UNFINISHED BUSINESS
More goals to set, strength to gain
IRISH LOOK TO ADD WILLIAMS TO BACKFIELD COMMITS

By MIKE MONACO
Senior Sports Writer

Though Notre Dame has lost three of its last four games and dropped out of the national rankings, there hasn’t necessarily been a corresponding loss of recruiting momentum, according to Irish recruiting analyst Tom Loy.

“I don’t think it’s going to play a big factor here,” said Loy, who covers Notre Dame recruiting for Blue and Gold Illustrated, part of the 247Sports network. “It does hurt, no doubt about that. … I don’t think it’s going to really affect recruiting going forward. If they lose to Louisville and USC, it’s going to raise some red flags.”

Even before Notre Dame’s loss to Northwestern on Saturday, multiple recruits were forced to alter their plans to visit campus.

Class of 2015 defensive back Ykili Ross had been scheduled to visit last weekend, but he was unable to catch his flight following his Friday night game, per Loy. The four-star prospect, Loy said, could visit this weekend, but that “remains to be seen.”

Class of 2015 three-star athlete Gary Jennings won’t be visiting this weekend, Loy said, after Jennings’ team won last weekend, setting up a Friday night game. Class of 2015 running back Ronald Jones also won’t be in town after his squad advanced as well, according to Loy. Jones, the No. 9 running back and No. 83 overall player in the country, per 247Sports’ composite rankings, is committed to Oklahoma State.

As part of Notre Dame’s continuing search for a second running back to pair with commitment Josh Adams in its class of 2015, the Irish are planning to welcome Miami pledge Dexter Williams to campus this weekend, Loy said. Williams is rated the No. 14 running back in the country and gave his verbal commitment to Miami in April.

Notre Dame sent out an offer to class of 2015 running back and Penn State commitment Saquon Barkley on Sunday, according to 247 Sports. Barkley checks in as the No. 16 running back nationally.

Loy said the flurry of activity at the position.

“As of right now, everything [Barkley] says [he] is completely pro-Penn State, 100 percent committed,” Loy said. “All you can do is take his word for it.”

In any event, Loy described the Whitehall, Pennsylvania native as a very athletic back who can do it all, including receiving out of the backfield. Barkley already decommitted from Rutgers before pledging to the Nittany Lions, and Loy said Notre Dame knows it’s a “long shot” to land him.

“Other class of 2015 running back targets include Soso Jamabo, Nick Brossette and Jordan Cronkrite.

In addition to potential visitors Ross and Williams this weekend, Loy said three-star safety Ben Edwards is in line to be on campus for the Louisville game. Loy believes Edwards’ recruitment will come down to the Irish and Stanford.

For more on Notre Dame recruiting, check out BlueAndGold.com. Email Andrew Owens at aowens@blueandgold.com and tell him The Observer sent you.

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By SAMANTHA ZUBA
Assistant Managing Editor

Senior linebacker Joe Schmidt had other offers.
But they weren’t from Notre Dame.

Since he was a little kid, Schmidt had wanted to attend Notre Dame and play for the Irish, and he decided not to set that dream aside for scholarship offers from schools like Air Force, Cincinnati and Arizona.

Instead, he decided to walk on for the Irish, not wanting to have any regrets.

“As a kid, my dream was always to play at Notre Dame,” Schmidt said. “It’s something I was passionate about since as long as I can remember. For some people, it’s about playing in the NFL or personal accolades. For me, it was always about Notre Dame, going to Notre Dame.”

Schmidt hails from Orange, California, deciding in USC territory, and his dad came from a USC Family. But Schmidt says his dad always liked Notre Dame, and once he watched “Rudy” with his family around age five, Schmidt was hooked on the University.

He and his dad used to watch the Irish, rooters in hand, and follow recruiting news. And it didn’t hurt that his sister and now brother-in-law attended Notre Dame, starting when Schmidt was 10.

Schmidt saw his sister and her future husband grow during their time at Notre Dame and knew the school would offer him the academic, athletic and personal development opportunities he wanted.

“I thought Notre Dame was going to provide me with the best place to really grow myself into the man I wanted to become, and that was important to me,” Schmidt said.

Schmidt started earning playing time sophomore year with the special teams unit, appearing in 10 games. Things really took off in the game against Miami at Soldier Field on Oct. 6, 2012. Schmidt made a series of tackles on kickoff coverage units, including one resounding hit on a sky kick.

“The [returner] kind of splits it out, and I’m the safety on the right on this particular play, and I ended up just hitting him really, really hard and making a great tackle right on their sideline.”

Schmidt said. “[Irish head] coach [Brian] Kelly saw it, loved it, and after that, coach Kelly put me on every team and told [special teams] coach [Scott] Booker that he wanted me on there.

“That was really my big opportunity, and thank God I was able to capitalize on it.”

Schmidt capitalized on enough opportunities to earn himself a scholarship after his sophomore season. In his junior season, Schmidt appeared in all 13 games and notched 15 total tackles.

As a senior and regular starter this year, Schmidt put together his best season yet as the team’s leading tackler with 65 total through the first seven games. He emerged as a defensive leader from the middle linebacker position as well.

Cornerback and senior fellow Connor Cavalaris and Schmidt have been friends since freshman year when both arrived as preferred walk-ons, and Cavalaris has seen Schmidt grow into his bigger role.

“He’s been, with so many young guys coming in and playing now ... Joe has just been not only a vocal leader, but a leader on the field, and he’s set the example since day one of camp or winter workouts that this is how we’re going to work,” Cavalaris said.

Sophomore linebacker Jaydon Smith said Schmidt also has led the young defense with his instincts for the game.

“Just Joe understanding the full dynamic of the defensive scheme, understanding what everyone has to do, making sure that everyone had everything set and locked and loaded, him being a senior, having that leadership, he’s meant a lot to us,” Smith said.

“All the young guys call him Papa Bear,” added Schmidt.

Schmidt will be the first one to admit his need to rely on instincts instead of sheer physicality, although he has worked tirelessly in developing that area.

“I’ve never been the biggest or the fastest,” Schmidt said. “Any physical attributes, I’ve never been the best at anything in that regard.”

Instead, he has led because of how well he understands the game, having played many different positions and in various schemes.

“I’ve played every position on the football field,” Schmidt said. “Everywhere from every offensive line position, quarterback, fullback, running back, tight end, wide receiver, all of them. I kicked. Actually, I’ve never held, but I’ve played corner safety, all the linebackers, all the defensive linemen.

“Growing up from a young age, I can remember. For some people, it’s about providing me with the best athletic, academic and personal development opportunities. I had the Irish. For me, my dream was always to play at Notre Dame, and that was important to me,” Schmidt said.

“As a kid, my dream was always to play Notre Dame, and that was important to me,” Schmidt said.

“When asked if he has a favorite moment, Schmidt quickly and firmly answers, ‘Yes.’”

When Schmidt is asked if he has a favorite moment, Schmidt quickly answers, “Yes.”

Cavalaris says, singing a rendition. “And I just remember opening my eyes and locking eyes with Connor and being like, ‘Yes.’”

Schmidt, a management-entrepreneurship major, hopes to work in consulting or sales and maybe start his own business.

But before that, Schmidt could have more football left to play.

“I love the locker room that we’re building, and I love the culture that we’re building, and I’m fired up about that, so definitely, I see it as an amazing opportunity if they allow me to come back,” Schmidt said.

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Atkinson competes on field, track for Irish

Observer Staff Report

Senior cornerback Josh Atkinson has done a lot of running in his time at Notre Dame. Not only running out of the tunnel at Notre Dame Stadium will come to a close Saturday, when the Irish take on Louisville.

Atkinson has not made an appearance for Notre Dame this season.

On the track, Atkinson competed in sprint events for the Irish. He placed fourth in the 100-meter dash at the 2012 Big East Outdoor Championships his freshman year and finished fifth in the 80-meter dash at the Big East Indoor Championships earlier that year.

After not competing for Notre Dame track and field this sophomore year, Atkinson took 15th place at the ACC Indoor Championships in the 200-meter dash last spring. At the conference’s outdoor championships, he placed fifth in the 100-meter dash and seventh in the 200-meter event and was part of the 4x100-meter relay team, which took second place.

Atkinson’s twin brother, George, was a standout on the gridiron, leaving Notre Dame after last season to prepare for the NFL draft. The Oakland Raiders signed George as an undrafted free agent in May, and the running back is currently a member of the team’s practice squad. George also competed on the track team his freshman year.

Notre Dame declined to make Atkinson available for an interview.

Brown sees time on field in secondary

Observer Staff Report

Senior cornerback Jalen Brown had his best year as a sophomore in 2012.

That fall and quick, the 6-foot-2, 202-pound Brown was a well-regarded Texas recruit coming out of high school as a football and track star at MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas.

Brown didn’t play his freshman year at Notre Dame in 2011, but in 2012 he appeared in seven games his sophomore season in 2012. Brown recorded his two career unassisted tackles that season, making one each against Purdue on Sept. 8 and Michigan State on Sept. 15.

As a junior in 2013, Brown played against Michigan on Sept. 7 and against Air Force on Oct. 26 but did not record a tackle.

An assisted tackle and pass breakup against Wake Forest on Nov. 17, 2012, round out Brown’s career stats.

He has not played this season. Brown is enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters as a sociology major.

Notre Dame declined to make him available for an interview.

