Senior linebacker Manti Te’o finishes his Notre Dame journey just as he started it — guided by faith, family and values

By ANDREW OWENS
Assistant Managing Editor

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He disliked the spelling and the way it was easy to mispronounce. “He was pretty much ridiculed as child and he came to me one year when he was 9 or 10 and all in tears saying, ‘Dad, I hate my name. People are teasing me’,” Brian said. “We reassured him that everything was okay and that, in joking, we said, ‘One day people are going to appreciate who you are because of your name and your name is going to be recognized all over the country.’”

“We were just trying to make him feel better … but it looks like it came true.”

Brian and Otiutta emphasized hard work and the value of remembering his identity in manti, it came true.”

When Manti was placed in Punahou Junior School — an hour-and-a-half drive from the Te'o house hold — but he missed his friends from his nearby elementary school. On top of that, every day was a grind. Manti would have to wake up by 5:30 a.m. each morning so Brian could drive him to the bus stop by 6:30 a.m. After school, it was another 90 minutes of traveling before he reached home.

“That went on for a while and finally he couldn’t take any more of it,” Brian said. “He just begged his mom and I to let him go back and he with his friends. We re- lented and said, ‘You know what, this is an opportunity you will regret one day.’” He was think ing like a typical eighth-grader wanting to be back with his friends.

Four months into his time at Kahuku High School, Manti realized his mistake. He was flourishing academically with a 4.0 grade-point average, but he didn’t feel as challenged as he did at Punahou.

“He said, ‘Dad, I’mKinda l’m not going to pass,’” Brian recalled. “I told him, ‘What do you mean? You’re getting a 4.0.’ He said, ‘Dad, I need to get back.’”

Chai Reddy, Manti’s defensive coordinator at Punahou, said he sees parallels between the decision to return to Punahou and Manti’s surprising decision to commit to Notre Dame.

“I think that’s one of the things that stands out about him,” Reddy said. “He doesn’t always take the track that makes sense. Given how much he loved USC growing up, I think going there or BYU made sense. Going to Notre Dame was sort of on the periphery in the same way going to Punahou was something on the periphery.

“There’s just this depth with him that you don’t get with a lot of 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds, even 20-year-olds. That’s one of many things that stand out about him.”

After transferring back to Punahou High School his sopho more year, Brian said Manti ap preciated the opportunity and learned his lesson the hard way. There was a quiet understanding: No more early-morning struggles to wake up or reach the bus stop. It was a defining mo ment in Manti’s maturation: The best path is not necessarily the easy one.

When Manti was placed in Dillion Hall leading up to his freshman year at Notre Dame, he relished the opportunity to meet new people, regardless of whether they were scholarship athletes or not.

“It was like having a normal roommate, except that he was a football player,” said Long Tran. Manti’s roommate for freshman and sophomore years. “He took his religion very seriously. I thought a football player would be partying (all the time), but he didn’t do that.”

“He helped me out a lot with real-life stuff. I was shy my freshman year, but he introduced me to all his friends. … He would pick me up when I was down … and had a very positive impact on my college career.”

Manti said it was never an ob ligation or an extra effort to be friend non-athletes. “It’s simply who he is.”

“I love to make friends,” he said. “I love to include people. I don’t like people to feel excluded from anything and I have some friends that are still in Dillon who are seniors.”

Fr. Paul Doyle, Dillion Hall rec tor and football team chaplain, said in both roles he witnessed Manti making a difference in people’s lives.

“He doesn’t even realize what an impact he had,” Doyle said. “I know he helped some people make good choices who might’ve been inclined to be doing things they shouldn’t be doing, but Manti was in the midst and they didn’t go that way and they’re better for it.”

Doyle recalled a moment in the locker room after Notre Dame’s overtime victory over Stanford in October that exemplified the senior captain’s grace and humility.

“We come in after the game and the players are hugging each other,” Doyle said. “Manti’s over there doing that too, and then he breaks away from the pack and thanks Fr. John Jenkins for letting him come to school here and gives [Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick] a big hug. That kind of presence is noteworthy.”

Although Manti moved off campus for his senior year, he told Doyle earlier this fall that he misses dorm life.

“If miss just seeing people around,” Manti said. “Seeing the freshmen wide-eyed, not know ing where to go and stepping out of my room and seeing friends running around. Now that I live off campus, it’s great because I have my own space and my own privacy but it’s just different and gives [Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick] a big hug. That kind of presence is noteworthy.”

