Peaks and valleys define four years

Four seasons ago, Notre Dame was ranked as the second-best team in the country. Braxton Miller and Tom Zzikowski were on the cover of Sports Illustrated. The Irish were a true national championship contender, had the Heisman frontrunner under center and a top-tier recruiting class. It was largely a landslide recruiting class, and we’ve learned to take nothing for granted.

Our first home game was a 41-17 stomping of No. 19 Pitt. We were followed by a shaky opener at Georgia Tech, but after routing JoePa and the Nittany Lions, the program was reinvigorated. Our Big Ten loss was at the hands of the Spartans in the snow. We were humiliated by Michigan in the rain. We were humiliated by LSU in the Sugar Bowl. We were humiliated by their biggest rivals and became a program’s best kept secret. We were humiliated by our biggest rivals and became a program’s best kept secret.

“I beat SC” for half an hour. We enjoyed a last-second win against Michigan State in the rain. We had numerous last-second plays and we were a part of the most phenomenal successes and sudden failures.

And more than anything, we took 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.

This season hasn’t been what we expected. But I think by now we’re starting to get used to a little disappointment. A program of Notre Dame should have higher standards of performance our four years and the last decade. But we’re a new generation of students.

The last year Notre Dame won a national championship was the same year many of us were born. We shouldn’t tolerate lowering the standards of the greatest college football program in the country, but we’ve grown to accept that was long ago, and we’re a long way away from the days where we expected to compete for titles every year.

Instead of looking back at this season in frustration and calling it another failure, I want to remember the great parts of Notre Dame football. We had numerous last-second wins and have seen some of the most exciting recruiting in program history.

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

This could have been the last game for a few players that aren’t seniors, too, and I hope that they didn’t let this one go. As a gift for the seniors that were on the field and in the stands to have that be their last home game as students.

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Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Prater, Ferguson make official visits

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

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ERIC OLSHEN

Olsen holds down offensive line as captain

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

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

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

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

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

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

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

It also hasn’t hurt that his new role has allowed him to step out and talk. “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 just fuels 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 back- grounds. 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 Turkovich addressed all the veterans address the team week.” Weis said he’d have his seniors that this was “your week.” Weis said he’d have his veterans address the team after each practice during the week, and there’s no doubt Olsen would be one of those guys.

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

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

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

So what is that message that Olsen received last year and can 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 that forever. You’re not going to be at this place forever. Just cherish every moment. Cherish every game and every practice, and make the most of every opportunity.”

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu

Ivan Gavlick/The Observer

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

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Eric Olsen senior center

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

Eric Olsen

Olsen holds down offensive line as captain

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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 Vinci Qui Laborat — “victory belongs to those who work.” No statement describes the senior defensive lineman better.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My dad really pushed me for it,” Quintana said. “He encouraged me to keep working hard. He was the guy who picked me back up from how I felt.”

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

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

Who was happiest? Quintana’s parents, naturally.

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

Although he had played football at a high level for a long time, playing for the Irish was something different entirely. Quintana said being around guys like Pat Kuntz and other defensive linemen was surreal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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MORRICE RICHARDSON

Richardson eyes success in the business world

By DOUGLAS FARMER
News Writer

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Senior football I want to try to work for one of the top four private consulting firms,” Richardson said. “Hopefully one day, I’ll be able to branch off and start my own consulting company.”

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

“A lot of the things you come across in the real world I came across playing football here as well, a lot of situations you have to be strong to deal with,” he said.

One of those football situations has been his scarce playing time, even through relative success on the field. Richardson has seen action in all four of his years, but has never started a game, and through his first three years with the Irish had recorded 18 tackles, including 11 in 2008.

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

Dealing with his frustration, Richardson has focused on the work that should attract offers from big businesses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In listening to the words, Richardson’s NFL dreams live on, as after listening to stories from Weiss 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.”

But that Richardson is overly concerned about making it in the NFL, he knows Notre Dame has prepared him for long-term success as well as possible short-term glory.

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

Contact Douglas Farmer at dfarmer1@nd.edu
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 Kuntz, recorded a music video titled “Bend but Don’t Break.” The video garnered some notable, if only fleeting, Internet fame.

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

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

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

“In high school, you’re the man and then you come in and want to be the man in college,” Parris said. “When things don’t go your way, it’s definitely a change 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 McDuffie, Parris 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 these guys come in you know there’s something special about them,” Parris said. “I could tell when they came in that these guys were going to play. So just being a little bit older, being on the field, seeing a little bit more than they’ve seen, you just kind of turn into more of a teacher role for them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not going to go out there and have 200-yard receiving games like those guys (Floyd and Tate),” Parris said. “These guys are miraculous at how they could do that. I’m just going to use what I have, sit back and see where it comes to me and I caught it. I didn’t do anything spectacular.”

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

“I knew it was fourth down, so all I really had to do was get about what 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 be out for theWide receivers coach Rob Ianello said Parris has been invaluable in the film room helping the younger receivers develop. (Photo by Tom La/The Observer)

Junior receiver Robby Parris said he learned to take on a mentor role to Floyd and then-sophomore wide receiver Golden Tate.

rookie season.

“I 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. It’s just hanging out with these guys in the locker room, just screwing around,” Parris said. “That’s better than anything that’s happened on the field.”

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

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

Parris has continued his music endeavors, recording songs with teammates as well as local musician and Notre Dame senior Pat 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 wise, everything that comes out of his mouth, you want to listen to it because he’s just so helpful in anything you’ve got.”

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Dillon player overcomes injury to make team

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Writer

The star line of Notre Dame's victory over Boston College this season featured the scout team middle linebacker, a really special thing.

