN-affiliated site irishsportsdaily.com. “At the end of the day, I think parents should choose a school because of the school, the players. Obviously coaching plays a huge part, but coaches come and go, and assistant coaches especially come and go all the time. It’s more about selling the Notre Dame program, tradition and academics.”

Frank said while winning games in a program’s best recruiting tool, the close nature of Notre Dame’s outcomes — which have come by a combined 18 points — allows the Irish coaches to tell recruits just how close they believe the program is to achieving greater standards. “They get on the phone and just say, ‘Hey, we need you. If we get a few of these players, we get over the hump,’” Frank said. “That’s really the message you can sell at this point — that you’ve done a lot of good, bad breaks and things not quite going our way, but we’re close in every game.” Notre Dame hopes to take one step closer to securing commitiments from both of its guests this weekend. Prater and Ferguson are both 4-star prospects by ESPN.com’s rankings. The 6-foot-6 Prater is one of the top receivers in his class. The Proviso West H.S. product out of Hillside, Ill., has issued a verbal commitiment to USC, but after coming to Notre Dame for the Irish-Trojans matchup, he decided to take an official visit to South Bend. “I think he’d like to stay closer to home if he could, but at the same time, I think he likes a lot about USC and their offense,” Frank said. “That’s something that really intrigues him. It’s a nice environment out there as well.”

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

Unlike Prater, Ferguson has yet to declare a leader in his recruiting search. ESPN lists Miami, LSU, Oklahoma and Maryland as schools the commuter, Md., product is considering in addition to Notre Dame. “He’s an athletic guy that can move,” Frank said. “He’s got a lot of offers and there’s good reason for it. Guys that big usually don’t move like he does.”

At 6-foot-3, 275 pounds, Ferguson is already a physically strong and conditioning program. “He’s just scratching the suface of his real potential,” Frank said. “He’s got great upside. Where other guys might come in as a polished project, he’s got a whole lot to work with. That’s why so many teams are interested in him.”

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s irishsportsdaily.com. E-mail Matt at mgamber@nd.edu. Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu

Mike Frank
Irish recruiting analyst
Eric Olsen

Olsen holds down offensive line as captain

By Matt Gamber
Senior Editor

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

Not that it’s a problem for the Staten Island, N.Y., native.

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

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

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

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

“Someone with that kind of knowledge, I try to pick his brain all the time and use that as a tool for myself in a selfish way,” Olsen said. “To get his advice and use his experiences is definitely to my benefit.”

It also hasn’t hurt that his new role has allowed him to be more vocal.

“I’ve really embraced it and tried to have as much fun as I can with it,” Olsen said. “I feel like I’ve been doing a solid job helping the other guys. It really fits my personality, being in the middle of all the action, making the calls. As a captain Olsen plays a similar role for the team as a whole. While he said he had been one of the team’s more vocal players in the past, serving as a captain has given a new perspective and a new set of responsibilities.

“I’ve got to keep my cool a lot more. I can’t let my emotions get the best of me in certain situations,” Olsen said. “I think that’s why the team voted him as one of the co-captains. He happens to be one of my personal favorites, too. A little of that Northeast bias.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After Dayne Crist through his first career touchdown pass, a 44-yard strike during the 49-14 Irish win over Washington State, the freshman quarterback looked almost too excited to celebrate — at least in the way Clausen and Tate were running over to Olsen, who lifts his quarterback toward the sky.

“When I was a freshman, I was running out there like that too, looking for something to do. It took the older guys to kind of reel me in,” said Olsen, who eventually found Crist and completed the touchdown celebration ritual. “It’s funny how things go full-circle and now I’m one of those guys. But being a veteran and being around here for so long, I know how much guys like that think. Now it’s my turn to teach it to the younger guys.”

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

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

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

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

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

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu
Parents encourage defensive lineman to keep trying out

By MICHAEL BLASCO
Sports Writer

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

Morrice Richardson

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

Richardson eyes success in the business world

By DOUGLAS FARMER
News Writer

Senior defensive lineman Martin Quintana came to Notre Dame because of its academic prestige.

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

Quintana has spent his time playing for the Notre Dame scout team trying to soak in as much as possible, calling it an honor to be around the likes of defensive line coach Randy Hart and graduate assistant and four-time NFL all-pro Bryant Young.

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

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

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

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

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Richardson eyes success in the business world

Short-term glory might be fun, but senior defensive end Morrice Richardson recognizes that long-term success is what will move him closer to his goals.

Richardson gained a work ethic on the gridiron under his belt — and a taste of playing in the House that Rockne Built — and a bit of success on the field. Richardson has eyed long-term success as well, a lot of situations you have to be strong to deal with,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu
Senior wide receiver Robby Parris is the most experienced receiver on the Irish roster. Parris was one of the players who came up big when sophomore Michael Floyd went down because of an injury earlier this season.

ROBBY PARRIS

Parris catches everything his way

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even though the Irish struggled to a 3-9 record in 2007, Parris started all 12 games and finished third on the team with 29 catches and second with 361 receiving yards. The sophomore saw the first meaningful action of his Irish career in the season opener against Georgia Tech, and caught three passes for 30 yards. Two weeks later, Parris recorded his first career start against the Wolverines. Parris also scored the first touchdown of his Notre Dame career that season against Boston College.

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

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

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

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

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

“That was a little bit better. We didn’t even get to go to a bowl game the year before that, and then the next year we’re in Hawaii living it up. We had fun down in Hawaii and then had a big game, kind of laid it on them really good,” Parris said.

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“I’m not going to go out there and make sure I do everything mentally right,” Parris said. “I think he considered his hands to be his biggest attribute as a receiver, and so far those hands have caught 22 passes for 210 yards and a touchdown.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I knew it was fourth down, so all I really had to do was figure out about was holding on to the ball,” Parris said.

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

“At the time, I didn’t even know that he came in from behind and hit me in the head because my leg got so twisted up. I thought I had torn my ACL because my leg got so twisted. I was in excruciating pain in my leg.”

Despite the pain, Parris said his main goal was just to not let the team down.

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

Ianello, though, wasn’t surprised.

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

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

“The best thing about playing is just hanging out with those guys in the locker room and just screwing around,” Parris said. “That’s better than anything that’s happened on the field.”

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

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

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

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

Is he going to do that for sure, though, Parris’ career as an Internet personality has come to a close.

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

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Dillon player overcomes injury to make team

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Writer

For most who compete at Riehle Field on Sundays representing their team, the thought of donning the gold helmet and running out of the tunnel to the cheers of more than 80,000 fans on a Saturday afternoon is nothing more than a pipe dream.

For Dillon Hall’s senior linebacker Tom Burke, however, that dream became a reality.

Burke, a 5-foot-9, 195-pound corner back from Brownsburg, Ind., wears the number 43 for Coach Weis’ team now, but his path to the home sideline of Notre Dame Stadium was not, by any means, a straight one.

Burke, one of the Big Red Interhall team’s freshman three years ago, was not expected to be a starter. He was poised to do so again during his sophomore year when he broke his leg, ending any chance of his playing for Dillon Hall that year.

In the spring, however, Stull tried out for the varsity team but failed to make the roster, as he was still not fully recovered from his injury. He doggedly continued to work out in hopes of making the team, waking up at 4:45 a.m. for months to work out despite his injuries.

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

“My favorite memory of being a Notre Dame student-athlete is running out of the tunnel for the first time in a regular season game,” Stull said. “It’s actually one of the first things my mom noticed about the team.

“After two years, I finally got a chance to contribute to the team.”

Joshua Stull
Senior linebacker

It was really special, and I’ll never forget that.”

“...is the biggest moment in my life,” he said.

Burke says he appreciates the commitment to the team, the opportunities he has had during his senior year.

“I’m sure they’ll have a lot of respect. The people who come to expect from the star playmakers. What the box score doesn’t show is the biggest moment in senior Tom Burke’s career.

Burke says he appreciates the commitment to the team, the opportunities he has had during his senior year.

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

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

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

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

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

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Tom Burke
Walk-on linebacker gets starting role against BC

By CHRISMAS
Sports Writer

The stat line of Notre Dame’s victory over Boston College this season featured the big numbers Irish fans have come to expect from the star recruits.

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

While Burke’s record this year is 3-6-1, he will never take for granted the opportunity to play for the Irish.

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

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

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

“Everybody wants to do this,” Burke said. “You go through a lot of the same experiences and naturally that binds you pretty tight. It doesn’t really matter who it is, whether it’s Brian Smith at linebacker, a really welcoming guy, or Kerry Neigh or John Ryan. They’re all just really good guys and we have a really good team dynamic.”

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

“Does get pretty intense between the scout team and the offense, and that’s our job, to make it intense,” Burke said. “We’re never going to be able to completely mimic the look that another team is giving us, you know, you know, we’re having some limits, but we bring it as hard as we can and we like to think that we compete pretty hard.”

