SHEDDING THE BLOCKS

Bennett Jackson completes transition to starting cornerback and captain
Tranquill visits, Irish extend offers

By MIKE MONACO
Sports Editor

Fort Wayne, Ind., native Drue Tranquill took an official visit to Notre Dame for the Michigan State game, and the Irish made a good impression on the 6-foot-3, 207-pounder, according to Notre Dame recruiting expert Mike Frank.

Tranquill, who committed to Purdue on July 23rd and received an offer from Notre Dame soon thereafter, had reportedly expressed concern over his position — either linebacker or safety — with the Irish. Frank, who runs the ESPN-affiliated Irish Sports Daily, said he thinks Notre Dame alleviated Tranquill’s concerns.

“Notre Dame reiterated their stance on where they see him defensively,” Frank said. “They didn’t say, ‘You’re being recruited as a defensive player and wherever you work out the best is where you’re going to go regardless of how you look good at safety and that’s where you want to start out, well then that’s what we’ll take a look at and see if that works. If it doesn’t, you’ll stay there. If not, we’ll look at other options.’

“I think it was important for him to hear he’s got a chance to play other positions and he in the nation, according to ESPN, and Hall checks in at No. 191. Hilliard, corner- back John Reid, defensive end/linebacker Jashaun Cornwell, defensive tackle Rashan Green, offensive lineman Tristan Hoge and quarterback Torrance Gibson.

“(Gibson) kind of fits exactly what they’re looking for right now,” Frank said. “There’s a bunch of other guys they’re looking at (for) quarterback right now, but he’s kind of the mobile guy that fits and looks like what they’re looking for.”

ESPN rates Gibson as 25th-best player in the nation.

Only one player in the class of 2015 — offensive lineman Jeremy Tillery, has committed to Notre Dame thus far. Tillery, the 6-foot-7, 312-pounder from Shreveport, Louisiana, is the defending Big Ten Freshman of the Year and was a consensus All-American as a true freshman.

“ Obviously Tillery is a very important recruit and he’s a guy that they’ve loved and think is just a tremendous prospect,” Frank said. “So it’s important to get Jeremy Tillery up on campus as much as they can and around the offensive linemen so he feels comfortable up here. It’s a long way from South Bend to (Louisiana). Sometimes these guys can feel a little disconnect- ed after awhile so it is important to get these guys on campus and around each other and just feel more comfortable and at home. So I think that’s im- portant for him to come up and have a good visit and just solidify in his head the reasons he chose ND.”

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out Mike Frank’s IrishSportsDaily.com.

Contact Mike Monaco at jmonaco@nd.edu

ND can change in one game

Think back to late October of 2012. Notre Dame was roughly a 10-point underdog to Oklahoma leading up to their top-10 clash in Norman, Okla., on Oct. 27.

Manti Te’o was still crafting his Heisman candidacy.

Everett Golson was still developing as the first-year signal- caller for Brian Kelly.

The defense had bent but not broken, surrendering yards but not points.

The Irish were 7-0, but people still weren’t convinced that Notre Dame was excellent, or even relevant.

But one game can change everything. Golson connected on a 50-yard bomb with Chris Brown and plunged in for a 1-yard go-ahead touchdown later in the drive. Te’o sealed the victory with a late interception. The defense limited Landry Jones and the Sooners to 13 points. Just like that, Notre Dame was in for real.

Fast forward to Oklahoma week 2013, and a similar uncer- tainty swirls around this Notre Dame squad. Kelly has talked about his team finding its identity, and he continues to insist the Irish are not a finished product. And if the matchup with Oklahoma in 2012 taught us anything, it’s that a lot can change with one game.

Last season, it was more of a perception change. “OK, we said, “Notre Dame defeated the Sooners convincingly. It was 30- 13. It was in Norman. It was in primetime. This team is for real now.” But it was, and by large, the same Irish team that had been playing the same Irish football the whole season.

People just began to truly believe after the statement win over the Sooners.

This season, it will need to be more than just a perception change to return to a No.2-level of prominence. Notre Dame has legitimate problems and unanswered questions.

Most notably and importantly, the defense has been bad at worst and inconsistent at best. The middle linebacker and safety rotations are still in flux.

Offensively, the Irish have struggled to run the ball. A definitive pecking order in the backfield has yet to crystalize, and the passing game has yet to prove it can carry the load. The offense is unfinish- ingly stuck the box.