While balancing the workload of a double major in finance and economics and the commitment to the team, Burke says he appreciates his time in the classroom.

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

Stull, a 5-foot-8, 189-pound corner back from Brownsburg, Ind., wears the number 45 for Coach Weis' team now, but his path to the home sideline of Notre Dame Stadium was not, by any means, a straight one.

"I was in Rolfs working out down before it even takes the field," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. "We're never going to be able to make it intense," Burke said. 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Sam Young

Stalwart tackle has started since week one, 2006

By MICHAEL BRYAN Associate Sports Editor

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

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

When he takes the field on Saturday, Young will set the Notre Dame record for most career starts by any player, with his 49 straight surpassing former teammates Maurice Crum Jr. and Tom Zbikowski.

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

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

He was there for the comebacks against Michigan State and UCLA in 2007, for every painful game in 2008, for the Sugar Bowl, a team that finally broke the bowl losing streak in 1972.

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

Teaming with future NFL line-men Harris, Dan Santucci and Sullivan, Young was named a freshman All-American for his part in protecting Quinn and opening up holes for Darius Walker. Quinn threw for more than 3,000 yards and Walker rushed for more than 1,000 in their final season with the Irish.

“I remember, before that first game [at Georgia Tech in 2006], I was fully suited up about ten minutes after we got off the bus, I was so anxious,” Young said.

“You go from the student to the pro. It’s a different approach to the game. The way I look at myself is I have all the information you would have as a member of the 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.”

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.

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

“You pass on those same keys you never noticed,” Young said. “You’ve got to go when you lose into the next week and regroup and stop the bleeding and keep plugging it. No one likes to lose.”

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

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

The offensive line certainly improved in 2008, with Young playing a large role.

The much-maligned unit allowed only 22 sacks in pass protection, although run blocking still proved to be an issue.

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

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

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

The Irish have allowed 21 sacks this season, and the emphasis and improve-ment 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 improve-ment from last season.

“I think we’ve gotten a lot better, we’re getting close to where we want to be, but aren’t there yet,” Young said.

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

Contact Michael Bryan at mbryan@nd.edu

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.
Chris Stewart

Offensive guard enters with unique football perspective

By ERIC PRISTER
Sports Writer

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

“It’s a different culture coming from Texas to Indiana for football,” Stewart said. “It’s an up-and-down atmosphere that plays in the air. College football is a sport that I never played in high school because of the culture 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 a lot different from athletes and academics that drew Stewart to Notre Dame from his hometown in Spring, Texas, despite the change in climate that a move to Indiana would entail.

“I expected it to be cold, and I 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 on the national spotlight, and you want to showcase talent in front of everyone in the nation every week. It lived up to my expectations. There were some down times which were hard, but that happens, just like anything else in life.”

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

“One of the best memories, even though the game didn’t go so well, was going to New Orleans for the Sugar Bowl, to go back down south,” Stewart said. “And actually a recent one was going to San Antonio. That was nice to get back down south. It’d say there are 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 specific thing I’m 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 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.

“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, and 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 that, so that was the reason that I did it.”

The doors that were opened for him at Notre Dame have given Stewart 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 a diverse 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.”

Contact Eric Prister at eprister@nd.edu
Unexpected fifth year pays off for Sharpay

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 Sharpay 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. Sharpay, who also plays first on the Irish baseball team, returned to play football after being drafted by the Seattle Mariners in the 10th 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," Sharpay said of coming back. "I didn't have the greatest season I've ever had with baseball, but I still got drafted."

Sharpay was drafted 1,593rd overall, which he said caused mixed emotions. "It was kind of bittersweet," Sharpay 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, Sharpay 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 had a great time, had a great summer playing summer, he said. "It was really fun."

"Initially, it was just to kind of cover my bases, in case baseball didn't work out."

Sharpay said his students knew I was going to play baseball, I knew I was going to play baseball. I knew I was going to play football, and compete in both sports.

Sharpay saw extensive action both backing up then-freshman Jimmy Clausen and starting games against USC and Navy. The game against the Trojans was Sharpay's first career Notre Dame start. He said he had to walk a fine line that season, both teaching Clausen and fighting for playing time himself.

"At the same time you want to see the team you're playing on and the program you're in successful, so whatever I would have to do, I would do," Sharpay said. "I wasn't holding anything back. I wanted to see him do well if he was playing, and hopefully likewise if I was playing he wanted me to do well."

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

"My first touchdown pass against Purdue was great, coming in and playing pretty well then," he said. "On the season, Sharpay finished his junior year with 736 passing yards with five touchdowns and three interceptions.

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

"We were playing Boston College," he said. "And I came in the second half, played pretty well, threw a couple of touchdowns passes." The play was a fourth-and-one from the Eagles' 13-yard line with the Irish trailing 27-14. Sharpay said as he was running out on the field, Irish coach Charlie Weis called him back and changed the play.

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

Irish tackle Mike Turkovich had been called for holding and the Irish couldn't convert and were pushed back 19 yards. Notre Dame ended up losing 27-14.

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

"I'm kind of always felt like a teacher or a coach, just with my knowledge that I have," Sharpay said.

In fact, when Sharpay was running the scout team as third-string quarterback earlier this season, coaches often raved about how he ran the opposing teams 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,'" Sharpay said.

Sharpay's teaching ability, though, stretches far beyond the football field. Currently a student teacher at Adams High School in South Bend, Sharpay 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, Sharpay said he was greeted in class on Monday with cries of "Mr. Sharpay, why wouldn't they let you throw the ball?"