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

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

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

“My favorite part of being on the football team,” Stull said, “is just being a part of something so special. After two years, I finally got a chance on my last opportunity.”
Stalwart tackle has started since week one, 2006

By MICHAEL BRYAN
Associated Sport Editor

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

While the past four years have been an up-and-down journey of wins, losses, success and failure, the one constant through every Notre Dame game has been offensive tackle Sam Young. When he takes the field on Saturday, Young will set the Notre Dame record for most career starts by any player, with his 49 straight surpassing former teammates Maurice Crum Jr. and Tom Zbikowski.

He is the only offensive lineman in the long and storied history of Irish football to start every game of his career.

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

He was there for the comebacks against Michigan State and UCLA in 2007 and there for every painful game of 2008.

So when it comes to the ups (like a blowout win over Nevada) and downs (like heartbreakers to USC, Michigan or Navy) of a season, there’s hardly anyone more qualified to discuss the rollercoaster ride that is being a Notre Dame offensive lineman.

“After that kind of loss, you’re upset, and it’s OK to be upset, and sometimes a good thing,” Young said. “But you have to forget about it the next day and then go back to work.”

Young has come a long way from his freshman season, a year in which he said he relied heavily on his veteran teammates Maurice Crum Jr. and Tom Zbikowski. He is the only offensive lineman in the long and storied history of Irish football to start every game of his career.

“Young has been the cornerstone of the Irish offensive line from Brady Quinn through Jimmy Clausen, becoming the leader of a deep and experienced unit. Young said. "But you have to prepare. Sometimes a good thing,"

It’s really been a rollercoaster ride for this senior class. There’s been highs and lows and in-betweens. It’s been crazy.”

Sam Young senior offensive tackle

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

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

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

“We had to work our rear ends off in winter conditioning, in spring ball and in the summer to improve,” Young said. “Everyone worked together to put in a lot of hours and get better.”

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

“You can’t do that when you have to be, but aren’t there to do it.”

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

“We had to work our rear ends off in winter conditioning, in spring ball and in the summer to improve.”

Young said of Verducci in the spring. “He obviously has so much experience on the field, he’s been around for so long,” sophomore guard Trevor Robinson said. “He has a really good ability to gather information before the snap, and the more information you have the more you expect and less likely you are to be surprised. He uses that help me out, help Eric (Jones) and Kyle (Rudolph).”

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

“I think we’ve gotten a lot better, we’re getting closer to where we want to be, but aren’t there yet,” Young said. “We as an offensive line want the team to be able to rely on us, whether it’s that short yardage play where we have to get one yard or whether it’s holding up on third and long to give Jimmy (Clausen) time. We have all the confidence in the world with Armando back there or any running back and in Jimmy, it’s just our job to make it happen.”

Entering this season, a major change for Young and the offensive line was the addition of coach Frank Verducci to Irish head coach Charlie Weis’ staff.

“It’s a different perspective. It’s a different way of doing things.”

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

The senior said his biggest thrill of his career thus far has been the opportunity to compete at the Outland level for the Orange and Black.

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

Sam Young senior offensive tackle

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

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

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WIDE RECEIVER STARTS OWN TRADITION ON THE FIELD

BY BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

Senior offensive guard Chris Stewart has succeeded both on the field and off since he entered as a freshman in the spring of 2006. Stewart came to Notre Dame with a unique football perspective. He played high school football in Texas, which he said can be more scrutinizing 22 yards than playing football under the Dome.

"It's a different culture coming from Texas to Indiana for football," Stewart said. "It's an upper Midwest football society. That's different. Not that Notre Dame fans aren't die-hard, but it's almost like they're used to playing down south and in Texas. Little kids from the area are interested in football but not the cult of football and school. It's just a little bit different, and it's hard to explain or pinpoint. It's just the way things are done. Even tailgating, it's just different. It's just different. It's just different."

Stewart is an athlete and academic that drew Stewart to Notre Dame from his hometown in Spring, Texas, despite the change in climate that a move to Indiana would entail.

"I expected it to be cold, and I was right on that," Stewart said. "It was a mix of academics and football. I was able to have a national spotlight, every week get better and see what it's like to showcase talent in front of every- one in the nation every week. It lived up to my expectations. There were some down times which were hard, but that happens, just like anything else in life."

Stewart has seen both the high and low of Irish football, and both of these experiences helped shape his Notre Dame experience.

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

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

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

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

"I kind of made (the Caribbean Studies specialization) up," Stewart said. "So I took a lot of political science classes and I had to bring in some American Studies classes. I ended up being pretty cool. Taking Common Human Diseases gave me my first glance into Haiti and Caribbean society, so I wanted to learn the history and backdrop of all of that, so that was the reason that I did it."

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

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

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OBSERVER STAFF PHOTO BY QUENTIN STENGER
Unexpected fifth year pays off for Sharpley

By SAM WERNER  Associate Sports Editor

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

Well, actually first base.

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

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

Sharpely was drafted 1,593rd overall, which he said caused mixed emotions. “It was kind of bittersweet,” Sharpely said. “It’s still awesome to get drafted, and I wanted an opportunity. I’m still going to remember those 1,592 guys that got drafted in front of me.”

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

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

“I've kind of always felt like I had a great summer playing summer, in case baseball didn’t work out.”

Evan Sharpely
Fifth-year quarterback

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

“Initially, it was just to kind of cover my bases, in case baseball didn’t work out.”

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

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

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

“I wanted to play both sports, and a lot of the places I was looking at they weren’t going to let me do that,” Sharpely said. “A couple that were like, ‘Well, maybe,’ but that’s really what it came down to. I knew I was going to get a great degree I knew I was going to play baseball. I knew I was going to play football. I knew I was going to play college football.”

Sharpely has taken on even more of a teaching role for the young quarterbacks.

“I’ve kind of always felt like a teacher or a coach, just with my knowledge that I have,” Sharpely said.

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

“It’s a running joke between coach [Jon] Tenuta and I when I’m running the other team’s offense, it’s, ‘Well, better than this guy again,’” Sharpely said.

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

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

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

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

“They come in and every week it’s like ‘Can we sign a petition to coach Weis to let you play?’” Sharpely said.

Sharpely teaches five classes at Adams, two senior government classes and three geography classes. He said that an average day starts at 6:30 a.m., with school until 2:30 p.m. and football until 8 p.m. After that, it’s back home to lesson plan or grade papers.

“It’s been a fun time so far, it’s been a great experience,” Sharpely said. “It’s difficult at times just because I am splitting time with both. Where I would maybe like to do more with a certain subject, I don’t have as much time as the other students teachers to plan those things.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking back, Sharpely said he couldn’t think of anything he would have done different- ly over the past four years.

“I try not to live like that,” he said. “Started dating my girlfriend earlier, I guess. I’m not that big of a guy, but hopefully it finishes up well.”

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

By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

For walk-on wide receiver Sam Vos, his college football experience has included personal growth and making the most of what opportunities he has got. It has also allowed him to have the chance to be around a major college program like Notre Dame has given Vos a deep sense of pride in what he is able to accomplish.

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

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

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

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

“Two big things I have gotten out of my relationship with Coach Weis is work ethic and time management,” Vos said. “Those two things will definitely be useful going forward.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I have not made it onto the field yet, but hopefully I will get on the field for the Connecticut game,” Vos said. “I will take what I can get, but I have hopes of getting in there as a receiver.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“With me and Mikey, the reason we are friends is because we walked on at the same time, and we have been through the whole process together,” Vos said. “As walk-ons we are not always getting the special treatment, so we joke around together and keep it real. Sometimes off the field we go out to eat together, stuff like that.”

Vos said he believes these relationships with the receiving corps and the walk-ons is his nickname, which refers to his stocky build.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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RAY HERRING
Video game addict only plays himself on field

By LAURA MYERS
Sports Writer

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

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

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

In his five years at the school, the fifth-year safety has been around for both ups and downs.

Herring grew up on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia, where he began his career in 2005. He played eight games his freshman year, mostly on special teams. He said his favorite moment as a student was when football was the 2005 game against USC in which the Irish lost at the last second.

“I know we lost, but it was a good game,” he said. “I think I’m the only one left who played in that game. It was an exciting time. Maybe it was because it was my freshman year, but I was amazed.”

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

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

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

In 2009, he has recorded eight tackles on special teams and one punt return. He also plays backup to fifth-year senior Kyle McCarthy.

Herring said he doesn’t prefer one position over the other.

“Special teams is fun because that’s where I started off,” he said. “I’ve been doing it my whole career.”

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

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

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

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

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**McCarthy stands apart as defensive leader**

By MATT GAMBER

McCarthy is often responsible for making defensive calls and arranging his teammates in accordance with offensive formations and audibles. "He makes a lot of calls," he said. "He's really football smart." Senior defensive back Darrin Walls said. "That's the kind of guy you can depend on, it really helps you have a guy like that you can trust, that's always good." McCarthy's persistence in having to wait until 2006 to earn a full-time starting spot makes him a good example for younger players to follow as well. Walls said. "I think the whole process for him, coming here behind [former Irish standout and current Baltimore Ravens safety Tom Zbikowski] and then finally having the chance to play and making the best of it — that's the kind of guy you want leading your team," Walls said. 