But as we learned last year, nothing is steadfast; performance and perception are subject to change. And, really, that’s the way football always is. Uncertainty around the Irish, certainly. But uncertainty should not be confused with finality.

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

"It would not surprise me if [safety/linebacker Drue Tranquill] flipped from Purdue to Notre Dame and fairly soon." Mike Frank Notre Dame recruiting expert

"That whole season. People just began to really believe after the statement win over the Sooners. For better or worse, by 7 p.m. on Saturday.

The Irish are again seeking for better or worse, by 7 p.m. on Saturday.
Nothing is new to Bennett Jackson anymore — not a different role, not a different position, not even different sports. He’s used to it.

The senior cornerback has risen to captain, switched sides of the ball and juggled sports in his four years at Notre Dame, marking one of the most versatile careers of any Irish player in recent history. But none of this is new.

Leading is old

Prior to the season, Jackson was named one of three Irish captains, joining senior receiver TJ Jones and graduate student tackle Zack Martin. But Jackson is the only man with a "C" on the defensive side of the ball.

If you thought a simple letter on a jersey would change Jackson’s approach, you’d be wrong.

“At the end of the day, I was vocal, just as energetic. It’s just Manti was just that main focus, that strength, strong point in the defense. I just try to be as vocal as I can, as energetic as I can, as communicative as I can and just keep things rolling.”

Last season was Jackson’s first as a starter with the Irish and he helped anchor a secondary that included three first-time starters. This season, though, he’s the man on the back end of the defense, he’s the lockdown corner, he’s the voice.

Irish coach Brian Kelly said Jackson has been hard on himself since being a captain.

“It has a tendency to put a little bit more pressure on you,” he said. “You don’t want to let anybody down. You want to live up to the incredible history and tradition of being a captain here at Notre Dame.”

Jackson has transformed himself from first-time starter into a statistical hybrid in just one season. He is only behind the inside linebackers in tackles and behind only defensive tackle Zack Martin.

But ringing up stats is nothing compared to switching positions.

Switching positions is old

Jackson used to be a running back — when he was six-years-old.

He scored his first-ever touchdown at the position, dashing in from 60 yards out and adding a heel-click and a skip as he crossed the goal line.

Then, Jackson was a receiver. He was an All-State wideout in high school and came to Notre Dame as the second-best receiver from New Jersey.

Jackson was buried on the outside linebacker and graduate student defensive end_dat_4.jpg

The speedster ran a personal-best 8.12 in the event before focusing exclusively on football.

The Hazel, N.J., native competed in four indoor meets for the Irish, running the 60-meter hurdles.

Switching sports is old

As a sophomore, Jackson (along with George and Josh Atkinson) began to run track.

“It’s almost like being a distance runner. … I think that these guys mentally are so strong and so energetic, it’s almost what a corner has to be. Their minds have to be so powerful and so strong-willed, the mindset has to be that it’s not going to happen again.”

Jackson knows all about track athletes.

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SOONERS PASSING

Last year, Notre Dame allowed its first rushing touchdown of the season to the “Belldozer” in one of his four carries on the night. He was 1-for-1 passing for eight yards. This year, the Irish will have to deal with Sooners quarterback Blake Bell a lot more. Bell is coming off a winning effort against Tulsa in which he threw for 413 yards and four touchdowns on 27-of-37 passing in his first career start. Irish coach Brian Kelly was clear in his weekly press conference that the Irish view Bell as a passing threat, not just the rushing threat he was last year.

The 6-foot-6, 252-pounder under center is just one part of Oklahoma’s explosive offense. The Sooners are averaging 490.3 yards-per-game this season. Sophomore receiver Sterling Shepard leads the team with 11 receptions and 146 yards on the season and reined in 15 passes for 123 yards on the ground himself.

It seems as though Notre Dame has gotten ten things together just in time in the secondary, as last week’s solid performance was well for how the Irish will handle the Sooners. If Notre Dame can get pressure on the quarterback, the back line is likely to find an interception from the inexperienced Bell.

EDGE: EVEN

SOONERS RUSHING

The Sooners are second in the Big 12 with 271.1 rushing yards-per-game, largely on the effort of senior running back Brennan Clay. Clay has accumulated 264 yards on 45 carries, good for 5.8 yard-per-attempt. Oklahoma also has three other rushers with at least 110 yards this season and Bell has added 55 yards on the ground himself.