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

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

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

It's been a great experi-

ence," Sharpay said. "It's dif-

cult at times just because I am splitting time with both. Where I would maybe like to do more with a certain sub-

ject, I don't have as much time as the other student teachers to plan those things.

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

"Being here over the past four years has helped me with time management, knowing when I can do some-

thing, when I need to sleep, when I need to eat," he said.

Sharpay 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, Sharpay said it's about more than just ath-

letics.

"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 connota-

tion with that."

Looking back, Sharpay 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."

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

Contact Sam Werner at swerner@nd.edu
Ray Herring was recruited out of high school to the state championship, and my youngest 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 to the state championship, and my youngest 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.
Kyle McCarthy stands apart as defensive leader

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

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

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

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

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

Ironically—or appropriately—enough, the same could be said about McCarthy’s role in his off-campus home last year, where he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan.

An Oct. 19, 2008, Irish Insider cover story, McCarthy called himself “the dad” of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line.

“It’s not a perfect analogy — no analogy is — but one thing that we need out there, he directs people, tells them where to go and how to line up. When you have a guy like that who you can trust, that’s always good.”

McCarthy’s persistence in having to wait until 2008 to earn a full-time starting spot 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, from back-to-back BC’s births to the worst two-year run in school history.

McCarthy has even been around long enough to be one of the leaders this year, when he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan.

“Having to wait until 2008 to play two seasons with his younger brother, Dan, who as a sophomore has climbed the depth chart to become his older brother’s backup. Looking at their resumes coming out of Cardinal Mooney H.S. in Youngstown, Ohio, it’d be hard to argue which McCarthy brothers apart.

Both were two-way standouts on their high school team as a “lead-by-example” type of player. Senior safety Kyle McCarthy, 28, captain and defensive leader, has grown into his role on the team as a “lead-by-example” type of player.

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

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

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

“He makes a lot of calls. He’s really football smart,” senior defensive back Darrin Walls said. “The coaches are going to sit down and 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.”

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

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

That’s not the case, McCarthy said.

“It has zero effect on how we go about doing things,” McCarthy said.

“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.”

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

“McCarthy’s role on the defense has been comparable to any analogy is — but one thing that we need out there, he directs people, tells them where to go and how to line up. When you have a guy like that who you can trust, that’s always good.”

However, McCarthy called himself “the dad” of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line.

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

Ironically—or appropriately—enough, the same could be said about McCarthy’s role in his off-campus home last year, where he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan.

An Oct. 19, 2008, Irish Insider cover story, McCarthy called himself “the dad” of the house, where it was his job to keep his teammates in line.

“It’s not a perfect analogy — no analogy is — but one thing that we need out there, he directs people, tells them where to go and how to line up. When you have a guy like that who you can trust, that’s always good.”

McCarthy’s persistence in having to wait until 2008 to earn a full-time starting spot 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, from back-to-back BC’s births to the worst two-year run in school history.

McCarthy has even been around long enough to be one of the leaders this year, when he lived with three of his teammates, including current fifth-year tackle Paul Duncan.

“Having to wait until 2008 to play two seasons with his younger brother, Dan, who as a sophomore has climbed the depth chart to become his older brother’s backup. Looking at their resumes coming out of Cardinal Mooney H.S. in Youngstown, Ohio, it’d be hard to argue which McCarthy brothers apart.

Both were two-way standouts on their high school team as a “lead-by-example” type of player. Senior safety Kyle McCarthy, 28, captain and defensive leader, has grown into his role on the team as a “lead-by-example” type of player.

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

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

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

“He makes a lot of calls. He’s really football smart,” senior defensive back Darrin Walls said. “The coaches are going to sit down and 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.”

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

Contact Matt Gamber at mgamber@nd.edu
By JARED JEDICK
Sports Writer

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

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 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 said he still remembers being recruited by head coach Charlie Weis. "The whole process was kind of a whirlwind," Ryan said. "I had to pinch myself every morning because I was deciding to come to Notre Dame. I don't regret it at all because it was one of the best decisions of my life."

The experience of being recruited to Notre Dame, and the family-oriented and at-home feeling that Weis gave off is what really made the process special for Ryan. "The whole thing was surreal," Ryan said. "Opening up the mailbox and seeing three letters from Notre Dame, getting my one phone call every month, and having him come make his visit to my house, it was wild. It was something that was obviously a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Ryan's emphasis on sticking together through thick and thin fortified him for a roller-coaster ride of college football career, from the highs of a Big East title to the lows of a 3-9 season. He said he has no regrets about coming to play at Notre Dame. "In terms of regrets, that is just how the game goes, you play a game with a ball with edgy, 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 missed opportunities and everything else, that's what really made the team that I am today." 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 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 things to be done right and do things the right way on and off the field."

PHIL HUDELSON/The Observer

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

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

“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.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Contact Barrick Bollman at jbollman@nd.edu.
Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Record: 6-4
AP: NR  Coaches: NR  BCS: NR

Statistical Leaders

30 rec., 606 yds., 6 TD
74 rec., 1,172 yds., 11 TD
71 rush, 342 yds., 5 TD
236-350, 3,053 yds., 21 TD
T.O.P . for: 32:30 (11th)
Sacks Allowed: 21 (69th)
Interceptions: 5 (16th)
Fumbles lost: 6 (20th)
Passing: 321.30 ypg (5th)
Total: 452.20 (9th)
Scoring: 29.30 ppg (46th)

2009 Schedule

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

2009 Schedule

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

2009 Schedule

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

Assistant HC

Jon Tenuta

Def. Coordinator
Assistant HC

Notre Dame Offense

Assistant HC

Notre Dame Defense

Notre Dame Head Coach

Charlie Weis

IRISH RUSHING

Armando Allen returned from injury last week and showed why the Irish ground game missed him so much, as the junior showed speed and power, albeit with limited opportunities (14 carries, 77 yards). Draw plays were especially effective against the aggressive Pittsburgh front. Weis tried to establish the running game early but said he was forced to abandon it as his team fell behind three scores in the second half. At defensive end opposite Witten is freshman Jesse Joseph, who at 238 pounds could be a target for a power run game — though Weis did praise his athletic ability. The Huskies linebackers are experienced, led by junior inside linebacker Scott Lumpus. Arguably, a lack of commitment has been the biggest roadblock standing in the way of the Irish ground game’s success.