Cavalaris gains strong friendships, scholarship

By GREG HADLEY
Associate Sports Editor

Connor Cavalaris has never questioned the path he is on, even as it has led him to stranger and stranger places.

While at Lake Forest (Illinois) High School, the senior cornerback drew interest from smaller FBS and Division II schools. He could have played and possibly started for FBS League teams. Instead, he chose to walk on at Notre Dame.

“I was on a visit here, and one of the coaches offered me a spot on the team as a walk-on,” he said. “It was an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up. The academics, the prestige … the football tradition. It was somewhere I knew I wanted to be, and I couldn’t pass that up. It was an easy decision.”

Then, when he arrived in South Bend, Cavalaris was assigned, along with three roommates, to Guglielmino Athletics Complex.

“It was a little chilly on those … walks to the east side of campus,” he said. “My first year. I was in a one-room quad with three other roommates, and you know, you meet guys from all different places around the world. That first freshman fall, you’re extremely busy, and you’re out of your comfort zone a little bit, and things are moving really fast.”

His entire freshman season, Cavalaris never saw the field. In his sophomore campaign, he registered his first collegiate tackle against BYU on Oct. 20. Then, in his finest moment on the field for the Irish, he collected two of his seven career tackles during Notre Dame’s 42-14 loss to Alabama in the 2013 BCS National Championship Game.

In 2012, Cavalaris played in 10 of Notre Dame’s 12 games on the run to the national championship. As a junior, however, he took the field only three times.

Finally, before the 2014 season started, Irish head coach Brian Kelly extended a scholarship offer to Cavalaris, rewarding the walk-on for his efforts.

“I’ve got a really strong group of seniors and senior leadership. We’re going to go out there and make our teammates, our coaches and our fans proud. We still have a lot to play for.”

As a walk-on, Cavalaris said he has developed deep friendships with his fellow non-scholarship players, including former walk-on and senior linebacker Joe Schmidt, he said.

“Joe and I were on the same visit for the spring game of 2011,” he said. “We kind of became friends after that, and ever since, we’ve been really close. We’ve both had success on the field and off the field, and we live off campus together.”

As anaccountancy major, Cavalaris has faced the usual struggle to balance athletics and academics but plans to put that major to use right after he leaves college, he said.

“It’s all about time management and discipline,” he said. “Accounting is a pretty demanding and intense major and being on the football team, you don’t exactly have a lot of free time, so you really have to be disciplined.

“I’m definitely interested in working in financial services or an accounting firm. I’m also interested in potentially in doing a Master’s program in accountancy or business administration.”

Through it all, Cavalaris has never questioned his decision to come to Notre Dame. The thought of starting for other schools or attending other academically elite universities does not bother him at all, he said.

“I always knew in high school that I wanted to play college football,” Cavalaris said. “Notre Dame nation is strong wherever you go, and you dream about being a part of something this amazing.

“Looking back on my time here, it’s been incredible. The people you meet, the coaching staff … the teachers, your fellow students, the people in your dorm — it’s been incredible. Being on the football team, you meet guys from a lot of different backgrounds, and the relationships you build with coaches and teammates that last a lifetime are the best things to take away. It’s just been very rewarding.”

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Brindza beats club foot, kicks into record book

By MIKE MONACO
Senior Sports Writer

Editor’s Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Oct. 11 edition of The Observer.

“You’re made to be a kicker or you’re not.”

The words of Brandon Kornblue ring true on Notre Dame’s campus. Kornblue, the former Michigan kicker and current kicking coach, sees the innate traits in one of his budding pupils, Irish senior kicker Kyle Brindza. Kornblue sees the power, the strength. He sees the confidence, the mental ability. Brindza agrees.

“Choosing kicking and having all those physical traits and mental traits, I feel like I’ve been born to be able to do this,” Brindza said.

But what happens when the kid born to kick is born, well, not to kick? What happens when the otherwise ready-made kicker is born with clubfoot?

With his next made field goal, Brindza will set the all-time Notre Dame record for most career field goals, breaking a tie with former Irish great and 23-year NFL kicker John Carney. Still, even though as a young peewee soccer player Brindza said he wanted to be an MLS goalie or a “field-goal kicker” when he grew up, it was tough for him to envision it playing out as it has.

“I look back now and I’m like, I never ever would have thought he’d be where he is today,” Brindza’s mother, Tiffany, said. “But with his determination, this is where he’s gotten.”

Dennis the Menace

Born with clubfoot that had his right foot turned backward, young Kyle was not like the other kids. Soon after his birth, Tiffany hauled him to Shriners Hospital for Children in Chicago to be treated.

“You hear the words from the doctors that he’s not gonna be able to play sports, he’s always gonna be handicapped, he’s not gonna be like the normal kids,” she recalled.

But sitting at Shriners, Tiffany soon realized that other kids had it worse. And right then and there, Tiffany made up her mind that she wouldn’t let a birth defect stop Kyle.

“I’m not gonna let this affect him and I’m not gonna step him if he wants to do something. I’m gonna encourage him and help him do what he wants,” she said. “That’s how I’ve always felt.”

Unable to put any weight on his foot, Kyle was carted to day care in a wagon. Before he even reached seventh grade, Brindza had somewhere between five and eight separate surgeries on his right foot. One even forced him into two different casts for a combined 12 months and sapped the calf muscle from his right leg, a difference still palpable today. Now, roughly 10 years removed from his last operation, the evidence is still convincing. His right foot is etched with stitching and scars the way the brown pigskin he boots is lined with white laces.

Amid the various braces and casts, other kids called him Forrest Gump.

But people also called him Dennis the Menace, as he was always running around the house, even in a cast.

“Having all the odds put against you, not being able to walk and all these stories about this person’s life being affected — I threw it out the window,” Brindza said.

In sixth grade, for instance, Brindza had surgery in November and was told he probably wouldn’t play sports for two years — an eternity for someone so eager to prove himself. He missed a whole year of sports, the majority of which was spent in a cast.

“You look now and I’m like, I never ever would have thought he’d be where he is today,” Brindza’s mother, Tiffany, said. “But with his determination, this is where he’s gotten.”

As a sophomore, he drilled 23-of-31 field goals. Last year, he only made six field goals so far, almost assuredly handle kickoffs in his pursuit of the next level, but almost didn’t have a record.

Brindza has always admired his all-time favorite athlete, former New York Yankees closer Mariano Rivera. He loves Rivera’s mindset on the mound, the potent knowledge that nobody could touch Rivera’s cutter.

In a similar way, Brindza is an avid golf fan and roughly a nine-handicap, even though he just began playing two years ago. Brindza, whose favorite golfer is Rickie Fowler, said he sees parallels between kicking and golfing.

“It’s the exact same thing,” Brindza said, citing similarities not just with the requisite on-your-own mental toughness but also with eye placement, follow-through and hip orientation. “I treat my drive like it’s my kickoff. I treat my field goals like it’s my 9-iron.”

Of course, Brindza is far from a man of his word. He’s far too busy to work on all three phases of kicking.

Brindza has never let it affect him. He’s always had the leg strength, Brindza said. “But it’s been accuracy that pushed me to get better.”

Brindza has also developed the trust of Irish head coach Brian Kelly. Brindza said he is always in Kelly’s ear on the sideline toward the end of drives, prodding Kelly to just “take the three points and get out of here.”

“You got this?” Kelly will ask Brindza.

“Yes,” Brindza replies.

“Are you sure?” Kelly double-checks, as if Brindza’s answer will change.

Brindza says he could hit from 65 yards away in a game with the wind at his back. He says he hit a 74-yarder this past summer with a snap and a hold, not just a stationary stick.

With his 45-yard field goal in the fourth quarter of Saturday’s win over Stanford, Brindza pulled into a tie with Carney for 51 career made field goals.

“This record is a blessing,” Brindza said. “John Carney was one of my idols growing up and he still is. He was so accurate, pin-point accurate. Being able to take that record is a blessing but at the same time I couldn’t care less just because I want to be 60-0 rather than have a record.”

The ‘dilemma’

Brindza still works with Kornblue here and there through the summer, now honing multiple crafts. During nearly every session, Brindza and Kornblue will work on all three phases of his game — kickoffs, field goals and punting.

But Kornblue said the pair will soon need to start deciding which area Brindza will focus on. He’ll almost assuredly handle kickoffs in his pursuit of the next level, but will he punt or kick field goals?

“It’s actually a dilemma that we’re in,” Kornblue said. “There’s nobody in the NFL that does all three.”

Brindza is well aware of that. But that’s not stopping him from setting his sights high. Indianapolis Colts punter Pat McAfee wants to perform all three, Brindza said. But so far, no one does it.

“If somebody takes a risk on that, it’ll be the best risk they’ll ever take,” Brindza said.

The odds have been stacked against him before.

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Carlisle helps Irish in various ways after transfer

Irish senior receiver Amir Carlisle returns a kickoff during Notre Dame’s 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland.

By KIT LOUGHRAN
Sports Writer

From USC to Notre Dame, from running back to receiver, Amir Carlisle has switched schools and positions en route to finding his place in the Irish offense. Carlisle’s on-field presence has been made known during his third year at Notre Dame. While he missed his sophomore season due to an ankle injury, Carlisle made his first appearance as running back in 2013. Carlisle played in all 13 games, carrying the ball 47 times for 204 yards with an average of 4.3 yards per carry. However, the 2013 season ended less advantageously than it began for Carlisle after his fourth-quarter fumble in a close game with Purdue on Sept. 14. The following spring, the decision was made that the Santa Clara, California native would switch positions to receiver — a decision that would transform his career.