Notre Dame’s defense matches up well with Oklahoma’s running attack, though. The Irish have limited their opponents to 114.2 yards-per-game this season. Oklahoma is likely to gain more than the 15 yards it managed last season against the Irish, but Notre Dame’s stout defense can limit the Sooners’ effectiveness on the ground. Bell’s size and mobility could be an issue though, based on Notre Dame’s early-season struggles against mobile quarterbacks Connor Reilly of Temple and Devin Gardner of Michigan.

EDGE: EVEN

SOONERS OFFENSIVE COACHING

As Sooners coach Bob Stoops approaches the all-time victory record at Oklahoma (currently held by Barry Switzer), it is hard to pick against his offensive coaching staff. Stoops has stacked up 17 coach of the year mentions, including eight on the national level. Stoops has coached Heisman winners along the way and trotted out a few offense almost without fail. Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco is stiff competition, but given that the Irish are still trying to find the right 11 to put on the field, Notre Dame is playing from behind in this category.

EDGE: OKLAHOMA

SOONERS SPECIAL TEAMS

Senior kicker Michael Hunnicutt has hit eight of his nine field-goal attempts this year, although his long is 44 yards. Junior kicker Nick Hodgson has sent 15 of his 22 kickoffs for touchbacks, which could take George Atkinson and the Irish return game out of the equation. Junior punter Jed Barnett is averaging 44.1 yards per punt this season, while senior receiver Jalen Saunders has a return average of 13.5 yards in eight punt returns this season.

EDGE: OKLAHOMA

SOONERS SCHEDULE (3-0)

Aug. 31 Louisiana-Monroe W 34-0
Sept. 7 West Virginia W 16-7
Sept. 14 Tulsa W 51-20
Sept. 28 @ Notre Dame Oct. 5 TCU
Oct. 12 vs. Texas Oct. 19 @ Kansas
Oct. 26 Texas Tech Nov. 7 @ Baylor
Nov. 16 Iowa State Nov. 23 @ Kansas State
Dec. 7 @ Oklahoma State

This is where the Irish will be ready. Honestly thought they would be surprised by Michigan State last week, turns out I still don’t know who since there was zero offense and zero fun sir. This is where they will be truly tested, and everyone will be watching.

This matchup will force the Irish to focus on every play call, down and second. Unlike Michigan, they will actually be facing a team with more talent than themselves. Add that to the vexing glare of Bob Stoops and company and the lingering feeling of a BCS-denying loss at home last season.

The Irish will find a way to succeed in their first opportunity as true underdogs, just as they did all year last year.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 33, Oklahoma 27

I think Oklahoma is overrated. I don’t know if they have a run game.

And I don’t know how Blake Bell will fare against one of the best defensive lines in the country.

But I just have a weird feeling about this game. Call it a gut feeling.

Notre Dame has not showed much to the nation this season with a seemingly underachieving defense and a vanilla offense.

And there’s just something about Bob Stoops that has me thinking the Sooners will be ready. But mostly because it’s not a bowl game.

I think Notre Dame’s 10-game home winning streak comes crashing down courtesy of the Belldozer.

FINAL SCORE: Oklahoma 27, Notre Dame 21

Looking past each team’s rankings, I see two squads in similar situations. Notre Dame is still an unknown entity for the most part. Oklahoma, meanwhile, may have ranked No. 14 in the AP poll, but who have the Sooners really played?

Still, I think the Sooners are quite strong, maybe even deserving of that top-15 ranking. Blake Bell is the right man for the quarterback job, and the skill-position players are talented and plentiful.

Say what you want about Notre Dame’s offensive struggles, but I think its defense will be the key. Can the Irish stop that skilled Sooners offense and play as they did against Michigan State, or will Bell pick apart the defense with a Devin Gardner-like ease?

I’m thinking closer to the latter.
IRISH PASSING
Senior quarterback Tommy Rees and the Irish passing attack put on a miserable performance last week against Michigan State, although multiple Spartan pass-interference penalties may have played a part in preventing Notre Dame from connecting on its passes. The good news for the Irish is that Rees probably will be better. In his prior three games the senior quarterback had averaged 326 yards through the air.