Weis said Tuesday the punt-resume his normal placekicking job would be wide open after the injured Nick Tausch could deliver from the pocket. Defensive end Lindsey Witten’s 10.5 sacks, however, are some cause for concern.

Weis said the circumstances of their own at the end. It will be another week dictated his conservative game plan against Pittsburgh. The Irish will be in the opposite situation Saturday on Senior Day. After two straight losses, and with the memory of last year’s Syracuse loss still fresh, this team could use a spark early in the form of a aggressive passing game downfield. The Irish are most successful when they achieve a pass-run balance, but that has been rare of late. Weis needs just to let his team execute.

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

Jordan Todman and Andre Dixon have combined for almost an identical number of carries this season, and each has had his moments. Dixon has struggled this season, but he has certainly been its strength this year. Todman has three 100-yard rushing games this season, and each has had his moments, with both rushing for 162 yards and four touchdowns.

It was Todman's turn last week, as he leads the Huskies in rushing with 98-154, 1,354 yards, and six touchdowns. Dixon has a big arm but has thrown seven interceptions compared to four touchdowns, and if it can create turnovers, a la the Boston College victory, it should be able to thwart the Huskies passing attack.

So, it's safe to say that the Huskies are going to hand Notre Dame its second straight Senior Day loss, it will be because it dominated the ground. The Irish suffered a pair of Navy losses, 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 needs 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**
**IRISH INSIDER**

**DAN WENGER**

**Lineman transitions from guard to center**

By DOUGLAS FARMER

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

Wenger’s sophomore season involved eight games of action, including five starts. His first three starts, against Georgia Tech, Penn State and Duke, were at right guard. Then he started at center 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 wireless streak that dated back to 1993 by beating Hawaii 49-21.

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

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

“I’m going to move there some day,” he said of the island chain. “Wherever we are, I still hate it [in South Bend]. I haven’t gotten used to stuff yet. I still love the Florida sun, going to the beach. I miss it every day.”

The weather led to some lighter practice moments. Wenger said. “I try to make the most of situations that are less intense out on the field.”

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

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**ERIC MAUST**

**Baseball player walks on, wins starting role**

By CHRIS MASOUO

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

“Social life takes a huge hit,” Maust said. “Freshman year the increase in the academic load, but being a walk-on from high school and then athletically the increase committments-wise, it was hard to juggle. But I can say that I’ve found a balance, and the choosing which way I went through, that’s been the most important thing. If it was easy, then it wouldn’t be so special.”

A scholarship baseball player and one of the Irish’s top pitchers from a recruiting standpoint, Maust verbally committed to play baseball out of high school, but due to the Notre Dame academic rigor, Maust felt he had the skills to be a part of the Notre Dame football tradition.

“ preached about the benefits of outside of high school to play quarterback at some smaller Division-I AA and Ivy League schools, but in my mind I was thinking I’m just playing baseball. But in my heart I couldn’t let football go,” Maust said. “So after the game I talked to the baseball coaches, they talked to the football coaches, so I walked-on and made the team.”

As the rule goes, walk-ons generally don’t see much of the field in Saturday afternoon, especially quarterbacks. Unable to continue at that position, Wenger 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 have our specialists team periods where we mimic the intensity of the game, so I’m trying to hype myself up so when the time comes I don’t get in the dog house or lose any intensity out on the field.”

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

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

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SERGIO BROWN

Outgoing safety gives Irish a shot of athleticism

By MATT GAMBER
Sports Editor

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

His teammates and coaches call him Notre Dame’s best athlete. But just how athletic is senior safety Sergio Brown? He’s been dunking alley-oop passes on the basketball court since early in high school. He says he’s never lost a foot race in his hometown of Maywood, Ill.

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

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

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

Until now.

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

Brown emerged as an impact player out of the nickel defense as a junior last season. He made his first career start in the 2008 season-opener against San Diego State and 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 our special teams, and then my role got bigger last year playing some nickel. Now I’m on the field a lot, and I’m loving it right now.”

His coaches are loving it, too. As Brown’s play at safety in the past two weeks has allowed the Irish to shuffle its personnel to produce Notre Dame’s best conservative 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 junior safety 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 year overall — Saturday against Navy.

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

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

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

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

So he started to use his athleticism in other ways.

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

That’s not hard to believe, considering Scout.com listed his high school 40-yard dash time at a blazing 4.40 seconds, the kind of speed that can’t be taught. He’s come a long way from his tumbling days, but he can still flip and fly.

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

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

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

So far, so good for Brown, who has looked comfortable in his move back to safety alongside senior captain Kyle McCarthy. He is fifth on the team with 18 solo tackles for the season, but perhaps his greatest contributions have come with the emotional spark he has provided a defense that, at times earlier in the season, lacked the confident swagger and confidence attitude it brings.