Family affair

Like any of his fellow fifth-year seniors, McCarthy has been around long enough to see just about everything. McCarthy is often referred to as the "dad" of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line. It's not a perfect analogy — or appropriate — enough, the same could be said about McCarthy's role in his off-campus home last year, when he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan. In an Oct. 19, 2008, Irish Insider cover story, McCarthy called himself "the dad" of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line. "He understands the bigger picture better, and he's taken on more of a leadership role," Brown said. "He's the older guy back there, and he understands where he's at." 

Old Reliable

Whenever the Irish have struggled and have been in need of a big play, it seems like McCarthy's been there, with game-clinching interceptions in wins against Michigan State and Boston College contributed to his total of five picks for the year. Often the last line of defense, McCarthy leads the Irish in solo (44) and total (72) tackles this season, and it isn't close. Junior linebacker Brian Smith places second in both categories with 28 and 51, respectively. And as the captain and unquestioned leader of the Notre Dame defense, it's McCarthy who is often responsible for making defensive calls and arranging his teammates in accordance with offensive formations and audibles. "He's a great leader," Walls said. "He's taken control in the weight room, in the locker room, and when you have a guy like that you can depend on, it really helps the team." Walls said McCarthy is more of a "lead-by-example" type but knows the right time to step up and address the team. "He doesn't always speak much, but when he does speak, people listen to him," Walls said. "He does what he tells them to do. He leads by example and everyone follows behind him." Brown said the type of person McCarthy is makes him a good leader. "Kyle is a classy dude, and I think the best thing about Kyle is he's not selfish," Brown said. "He's trying to help out others. I believe when you put others first, when it's not always about you, everybody else appreciates that... That's why he's played the way he's played this year."
JOHN RYAN

Brothers, parents inspired Ryan to lead by example

By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

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

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

Having spent four years here, Ryan feels that he has been able to become a part of that tradition, something he feels very honored and humbled by.

"Yeah, I definitely feel like I am part of the tradition," Ryan said. "Every game you hit the same sign as Jerome Bettis, you walk out of the tunnel and you see the band and the fans.

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

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

"My brothers are definitely the inspiration of my life," Ryan said. "They have played the same type of role model for him that he said he hopes to play for his younger brothers.

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

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

"I think, obviously, where I went to high school played a big part in my choice to come here," Ryan said. "It is a Catholic university, a strong football program with a great tradition. I think going to Ignatius had a big part in my coming here." Ryan said he still remembers being recruited by head coach Charlie Weis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ryan still remembers well the first time he got on the field, freshman year in the win at home against Penn State, 41-17.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I always want to be nice to people. I want to be good to people," Ryan said. "I just have tried to do things the right way, good or bad I want to be able to look back and do things the right way on and off the field."
While he might not be as well known as some of his other Fighting Irish teammates, senior Kallen Wade has been just as important of a contributor. The 6-foot-5, 250-pound hybrid defensive end and outside linebacker hails from Cincinnati, Ohio. In his prep career, Wade started at safety before moving to defensive end and defensive tackle. While in high school, Wade was selected to participate in the prestigious Big 33 Ohio/Pennsylvania All-Star Game, which counts NFL greats like Joe Montana, Jim Kelly, Ben Roethlisberger and Marvin Harrison as alumni. Wade became the fourth recruit in Irish coach Charlie Weis’ first full recruiting class. Wade chose Notre Dame for its location in relation to Cincinnati. My mother had health problems, so I wanted to be close enough to home so I could get back if anything happened, but also far enough away to be able to separate home life from school.” Wade said. “Also, Notre Dame offered the best of both worlds when it came to athletics and academics. Wade has spent most of his Notre Dame career at either defensive end or outside linebacker, changing positions as the Irish switched between the 3-4 and 4-3 defensive fronts. “It was a little awkward at first because I never played linebacker before, but I played sort of defensive end and outside linebacker at the same time,” Wade said about his position switch. “I was able to adapt to being in coverage more because of what I did as a sophomore in high school at safety.

After redshirting his freshman year, Wade saw his first playing time against Georgia Tech in 2007. Since then, he has played in reserve roles and on special teams. While his action may be limited on the field, Wade has made an impact on the practice field, preparing the front line players for the week’s games. “My main role is to show a look for the starters, like Sam Young and Paul Duncan,” Wade said. “Basically, I try to mimic whatever team we are about to play that week and go as hard as I can to try and make them a better player and have the best preparation they can get.” Wade suffered a fracture-dislocation of his ankle during his junior year that required four months of recovery. Through a persistent effort in the recovery process, he was able to participate in the spring game ahead of schedule.

Senior defensive end Kallen Wade has played many different roles during his Irish career. He currently plays on the scout team. “I feel like this has been the most we’ve ever clicked as a team.” Wade said. “Basically, I try to mimic whatever team we are about to play that week and go as hard as I can to try and make them a better player and have the best preparation they can get.”

While Wade has many favorite Notre Dame moments, he considers the 2009 season as a whole the best part of his career. “It has been remarkable how we have come back from where we were two seasons ago to be the team we are today,” he said. “It’s great to be part of it.” Another one of Wade’s favorite parts of his Notre Dame experience has been the camaraderie of the team. “The whole unity of the team is great,” he said. “I feel like this has been the most we’ve ever clicked as a team.” Even though football is a huge time constraint, Kallen applies himself in the classroom as well. He is a double major in psychology and computer applications. In the spring semester of 2008, he carried a 3.33 GPA.

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

The Observer • IRISH INSIDER
Friday, November 20, 2009 page 13

KALLEN WADE

Cincinnati native learns new defensive positions

By BARRICK BOLLMAN
Sports Writer

Contact Barrick Bollman at jbollman@nd.edu

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

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

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

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

FALL 2009 SCHEDULE

9.5.09 (vs. Nevada)
“The Memory Wars: Public Art and Public Feelings in America Today”
Erika Dean, Professor and Chairperson, Department of American Studies

9.19.09 (vs. Michigan State)
“International Studies: What the Eggheads Can Teach the Generalists”
Michael Desch, Professor and Chairperson, Department of Political Science

10.3.09 (vs. Washington)
“Images That Matter: The U.S. as Seen Through Latin American Eyes”
Thomas E. Anderson, Associate Professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

10.17.09 (vs. USC)
“Shakespeare in the 21st Century”
Peter D. Holland, McKeon Family Professor in Shakespeare Studies, Department of Film, Television, and Theatre

10.24.09 (vs. Boston College)
“The French Revolution, or How to Keep Your Head in Turbulent Times”
Julia V. Donaldson, Professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

10.31.09 (vs. Washington State) games in Sean Aaran Miller 10@10 cm, Maretz Riverfront “Latinos and the Renewal of American Catholicism”
Virgilio P. Elizondo, Notre Dame Professor of Pastoral and Hispanic Theology, Department of Theology

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

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NEWS & EVENTS
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CONSECUTIVE LOSSES HAVE BURSTED JIMMY CLAUSEN’S HEISMAN TROPHY BUBBLE, BUT THERE IS NO DENYING THE JUNIOR GUNSLINGER REMAINS ONE OF THE TOP PASSERS IN THE COUNTRY. FOR THE THIRD CONSECUTIVE WEEK, HE MADE HIS FIRST CAREER FIELD GOAL AND TATE WILL COME UP WITH SOME HIGHLIGHTS IN ACTION, AS THE PAIR WILL TRY TO BECOME THE FIRST IN IRISH HISTORY TO EACH RECORD THREE STRAIGHT 100-YARD RECEIVING GAMES.

THE Huskies secondary is statistically mediocre and, like most teams on the Irish schedule, Connecticut cannot match Notre Dame’s talent at the skill positions. The Irish offensive line should have better luck than it did against Pittsburgh, which should bode well for Clausen and the time he’ll have to stand and deliver from the pocket. Defensive end Lindsey Witten’s 10.5 sacks, however, are some cause for concern.

STILL, THOUGH, THE Notre Dame aerial attack has been curiously quiet early in games recently, so it will be interesting to see whether Charlie Weis opts to fire early or if he’ll repeat last week’s conservative start.

EDGES: Notre Dame 16, Connecticut 13

The good: David Ruffer had an extra point blocked and Eric Maust on his five punts. Armando Allen returned from injury last week and showed why the Irish ground game missed him so much, as the junior showed speed and power, albeit with limited opportunities (14 carries, 77 yards). Draw plays were especially effective against the aggressive Pittsburgh front. Weis tried to establish the running game early but said he was forced to abandon it as his team fell behind three scores in the second half.

At defensive end opposite Witten is Arguably, a lack of commitment has forced the Irish to sell out against the run and try to stop the pass-run balance, but that has been rare of late. Weis needs to let his team execute.