It’s been a learning experience, definitely,” Carlisle said. “A new position is a new perspective. It’s been a cool position switch, but it has its challenges, definitely,” Carlisle said. “It’s about trusting in God and trusting in my training staff to get me back on the field.”

Unfortunately, I’ve spent a good amount of my career with our training staff, and they’ve done a great job throughout my career. Carlisle said he will continue his football career next year at Notre Dame, as he still has one year of eligibility left. While his ultimate goal of reaching the NFL remained steady during his transfer from USC to Notre Dame, Carlisle said he was grateful for the opportunity to shed USC’s cardinal and gold for the Irish blue and gold — despite trading in the Southern California sunshine for the South Bend winters.

Irish senior receiver Amir Carlisle returns a kickoff during Notre Dame’s 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland.

“Notre Dame was always a dream out of high school, especially when Notre Dame was recruiting me,” he said. “It’s such a prestigious school, with all its tradi- tions — academically and athletically.

“The opportunity presented itself while I was at USC, and it was kind of a Godsend that I couldn’t pass up the opportunity, so I decided to come here. The weather is obviously an adjustment, but otherwise my experience here has been a very solid experience.”

As the senior helps the Irish close out their regular season, Carlisle expressed humility for his on-field success, attributing his achievements to the support provided by team- mates, faith, and especially his family.

“I have two great Christian parents who have really raised me well, and I just want to thank them for all they’ve done and for getting me to the position that I’m at today,” Carlisle said.

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Irish senior receiver Amir Carlisle returns a kickoff during Notre Dame’s 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland.

knocked the 5-foot-10, 190-lb. receiver out early during the Purdue game this sea- son. But Carlisle said he has continued to keep his head up and his focus as strong as ever.

“It’s just about leaning on God and my relationship with God as a Christian as well as staying mentally strong with God as a heal- er,” Carlisle said. “It’s about trusting in God and trusting in my training staff to get me back on the field.”

Carlisle said he will continue his football career next year at Notre Dame, as he still has one year of eligibility left. While his ultimate goal of reaching the NFL remained steady during his transfer from USC to Notre Dame, Carlisle said he was grateful for the opportunity to shed USC’s cardinal and gold for the Irish blue and gold — despite trading in the Southern California sunshine for the South Bend winters.

“Unfortunately, I’ve spent a good amount of my career with our training staff, and they’ve done a great job throughout my career.” Carlisle said. “But hopefully, God has bigger and better things in plan.

“My ultimate goal is to help the team win in whatever way I can. I’m not a guy who’s really focused on sta- tistics, but whether it says W at the end of the day in the win column.”

Carlisle isn’t only helping the Irish on their road to victory in his new slot re- ceiver position. He has also become an important asset on kick returns. He leads the Irish on the season with 491 yards on 23 kick returns, averaging 21.3 yards per return. Carlisle re- corded a career-long 47-yard return off the opening kick- off against Purdue on Sept. 13, which marked the longest Notre Dame kickoff return since former Irish running back George Atkinson’s 47-yard return against Purdue last season. Against Arizona State alone, Carlisle had four kickoff returns for 102 yards.

“Kick return has always been fun for me,” Carlisle said. “It’s always an opportu- nity to make a play, and it’s really a team unit because it takes all 11 guys on the field in order to have success. “So, it’s definitely been fun, and it’s been a blessing that the coaches have trusted me to this position. The best is yet to come for our kickoff return. However, Carlisle’s jour- ney has not been all smooth as it may appear on paper. Since leaving USC after the 2011 season, Carlisle has suffered from ankle, col- larbone and MCL injuries. For most, sitting out an en- tire season due to injury as Carlisle did his sophomore year would demotivate, as would the MCL injury that...
Collinsworth captains team through injuries

By ALEX CARSON
Sports Writer

As far as the Brian Kelly era at Notre Dame goes, graduate student safety Austin Collinsworth has been a mainstay. When the Fort Thomas, Kentucky, native committed to Notre Dame less than a week after Kelly was hired, he became the coach’s first commit at his new job.

“I always loved Brian Kelly when he was the coach at Cincinnati,” Collinsworth said. “I just didn’t really want to go there because I wanted to go to a school with great academic prestige ... so when he moved and went to Notre Dame, me, it was no brainer. A coach I loved and a school I loved — it was just easy.”

Of course, with that academic prestige comes a lot of work — especially when juggling the class load with the football load.

“It’s been tough,” Collinsworth said. “Certain times more than others, but you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. ... It’s hard at any level at this school, but certainly with the time requirements, you’ve got to sacrifice sleep and get the work done and just find a way.”

Collinsworth’s career did not start out at his familiar safety role. When he first came to campus in 2010, he was viewed as a receiver before quickly switching over to the defensive side of the ball.

“It was a whole lot of working, a whole lot of time in the film room,” Collinsworth said. “You know, one year I’m learning route combinations, and the next year, I’m learning how to cover them. But it does all kind of fit in ... so it did help me out.”

Last Saturday against Northwestern, Collinsworth recorded his first career interception against the Irish defense’s streak of 13 straight games without one.

“It was my first college touchdown, so it was pretty cool; I’m not gonna lie,” Collinsworth said. However, for the safety, the moment is not clear-cut as his best in an Irish uniform. In each of the final three games of last season — BYU, Stanford and the Pinstripe Bowl against Rutgers — Collinsworth recorded an interception, becoming the first Irish player to notch an interception in three straight games since Kyle McCarthy did it in 2009. Not to mention that his trio of interceptions started the Irish defense’s streak of 13 straight games with one, the nation’s second longest active streak entering this weekend.

“They’re both great moments,” Collinsworth said. “It’s hard to put one over the other.”

Collinsworth was named one of four team captains, along with senior running back Cam McDaniel, senior defensive lineman Nick Martin and junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day.

“They named Sheldon first, and I obviously knew that there were only two defensive captains, so I got a little nervous, you know, I was hoping to be captain,” Collinsworth said. “I wasn’t sure, but then it ended up happening, and it was a pretty awesome surprise.”

While not necessarily making it a goal to be named one, Collinsworth has had experiences from past mistakes that he wanted to share with the team as a captain.

“I always wanted to lead the guys and have them look up to me,” Collinsworth said. “I’m an older guy. I think I have a lot of wisdom from over the years, screwing a lot of things up, so it’s nice to be able to pass that down and have it recognized.”

But thanks to a pair of injuries, Collinsworth has played in only three of Notre Dame’s 10 games this season and has had to take on more of a coach-type role to carry on his captain duties.

“I spend time watching film with the guys, getting them ready for games, coaching them on the sidelines,” Collinsworth said. “It’s not the most glamorous job in the world, but that’s kind of what I signed up for, and I think it’s what everyone expects out of me as a captain — just doing whatever I can whenever I can.”

Despite his experience this season with watching film and coaching his teammates on the sidelines, Collinsworth said he has no interest in going into coaching — at least not immediately.

“Right now, I would say there’s no way I’m going into coaching,” Collinsworth said. “Now, that could change. I’ve just been so immersed in football for so long. I think it’s going to be nice to take a break, get away from it for a little while.”

Collinsworth, who is currently enrolled in the MBA program, said he is still unsure about his path after graduation.

“I spend time watching film and just find a way to get ready for the next step,” Collinsworth said. As Kelly’s first commit nearly five years ago, Collinsworth has been around for the entire evolution of the program under the head coach and said he thinks the program has transformed dramatically during Kelly’s tenure.

“The culture of this program has changed 180 degrees,” Collinsworth said. “When I first got here, it was all about, ‘How do I get to the NFL?’ people didn’t care that much about the team; it was a lot more individual-based, and every year, it’s taken a step towards more of a team, more of a team. And this year, you hardly hear about an individual goal from anybody ... and that’s a championship-caliber program, and I think that’s what we built here.

“I really hope that, going forward, this is continued and built on until we are back in our former glory.”
Prince Shembo and defensive lineman Ishaq Williams. Last season, Councell was primed to have his best year at Notre Dame, rotating in the starting outside linebacker position with Williams and then-freshman Jaylon Smith. He played in nine games before injuring his left ACL against Navy on Nov. 2, 2013.

Councell was having a career game against the Midshipmen, tallying five tackles, a tackle for loss and a pass breakup before his untimely injury. Councell said it wasn’t easy for him to accept the significance of the injury, which sidelined him for the rest of the season.

Before talking about his injury, Councell stood quietly for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out a way to describe an incident he wishes he could have avoided.

“It was definitely a big setback,” Councell said with a sigh. “I was finally getting comfortable with the defense, getting playing time and starting for a starting job. From Air Force going into Navy, I had two big games, and getting hurt was just tough, but it is what it is.”

Councell admitted that there was a silver lining following his season-ending injury. His roommate, senior linebacker Jarrett Grace, suffered a broken tibia and fibula in a win over Arizona State a few weeks before his injury. As both of them recovered from their respective injuries, their friendship grew by spending much of their time together. Councell said they called themselves the “cripple crew.”

“We were always together with our crutches and scooters walking around campus, so the injury had its good and bad,” he said.

A season removed from the ACL injury, Councell said he still doesn’t think he is 100 percent back to full recovery. Coming into a new 4-3 defensive scheme under new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder, Councell had to learn a new defense and play a different role than he did in the last three years.