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

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

“He’s a passionate kid,” Weis said. “He’s fun to be around. He’s a goof ball. But I really like being around Sergio, and so do his teammates. And I think that he’s not selfish. He wants to be around the 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 teachers to call him by the nickname he picked up from a rap song during his freshman year.

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

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

“Fake Whoopi Goldberg!” Brown 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 [Causen] 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 Brown’s fun isn’t limited to jokes with teammates. Last spring, he filmed a promotional spot for insidenotredamefootball.com in which he and Jack Swarbrick, Notre Dame’s director of athletics, mimicked the popular Geico commercials featuring 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 director for student-athlete welfare and development, approached him with an idea for a video that would air at last spring’s OSCARS.

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

In the video, Brown yelling at the camera, dances with a Notre Dame blanket draped over his back and, of course, does a back flip. The video was a hit, with Brown telling about Notre Dame’s Monogram Club in a professional office setting.

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

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

“I like to have a lot of fun,” he said. “But really, I was just 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

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

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

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

“I still want to be around sports, I have been my whole life,” Burkhart said. “There’s a lot of tradition there and a lot of memories.”

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

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

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

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

“It was an incredible experience,” Burkhart said. “It’s an experience in the first place to come to play at Notre Dame and then to play as a freshman. “Going to the Sugar Bowl was my favorite memory,” he said. “Just the hype and going to a BCS bowl game, and that chance to play for the University.”

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

“Hawaii was great just to say that you’re on that team that broke the bowl streak,” he said. “It’s all about football here, but there it was the first time we all 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.”

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

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

As he works on keeping in touch with those he’s met here, Burkhart, a management consulting and psychology major, hopes to find a career opportunity of playing and wearing the uniform. Burkhart can only describe it as one of his best life experiences.

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

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From the start, Mike Anello became known for his ferociousness both on and off the football field. After graduating from high school in wrestling, Anello decided to try the sport he knew nothing about. As a walk-on, he had to earn a place on the team and was determined to do so. He worked hard,- pushing himself and the people around him to do their best. Anello was a Scrappy walk-on, and his unrelenting attitude earned him a spot on the special teams unit.

Anello's passion for the game and his willingness to learn and improve were evident from the start. He was a key player on the special teams unit, where he was known for his aggressive tackling and his ability to get after the ball. Anello's energy and determination were contagious, and he inspired his teammates to do their best as well. As his reputation grew, so did his opportunities. Anello was eventually awarded a scholarship and became a starter on the Irish football team.

Mike Anello's story is one of hard work, determination, and the belief that anything is possible. He is a testament to the power of perseverance and the importance of never giving up. Anello's journey is an inspiration to us all, and his legacy will continue to be a source of motivation for future Notre Dame football players.
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 team’s early enrollment program. The experience had such a big impact on Aldridge that he still considers it his favorite memory at Notre Dame four years later.

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

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

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

Aldridge said with a laugh, “But it’s just kind of the way I was when I was younger that I needed.”

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 when 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 Maurice Walker as the team’s second-leading rusher with 142 yards on 37 carries.

Aldridge was then one of the bright spots during Notre Dame’s rough 2007 campaign, leading the team with 463 rushing yards. His most memorable start came against Michigan State when he became the first Irish running back since Tony Fisher in 1999 to register more than 100 yards in his first career start with 104 yards on 18 carries.

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

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

Aldridge is the rusher with the most yards in Notre Dame history.

“You come to Notre Dame because it’s a unique university, and I’ve never seen that before and it’s things like that [that make Notre Dame special].”
Mike Narvaez

View from the stands not good enough for walk-on

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sport Writer

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

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

"My first game was Penn State freshman year," Narvaez said. "It was an ultrasound." After standing in the student section throughout the 2006 season, however, Narvaez knew he wanted more and decided to try-out in the spring of his freshman year.

"I thought I'd give it a try," he said. "The opportunity was there, and I didn't want to have any regrets while I was here. I really want to make the most of the opportunities presented to me.

For Narvaez, football was not part of his life until freshman year, but the tradition of Notre Dame football is very important to him. He said his favorite things about Irish football are his teammates and getting to know people in general.

"There are a lot of guys who scampered into the end zone for him. The place for him.

Narvaez caused his playing time to return team. Although his sophomore year when he tallied 172 receiving yards and 22 return yards. He also notched 271 return yards and 22 return yards.

"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 student-athletes at Notre Dame, getting a good education, and breaking the bowl streak. In fact, the academies of Notre Dame were on par with its tradition as far as what drew West to campus.

"If you grew up the game of football somewhere and you might see good academics somewhere else, you can see both at many schools, and the combination of both is really what brought me here," he said.

West is currently enrolled in the Mendoza College of Business as a finance major. "I love numbers, and it kind of gave me the opportunity in the big picture to work with numbers and work with people.

"I told both his parents are the main contributors in getting him to where he is today.

"They helped me with my weight training, they taught me what it means to be a hard-working guy, a stand-up guy, a guy who gives 100 percent every day.

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

"There are a lot of guys who touched the ball on offense this year. However, without football as part of his spring schedule, he plans on making the most of his free time and being part of the team. "I'm not just playing for Notre Dame, I'm not just playing for the University. I'm not just playing for my friends and for life, friends that I will never forget." Specifically, West is closest with his roommates, running back James Aldridge and linebacker Tomyah Smith. "They are guys I'm with every day," he said. "Guys I knew since I've been here, when I came early with them.

"I wanted to have no regrets," he said once more. "The opportunity was there, and I didn't want to have any regrets while I was here. I really want to make the most of the opportunities presented to me.

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

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

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

"I wanted to have no regrets," he said once more. "The opportunity was there, and I tried to take advantage. I've learned a lot of lessons and made a lot of friends. When you pass, it's not like you want to watch it from the outside. It's something I've been a part of, and I tried to take advantage.