Armando Allen’s Heisman Trophy bubble, but there is no denying the junior gunslinger remains one of the top passers in the country. For the third consecutive week, made his first career field goal and Tate receivers — Golden Tate and Michael Floyd — in action, as the pair will try to become the first in Irish history to record three straight 100-yard receiving games.

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EDGE: Notre Dame

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Harry Flemming
FBCurr
ND Defense
Sacks: 18 (68th)
Fumbles rec.: 6 (91st)
Turnovers for: 17 (62nd)
Passing: 237.30 ypg (85th)
Rushing: 153.20 ypg (72nd)

Connecticut Huskies
Record: 4-5, 1-4 Big East
AP: NR
Coaches: NR
BCS: NR

Huskies Offense vs. Irish Defense

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

Still, Notre Dame has tended to make average quarterbacks look like All-Americans this season, and Frazer certainly has the talent to do just that. Pressure will ultimately be the key, and a lack of a pass rush doomed the Irish defense against Pittsburgh. Notre Dame will probably surrender yardage, but if it can create turnovers, a la the Boston College victory, it should be able to thwart the Huskies passing attack.

EDGE: CONNECTICUT

Joe Moorhead’s offense relies on the run, and with a quarterback who might be a bit over-excited for his return to Notre Dame Stadium, he’ll almost surely lean on the ground game, at least early. Rushing success and Frazer’s strong arm could cause Tenuta to scale back his blitzes, particularly after seeing some of Pittsburgh’s big plays last Saturday. Notre Dame’s defensive performance will, as always, come down to tackling — which is always a concern.

EDGE: CONNECTICUT

In two weeks, it’s gone from hard to predict a blowout Irish victory to hard to predict any Irish victory. It was no secret all year that Notre Dame was a flawed team, but since the Navy loss, it seems like those flaws have been exposed at an incredible rate. That being said, I think the last two weeks serve as a wake-up call for a tightly-knit Irish team that wants to send its seniors out on a high note.

Notre Dame won’t play a perfect game, and chances are both defenses will look clueless against opposing offenses with big-time playmakers. It probably won’t be pretty, but for group of seniors that has had a rough go of it over the last three years, that victory lap around Notre Dame Stadium will be sweet nonetheless.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 34, Connecticut 27

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

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

The senior lineman did not see any chance to come through on more than one of the first-team defense tough competition in practice. He said this coincided with his goals coming to South Bend.

Just going from high school to college is a hard transition to make, but in balance, I'd say it's pretty good," Wenger said. "I define myself developing into a pretty good football player and working hard and aspiring to play at my best.

Wenger's sophomore season involved a lot of changes and a lot of times, including five starts. His first three starts, against Georgia Tech, Penn State and Michigan, were at right guard. Then he started at center for the last two games of Notre Dame's worst season in the history of its program. Wenger said the trials of such an experience taught him lessons that carried past the football field.

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

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

"Absolutely phenomenal, to be a part of (breaking the losing streak). It was such a highlight of my college career," Wenger said. "(I tried to) have a mental edge, and I'm sure it was a factor in the game because that's the way I've been taught since I was young. Very few times. You just have to deal with the situation at hand and make the best of it. I wasn't going to be in the dog house or lose any intensity out on the field." Wenger set about giving the coaches reasons to keep him on the field, and before the season began, he was the backup for all three interior line positions.

"There is a sense of self-confidence that comes along with knowing three positions," Wenger said. "You can sit there and say to yourself, 'Hey, if I'm in there or someone goes down, I have the confidence in myself and I'm going to show the coaches I'm going to get the job done.'

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

"That definitely made me stronger and motivated me more," he said. "I can tell that I appreciate not only where I am at, but the amount of snaps that I get, and realize nothing is guaranteed.

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

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

Contact Doug Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu

ERIC MAUST

Baseball player walks on, wins starting role

By CHRIS MASOU

Sprint Writer

Balancing the work load of a Notre Dame football curriculum and an active social life can be quite a challenge for many student athletes. With a majority of the 20 players to have won a scholarship at Notre Dame, Maust felt he had the skills to be a part of the Notre Dame football tradition.

"You have the option of going out of school to play baseball or you could come here, but in my mind I was thinking I'm just playing baseball. But in my heart I couldn't let football go," Maust said. "So after the game I talked to the baseball coaches, they talked to the football coaches, so I walked-on and made the team."

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

"Being a specialist, it's a tricky position because for the majority of the time you're not playing, but you know your role is fairly important," Maust said. "I try to prepare every practice in the best way possible."

Maust's senior punter team included former standout Steven Elmer, who was considered himself a specialist.

"You learn a lot about football and life go some-\[times. You just have to deal with the intensity out on the field."

"I'm a real competitive guy, so we'd always have during prac-\[ticing throwing competitions," Maust said. "Thursday before USC we had game-\[planned the fake, so everyone was trying to coach each other. I was being laughed at, but all the times I asked, and at the end of the week you get to look back and see if you accomplished that goal, and that resonates with me because that's the way I've structured my life."

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

"Like many players, Maust has drawn parallels between his experience on the gridiron and his experiences outside of foot-\[ball."

"In what way football and life go some-\[times. You just have to deal with the situation at hand and make the best of it. I wasn't going to be in the dog house or lose any intensity out on the field."
By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

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

His teammates and coaches call him Notre Dame's best ath-le-lete. But just how athletic is sen-i-or safety Sergio Brown?

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

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

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

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

Until now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We did the splits and showed and all that other stuff," Brown said. "Once I got bigger, it started getting a little harder to flip." So he started to use his athlet-ic ability in other ways.

"We race a lot in the neighbor-hood to see who's the fastest," Brown said. "Once I got bigger, it started getting a little harder to flip."

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

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

"He's a guy you can't help but root for," sophomore linebacker Chris Johnson said. "He's fun to be around. You can't help but just smile and laugh when you're around him. He really brings something else to our team that's going to be hard to replace next year."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One time we were in the training room and Jimmy [Caussen] was talking to former Irish quarterback Joe Theismann," Brown said. "I really didn't know it was Joe Theismann at the time, and I was just standing behind him, waving and making faces at him while they were talking, acting like a fool. Jimmy started to bust down laughing. We just all mess with each other."

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

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

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

In the video, Brown yells at the camera, dances with a Notre Dame blanket draped over his back and, of course, does a hack flip too. After all, Swarbrick talks about Notre Dame's Monogram Club in a professional office set-
ting.

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

Not that it was a problem for Brown, who will likely be in the north end zone, preparing him-self for another hack flip after Saturday's game as his team-mates gather to sing the alma mater.

"I like to have a lot of fun," he said. "I don't think in the time is called, but everything's always better when you're having fun."

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

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu
Local kicker always keeps ND close to heart

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

Ryan Burkhart, a placekicker, grew up in Wakarusa, Ind., a half-hour away from campus. Burkhart has been living his dream the past four years by wearing the Notre Dame uniform. "I still want to be around the Dome and Touchdowns," Burkhart said. "I can't even explain it. I've had a lot of memories."

"It was an incredible experience in the first place to come to play at Notre Dame and then to play as a freshman. "Going to the Sugar Bowl was my favorite memory," he said. "Just the hype and going to a BCS bowl game, and that chance to play for the University." Burkhart also recalled playing in the Hawaii Bowl, and being part of the team that broke the Irish bowl streak, as being one of his best times on the team.

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

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

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

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

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By DOUGLAS FARMER
Spokes Writer

Originally Mike Anello saw walk-on tryouts as a way to avoid the freshman 15, not as a way to end up speaking to thousands of fans before the USC game this year. “At the end of my senior season [in high school] I was talking to my football coach, and I decided I’d try walking on the football team [at Notre Dame],” Anello said. “Worse comes to worse it would keep me in shape for another nine months.”

The Chicago-suburb native barely even played football in high school, only seeing the field his senior season. Rather, he shined on the wrestling mat, where he learned the skills that helped him work his way onto the Irish football team in the spring of 2006. “The wrestler mentality of just really pushing yourself so hard and just going beyond your limits helped me out so much,” he said. “Everything we have done here has been a lot easier than what I did in high school in wrestling.”

Irish coach Charlie Weis agreed with Anello that his wrestling background helped him on the football field. “His wrestling background helped him on the football field,” Weis said. “[Anello] is a guy from Chicago, came in here a little raw, a little green, told him he couldn’t play football...” Weis said. “He comes out, walks out on the team, ends up being a pain in the butt on the scout team, a real nuisance.”

While Weis used “rugrat,” Anello preferred the term of a competitive aspect to the matter. “When I came here I was just like I’ll try walking on the team just to see, stay and continue doing everything like that,” he said. “Once I got out there and started competing, I said ‘Hey, Mike, I might be able to make some hay with this and actually provide on the field and make some plays.’ And make plays Anello did, at first only in practice to his coach’s frustration, but before long he made it to the field on Saturdays.