“I’m not going to use it as an excuse, but I definitely don’t feel the same as I did before,” Councell said.

Despite the changes and return from injury, Councell said he believes his role is still important on the team. With Jaylon Smith in his second year as a starter, Councell put it on himself to help develop Smith and other young players that have had to contribute early. As a mentor for others, Councell said he feels like the locker room atmosphere is only getting better as the players around him continue to grow, on and off the field.

“My biggest takeaway from this season is the camaraderie,” Councell said. “I love being with these guys and watching the young guys coming in and develop real quick. I try my best to help them with the pressure and help them learn, but kicking back with them is probably the thing I’m going to miss the most.”

Despite not wanting to get away from home as a senior in high school, Councell said he feels like he built another home here. Still undecided about whether he will return next season, Councell said he knows he has left his mark on Notre Dame’s football program and will not forget the memories he created during his four years here.

“I (Ben Councell) will be remembered for going out and pushing it 100 percent of the time,” Councell said. “Pushing through pain and going out there every single day, giving it my all, is what I hope to be remembered for.”

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Councell feels at home in unlikely place

By MANNY DE JESUS
Sports Writer

More than 600 miles away from his hometown in Asheville, North Carolina, senior linebacker Ben Councell is convinced that Notre Dame has become a second home for him.

“I’ve never really heard of anything on Notre Dame previously to being recruited for football,” Councell said. “I watched Rudy, and that was really the only thing I’ve ever really known about Notre Dame, so when they came up and they started recruiting me, it was strange. But then all I had to do was come up for a visit with my dad, and I was sold.”

Ranked in Rivals.com’s top 100 players in the class of 2011, Councell was an all-state linebacker at A.C. Reynolds High School and an ESPN four-star recruit. He received interest from Auburn, Georgia Tech, North Carolina, North Carolina State and South Carolina, and Notre Dame was the only school outside of his region that he received interest from. Councell said his only concern about attending Notre Dame was how far from home it was.

“Compared to all the other schools, it was a different culture here,” Councell said. “It was orderly, the coaching staff here was really interested in creating a family, and the academics here is next to none. It was really weird for me because I was a homebody. I grew up in North Carolina, and I didn’t like leaving home, so coming here was a huge step for me.”

Councell entered the program as an outside linebacker who looked to fit well in Bob Diaco’s 3-4 defense. However, he redshirted his freshman year behind a defense led by former Irish linebacker Manti Te’o, defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore and safety Harrison Smith. Despite not playing, Councell said he learned more than he could imagine watching and practicing with a defense that would go on to lead Notre Dame to a national championship.

“I learned a lot that year,” Councell said. “At the time, I didn’t think we understood how good we really were, but now looking back, it’s easy to see that we were a good team. It was cool being able to play with them and learn a lot from them, and of course, going to the national championship game was surreal.”

Councell had won a state title in the 4A North Carolina football division in 2009, but to go on to play in the BCS national championship Game was unbelievable, he said. Although he was a part of the team’s run to a title appearance, Councell was still limited on the field, appearing in all 12 games and backing up former Irish linebacker
Farley finds success with position change

By ISAAC LORTON
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor’s Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Nov. 14 edition of The Observer.

Whatever may change on the field, Matthias Farley remains the same.

“Sweet beard pic,” Farley said as he wrapped up his photo shoot Wednesday.

Farley’s facial follicles are a talent of his, he noted.

“Every time I have had a beard since I started playing football, I have played better than if I shave my face, historically,” Farley said.

The easy-going, self-assured Charlotte, North Carolina, native said it is this nature that allows him to weather the chaos of Notre Dame football.

“I have been the exact same way since I’ve got here,” Farley said. “When you’re going through change, if you’re grounded and find out who you are as a person outside of football — because there’s so many things that can change on a whim in this game — you can’t be serious all of the time. So I think it has helped me because I like to goof around and have a good time. Just keeping that in mind and understanding that there’s a lot of things at stake in the game of football (is important), but just remember to enjoy it and understand it’s a blessing to be able to play it, especially to be able to play it here, (is also important)”

Farley has played four different positions in an Irish uniform and started at three of them. As a freshman, Farley was on the practice squad as a redshirt receiver who often watched away games from his dorm, Carroll Hall. As a sophomore, Farley was asked to play safety, and shortly thereafter, he was thrown into a starting role after injuries to former Irish safety Jamoris Slaughter and graduate student safety Austin Collinsworth.

Farley excelled in his new role with 49 tackles, an interception and a crucial seven-yard tackle-for-loss against Stanford in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame’s 20-13 win in October 2012. As a junior, much was expected from Farley, but he did not quite live up to those high expectations throughout the season. Farley said he placed those lofty expectations on himself as well, but such thoughts were hindrances at times.

“I think I had to grow up a lot,” Farley said of his play last season. “When you get put in a situation where you do well and then you come back and things are expected of you and you don’t do as well or don’t live up to it, it’s easy to take it hard on yourself and harp on things that you should probably let go.”

As a senior, Farley was asked to play the nickelback corner position under new defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder. The position was much more complex compared to the nickel corner in former defensive coordinator Bob Diaco’s system, and after watching a lot of film, VanGorder asked Farley to take on that role. Used to changing positions, Farley said he took it all in stride.

“I saw it as a way to start over,” Farley said of his position change. “It’s a new coordinator, a new system. It’s kind of been the story of my career: starting over. I had no reservations about when he said he wanted to move me. I was on board 100 percent.”

Farley said he was much more prepared for his senior year because he put his time at Notre Dame into perspective. His even-keeled demeanor has contributed to his play this season, which has included 32 tackles, 3.5 sacks, 6.5 tackles-for-loss and three interceptions.

“I came in (this season) with a different mindset that I was just going to enjoy this because there’s somebody somewhere — probably thousands of people who would trade with me in a day — and trade with any of us, not just myself. It goes so fast… I feel like I just got here. So really I just enjoy every day, give my all every day and try to encourage everybody else around me.”

It is through all of his trials and experiences that Farley has become a calming source and advisor for his young teammates and new starters on the Irish defense, he said.

“I feel like I have gone through a lot of things that they have gone through,” Farley said. “My sophomore year, I got thrown in due to an injury, and last year, I had a lot of ups and downs. So having gone through that, and seeing guys when they get done, it’s really easy for me to pick up on it because I was right there really not too long ago at all.”

Farley remains rooted in and inspired by the lessons his family has taught him, he said. His memories cover his left arm, chest and back in the form of tattoos. On his biceps, his very first tattoo, which reads “Farley Semper,” or “Farley Forever,” surrounded by the outline of North Carolina reminds him of his family and home. The number “7” on his elbow represents his seven siblings. Coming off the “7,” a staircase climbs into the clouds of heaven in remembrance of his deceased brother, Titus. The poem, “Invictus,” on his back tells him “he is the master of [his] fate” and the “captain of [his] soul,” while the large Icarus on his shoulder reminds him to be humble and grounded, he said. These images map out how Farley became who he is as a person, he said.

“I think tattoos are the story of my life on my arm,” Farley said. “And it’s a constant reminder of people and things that have had huge impacts on my life. Just in a visual form… it’s a great reminder to pull me back to home base of what I have gone through, where I have been and where I want to go, and the people who have helped me get there.”

The tattoos add to Farley’s unique style, something about which his teammates make frequent comments.

“I think it’s kind of comical because I wear the same things every day,” Farley said. “Every once in a while I throw a curveball and wear some cowboy boots.”

“There’s not too much variety, I just own it. Just rock it.”

With his style comes his music. Farley has a great affinity for music, one he has been trying to express by playing the ukulele since sophomore receiver Corey Robinson.

“I love music,” Farley said. “I don’t think the world should exist if there wasn’t music in it. I have never been musically gifted — I am not very good at the ukulele — but I really enjoy playing. I think music is applicable to anything and everything in life, whether it is good or bad.”

Learning the ukulele has not been as easy as changing a position, Farley said.

“It’s honestly a frustration because Corey Robinson is still so much better at it than me,” Farley said. “I always wanted to play an instrument. I joke around all the time and say I’m really good at the kazoo, which I actually am, but that doesn’t take too much talent. It’s been cool to learn something new, pick something up.”

Music connects to all things, even football, Farley said.

“When you’re playing a game like football, [music] definitely adds to it, even if it is just a pre-game soundtrack,” Farley said. “If you hear it every time before you go out, it kind of gets your mind set right, adds consistency.”

The consistency and uniqueness that define Farley as a person have shown up on the field this season, as he has consistently made the big play when most needed. Farley summed up his personality and play in his description of his beard.

“If you have a gift, you should share it.”

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Matthias Farley celebrates his first of four interceptions this season during Notre Dame’s 40-17 win against Rice on Aug. 30.
Investigation mars Hardy’s senior season

By BRIAN HARTNETT
Managing Editor

Notre Dame senior safety Eilar Hardy’s time at the University has been characterized by waiting. Hardy waited to get his shot at playing time in his first two seasons, during which he didn’t see the field. After a junior season in which he became a contributor in the secondary, he again had to wait during his senior season — this time, it was to find out if he would return after he was held out as part of an investigation into “suspected academic dishonesty.” Hardy was cleared by the NCAA to participate in competition Nov. 7, and he made his season debut the following day against Arizona State. Hardy recorded his only tackle of the season to date against the Sun Devils. Hardy did not see any playing time during his first two seasons.