"From the excited look on his face, it seems like he did.
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 on 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 clinched the 42-21 in the road in Charlie Weis’ Irish coaching debut on Sept. 3, 2005. Duncan said he wants nothing but 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 think about that and say they just want to go out and get a win for the seniors and fifth-year guys and it means a lot that they respect us like that.”

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

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

After playing as a reserve linemen throughout his sophomore year behind then-freshman Sam Young, Duncan stepped into a starting role his junior year and experienced Notre Dame’s historic 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 in 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. “With Coach Weis’ coaching staff, we’ve really been able to progress 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’s Gridiron.

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TORYAN SMITH

Linebacker credits family for helping him succeed

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

As Toryan Smith stood in the hallway of the athletics facility, talking about how sports teaches life lessons, “Any time you’re on the field you have to keep your head straight.”

“They keep your head straight.”

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

Smith was no stranger to the friendly confines of the Notre Dame facility, By playing his high school ball in Rome, Ga., he experi- enced the gallery of southern high school foot- ball.

“You go to a game, you see 10,000 people,” he said. “It’s a lot, there are a lot of big rivalries, lots of big-time players, lots of big-time football games.”

Smith’s father, Charles, played offensive line at Georgia. Smith said his dad wanted him to play the line, but Smith ended up at line- backer instead.

“It was a real smooth tran- sition,” he said.

The academics and the prestige of Notre Dame attracted Smith to South Bend, but once he got here, he said he realized how tough the college game was. “It just went real fast,” he said.

During his freshman year, Smith played in nine games and had nine tackle- tes. He said keeping himself in shape and maintaining his strength and speed were important to adjusting to col- lege.

The main thing was just to get yourself in good condi- tion, good shape,” he said.

“The game’s a lot faster, the players are a lot stronger. You got to come in and work a little extra hard.”

His sophomore season, he played in 11 games and started two. Against Navy, when starting linebacker Brian Smith was sidelined because of an injury, he stepped up. Smith recorded 10 tackles and returned a blocked punt for a touchdown.

“Any time you’re on the field you have to try to make the best opportunity of it.”

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

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

Even more than that, he said the bonds he’s formed with his teammates super- sede 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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Brian Coughlin

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

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

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 my high school, I applied, and I decided to come to Notre Dame," Coughlin said.

During his freshman and sophomore years, Coughlin played baseball for Dillon Hall, but was not satisfied and began tussling 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 thing," Coughlin said.

The newness of the experience has been so much that Coughlin said he's learning so much about the game.

"It's the Notre Dame family, the tradition, the classmates. Just all of it," Coughlin said.

Deloitte and Consulting Firm. He then intends to return to Notre Dame for a fifth-year masters of accounting program and hopes to find a job as an accountant.

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

Walk-on wide receiver Coughlin turned down offers from Division III schools in hopes of one day playing for the Irish.

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Paddy Mullen

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 treasure the moment. Unfortunately, Paddy Mullen has been treasures it's not something he's used to.

Mullen was recruited out of DeSmet Jesuit H.S. in St. Louis as a blue-collar Irish Catholic fan. He said he knows the significance of the moment, and felt emotional.

"You learn so much about yourself. You have to take things away from it for life afterwards.

"It's the Notre Dame family, the tradition, the classmates. Just all of it," Coughlin said.

Deloitte and Consulting Firm. He then intends to return to Notre Dame for a fifth-year masters of accounting program and hopes to find a job as an accountant.

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

Walk-on wide receiver Coughlin turned down offers from Division III schools in hopes of one day playing for the Irish.

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Paddy Mullen

"It (my first sack) was another surreal moment. Everything moved so slow. I just kept thinking. 'Just tackle him. Just tackle him. Don't miss him.'"

Paddy Mullen

Senior nose tackle

"I just soaked it up a bit," he said. "It was the last play, time ran out as I did it, so most of the guys on the field. They congratulated me and I did my dance.

Mullen may have received some tips on dancing on the team's trip to Hawaii last December.

"More importantly, Mullen grew closer to his teammates. He now tends to brothers during the work vacation.

We prac-
"ticed hard and we got to visit a few sites in Hawaii while we were there," he said. "It was a great bonding experience. I learned a lot about the guys on the team.

Not only did the Irish bond, but they broke a not-so-favorable bowl streak that had been hindering them for some time.

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

Though Hawaii was a good memory, other parts this senior class' tenure were not. Mullen and his classmates saw the Irish finish the year 3-9 in the 2007 season. Mullen possibly took as much away from that season as he did during the more pleasant 2008 season.

"As my father always told me, you never get too low when you're down, and you never get too high when you're up," Mullen said. "You just keep a level head and keep going on.

Mullen said putting away four years has left him already, and the four years aren't even over yet. "You learn from anything.

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

"I am definitely going to miss the fact that at Notre Dame you have a community of 8,000 peers and people your age all around you," Mullen said. "I am going to miss the people the most.

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SCOTT SMITH

Fifth-year linebacker becomes mentor on field

By BILL BRINK
Sports Writer

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 fumble.

“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’ll probably be one of the ‘tell my grandkids’ stories. This was my grandma’s first play, my first tackle, probably be a way to build myself up in the future.”

He doesn’t want to build himself up now, though. The fifth-year senior acts as a coach on the field, the man who distills defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta’s schemes for the younger players and someone who portrays consistency and character.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a freshman, Smith played behind linebacker Corey Mays, who graduated in 2006 and now plays for the Kansas City Chiefs. In a way, Mays was to Smith as Smith now is to the younger linebackers.