“[He’s] one of those guys where every time you go around he is blowing up a play that you are getting mad because he is blowing up a play,” Weis said. “Next you thing you know you put him on the punt team... The one guy making plays was Mike Anello.”

After spending 2006 on the sideline, he earned his way onto the depth chart in 2007, and earned notoriety in 2008. Opposing teams had 72 returns in the 12 games Anello played in last season, and he was a part of the tackle on 23 – nearly one-third of those returns. In the season opener against San Diego State, the then-anonymous special teams player made four solo tackles. The following week Anello sparked the Irish victory over Michigan with three more tackles, an early forced fumble and the ensuing recovery to set up the Irish to take a 14-0 lead. The play occurred directly in front of the Notre Dame student section, and Anello was no longer an unknown.

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

Again, it was the wrestler showing through in Anello that made him into a special teams player. “I always looked for the chance to play when chasing down a return man,” Anello said. “I just can’t wait to get down there [on returns],” he said. “As long as they don’t call for a fair catch you are licking your chops ready to get right behind him.”

Anello finished last season with 23 tackles, the most of any Irish walk-on receiver, in 12 games. A broken leg suffered on his first play against USC kept him out of the rest of that game as well as the Hawaii Bowl. Despite not being able to play in Hawaii, Anello still enjoyed everything about the bowl-game experience, especially the first postseason victory for the Irish in its last 10 tries. “I had a metal rod put in my leg with a screw on top to keep it secured so I couldn’t really do too much in Hawaii. But just being there with all the guys and getting that big monkey off our back, to finally get people off us, felt good,” he said.

After the two games on the sideline, especially the USC game, Anello had two games circled on the schedule for this season — Michigan and USC. “This week before the USC contest, he was casually talking with Weis about certain aspects of the rivalry and how important it was for the fans to understand the true meaning of it when Weis said Anello should be on the field during the pep rally that week,” Anello said. “[Weis and I] had just been talking earlier that week and there were some things that I wanted to make sure everyone knew what was going on with the situ- ation; we had to get the crowd up and there were other things I wanted to get across when [the captains] were speaking,” Anello said. “He told me not to be surprised if he called me up there, and I was hoping it would happen.”

It did happen. After Rocket Ismail had introduced Anello into a frenzy of yells of “This is not a game!” and “Let’s go get it!” Weis handed the mic to Anello. The walk-on was not fazed by the Notre Dame legend’s antics before-hand and tapped the pep rally off promising the throngs of Irish fans a “victory lap around campus with the goal- posts on our shoulders.”

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

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

“It’s incredible to be in the stands in front of 80,000 people,” Anello said. “But if I don’t do that I’m going to head out to Boston to work for a venture capital firm.”

Weis said Anello may want to hold off on any plans involving a desk job for a bit longer yet. “He’ll end up in somebody’s camp this summer,” Weis said. “He’ll be one of those guys in the butt to get rid of because he’ll be one of those guys on kickoff team and on punt teams that’s down there involved in every play.”

Weis already sympathized with whoever is debating cutting Anello in the summer, as Weis knows the feeling from a few years ago. “You going to want to look at him and cut him just by look- ing at him,” he said. “Then about halfway through you are going to say what are we going to do about this guy?”

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

“The easiest way to put it is life changing,” he said. “From one day I went out there it has just been incredible.”

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

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

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu
Aldridge relishes unique college experience

By MIKE GOTIMER
Sports Writer

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

Aldridge's Notre Dame career began in a way that was decidedly unique when compared with how most other top recruits enter college. The heavily recruited running back became one of the first recruits under Irish coach Charlie Weis to participate in the early enrollment program.

The experience had such a big impact on Aldridge that he still considers it his favorite memory at Notre Dame four years later. "Moving in, I was an early enrollee, you know, when I was in high school one week and the next week I was in college," Aldridge said. "So just the transition period and getting acclimated to every- thing. When I first got here was the most expansive memory I have."

It was an experience Aldridge thought was important for him, and he feels it helped him grow a lot as a person. "It was a culture shock, but I thought it was a culture shock that I needed," he said. "As a person I grew up, and I grew to like everything. I didn't know what else encompasses a college culture you know besides football."

Aldridge's road to Notre Dame began as a high school senior at Merrillville H.S. in Merrillville, Ind., where he finished with 3,883 all-purpose yards in just two years and 1,453 yards and 21 touchdowns in his senior season. That earned him a spot as one of nine running backs on Parade's Prep All-America team, and he was also one of 16 candidates for the Parade All-America High School Football Player of the Year award.

Like so many others before him, Aldridge was attracted to Notre Dame because of the University's prestige. "You come here, you really know about the tradition, and once you get here and see what it's all about, that's what really drew me here," Aldridge said.

"They play this recruiting video for all the recruits with all this Notre Dame stuff, and I was just like 'alright, I'm coming.'"

Once he got to campus, Aldridge began to make his Notre Dame experience unique almost instantly. He learned to embrace all of the opportunities and special spots on campus — including his favorite place, North Dining Hall. "You know, spring semester when I first got here and after nights of going out, you know I'd wake up in the morning and go to North [Dining Hall] with my roommates, and I would be sitting in the dining hall for hours on end just looking at girls," Aldridge said with a laugh. "But it's just kind of the way I was when I was younger you know. Since those early days where he would spend hours in the dining hall taking it all in, Aldridge has taken advantage of many of the opportunities available on campus, including the football field.

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

Aldridge was then one of the bright spots during Notre Dame's rough 2007 campaign, leading the team with 462 rushing yards. His most memorable start came against Michigan State when he became the first Irish running back since Tony Fisher in 1999 to register more than 100 yards in his first career start with 104 yards on 18 carries. Aldridge's biggest highlight in that game came when he burst out a 45-yard carry on Notre Dame's second scoring drive that resulted in only their second offensive touchdown of the season. He also rushed for a career high 125 yards against Navy.

During his junior season in 2008, Aldridge notched his first career touchdown when he burst through the line of scrimmage from two yards out against North Carolina. Two weeks later at Washington, Aldridge led the team with 84 rushing yards and registered his first career multi-touchdown game. For the season, Aldridge finished with 357 yards on 91 carries.

In 2009, in the middle of a crowded backfield, Aldridge moved from halfback to fullback. Although injuries have limited the psychology major to only four games this season, Aldridge plans to finish out his career strong. "I want to continue to embrace what this University is about while I'm here," Aldridge said. After this season, Aldridge plans to continue to train, but in his spare time aside from that, he'll continue to add to the "unique" streak he has with respect to other football players by launching his own clothing line, aptly named "Live Unique."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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West still treasures 2006 score against Purdue

By CHRIS MICHALSki
Sports Writer

In 2006, Notre Dame was stocked with talent and head- ed toward a BCS bowl. It was not surprising to fans then when quarterback Brady Quinn marched his offense 70 yards down the field for a score capped by an 11-yard end-around on the drive's last play.

But to senior wide receiver George West, it wasn't much more than a place for him.

"I'm playing for the story, the University. Wearing that gold helmet means a lot to me."

George West senior receiver

Even when he tallied 172 receiving yards and 22 return yards, when he scored his first touchdown against Purdue his freshman year on an end-around run, and is different from my fall of freshman year, but some of the opportunities. Notre Dame is a great school all-around, and I don't want to take anything for granted."

After graduation, Narvaez's busy schedule will most likely start all over again as he has plans to go to medical school.

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

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GEORGE WEST

View from the stands not good enough for walk-on

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

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

"I'm happy to be a part of it. It's something that helps me keep my head up, something to strive for," West said. "I'm just playing for myself, I'm playing for the story, the University. Wearing that gold helmet means a lot to me."

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

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

Although West's favorite place on campus, and what he calls his second home is the Guglielmino Athletic Complex, his story doesn't end with the student-athletes at Notre Dame, getting a good education, staying in the area, and being a Notre Dame football somewhere and you might see good academics support them in terms of how they are being treated at many schools, and the combination of both is really what brought me here," he said.

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

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

"They helped me with my weaknesses, they taught me what it means to be a hard-working guy, a stand-up guy, a team player."

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

"There are a lot of guys I've seen both his parents said the main contributors in getting him to where he is today.

"They helped me with my weaknesses, they taught me what it means to be a hard-working guy, a stand-up guy, a team player."

"I thought I'd give it a try," he said. "The opportunity was there, and I didn't want to have any regrets while I was still young. That's the combination with how it turned out."

For Narvaez, football was never part of his life until freshman year.

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

"It takes up a lot of time and is different from my fall of freshman year, but some of the opportunities. Notre Dame is a great school all-around, and I don't want to take anything for granted."

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

"It was tough being hurt watching them play in a giant stadium, playing my senior season I came back and had a lot of motivation, a lot of energy, and that was a lot of the reason I tried out," Narvaez said. "I had some unfinished business.

His "unfinished business" turned into a strict schedule, the team? Traveling to Hawaii gave it my best shot.