He appeared in 10 games last season, starting against Pitt and BYU. Hardy made 26 tackles, including one tackle for loss, last season. He accounted for 15 tackles in his two starts, recording a career-high eight tackles against BYU and seven stops against Pitt. A Reynoldsburg, Ohio native, the 5-foot-11, 202-pound Hardy comes from an athletic background. His father, Bill Hardy, played baseball for Youngstown State, and his brother, Terrance Brown, played receiver at Michigan State from 1998 to 2001. Another brother, Eisen Hardy, played cornerback and safety at Ohio Dominican from 2009 to 2012.

Hardy was named to the Associated Press Ohio Division I all-state first-team as a defensive back for Pickerington Central High School in 2010. He recorded 63 tackles, six pass breakups and four interceptions during his senior season.

Hardy is enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters, majoring in sociology.

Notre Dame declined to make Hardy available for an interview.

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Golson makes anticipated return after suspension

By MARY GREEN
Sports Editor

Editor’s Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Aug. 29 edition of The Observer.

“Am I having too much fun?” Everett Golson can’t help but laugh as photo after photo is snapped of him. Strapping up his helmet, tugging on the face shield, he’s focusing on a receiver on 3rd-and-long — and then Golson even looks into the lens like he’s a model.

It’s clear a career in modeling — and the attention that comes with it — is leaps and bounds from the one he was a year ago.

But according to his coach, he wasn’t as good of a quarterback as he is now.

“He’s definitely made some strides,” Kelly said March 3 after Golson’s first practice back from his suspension. “I think there must have been some real good teaching there that has allowed him that opportunity to come in and have a better sense of everything.”

That teaching came at the hands of George Whitfield Jr., the “quarterback guru” who made sure Golson stayed sharp in his absence.

Whitfield has worked with some of the NFL’s finest quarterbacks, such as Ben Roethlisberger and Andrew Luck, and with him, Golson was able to fine-tune his skills out in California.

That’s allowed him to take on a more complex offense this season, which will utilize his speed and that of his receivers.

“It’s tremendously fast,” Golson said. “Two years ago, we didn’t run at as near a fast pace. It was more conservative, in a sense — slow the ball down, run the ball, that type of thing. Now, we want to be really aggressive on the offensive side.”

That improvement has helped the Irish as a whole, Day said.

“Definitely took over the role as a leader on the offense and built them to be a better offense as the team’s other No. 5,” Kelly said March 13 after Golson’s first practice back from his suspension. “He definitely took over the leadership role in the offense.”

In his first year seeing playing time for Notre Dame, Golson was the starting quarterback on the depth chart. But he had that privilege taken away in a game against Miami on Oct. 6, 2012, for being late to practice.

“He wasn’t doing the things leaders do,” Kelly said at the team’s media day Aug. 19.

In Golson’s defense, the 2012 squad wasn’t lacking leadership. That improvement has helped the Irish as a whole, Day said.

“I think 2012 was a little different,” Golson said. “He’s always asking us, ‘What did you do here, what did you do there?’ to make sure he doesn’t make them again.”

Golson said he now sees the value of the privilege he lost in 2012, when he tended to rely on his mobility rather than a thorough knowledge of the playbook to pick up first downs.

Day said that dedication is now paying off.

“It was more conservative, in a sense — slow the ball down, run the ball, that type of thing. Now, we want to be really aggressive on the offensive side.”

That improvement has helped the Irish as a whole, Day said.

“When you’re a team, that’s what I’m trying to prepare myself for is just understanding that the crowd is there but also dialing myself in and performing my task at hand.”

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Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson tries to sneak past Rice redshirt sophomore linebacker Tabari McGaskey during Notre Dame’s season-opening, 48-17 victory against the Owls on Aug. 30.

In 2012, Everett Golson was the starting quarterback for a team whose first loss of the season came in the BCS National Championship Game.

Golson is as important to the offense as the team’s other No. 5 was to the defense.

But he wasn’t a leader.

Irish head coach Brian Kelly said Golson was “spotty” in attendance and occasionally late for meetings.

In his first year seeing playing time for Notre Dame, Golson was the starting quarterback on the depth chart. But he had that privilege taken away in a game against Miami on Oct. 6, 2012, for being late to practice.

“After the game, they were in that leadership role,” Golson said at the team’s media day Aug. 19.

In Golson’s defense, the 2012 squad wasn’t lacking leadership, with leaders that included Heisman Trophy runner-up and quarterback guru to pick up first downs.

“We had Zack; we had guys that were in that leadership role.”

This year, the quarterback said he saw a hole and decided to fill it.

“For the simple fact that we don’t have as many guys — all those seniors that are now gone,” he said Aug. 19. “I look up now, and I’m the senior, so I have to be the leader of this team.”

Golson said he now sees the value of the privilege he lost in 2012, when he tended to rely on his mobility rather than a thorough knowledge of the playbook to pick up first downs.

Day said that dedication is now paying off.

“Definitely took over the role as a leader on the offense and built them to be a better team, and he shows that through his vocal skills and his playing,” Day said.

But Day said Golson’s natural abilities may be his greatest strength.

“He’s committed to everything,” Day said. “I’ve had time to see different things, being away from the game.”

And he readily shares his appreciation to learn and compete at Notre Dame once more.

“I’m so grateful for just the opportunity to be back here because it could have been another way,” he said.

In 2012, Everett Golson had a 130.0 quarterback rating.

He averaged more than 200 yards through the air each game.

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Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson looks downfield during Notre Dame’s 30-14 win against Purdue on Sept. 13.

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Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson looks downfield during Notre Dame’s 30-14 win against Purdue on Sept. 13.
By ZACH KLONSINSKI
Sports Writer

To put it simply, the 2014 season did not unfold the way linebacker Jarrett Grace planned for his senior year.

After sitting his freshman campaign and seeing mostly special teams action his sophomore season, the Cincinnati native began come into his own by former Irish linebacker and All-American Manti Te’o. He was able to ‘see’ a lot more out there, and senior linebacker Joe Schmidt was out there, too. Joe just really stepped into the spotlight this year. Honestly, anyone who knows Joe wasn’t surprised by that because he’s always been diligent, prepared. He’s really intelligent.

“At the same time, with [sophomore linebacker] Jaylon Smith, all these guys, just trying to take what coach says during the meetings or what our install is and be able to really watch that because it’s harder for them out there. They’re actually doing the work, running around, so I can just try and remember those fine details and pull them over to the side and say this, or after practice try to share what I saw with them — really in any way I can just to help out.”

Six years younger than his older brother, Grace said he was always trying to do what his brother did growing up. That meant strapping on the football pads when he was four and playing pee-wee football for the Northside KFC Rebels and the Colerain Little Cards.

“I didn’t know anything,” Grace said of the moment. “You go from being confident in your abilities, feeling good — school was going good, too, that was a huge part of it. Everything in life just seemed to be falling in all the right places.”

Grace’sibia fractured in four places, and he was carted off the field to a local hospital, where he underwent surgery while moving to Notre Dame, Grace came with him.

“Leaving Cincinnati was hard just because, being from a big German-Catholic family, family is really important to you. You want to be there,” Grace said. “Cincinnati was being a lot of success … setting records at the school, and I was like, ‘Wow, I could be a part of that.’”

“But Notre Dame is just different. People are going to say that to you. Everyone knows that … it’s a decision that goes beyond just the fun you have playing football — which is great, but I was thinking more about the relationships that I could build that would really just transform my life over the long-term.”

While it might have been a setback for this season, Grace said his leg is on a road to a full recovery. “It’s doing fantastic,” Grace said. “I had some X-rays this past week. The bones look great, so that’s one part of the puzzle. Just working on the muscular and the nerves part of it, just get those on board and cooperating. So it looks optimistic.”

With one more year of eligibility remaining after sitting out his freshman year, Grace said he will be playing football again in the future. “Obviously, the coaching staff decides who they’re going to bring back, but I’m definitely going to play some more football in my future,” he said. “And I’m going to play some good football. That’s my mindset.”

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Irish senior linebacker Jarrett Grace (59) slaps hands with sophomore linebacker Jaylon Smith during Notre Dame’s season-opening 28-6 victory against Temple on Aug. 31, 2013 at Notre Dame Stadium.
Hanratty carries on legacy at Notre Dame

By RYAN KLAUS
Sports Writer

Senior offensive lineman Conor Hanratty has always been around Notre Dame.

Long before his career began, Hanratty's father, Terry, was a three-year starting quarterback for the Irish in the late 1960s, winning a national championship in 1966, finishing third in Heisman Trophy voting in 1968 and earning consensus All-America honors in 1968.

"Growing up a Notre Dame fan was great," Hanratty said. "My dad is a great role model for me, and I always knew what Notre Dame had to offer [from] visiting here so much."

Despite the fact that his father's playing days are engrained in Notre Dame lore, Conor Hanratty said he tried to stay away from that legacy when molding over offers in his recruiting process.

"I kind of put that aside and visited other schools and took other visits, knowing in mind what Notre Dame was all about," he said. "At the end of the day, it was the best place for me. I visited a bunch of great schools that all had a lot to offer, but I felt like this was the best."  

The New Canaan, Connecticut, native started his own Notre Dame career in 2011 in a position much different than that of his father's — on the offensive line.

At 6-foot-4 and 310 lb., Hanratty came in as part of head coach Brian Kelly's second recruiting class at Notre Dame.