If Irish freshman receiver Corey Robinson can carry over his breakout performance while TJ Jones and DaVaris Daniels get back to their productive ways, Notre Dame could use its passing attack to pull off the upset. It won’t be easy, though. Oklahoma is first in the Big 12 in pass defense efficiency and second in total scoring defense, having allowed only nine points-per-game through three contests. Sooners redshirt senior safety Gabe Lynn leads the team with two interceptions and also has a fumble recovery on the year. Granted, Notre Dame brings more to the table than University of Louisiana Monroe, West Virginia and Tulsa, who rank 77th, 72nd and 74th in the nation in passing offense. Notre Dame ranks 28th, but will have to avoid turnovers. Oklahoma has brought down an interception in 73.5 percent of its games under Stoops.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH RUSHING
Irish coach Brian Kelly has listed five running backs atop Notre Dame’s depth chart heading into the matchup against Oklahoma, so freshmen Tarean Folston and Greg Bryant will presumably join seniors Cam McDaniel, Amir Carlisle and George Atkinson in the running back rotation against the Sooners. The depth-chart magic by Kelly is a recognition of the fact that no Irish back has gotten it done this year. Atkinson leads the team with his average of five yards-per-carry, but he only has 24 rushes. McDaniel leads the team in rushing attempts and rushing yards with 45 and 189, respectively.

Oklahoma, meanwhile, leads its conference in total defense (291.3 yards-per-game), third-down defense (27.3 percent) and rush defense (100.7 yards-per-game). Senior linebacker Corey Nelson leads the Sooners with 20 tackles on the year and has three tackles for loss. Given Oklahoma’s hot start in run defense, and the fact that Notre Dame has five options in the backfield but none competent enough to secure the job, Oklahoma holds the edge here.

EDGE: OKLAHOMA

IRISH OFFENSIVE COACHING
Brian Kelly executed his game plan last week en route to a win against the Spartans. With nine defenders stacking the box on many plays, Kelly instructed the Irish to throw it over the heads of the Michigan State players and challenge the corners in man-to-man coverage. The offensive production was extremely muted for the Irish, but Notre Dame did draw flags from many of its attempts to connect down the field. Sooners defensive coordinator Mike Stoops has had notable success with his units in the past, most notably when he was with the Sooners originally from 1999-2003. Having returned to Oklahoma last season after serving as the head coach at Arizona, Stoops coached his defense to a disappointing season in which the Sooners allowed 398.3 yards-per-game.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS
Senior punter Kyle Brindza won the game ball for his fourth quarter punts against the Spartans, but he averaged only 42.8 yards on four punts. Brindza missed his second field-goal attempt of the season against Michigan State, but remains a reasonably reliable option. TJ Jones showed signs of discomfort at punt return last week, dropping one punt and running into another, although the Irish recovered both. Oklahoma has surrendered only 114 return yards on six kick returns, but Atkinson always has an outside shot of making a big play on special teams.

EDGE: EVEN

IRISH SCHEDULE (3-1)
Aug. 31 Temple W 28-6
Sept. 7 @ Michigan L 41-30
Sept. 14 @ Purdue W 31-24
Sept. 21 Michigan State W 17-13
Sept. 28 Oklahoma Oct. 5 vs. Arizona State
Oct. 19 USC
Oct. 26 vs. Air Force
Nov. 9 @ Pittsburgh
Nov. 23 BYU
Nov. 30 @ Stanford
Three-man rotation at inside LB yields success

By JACK HEFFERON  
Sports Writer

That’s the decision Irish coach Brian Kelly and his staff have faced in trying to determine who will play at their two inside linebacker spots this season.

But it’s also a listing, in order, of Notre Dame’s top three tacklers this season, meaning the Irish have found an ideal recipe for playing time in the middle of their defense.

“You’ve got a three-person rotation that’s working out pretty good for us,” Kelly said. “All three of those guys are working well together.”

With the departure of Manti Te’o, the Irish linebacking corps was not expected by many to be the same strength heading into this season that it was in 2012. But struggles in the secondary and double teams on the line have forced junior Jarrett Grace and graduate students Dan Fox and Carlo Calabrese into the spotlight. Grace leads all Notre Dame defenders with 28 tackles, and Fox and Calabrese follow close behind with 27 and 26, respectively.