When Manti told his father about having some regrets, Brian immediately flashed back to when his son transferred away from Punahou.

“He told me, ‘Dad, sometimes I wonder why I’m off-campus because I spend as much time on campus anyway. I should’ve just stayed in the dorms.’ It was another moment where I wanted to slap him in the head and say, ‘I told you so,'” Brian Te’o said.

“There was just so much more to experience for him.”

Before Manti made the de cision to return for his senior season, Brian researched the possibility of Manti declaring for the NFL Draft. When presented with the information, Manti asked his father for advice.

“At his age I was a dad with two kids, so I would’ve gone [to the NFL],” Brian said. “But I looked him in the eye and said, ‘Son, you are not me and you are not in my position. You’re a young man with your whole future ahead of you.’

“He looked at me and said, ‘Dad, I want to stay. I want to experience my last year at Notre Dame.’ Given the presentation of a secure future for himself and his family, he went deeper and made a decision that was much more fulfilling: to complete his goal and get a degree from Notre Dame.”

Brian said Manti, a design major, has fully immersed him self in his academic and athletic crafts this year in ways he hadn’t always before.

“This year was a lot about personal redemption for him,” Brian said. “He committed himself to the little things, like saying prayers, going to church meetings down the street in Mishawaka, attending all the practices and film studies on time and going to the studio to finish [an academic] project, even if it took him until 3 a.m.

“That kind of stuff he never really applied himself fully. Before he’d come home at 10:30 and have a group project to do, but he’d say, ‘I’m too tired. I’m going to sleep. Now I’ll call him at 12:30 [a.m.] and he’s still in the studio working’.”

Manti said the realization of impending graduation and a farewell to Notre Dame has helped motivate him.

“I try to make friends, experience everything, experience everything and not count my days and try to make my days count and live every day like it’s my last,” he said. “I think, as a young guy, you don’t understand that because you see you have four years and you think it’s such a long time and I can post pone things and lounge around.

“When you know you have less than two months left, it puts a fire under your butt to stay inolved and try to experience as much as you can because it’s go ing to be over.”

Kelly said Manti’s example permeates the program as young players watch the star’s every move.

“I think it’s important Manti understood [the importance of education],” he said. “Hopefully he can be the guy that says, see THE O PAGE 4
“Look, you can be a great player. You can still lead your team and have a degree, and have a degree from somewhere, so Notre Dame, please. ... I think it’s a very special place and has helped me to grow.”

Two months ago, while Manti Te’o and his family grieved their personal loss, another family was in pain. Another family’s reality was about to come to a screeching halt.

Te’o is a 255-pound linebacker set to play professional football in a matter of months. Bridget Smith was a 12-year-old girl fighting to be a Catholicism or Buddhism or whatever, Manti said. “It’s a very special place and has helped me to grow.”

Part of Manti’s character development has manifested in his motivation to positively influence children. Micaela Kauhane can attest to that.

“Before she passed away, I said, ‘We hope to reach out and make sure she’s okay.’” Reddy said he has seen Manti influence several young fans like Kauhane.

“Here’s this random fourth-grade girl Manti made this friendship with,” he said. “They kept the communication on. The stories were of how big that was to her and there are countless other stories like that.”

On Saturday, Manti will take the field through the Notre Dame Stadium tunnel as a national champion. It will be his 26th time through that storied tunnel, but it will also be his last. And the man who has grown with so many ways since the first time he took the field will have his parents by his side — and 40 other family members and friends from Hawaii in the stands.

“I’m not looking forward to that moment,” Brian said. “I don’t want to go let of the memories we’ve created to come to the conclusion that this is the last time.

“I hope the cameras don’t focus on me, because I guarantee I’m going to be crying like a baby.”

Manti’s Irish are 10-0 and pursuing a national championship. He said his task is to avoid getting swept up by the Senior Day moment, lest his team pay the price.

“I don’t know what it will feel like, honestly,” he said. “I know it’s going to be emotional … so I’m trying not to be too distracted.”

But if he struggles to accomplish that, another in an endless list of feats, all he has to do is look up at his brothers and sisters, 8,500 strong, and know that he’s among family.

Contact Andrew Owens at aowens2@nd.edu

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Beyond the academics that drew him to the University, Te’o continued...