As a member of some deep offensive line units at Notre Dame, it took some time before Hanratty saw game action on the field. In his freshman season, he did not play at all; however, as a sophomore in 2012, Hanratty began getting opportunities on special teams.

"It's always good to get out on the field and play when you can," Hanratty said of his early opportunities with special teams.

It appeared that Hanratty was headed for a similar fate during his junior season in 2013. The Irish offensive line was deep again and returned multiple starters from the team that played for the national championship the year before.

For the first half of the 2013 season, Hanratty's work was on special teams. As he waited on the line finally began to appear, with two starters — former offensive lineman Christian Watt and current graduate student offensive lineman Chris Watt — both battling injuries during the final half of the year, opportunities to play on the field and play when you can, "Hanratty said of his early opportunities with special teams.

He appeared in each of Notre Dame's final six games during his junior season, starting four times.

Hanratty contributed to what was overall a successful season for the Notre Dame offensive line. As a group, the unit allowed just eight sacks, which ranked second among FBS teams for fewest sacks allowed.

Building off his performance in 2013, Hanratty came into the 2014 season as a starter for the Irish at left guard. However, the offensive line as a whole did not have near the success at the beginning of 2014 as it had in 2013, and eventually the coaching staff made some changes to the unit.

Following Notre Dame's win over Purdue on Sept. 13, a shake-up resulted in a revamped offensive line for the Irish, which featured three new players in new spots.

Unfortunately for Hanratty, he was moved to the bench because of the switches, leaving him in a similar spot to the one he was in at the beginning of last season — the role of a backup who will immediately take over if injuries become prevalent.

"It feels as you could imagine," Hanratty said of his move to the sideline. "Not playing kind of sucks, but I'll just do whatever the team needs for me, and whenever I can contribute, I'll contribute. I'll be ready to be play when my number's called, just like last year."

Off the field, Hanratty has plans to earn his degree from the Mendoza College of Business next spring. Specifically, he is studying management-consulting, noting that a big influence in him choosing the major is the variety of potential career paths it opens up.

"I feel like it's a very adaptive major," Hanratty said. "There are a diverse amount of options for having success with it."

When Hanratty looks back on his experiences at Notre Dame, he said he recognizes how special an opportunity playing for the Irish is and how captivating it can be for recruits.

"Part of the appeal of Notre Dame is that you're always on TV, have sold out crowds and have all the tradition," Hanratty said. "Being able to run out of the tunnel is something special. There's nothing like it, and it's just great being a part of that."

Overall, Hanratty said he couldn't single out one moment as his favorite memory in his career.

"It's tough to pick a top moment," he said. "All wins that I've been a part of have given me a great feeling in terms of being able to contribute to the team and getting to play with some of my best friends."

Hanratty's last game at Notre Dame Stadium this season will be the Louisville game on Saturday, and he said he is looking forward to being able to share some of the last few moments of his career with his former Notre Dame quarterback father and the rest of his family.

"It's just going to be great to have my parents and my family there," he said. "Senior Day is special for me and them."
CARDINALS PASSING

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Will Gardner, Louisville’s starter in seven of its 10 games, won’t play after suffering a knee injury Saturday in the Cardinals’ 38-19 win over Boston College. But Louisville has a viable if inconsistent option in freshman quarterback Reggie Bonnafon.

Gardner had injured his knee earlier in the season against FIU, and Bonnafon earned his first career start in the next game against Wake Forest, a 20-10 win for Louisville. Bonnafon also started against Syracuse and Clemson. Bonnafon’s best passing performance came against Wake Forest when he threw for 206 yards. He also threw for 174 yards against Syracuse. Bonnafon has thrown for only four touchdowns on the season, and Gardner took over partway through the loss to Clemson.

The Irish secondary has had its struggles this year, but Bonnafon has yet to turn in an eye-opening passing performance.

Senior wide receiver DeVante Parker is the Cardinals’ most dangerous receiver, but the rest of the Cardinals receivers have not been nearly as productive in terms of yardage.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

CARDINALS OFFENSIVE COACHING

Cardinals offensive coordinator Shawn Watson has guided a high-scoring offense this season. Louisville has an 84.4 percent conversion rate in the red zone and has scored 31.6 points per game. He also has coached two very different quarterbacks with success this season.

Bonnafon has running ability that could give the Irish fits with the right play calls, as happened against Boston College. Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder and Notre Dame’s defense haven’t been able to pull the right strings to stop similarly mobile quarterbacks this season, and this could turn into a problem Saturday.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

CARDINALS SPECIAL TEAMS

Louisville has performed well on returns, and redshirt junior kicker John Wallace hasn’t missed a point-after attempt all season. He has made 13 of 16 field goals with one of his misses coming between 30 and 39 yards and two between 40 and 49.

Notre Dame’s coverage units have been solid, however, allowing no punt or kickoff return touchdowns. The Irish will be able to limit the Cardinals’ return game and win this part of the matchup.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

CARDINALS SCHEDULE (7-3)

Sept. 1 Miami (Fl.) (W 31-13)
Sept. 8 Murray State (W 66-21)
Sept. 13 @ Virginia (L 23-21)
Sept. 20 @ FIU (W 34-3)
Sept. 27 Wake Forest (W 20-10)
Oct. 3 @ Syracuse (W 28-6)
Oct. 11 @ Clemson (L 23-17)
Oct. 18 NC State (W 30-18)
Oct. 30 Florida State (L 42-31)
Nov. 8 @ Boston College (W 38-19)
Nov. 22 @ Notre Dame
Nov. 29 Kentucky

My first home game as a Notre Dame student was a 23-20 loss to south Florida in 2011. That game featured five Irish turnovers and sloppy play. I expect Saturday’s game to feature much of the same.

Do I think Notre Dame has improved since 2011? Certainly. But does that mean this team doesn’t have some of the same issues present in 2011? Nope.

The Irish are in a historically bad stretch defensively, at least by points allowed, and can’t keep from hurting themselves defensively.

These shortcomings both spell disaster against a Louisville team that averages more than 33 points per game and leads the nation in passes intercepted.

And it means the result of my final home game will be similar to that of my first home game.

FINAL SCORE: Louisville 38, Notre Dame 27

The loss to Arizona State: tough, but the team still had playoff potential.

The loss to Arizona State: tough, but the team still had a shot at an elite bowl game.

The loss to Northwestern: tough, plain and simple. The Irish are banged up physically without senior linebacker Joe Schmidt and now junior defensive lineman Sheldon Day, and they’re also psychologically shaken. Brian Kelly’s rationale in going for two against Northwestern, after all, was a lack of confidence in the kicking game.

But Louisville will be missing its starting quarterback. And the Cardinals have lost two of four. And the Irish are playing their final home game. Notre Dame will respond with a win.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 35, Louisville 28
IRISH PASSING

After a four-interception debacle against Arizona State, the Irish offensive line provided Everett Golson with more decision-making room and time against Northwestern. Golson threw one interception against the Wildcats but also threw for 287 yards. And even against Arizona State, he threw for a season-high 446 yards. In four of his last four games, Golson has thrown three touchdown passes, the exception being Arizona State.

At this point, one can feel confident Golson will produce. His lowest-yardage game was a 226-yard performance against Michigan, and he hasn’t thrown fewer than two touchdowns in any game.

Louisville leads FBS with 22 interceptions, even better than Northwestern’s No. 22 rank with 12 interceptions. If the offensive line does a good job protecting Golson, however, he has a chance to play a clean game and keep miscues from marring his productive numbers. He also has an arsenal of receiving options in wide receivers Will Fuller, Corey Robinson, Chris Brown, C.J. Prosise and Amir Carlisle as well as tight end Ben Koyack. Fuller has amassed 853 yards on the season and has been part of several long plays for the Irish. Notre Dame should win some of the matchups against Louisville’s secondary.

EDGE: NOTRE DAME

IRISH SPECIAL TEAMS

The kicking unit’s woes hurt Notre Dame again versus Northwestern. Senior kicker Kyle Brindza’s field goal percentage is now 57.9 percent on the season. He hasn’t benefited from sloppy holds and inconsistent blocking on his attempts.

Kelly demonstrated how much the kicking unit has lost confidence when he elected to go for a two-point conversion against Northwestern while the Irish were leading by 11 points.

EDGE: LOUISVILLE

IRISH SCHEDULE (7-3)

Aug. 30 Rice (W 48-17)  
Sept. 6 Michigan (W 31-0)  
Sept. 13 vs. Purdue (W 30-14)  
Oct. 1 @ Florida State (L 34-31)  
Oct. 8 @ Arizona State (L 55-31)  
Nov. 1 vs. Navy (W 49-39)  
Nov. 15 Northwestern (L 43-40 OT)  
Nov. 22 Louisville  
Nov. 29 @ USC

Despite the dreary prospect of finishing 7-5 with losses to Louisville and USC to close out the season, I don’t think that will happen at home on senior day.

Although the Irish defense is banged up, with the loss of Sheldon Day, it will do just enough to stop the Louisville offense.

Everett Golson and the rest of the Notre Dame offense will limit its turnovers because that is what the game will come down to: the Irish not shooting themselves in the foot.

The Irish will pull this game for their seniors.

FINAL SCORE: Notre Dame 41, Louisville 38
Hegarty recovers from stroke, becomes starter

By MIKE GINOCCHIO
Sports Writer

They’re the immovable objects in the middle of the chaos. All that happens on the football field run through the offensive line, those five men in the middle without whom nothing happens for the offense. They are constantly fighting and scrapping with no plays off. This is in the middle of the action more than the center. It’s a colossal burden to shoulder, and it’s a job Irish senior Matt Hegarty performed day after day.