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

After graduation, Narvaez's busy schedule will most likely start all over again as he has plans to go to medical school.

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

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MIKE NARVAEZ

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

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

After standing in the student section throughout the 2006 season, however, Narvaez knew he wanted more and decided to try-out in the spring of his senior year.

"I thought I'd give it a try," he said. "The opportunity was there, and I didn't want to have any regrets while I was still young. That's the combination with how it turned out."

For Narvaez, football was never part of his life until freshman year. Reflecting on his four years at Notre Dame in the Guglielmino Athletic Complex, his story doesn't end with the student-athletes at Notre Dame, getting a good education, staying in the area, and being a Notre Dame football somewhere and you might see good academics support them in terms of how they are being treated at many schools, and the combination of both is really what brought me here," he said.

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For Narvaez, football was never part of his life until senior season I came back and had a lot of motivation, a lot of energy, and that was a lot of the reason I tried out. Narvaez tore his ACL his senior year of high school — he was too big for the Pee-Wee man year of high school — he knew since I've been here, when I came early with them."

"It was tough being hurt watching them play in a giant stadium, playing my senior season I came back and had a lot of motivation, a lot of energy, and that was a lot of the reason I tried out," Narvaez said. "I had some unfinished business.

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Duncan eager to leave Notre Dame with a win

By ALEX BARKER
Sports Writer

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

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

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

“You don’t want to think about the last time you played in Notre Dame Stadium as a loss,” he said. “It’s never an appealing thought to anybody. A lot of the younger guys are going to come to the facility, talking about how they’re going to get a win for the seniors and that’s a lot that they respect us like that.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I think (having an extra year) helped me out a lot,” Duncan said. “While I was out, I think (freshman) Taron Smith was leaving last year, I was thinking that could have been me sitting right there next to him. I was thinking about where I was and that I wasn’t ready to go yet physically or mentally. I just wasn’t ready to go and it was just a blessing being able to come back for another season.”

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

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

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

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

While Saturday’s game will have a much different feeling for Duncan, he said that he isn’t going to be making any changes in the way of game preparation.

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

With that in mind, winning is still the focus for Duncan and his fellow seniors who have experienced a number of ups and downs during their Irish careers. And Saturday marks the final time that they will be able to accomplish that goal within the friendly confines of Notre Dame Stadium.

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Linebacker credits family for helping him succeed

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

As Toryan Smith stood in the hallway of the athletics facility, talking about how sports teaches life lessons, he said:

“The academics and the prestige of Notre Dame attracted Smith to South Bend, but once he got here, he said he realized how much he loved playing football as long as I’m here. I’m going to try to keep playing football as long as I have the opportunity, he said.

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

“We’ll see what happens,” he said.

Whatever happens, Smith said the community he experienced at Notre Dame will stick with him.

“It’s an instant connection,” he said. “You really feel it.”

Even more than that, he said, the bonds he formed with his teammates supercede everything else from his time here.

“I think really just meeting these guys that I’ve played with,” he said when asked what he’d remember. “You can talk about all these big games, big stadiums, parties, whatever you want to talk about, but when it really comes down to it … [it’s] the friends that I’ll have the rest of my life.

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Being on team fills void for wide receiver

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

From the start of his freshman year at Notre Dame, Brian Coughlin knew something was missing, something was just not right about being away at school and not being a part of the football team. So he turned down Division III offers in the hopes of suiting up for his hometown team.

Now he’s a senior wide receiver.

As a senior at Brother Rice High School outside Chicago, he had the opportunity to talk to a few different college coaches about the prospect of playing football at the college level. But Coughlin had different plans.

“I had some Division III coaches talk to me, they would come out to the school, and we could talk to them,” Coughlin said. “But more specifically, I wanted to come to Notre Dame so I didn’t pursue playing in college.”

Coughlin and his younger brother, Patrick who is also a walk-on receiver at Notre Dame, grew up in South Bend clearly, a rivalry game against Navy.

“I still have a picture in my basement of my brother, my grandpa, my dad, and me at Notre Dame from that game, and we all look so excited,” Coughlin said. “It was so long ago, but I remember being so happy.”

These early memories helped Coughlin decide that attending Notre Dame as a non-athlete ruled over the prospect of being recruited to play football at a different school.

“Seeing Notre Dame football on television and hearing about their academics made me want to come here,” Coughlin said. “I realized I had a chance to get in when I was a sophomore in high school, and I applied, and I decided to come to Notre Dame.”

During his freshman and sophomore years, Coughlin played Intramural football for Dillon Hall, but was not satisfied and began tuning around the idea of playing on the varsity football team.

After discussing the walk-on tryouts with his roommate who had gone through the process, Coughlin decided to prepare himself physically and give it a try.

“I talked to some of the other guys and they told me, and at the time when I made it after the first cut where they cut a lot of people,” Coughlin said. “I was really nervous at the first cut, but then it kind of sunk in that I had a really good chance at making it.”

Upon surviving all the cuts and maintaining consistency in practice and workouts, Coughlin was picked to be a member of the Notre Dame football team.

“The first time running out of the tunnel was just amazing,” Coughlin said. “We ran out of the tunnel for the Blue and Gold game, but it just wasn’t the same.”

Coughlin walked on the team during the spring of his sophomore year, which has allowed him to be on the football roster for his junior and senior seasons.

“It’s really like a 180-degree change. There are a lot of necessary changes in transferring from a regular full-time student to a Division-I athlete,” Coughlin said.

“The brotherhood you have with your teammates is definitely something I’m going to miss after graduating,” Coughlin said.

The term brotherhood on the football team has a more literal meaning to Coughlin in particular, as his younger brother Patrick also decided to come to Notre Dame and walk on the football team.

“It was fun to know that we both made it on our own,” Coughlin said. “Without having him help, he knows that he made it himself.”

An important part of team structure that Coughlin noticed is how the coaches have formed with all players by stressing the importance of every member of the team.

“I got to sit next to coach Weis in my first year, so I know him better, which was cool because you wouldn’t really talk to him in your first year. But you have a really good relationship with them,” Coughlin said. “He and all the other coaches want to make sure that everyone feels like they are valuable players.”

After graduating in the spring with a major in accounting, Coughlin will be interning at Deloitte and Accounting Consulting Firm. He then intends to return to Notre Dame for a fifth-year masters of accounting program and hopes to find a job as an accountant.

“Accounting gives me the best options down the road,” Coughlin said. “I went to a lot in my sophomore year accounting class, and I knew I wanted to be in the business school.”

This week’s final home game against Connecticut marks Coughlin’s last football game, and next semester, his last as an undergraduate at Notre Dame.

“I am definitely going to miss the fact that at Notre Dame you have a community of 8,000 peers and you’ve been around you, you’re going to miss the people the most,” Coughlin said.

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Irish Catholic nose tackle finishes his time at ND

By DOUGLAS FARMER
Sports Writer

When your first career sack comes in the second half of your senior season, you tend to treasur- e it for the rest of your life. And fortunately, Paddy Mullen has been treasuring his moment since he was first recruited to play for the Irish.

The senior was recruited out of DeSmet Jesuit H.S. in St. Louis as a defensive end who could play some tight end as well as recruit- ing coordinator and receivers coach Bob Davids.

“It was pretty cool,” Mullen said of the recruiting experience. “It was a lifelong dream. Growing up as a Notre Dame football fan, you always dreamed of playing for Notre Dame.”

He walked on the team and saw some of his teammates, Mullen’s dream was in for a reality check.

“It was a bit of a shock. There was a change from high school, from books and workouts and coming where everybody was the man,” he said. “Everybody could play.”

The blue-collar Irish Catholic side of Mullen showed through quick in how he approached the competition.

“The competition within the team is kind of a blessing at the same time,” he said. “You push yourself even harder to stand out from the crowd this was always my mentality.”

Mullen did not see any game action in 2006, but in his sopho- more season he played in three games. Mullen recorded a tackle in his first game on Oct. 7 against Georgia Tech. By then he played exclusively on the defense. Mullen was told by the defensive line coach Randy Hart to play exclusively on the defensive line.

“When you have to be ready at all times [when seeing limited play- ing time],” Mullen said. “You kind of deal with it, fulfill your role and do what you can to be ready whenever the coach calls upon you.”

This season Mullen’s role has not changed much. He provides some depth on the Irish defensive line, and is ready whenever defensive line coach Randy Hart tells him to get in the game. Mullen played in the closing moments of Notre Dame’s 40-14 victory over Washington State, and the former Morrissey Manor resident made the biggest play of his career in the final play of the game.

“Winning that game was a great thing,” Mullen said. “Getting that bowl streak out of the way was pretty cool.”

Though Hawaii was a good memory, other parts this senior class’ tenure were not. Mullen and his classmates saw the Irish finish the year 3-9 in the 2007 season.

Mullen possibly took as much away from that season as he did during the more pleasant 2008 season.