“He seemed like that old guy who knew everything and was the best guy to go to for advice and always had a good answer,” Smith said. “I really appreciate him taking me under his wing. I’m sure just 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,” he said. 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 to the quarterback.”

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

T o r y a n S m i t h

“H e ’ s (Smith) really taken on the play-coach role. He’s the coach when the coach is not there,” Toryan Smith 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 criti- que our play is all geared toward us becoming better football players and us being better prepared to help the team win. It’s kind of nice to get that view of being almost in his head, because everything he sees gets transferred right to us.”

“In the future possibly wanting to coach, having that perspective on how to approach different types of opponents,” he said. “Being a fifth-year senior gives Smith more time to relax, something that previously eluded him. He said he enjoys sleeping and spending time with roommates Paul Duncan and Bartley Webb. He’s also got his TV schedule dialed up every week — on this particular Wednesday, Law and Order: SVU awaited him.

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

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

“I’ll be honest, I didn’t do all the reading for class,” he said. “You kind of pick and choose your spots where you think you can be successful. It’s a factor of knowing your 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 that they’re going to get. 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 corner-
back on a Division I football team doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel
the same about his college
experience as most stu-
dents.

“It seems like it’s flown by,” McNeil said. “Those four
years have just really flown by.”

From his role as a special teams player in 2006 to his
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 recruit-
ment during high
school after
all, it feels like
just yesterday to him. He said that
Notre Dame’s aca-
demic prestige, as well as the
camaderie of the team,
attracted him to the Irish.

“Seeing some of the other
guys, Darius Walker and
Chinedum Ndukwu, 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 accli-
mated to the program and
began his career as a college
cornerback.

“Ndukwu was one of the
guys that really attracted me
to this place, one of the guys I
could really see myself hang-
ing out with,” McNeil said. “I
really wanted to be great friends with
Tommy Zbikowski, and we still
talk and text 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.

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

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

McNeil is a starting corner-
back for the Irish and had a number of
career highlights.

“In fact, McNeil said that the
most memorable moment of
his Irish career came in a 23-7
loss to Michigan State in East Lansing. Early in the
game, with the Irish trailing by only three,
McNeil broke up an attempted deep pass
from Spartan’s quarterback
Brian Hoyer to receiver B.J.
Cunningham.

“They ran a little combina-
tion route, where basically I
had to push and help the
backside corner and what
happened was there was a lit-
tle breakdown in the coverage
and the backside corner was
n’t there, so there I was left
on his guy,” McNeil said. “I
ended up making a play on a
depth ball in the end zone,
which was probably one of the
bigger plays of my career.”

Later that season, McNeil
recorded the first start of his
career against Stanford.

“On a whole, though, he said the season
was disappointing,
but that it moti-
vated himself, and
the rest of the
team, to work harder for
every win naturally from
that point for-
ward.”

While McNeil’s sophomore
season, in which the
Irish went 3-9, may have been for-
gettably for most fans, it did
have some bright spots of the
young cornerback. McNeil
notched his first
sack against
Stanford.

“Like a lot of
guys, I had never been on a
team that lost that
much, but that many games,”
McNeil said. “Really going through it
then was there was a lit-
tle breakdown in the coverage
and the backside corner was
n’t there, so there I was left
on his guy,” McNeil said. “I
ended up making a play on a
depth ball in the end zone,
which was probably one of the
bigger plays of my career.”

Later that season, McNeil
got to experience another
memorable moment, when the
Irish played at North Carolina,
the Cooleemee, N.C., native
got to play a college football
game just two hours from his
hometown.

Prior to the game, McNeil
said that there was some com-
petition between himself and
to fellow Tar Heel state residents
Robert Blanton and Kerry
Neal for who could get tickets
for their friends and family in
attendance. McNeil said he
had to start planning in the
summer in order to
get enough tickets for the
more than 20 friends and family
members that would be in attendance.

“Blanton actually got a pretty
good deal,” McNeil told The
Observer last season. “He
got most of the freshman class.
I swooped them up real quick.”

While he said the experience
was great, McNeil was fast to
give credit to the game, which the
Irish lost 29-24 to North
Carolina, could have gone bet-
ter.

“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 remem-
ber 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
here could 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, hitting a then-career-high
six tackles.

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

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

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

With the experience, though,
comes an added responsibility.
McNeil said that he has
taken on the role of mentor to
the younger defensive backs,
lke 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
some of the younger guys, keeping
them focused during games
and stuff. All that stuff
just comes naturally to me. It
feels good to be in this posi-
tion.”

So far this season, McNeil
has notched eight total tackles
while playing in all 10 games
to date. After the Irish wrap
up their season in two weeks
against Stanford, McNeil
hopes that it won’t be the last
regular season football game
he plays in.

“I’m going to give this foot-
ball thing a shot,” he said of
his post-graduation plans.

“God willing, I’ll still be play-
ning. So hopefully my last game
won’t be Stanford.”

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

“[Football is] the plan,
but if that doesn’t work out,
I’m getting some things going
with industrial design,” he
said. “I plan on working on
my portfolio in the spring,
and sending out my portfolio
and my résumé, try and get things
rolling.”

Either way, McNeil said he’s
a much more mature person
now than he was four years
ago, both as a football player
and as a person. That person-
al growth has also paid off on
the field, McNeil said.

“I just think that I’ve
not only matured as a player,
but as a person,” he said. “I
feel like that’s only helped my
game. Over these past four
years, the game has really
slowed down, and I think that
comes from maturity, being
able to see things, being able
to understand the game more.”