It’s a responsibility he doesn’t take lightly.

“First and foremost, you gotta make sure you get the play started with the snap,” Hegarty said. “And then secondly, you gotta give a guy on both sides. And if there’s a miscommunication, it falls back to you for not getting everyone on the same page.”

There’s a notably relaxed nature in how Hegarty describes his job. It’s an exhausting position, yet the way he presents it makes it seem like just another everyday routine, likely something he’s always been good at.

That’s because considering what he’s overcome, juggling plays and his leadership duties on the line all while handling a cagey defensive lineman in front of roaring fans is a walk in the park.

It was during Boston College when Hegarty first felt a sensation on Oct. 21, 2012 that Hegarty realized something was wrong. While most injuries or ailments for his position are relatively recognizable, this was different.

“We were in the weight room during the walkthrough, and I couldn’t talk,” Hegarty said. “I was trying to make calls on the line. Basically, the brain was thinking, but the mouth wasn’t moving.”

His teammates were quick to notice.

“We were about to get ready to go to practice, and I was still trying to talk to them,” Hegarty said. “I’m still having trouble with the words. But they didn’t really know what to think about it, and there they realized, ‘Something’s wrong with Matt.”’

They notified the coaching staff, and Hegarty was sent to the hospital. By then, Hegarty’s speech had returned, and the effects of whatever it was that had hit him were fading away enough for him to think that it was just a fluke. But still, he said he found himself thinking.

“What really scared me most was that I wasn’t sure because this is such a wide range of things,” Hegarty said. “I was like, ‘I’m young, it couldn’t be this or that or this.”’

In the middle of his attempts to figure out the problem, a possible diagnosis emerged.

“I’ve known people who’ve had strokes, and that was what this reminded me of,” Hegarty said. “Especially when I heard them describing trying to make a word.”

Did he think he was having a stroke?

“Slightly,” Hegarty said. “But at the same time, I’m a realist. I’m thinking, ‘I’m in my 20s. This has got to be something else.”’

The next morning, Hegarty went for an MRI to determine what had happened. After sitting in the room there for about an hour and a half (“I remember I had a cough stuck in my throat, and I couldn’t get it out. I just had to sit there,” he said), Hegarty said he emerged to hear the doctor tell him that he’d gotten off the phone with Matt’s mom, and she was flying out to be with him now.

He’d had a stroke.

“I was shocked,” Hegarty said. “It was surreal, especially since I was feeling so much better that I thought that whatever it was, it was done, and all I could think about was how soon do I get back on the field. And now, I’m given a scale of just how big the picture was now.”

Hegarty’s stroke had been brought on by the presence of two small holes in his heart that had existed there, undetected since birth. He underwent surgery on Dec. 14 of that year to repair the damage.

With the rest of his season that year immediately ruled out, Hegarty said it was best to stay involved with the team. He was always a presence on the sideline and traveled to Florida for the BCS National Championship Game. Of course, now there was more to juggle in addition to being a member of the Irish.

“I was going to team meetings, but I was also doing my rehab,” Hegarty said. “I worked out as much as I could, obviously with limitations on what I could and couldn’t do as far as pushing my limitations on what I could and couldn’t do as far as pushing my heart.”

It was that dedication and commitment that got him to Notre Dame in the first place; it would be that same dedication and commitment that would get him through this. And in the midst of it all, he found an unlikely — but all too fitting — source of inspiration: Tedy Bruschi, retired New England Patriots linebacker.

“Tedy Bruschi is a perfect example,” Hegarty said. “He had a stroke when he was playing, and he wrote a book about it. My parents got it when he was playing, and he wrote a book about it. My parents got it and brought on to me. I had the realization, this was different.”

Hegarty said he did his best to stay involved with the team. Hegarty had returned, and the effects of his stroke had been nothing more than the center. It’s a responsibility he doesn’t take lightly.

“I think really what helped there was the simple act of getting after it in practice.”

But nerves or not, Hegarty was back on the field for the Irish and proved everyone who had believed he could make it back was right.

“I sincerely feel like that’s one of the biggest things that helped me get through it,” Hegarty said. “Teammates here and my family and people back home and people that have had strokes have reached out. That was enough of a mountain to climb in and of itself, but several months into the season, injuries to the offensive line forced Hegarty to jump into the role of starter against BYU on Nov. 23. It was the first game Hegarty had ever started.

“That was my first time really jumping in and taking the reins,” Hegarty said. “My first concern was, with the wind and the snow, just to get the ball to [former Irish quarterback] Tommy Rees, and the rest of it kind of worked itself out.”

But more importantly, there was something that wasn’t on his mind.

“By that point, most of my nerves about my health were gone,” Hegarty said. “I had the season under my belt, and we were three to four months into the season. I didn’t have time to be nervous about that. It was just, ‘Hey, I just gotta go out and do my job.”’

Now, as Hegarty prepares for the home stretch of season, he said he can look back on just what he’s overcome to get to this point and start thinking about the future. Hegarty, a management and consulting major in the Mendoza College of Business, said he knows that wherever the road takes him, he’s been fortunate to be where he is today.

“I think the nice part about being here is that you don’t really have to choose a life without football,” Hegarty said. “Obviously. I would like to play for as long as I can. My goal here is to continue to get my education while I get myself the best opportunity to get ready for the next level. I know that in my back pocket, whenever the time comes that my career is over, I can look at a degree from Notre Dame. That’s really nice.”

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Hounshell stays positive despite injuries

By BENJAMIN HORVATH
Sports Writer

Most college football players would consider just one shoulder surgery a major setback, particularly even a career-ending injury. Senior defensive lineman Chase Hounshell has experienced this painful injury three times during his career at Notre Dame.

Born and bred in the heart of Big Ten football country, the Kirtland, Ohio, native was one of the state’s top players in high school. In 2010, the Lake Catholic High School alum earned AP Ohio Division I high school football honors. The versatile lineman entertained offers from Notre Dame and Big Ten schools, like Michigan State, Iowa and Wisconsin. Hounshell surprised many, however, when he committed to Florida.

However, after former Gators head coach Urban Meyer’s abrupt retirement prior to the 2010 season, Hounshell decommitted from Florida and decided the Irish.

“You could really feel a family atmosphere here at Notre Dame, and I had great opportunities to connect with teammates and coaches prior to beginning my career,” Hounshell said. “That’s what ultimately drew me to this school.”

During his freshman year, Hounshell saw action in seven games for the Irish because of injuries to defensive linemen. “I didn’t really expect to play as a freshman, so that came as a surprise,” Hounshell said.

Hounshell first saw game action in front of a sold-out Notre Dame Stadium crowd on an unseasonably warm and sunny Saturday in October, during a contest against Air Force.

“Stepping out onto that field was something I’ll probably never forget,” Hounshell said. “Being out there with my teammates, hearing the crowd and having my parents and family in the stands, that’s something you can’t get anywhere else.”

The freshman recorded four tackles in his debut, helping the Irish rout the Falcons, 59-33.

Hounshell soon faced his first major setback, however, as just three weeks later he tore the labrum in his throwing shoulder. The maturing freshman tore his labrum in a win against Navy.

Demonstrating the resiliency that would become a defining characteristic of his career, the freshman player injured for the remainder of the season, contributing in a limited capacity in six of the final seven games for the Irish.

“You can either choose to quit or put your head down and work hard,” Hounshell said. “Being out there with my teammates, hearing the crowd and having my parents and family in the stands, that’s something you can’t get anywhere else.”

The Irish senior defensive lineman Chase Hounshell sings the Alma Mater after Notre Dame’s season-opening victory against Rice on Aug. 30.

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Pre-med major finds football, school balance

By MAREK MAZUREK
Sports Writer

Eric Lee is the embodiment of a student athlete.

While the senior receiver spends much of his time practicing and playing for a nationally-ranked program, the science pre-professional major is also preparing to head to medical school after graduation.

During his high school career at Dowling Catholic in West Des Moines, Iowa, Lee maintained a 4.1 GPA while competing as an all-conference athlete in three different sports.

For Lee, though, football quickly became his sport of choice over baseball and basketball as he looked to college.

“I think it was more so the opportunity,” Lee said of making the choice to play football. “I didn’t have a favorite out of the sports — I liked them all. I played them all pretty well. I think football opened doors here. I could come to camp my freshman year, and that was a big part of it. It was more the doors that [football] opened for me.”

After narrowing down his choice of sport to football, the question that remained was where would Lee play.

“I wasn’t a huge Notre Dame fan growing up,” he said. “I never really followed them; I never really thought about them until I started coming out of high school wanting to go to a good academic school, and [Notre Dame] definitely popped on the radar. That’s when I started thinking about them for school.”

The 5-foot-8, 170-pound Lee gained a preferred walk-on slot receiver.

“I’ve been pretty consistent my whole time here,” he said. “I’ve never really had that much opportunity to get the full four years in — a lot of guys don’t get that chance. It’s been a long process, but it’s definitely been good.”

Throughout his career as a Division I athlete, Lee said he still finds time to excel in his studies.

“It’s pretty tough, especially as a pre-med major,” he said. “That’s hard in and of itself, and on top of football, it’s a challenge. I have to give up a lot of social time, but other students don’t get to run out of the tunnel on Saturdays, so I feel like it’s worth it for me. I’ve learned to manage my time pretty well.”