“As my father always told me, you never get too low when you’re down, and you never get too high when you’re up,” Mullen said. “You just keep a level head and keep going, it’s going to be better.”

Mullen said-plugging away for four years has left him already, and the four years aren’t even yet over. “You learn from anything. This whole experience has been the past four years, I have learned so much about myself. You have to take things away from it for life afterwards.”

As that life after- wards approaches quickly, Mullen knows he will miss his teammates when this season finally ends.

“Oh yeah, [I’ll miss] the locker room and the camaraderie as a team. I’ve grown to be pretty much brothers with some of the upperclassmen.

The familial feel extends past the locker room for this Irish Catholic. Coughlin said he knows what separates Notre Dame from everyone else, and knows he’ll miss it more than anything else.

“It’s the Notre Dame family, the tradition, the classmatess. Just all the people and the family feel of this place,” Coughlin said.

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Not many players can say the first play they tackled in their college career was Steve Breaston. Scott Smith has that distinction. In his first game as a freshman, he tracked down the former Michigan wideout and kick returner, who now plays for the Arizona Cardinals, and had more than 1,000 yards receiving last season, on a reverse.

“One of those situations everybody has when it seems like things are moving so fast, you really don’t have a chance to kind of get your bearings,” Smith said. “That’s definitely something that I probably be one of the ‘tell my grandkids’ stories. This was grandma’s first play, first tackle,” probably be a way to build myself up now, though. The fifth-year senior acts as a coach on the field, the man who distills defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta’s schemes for the younger players and someone who portrays consistency and character.

“He’s just a regular guy. Goes to class, goes to work,” fellow senior linebacker Toryan Smith said. “Does everything he’s supposed to do. He’s a great student. He’s a really good guy.”

Smith’s skills at linebacker developed late. Due to weight restrictions in middle school, he played on the offensive and defensive lines. At Highland Park, Ill., he played defensive end and tight end, but at the beginning of his sophomore year, coach Kurt Weinburg told him he’d be playing middle linebacker.

“I ended up just sticking there for the next three years and playing a bunch of different positions on offense,” he said. “I guess I was able to make a pretty good impression on some people.”

Smith said he liked getting off the line of scrimmage and working in space rather than pounding around in the trenches.

“I think [the coaches] tried to make it as easy for me as possible. Just find the ball and go tackle someone,” he said. “As I got more comfortable and as I got more used to playing the position my responsibilities kind of increased.”

Aside from the combination of academics and big-time football that Notre Dame offered, Smith said the size of the school attracted him and he liked the opportunity to be more than a number.

“Smaller classes, [having] an opportunity to interact with professors and build relationships,” Smith said. “Those relationships too are something that will help me in the future looking for jobs and getting references and things like that.”

As a freshman, Smith played behind linebacker Corey Mays, who graduated in 2008, and now plays for the Kansas City Chiefs. In a way, Mays was to Smith as Smith now is to the younger linebackers.

“He seemed like that old guy who knew everything and was the best guy to go to for advice and always had a good answer,” Smith said. “I really appreciate him taking me under his wing. I’m sure I got a little annoying with all the questions. I’m sure I look like that old guy to a lot of the freshmen now, so I’m trying to return the favor, I guess, with them.”

Now Smith answers questions for younger linebackers like Manti Te’o, Carlo Calabrese and Dan Fox.

“It’s kind of weird how it’s come full circle. One day you’re this wide-eyed freshman, the next you’re kind of like this wise old veteran. It’s pretty neat.”

Smith didn’t play his sophomore year, but appeared in every game in his junior and senior years. He made 18 tackles, seven solo, during his junior season.

Smith said the biggest improvement in his game is his ability to shed blocks. In high school, he said, he could blow by the blockers, but now he needs to use his hands. This is especially true since he’s moved from middle linebacker to outside linebacker at Notre Dame, where he faces the tight end on a regular basis.

“Obviously they’re a threat as a receiver playing man coverage,” he said. “It’s a little bit different just because of the athletic difference, but some of these linemen who are 315 pounds, you don’t expect them to move what they do, but they can get it on some people.”

For the past two seasons, Smith has played under defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta. He’s acted as an intermediary between Tenuta and the players.

“He’s like JT in that he’ll get JT’s message across very well, associate head coach C e r w i n Brown said of Smith. “He’s the cuts through the fat.”

T o r y a n S m i t h

“He’s (Smith) really taken on the play-coach role. He’s the coach when the play-coach role is not there,” Toryan said. “I feel like he really accepted the leadership role on the team. He wasn’t asked to do it.”

Smith said playing under Tenuta not only gives him an opportunity not many other players get, but a chance to learn lessons for a potential future in coaching.

“To have the opportunity to have one of the best defensive coordinators in the country as your position coach is not something a lot of guys can say,” he said. “The way that he talks to us, and the way that he helps us, and the way he critiques our play is all geared toward us becoming better football players and us being better prepared to help the team win. It’s kind of nice to get that view of being almost in his head, because everywhere he sees gets transferred right to us.”

“In the future possibly wanting to coach, having that perspective on how to approach different types of opponents.”

Being a fifth-year senior gives Smith more time to relax, something that previously eluded him. He said he enjoys sleeping and spending time with roommates Paul Duncan and Bartley Webb. He’s also got his TV schedule dialed up every week — on this particular Wednesday, Law and Order: SVU awaited him.

“Probably the greatest show ever made on TV,” he said.

Smith is currently taking graduate classes, but as an undergrad he finished with a 3.65 grade point average. Time management helped him, he said — as did playing to his strengths.

“I’d be honest, I didn’t do all the reading for class,” he said. “You kind of pick and choose your spots where you think you can be successful. It’s a factor of knowing my strengths and weaknesses and putting effort where it was needed.”

In the same way a defense has moving parts, Smith wants to be part of a business with a lot of moving parts and change. He said he’d like to work in business problem solving and possibly re-enter the sports world.

“I wouldn’t mind doing something in sports, obviously, just because that’s where the majority of my life has been spent,” he said.

Whether it’s football, course work, a future job or dealing with his family, Smith said he strives for consistency and character.

“As a person the most important thing for me is to be consistent, to be approachable and be that guy that you know has a real good character,” he said.

“You hear a lot of people say character is what you do when nobody’s watching. That’s what I try to be, the same person all the time. Just know the people in my life, like my friends in family, know they’re going to get it. I’m just going to be me.”

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Once a pupil, Irish cornerback becomes a teacher

By SAM WERNER
Associate Sports Editor

Just because Raeshon McNeil is a starting cornerback on a Division I football team doesn't mean he doesn't feel the same about his college experience as most students.

"It seems like it's flown by," McNeil said. "There were four years that have just really flown by."

From his role as a special teams player in 2006 to his full-time starting role now, McNeil said that the anticipation for games in the fall, and looking forward to football season in the spring made his four years at Notre Dame speed by.

"It's easy for McNeil to look back at his recruitment during high school after all, it feels like just yesterday to him. He said that Notre Dame's academic prestige, as well as the camaraderie of the team, attracted him to the Irish.

"Getting some of the other guys, Darius Walker and Chinedum (Ndukwe), I just felt like it was a good fit for me," McNeil said.

Once he got to South Bend, McNeil said that those same players helped him get acclimated to the program and began his career as a college cornerback.

"Ndukwe was one of the guys that really attracted me to this place, one of the guys I could really see myself hanging out with," McNeil said. "I really wanted to be great friends with Tommy Zbikowski, and we still text and talk all the time. Also, Mike Richardson, I liked the way he played, the instincts that he had."

His freshman year, McNeil played in 11 games for the Irish, and totaled four tackles in mostly special teams duty. He said that while some players have trouble adjusting to being a role player early in their college career, he was ready for the transition.

"It really wasn't that had for me," McNeil said of his adjustment to college. "I'm really not a high school player, so I understood what I had to do. I understood paying my dues."

While McNeil's sophomore season, in which the Irish went 3-9, may have been forgettable for most fans, it did have some bright spots of the young cornerback. McNeil recorded the first start of his career at Purdue, and he recovered his first sack against Stanford.

On a whole, though, he said the season was disappointing, but that it motivated himself, and the rest of the team, to work harder for every win to naturally.

It was great. It was horri- ble that we lost, but it was great for me to go back there," McNeil said.

At the same time, McNeil said he would always remember the experience for getting to play in front of his friends and family.

"I had a lot of family in town," he said. "A lot of people that aren't able to make it up here to see my play. My grandmother was in the stands, all my brothers and my aunts were in the stands. It was great being able to go back there and them being able to see me play again." McNeil set another career high in his homecoming game, notching a then-career-high six tackles.

Later in the season, the junior notched his first two career interceptions in Notre Dame's quadruple-overtime loss to Pittsburgh.

Now, McNeil is one of the more experienced players on the defensive backfield. He said that over the past four years he's become close with the other upperclassmen in the secondary. He finished the season seventh on the team with 41 total tackles.