Grace has been one of the team’s most surprising revelations. The Cincinnati native sat behind Te’o for his first two seasons before coming on strong this spring and working his way into the rotation. Kelly said while Grace may have risen back up the depth chart, the junior has always been a key player for the Irish.

“Even though he was behind our best leader in our program, and that has a tendency, obviously, to overshadow you, he led in community service,” Kelly said. “He led in fellowship. Now he’s starting to become more vocal as a football player as well, and he’ll continue to develop in that manner.”

Fox and Calabrese were mainstays in the Irish lineup with Te’o, and the two boast over 40 career starts between them. Grace said having two fifth-year players in the same unit has done nothing but help his development and all three have grown together as a unit.

“Something I’ve learned from Dan and Carlo is they’re always taking care of their bodies, addressing every little nick and bump,” Grace said. “We’re watching film together for hours, extra, every day, and we’re getting great vision and clarity when we step on the field. That’s something we’ve really embraced together.”

That group improvement has allowed the Irish to run a three-man rotation through their two inside linebacker spots, which has allowed the trio to stay fresh, show different looks and thrive as a group.

Contact Jack Hefferon at wheffero@nd.edu

Dan has played a lot of football for us,” Kelly said of the rotation. “That’s how great of a team player [Fox] is, that he moves over ... as we continue to get Jarrett some other work.”

Such competition for playing time might cause tension or pit a unit against one another. But Grace said he and the two seasoned veterans value the team success too much to succumb to those pressures, and they know the best thing each can do is push the other two on every snap.

“I have just as much invested in this team as these guys do, and we all want to win,” he said. “If I can do something that’s going to help the team win, I better do it.”

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Irish graduate student inside linebacker Carlo Calabrese, pictured here in the season-opener against Temple on Aug. 31, is part of a three-man rotation at inside linebacker along with Dan Fox and Jarrett Grace.

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On first-and-goal, Blake Bell began moving to his right immediately following the shotgun snap, evaded two Irish defenders, lowered his shoulder into fresh -man cornerback Keivarae Russell and stretched for the endzone. In Notre Dame's seventh game of the year, Oklahoma's short-yard age quarterback used all of his 6-foot-6, 252-pound frame to run through the stalwart Irish defense for the first time in 2012.

“You don't get the nickname Belldozer for no reason,” Irish junior linebacker Jarrett Grace said.

Despite only recording four carries and throwing a single pass, the Belldozer made his mark on last year's contest in norman, a productive sooner offense as the quarterback will be at the helm of okla. This year, the redshirt junior pass, the belldozer made his mark through the air and four yards rushing. The Sooners (3-0) surround him with a dynamic receiving corps, led by sophomore Sterling Shepard, redshirt senior Jaz Reynolds and senior Jalen Saunders. In Bell's first week as the starting quarterback, Shepard hauled in eight passes for 123 yards and found the endzone twice against Tulsa. Reynolds caught four balls for 109 yards while Saunders came down with three completions for 47 yards and a score.

Bell's performance in his debut week at the helm of the Sooner offense showed his ability to do more than just run it between the tackles, Kelly said. “He threw it to really fast receivers,” he said. “He's got a reputation that is not really correct, because they’ve got a lot of dangerous weapons. We are going to expect their dual-threat ability … so we have to have another great one this weekend.”

Still, the Irish realize they will have show up ready to play on game day against Bell and the prestigeous Oklahoma program, Grace said. “Oklahoma's a whole new set of challenges,” he said. “They have that dual-threat ability … so we just have to be very assignment correct, because they’ve got a lot of dangerous weapons. We are going to expect their very best on Saturday.”

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“Belldozer” takes over helm of Sooner offense

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Associate Sports Editor

The Sooners (3-0) surround him with a dynamic receiving corps, led by sophomore Sterling Shepard, redshirt senior Jaz Reynolds and senior Jalen Saunders. In Bell's first week as the starting quarterback, Shepard hauled in eight passes for 123 yards and four touchdowns. He added 24 yards rushing.

“Again, I think from a scheme standpoint, they put you in a position where you have to cover a lot of different scenarios,” Kelly said. “We've had that for the last couple of weeks. Our staff and (defensive coordinator Bob) Diaco has done a great job of formulating the plan, and we're going to have to have another great one this weekend.”

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