Things may have slowed
down for McNeil on the field,
but the past four years have
still gone by more quickly
than he ever could have imag-
ined.

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Dame is the people and the sphere defined by strong relationships established on and off the field, which is what drew Gordon to South Bend over Baton Rouge and LSU. At New Orleans Baptist, he said, "Everyone from classmates to professors to teammates to coaches." That attitude extends into what he loves about being on the football team. At Notre Dame, he said, the coaches and players have a true commitment to the University, which is what drew him to South Bend over Baton Rouge and Nashville in the first place.

At other schools, he said, the football teams often broke up into small groups and players rarely spent time with teammates outside of their small social circle. At Gordon, that simply isn’t the case here. "You can hang with any of the guys on the team," Gordon said. "I obviously hang out with the defensive backs the most, but I can really hang out 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 atmosphere here both on and off the field, which means a lot to him.

Gordon said that the football memory is of the NCAA Notre Dame game in 2006 when he was a redshirt freshman and quarterback. Gordon said that he has done a lot of maturing from the time he entered as a freshman to now. Coming in as a freshman, he was not as mature as he needed to be — he was 18, after all. "I’ve really become a man here," he said. "I feel close to all my teammates, but just being around the guys in your same position, I mean they’re so funny," Franco said. They know how to focus, and everybody just swarmed me. It was a blast. He let me get the best of him that one time, that one time. Franco has developed with his 108 team-mates, and especially within the wide receiver unit, has become an important part of his career.

"I went and scored a touchdown, and it was so unsu- mable and it came out of nowhere," Franco said. "It was a pretty nice day, and everybody just swarmed me. It was a blast. He let me get the best of him that one time, that one time. Franco said he owes a lot of his development as a player to wide receivers coach Rob Ianello, who has taken on more than just the role of a position coach. "He’s on all of us about the small things that we do right, the small things we do wrong," Franco said. "He’s always paying attention to us and taking notes, so it’s really in the small details that he won’t let us get away with. Maybe we’ll notice, maybe we won’t, but I’ll notice them and make sure that they get corrected. Every coach is sort of like a father figure because it’s not always about football." Franco has never started a game for the Irish, but he has come to understand his role as a valuable member of the offense and taken 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 fresh- men 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 the practices, how things are and even just talking to them about everyday life.

Conversely, Franco’s team-mates have made him a better player through their efforts to compete for a job, and none more than junior cornerback Nick Lezynski, a fellow walk-on. "We’re both the same number, and we’re constantly compet- ing," 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 real- izes that when he graduates this spring, his teammates and the relationships he has developed will be missed the most. "It sort of just happens," Franco said. "You just get really close with the guys day in and day out, with early morning lifts or just in the middle of practice. The memories and the stories that you get to carry with you, that’s what I treasure most.

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

Leonard Gordon
Fifth-year builds relationships with teammates

By ALLAN JOSEPH
Sports Writer
Leonard Gordon passed up a chance to achieve the dream of most Southern football fans — to see him play in the Southeastern Conference to flock North to Notre Dame. The junior safety, who’s from Clarksville, Tenn., chose the Irish over Vanderbilt and LSU, and he has not looked back.

"I’ve really become a man here," Leonard Gordon senior safety

"I definitely made the right decision," he said. For the 5- foot-11, 189-pound safety who dons the No. 24 at Notre Dame, the football team reflects what he considers the defining characteristic of the University as a whole: a vibrant community atmosphere defined by strong relationships.

"The most important part of Notre Dame is the people and the relationships that I’ve built," he said. "They’ve helped me develop as much as anyone. I’ve been the first to approach them, and they’ve helped me develop as much as anyone. I’ve been the first to approach them, and they’ve helped me develop as much as anyone.

That attitude extends into what he loves about being on the football team. At Notre Dame, he said, the coaches and players have a true commitment to the University, which is what drew him to South Bend over Baton Rouge and Nashville in the first place.

The memories and the stories that you get to carry with you, that’s what I treasure most. Without a doubt, Franco realizes that when he graduates this spring, his teammates and the relationships he has developed will be missed the most. "It sort of just happens," Franco said.

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Division III transfer found right atmosphere at ND

By MEAGHAN VESELIK
Sports Writer

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

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

In high school, Bathon played both quarterback and safety, starting three of his four years. Close with his teammates and from a small town, many of his former teammates, coaches, friends and neighbors still kept tabs on him, first at Carnegie Mellon and now at Notre Dame.

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

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

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

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

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

“Football is something I’ve played my whole life,” he said. Bathon said the goal of donning the Irish blue and gold was a lifelong dream.

“I’ve always been driven to play Notre Dame football, and this was my chance,” Bathon said. And when the time came sophomore year, Bathon was ready to take whatever the tryouts threw at him. The results are clear as he stands smiling after another grueling Notre Dame practice, but still can joke around with his teammates walking by.

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

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

“Everyone here is my best friend,” he said. “Scholarship, recruit, walk-on — doesn’t matter. These guys are my closest friends.” When faced with the question of what his life will be once the season closes, Bathon could only shake his head in wonder.

“I don’t know what life will be like without football,” he said. “I’m happy things worked out the way they did. I realize I’m playing Notre Dame football and it’s a dream come true.”

His plans for when he leaves Notre Dame, and two seasons on the team, as well as the friends he has made, with him for the rest of his life.

“It’s been an experience I never going to forget,” Bathon said. “Sometimes I have to stop and get it back in my head that I’ve done this. I’m going to remember all the friends I’ve made here, the ones I see every day. The guys I’ve built up a relationship with, the ones I go out with and hang out with. It’s been a dream come true.”

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