"I've gotten really close to a lot of the DBs," he said. "Me, Sergio [Brown], Leonard [Gordon] and Darrin [Walls]. We've been really tight since we've been here."

With the experience, though, comes an added responsibility. McNeil said that he's had to take on the role of mentor to the younger defensive backs, like sophomores Robert Blanton and Jamoris Slaughter. To McNeil, though, being a teacher is no big deal.

"I just like helping people," he said. "Being in this role for me is natural, trying to coach up some of the younger guys, keeping them focused during games and stuff. All that stuff just naturally comes for me."

While professional football is still the primary goal, the industrial design major said he has a good backup plan ready.

"I'm going to give this football thing a shot," he said of his post-graduation plans. "God willing, I'll still be playing. So hopefully my last game won't be Stanford."

As for McNeil, he hopes that it won't be the last regular season football game he plays in.

"I'm going to give this football thing a shot," he said of his post-graduation plans. "God willing, I'll still be playing. So hopefully my last game won’t be Stanford."

Senior cornerback Raeshon McNeil started 13 games in a breakout 2008 season, finishing with 41 tackles and two interceptions.

McNeil has relished the opportunity to mentor younger defensive backs like sophomores Robert Blanton and Jamoris Slaughter.

Senior cornerback Raeshon McNeil started 13 games in a breakout 2008 season, finishing with 41 tackles and two interceptions.

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IRISH INSIDER
DAN FRANCO

Notre Dame obvious choice for South Bend WR

By CHRIS MASOUD
Speen Writer

Senior safety Leonard Gordon chose Notre Dame over southern schools like Vanderbilt and LSU, and he has not looked back.

“I’ve really become a man here.”
Leonard Gordon

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Speen Writer

Fifth-year builds relationships with teammates

At other schools, he said, the football teams often broke up into small groups and players rarely spent time with teammates outside of their small social circle. To Gordon, that simply isn’t the case here at Notre Dame. “I can hang with any of the guys on the team.”

The former Dillon Hall resident has been around football his entire life, he said, and the team atmosphere has always been very central to his football experience, which is one of the reasons why he loves Notre Dame so much. He said there is a true team atmosphere here both on and off the field, which means a lot to him.

Gordon’s most recent football memory is of the UCLA-Notre Dame game in 2006 when he rode a 40-yard pass to Jeff Samardzija with less than a minute left in the game to cap a come-from-behind victory. Though he was redshirted that year, Gordon said it was an unbelievable experience during his first year on campus.

“Since I made the decision to come here, I’ve become a man here,” he said. “Although he may have done some of this “growing up” at other programs, Gordon believes that Notre Dame was the best place for him to learn and become an adult.

Though the community aspect of Notre Dame and the football team was enticing to Gordon, the academics of the University were also extremely attractive. He is both a political science and preprofessional studies major and after graduation, plans on attending Baylor University in Texas to attend physical therapy school through the Army-Baylor doctoral program. After graduation from this program, he will serve in the United States Army as a physical therapist.

Vanderbilt and the academicians, and LSU had the high-caliber football — and they both play in the famed SEC — but when looking back, the product of the South is what he’s always about football. Gordon has never started a game for the Irish, but he has come to understand his role as a valuable member of the offense and taken upon himself to make his teammates better.

“As a walk-on, you know that you’re not going to be playing in any games but when the freshmen first get here, they’re learning from everybody, the ropes and things like that,” Franco said. Especially during the summer when we do seven-on-seven stuff, just helping them get along with the plays, the tempo of practice, how things are and even just talking to them about everyday life. Conversely, Franco’s teammates have made him a better player through their efforts to compete for a job, and none more than junior cornerback Nick Lezynski, a fellow walk-on.

“Walter and I have the same number, and we’re constantly competing,” Franco said. “Oh you made this play, what did you do today? Who’s the real 42? We’re joking around in good fun, but we’re on each other’s coattails, just getting after one another, making sure we’re both doing our jobs.” Without a doubt, Franco realized that when he graduated this spring, his teammates and the relationships he has developed will be missed the most.

“It sort of just happens,” Franco said. “Just you get really close with the guys day in and day out, with early morning lifts and just in the middle of practice. The memories and the stories that you get to carry with you, that’s what treasure most.”

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

Leonard Gordon

Fifth-year builds relationships with teammates

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“As a freshman, that really stands out in my mind,” he said. “The Stadium was so loud. Gordon began seeing action on special teams during his second year of eligibility and earned increased game repetitions as the years progressed, as well as seeing more playing time in safety last year. Gordon says that he has done a lot of maturing from the time he entered as a freshman. He was not as mature as he needed to be — mentally and physically. “I’ve really become a man here, he said. “Although he may have done some of this “growing up” at other programs, Gordon believes that Notre Dame was the best place for him to learn and become an adult.

Though the community aspect of Notre Dame and the football team was enticing to Gordon, the academics of the University were also extremely attractive. He is both a political science and preprofessional studies major and after graduation, plans on attending Baylor University in Texas to attend physical therapy school through the Army-Baylor doctoral program. After graduation from this program, he will serve in the United States Army as a physical therapist.

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LEONARD GORDON

Notre Dame obvious choice for South Bend WR

By CHRIS MASOUD
Speen Writer

Coming out of high school, the decision of choosing the right college can be a stressful process. But for South Bend native Dan Franco, the decision to come to Notre Dame couldn’t have been easier.

“Just seemed like the perfect fit for me. I grew up in South Bend since I was 8 months old, and I’ve been immersed in the whole tradition and everything, and I just loved it since the beginning.”

A product of nearby Clay H.S., Franco compiled some impressive numbers at the wide receiver position. Coupling that with the desire to play for the Irish instilled at an early age, Franco walked onto the team as a freshman.

Franco learned early on that coming to play for the Irish is much more than just a commitment to the football program. He knows his Notre Dame experience will be defined by more than simply his accomplishments on the field.

“The student body, just the character of kids that are here, it’s just the whole atmosphere. And it’s been really proud to be a part of,” Franco said. Just about anybody I talk to, both the professors, there’s been a number of outside of football. Just been fortunate to meet through the likes of a football father figure because it’s not something you get to carry with you, that’s what treasure most.”

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CHRIS BATHON

Division III transfer found right atmosphere at ND

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

Defensive back Chris Bathon's path to Notre Dame wasn't a direct one from his hometown of Pleasantville, N.Y. But after playing football at Division III Carnegie Mellon as a college freshman, Bathon knew transferring to Notre Dame and trying out for the Irish squad was right for him.

"Football was a big deal in high school, and it wasn't too different at Carnegie Mellon," Bathon said. "I wanted to take a chance and come here, try out and I don't regret it. I don't know what I'd do without football.

Coming from a small school to a much larger university was an adjustment, but not a difficult one for Bathon. Playing in a stadium like Notre Dame's was a difference, though, he said.

"There is nothing like that in size at Carnegie Mellon," Bathon said. However, his experience playing there prepared him well to try out for the Irish team.

"I was not intimidated," he said. "Playing at Carnegie Mellon got rid of any nerves that I had. It was a big adjustment but nothing that I couldn't handle. I was pretty confident coming from Carnegie Mellon and found I stacked up well athletically."

The walk-on process did not phase Bathon much, either. Coming in as a sophomore, he found himself no more nervous than he would have been had he been at Notre Dame a year earlier, he said.

"Football is something I've played my whole life," he said.

Bathon said the goal of donning the Irish blue and gold was a lifelong dream.

"I've always been driven to play Notre Dame football, and this was my chance," Bathon said.

And when the time came sophomore year. Bathon was ready to take whatever the tryouts threw at him. The results are clear as he stands smiling after another grueling Notre Dame practice, but still can joke around with his teammates walking by.

"I thought I'd have to kick it into another gear at practice to show myself to the other guys, but it wasn't like that," he said. "Everyone treats you just as well. You earn your respect from the other players and they earn yours. Everyone starts to realize who you are and that you can play.

Although he is a walk-on, Bathon has found that the friendships made on the Irish team are some of his most valuable.

"Everyone here is my best friend," he said. "Scholarship, recruit, walk-on — doesn't matter. These guys are my closest friends."

When faced with the question of what his life will be once the season closes, Bathon could only shake his head in wonder.

"I don't know what life will be like without football," he said. "Everyone here is my best friend. Scholarship, recruit, walk-on — doesn't matter. These guys are my closest friends.

"It's a big deal in my town to play Division I at a school," Bathon said. "Everyone from home follows me, will send me e-mails. I have four younger siblings and they're always telling me of someone asking them about me or just keeping up with Notre Dame football. It's been a great experience."
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Friday, September 5, 2008

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IRISH INSIDER
Friday, November 13, 2009

‘THE OLDER GUY BACK THERE’

STARING DOWN STATE

Sam Young and the Irish try to break the Spartans’ six-game winning streak in Notre Dame Stadium.

Photo credit: ANDREA ARCHER and IAN GAVLICK