Even Lee’s favorite football memory points to his academic excellence. Lee was a member of the “Green Bear” his sophomore and junior years, where he would stand on the sideline and give the signals for the play to his teammates on the field.

“One of my favorite memories was the Green Bear,” he said. “It was me, [graduate student running back] Tyler Plantz and [former receiver] Nick Fitzpatrick running signals into the game my sophomore and junior years.

“We had a really good time doing that. I also got in the Rice game, the season opener this year. I was in on Malik’s [Zaire Long] and Greg’s [Bryant] first touchdown playing slot receiver, so that was also pretty exciting; the whole family was there, so that was pretty cool.”

Lee said his pre-med school plans are much different than being part of the Green Bear or lining up as a slot receiver.

“The academics are really tough medical school right now, and that’s a stressful process,” he said. “I have to interview [soon]. It’s a long process, but hopefully I’ll get in somewhere by the next couple months.”

Looking past college, Lee said he plans to carry his Notre Dame football experience with him in business or entrepreneurship following his graduation in May but added he will miss the “little things” about student life at Notre Dame.

“I’ll miss the overall atmosphere of campus, just being able to walk along South Quad and see so many people you know through-out the day — that’s something I’ll remember for the rest of my life,” Hounshell said.

The senior lineman said it was at first difficult to find the balance between academics and football, but he has developed a sense of enjoyment in completing his daily schedule.

“Coming in to Notre Dame, you always hear academics is so difficult, and on top of that you’re going to be so busy with football, and for the most part that is true,” Hounshell said. “But you start to realize that you choose your classes and area of study, and football becomes something you enjoy with your brothers and something that’s doable.”

And Hounshell’s advice to incoming Notre Dame football players? It’s simple: don’t be lazy.

“It’s hard work — nobody’s going to lie to you and tell you it isn’t — but it’s definitely something that’s doable if you put your head down and work hard,” he said.

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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2014
By KIT LOUGHRAN
Sports Writer

At Notre Dame, tight end might be considered the program’s most consistent-ly talented position. “Tight End U,” as the University has come to be known over the last few years, did not fail to disappoint once again, as Ben Koyack stepped up at the position this year.

For the first three seasons of his career, Koyack had been playing in the shadows of former Irish tight ends Tyler Eifert and Troy Niklas, who have both jumped from distinguished careers at Notre Dame to roster spots in the NFL. Eifert with the Bengals and Niklas with the Cardinals.

This season Koyack was no longer the number two guy behind Niklas. It was his turn.

“I’ve tried to keep [the role] open, to keep a good relationship with all the guys,” Koyack said. “It doesn’t neces-sarily feel like a strict kind of environment but more like one where we have dif-ferent authority, where we still have to do the right thing but can still have some fun with it. I think that helps the guys out a lot.”

With that humble ap-proach, Koyack has quietly yet powerfully help lead the Irish on the field. The senior stands fourth in receiving yards for Notre Dame, with 27 catches for 289 yards and two touchdowns.

Perhaps Koyack’s most sig-nificant play this season was his game-winning touch-down against Stanford. The Irish were down 14-10 to Stanford with one minute left on the clock. On fourth-and-11 from the Cardinal 23-yard line, Golson found Koyack in the back of the end zone. Koyack caught the pass on his way out of bounds to clinch Notre Dame’s 17-14 victory over Stanford on Oct. 4, keeping a then-undefeat-ed season alive.

“I guess just execute and catch the ball,” Koyack said of his thinking on the play. “I knew there was going to be a guy coming who was go-ing to try and knock it out, so I thought [to] just follow the ball, catch the ball and keep my feet up.”

The 6-foot-5, 254-pound er made getting behind the ball, catch the ball and keep our feet up a thing but can still have some-thing else … so it’s just about being well-rounded and be-ing able to be counted on for however many snaps. I can always improve. I’ll always be working to be the best I can possibly be.”

The starting tight end will continue to strive to be “the best that he can possibly be” as Notre Dame closes out the regular season with games against Louisville on Saturday and USC on Nov. 29. As his time at Notre Dame comes to a close, Koyack re-flected on the time he has spent at the University, in-cluding the experiences that stretched beyond walking out the tunnel into Notre Dame Stadium.

“It went fast,” Koyack said. “It was hectic, but it was fun, and it feels like I was walking in the dorm freshman year, not knowing what I was do-ing, just yesterday. It’s been interesting, and it’s been a fun transition to go from my head swimming to now, knowing the entire offensive unit. It’s been something I will never forget.”

“It’s been a great opportu-nity and privilege to go here, to walk away with a degree from here. I’ve met a lot of great people, Notre Dame is something I’m really happy to have been a part of.”

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Senior tight end Ben Koyack lunges down the field during Notre Dame’s 49-39 victory against Navy on Nov. 1 at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland. Koyack scored a touchdown in the Irish win.

KEVIN SONG | The Observer

Ben Koyack celebrates his game-winning touchdown during Notre Dame’s 17-14 victory against Stanford on Oct. 4 at Notre Dame Stadium. Koyack caught a 23-yard pass from Everett Golson for the score.

Koyack earns membership in ‘Tight End U’
Lombard builds upon consistency on O-line

By BENJAMIN HORVATH
Sports Writer

As a leader of one of the most oft-overlooked offensive units, graduate student offensive lineman Christian Lombard fits the bill: quiet, unassuming and hardworking.

Lombard has built an impressive résumé in his five years at Notre Dame. Entering Saturday’s game, Lombard has played in 42 games for the Irish, including the first national championship game appearance for the Irish since 1989.

Lombard, the starting right tackle in his fifth year of eligibility, was one of former Irish head coach Charlie Weis’s earliest commitments for the 2010 recruiting class.

Weis was let go following the 2009 season, but despite the coaching change prior to Lombard’s arrival in South Bend, he said he never thought to de-commit from Notre Dame.

“I never reconsidered my choice because I told myself I committed to a school, not to one particular coach,” he said.

As a senior at Fremd High School in Palatine, Illinois, Lombard received a number of national honors, being named a USA Today first-team prep All-American, EA Sports first-team All-American and the Gatorade Player of the Year for Illinois.

The 6-foot-5, 311-pound lineman certainly had a number of offers, including several from Big Ten schools, but he said Notre Dame was different from the others.

“I saw a place here that holds you to high academic and moral standards,” Lombard said. “I knew I wanted to be a part of that.”

But just as many freshmen are expected to work to earn the respect of their players and coaches, offensive linemen must work perhaps even harder to find a starting slot in the highly cohesive unit of the offensive line.

Lombard said he understood this going into his first year, in which did not see game action, but he also said he was committed to a positive mindset at the year’s beginning.

“Traditionally, offensive linemen don’t play as freshmen, so I understood that going in,” he said. “I knew that it was a process, so I just committed to taking all the steps necessary.”

The next step in that process would come the following 2011 season, when Lombard saw action in all 13 of the Irish contests, playing on the special teams unit.

Although not yet a starter on the offensive line, Lombard said this special teams role contributed to his preparation for earning a top spot on the depth chart.

“I played punt coverage and field goal protection, and those guys take a lot of beating,” Lombard said. “From the standpoint of physicality, it got me prepared for those next couple of years.”

And his first two years of hard work would come to fruition in Notre Dame’s 42-14 rout over the Irish.

The next step in that process would come the following 2011 season, when Lombard saw action in all 13 of the Irish contests, playing on the special teams unit. Although not yet a starter on the offensive line, Lombard said this role contributed to his preparation for earning a top spot on the depth chart.

“Traditionally, offensive linemen don’t play as freshmen, so I understood that going in,” he said. “I knew that it was a process, so I just committed to taking all the steps necessary.”

Lombard said this helped the offense find a rhythm and consistency, as the line developed a tight-knit relationship during the championship run.

“That type of relationship is necessary for a successful line, and the ability to protect and block for the guys behind us,” he said.

In a year with a number of close victories that came in the games’ final minutes, Lombard said his favorite memory was Notre Dame’s come-from-behind, triple-overtime 29-26 victory against Pittsburgh on Nov. 3, 2012, which kept the undefeated season intact at 9-0.

“We ran a crazy amount of plays, like 110 or something, and afterward, we were all so exhausted, but we just kept believing and blocking play after play,” Lombard said.

However, as most Irish fans remember, the magic of the season would come to a screeching halt in the BCS National Championship Game, when Alabama convincingly claimed its second straight championship in a 42-14 rout over the Irish.

Although a difficult loss, Lombard said it served as a motivator for the Irish before they kicked off the next season.

“We really had a great off-season, and I think we all felt like we really had so much more to prove to the world and to ourselves and to our fans,” Lombard said. “It was definitely a motivation.”

In the 2013 campaign, Lombard made the switch from right tackle to right guard, a difference that may seem insignificant but has noticeable nuances for any lineman.

Despite this transition, Lombard, and the offensive line as a whole, excelled in 2013, something Lombard attributes to the Irish coaching staff.

“The transition was difficult from the standpoint that I had never played the guard position before, but we don’t necessarily teach different fundamentals specific to each lineman position, so it was fairly easy to catch on,” Lombard said.

The 2013 offensive line was, statistically speaking, one of the best in the nation. The Irish were second in the country in fewest sacks allowed, and no other team attempted more passes and allowed fewer sacks than Notre Dame, which gave up only eight sacks on 429 passes.

Lombard’s season was cut short, however, because of a back injury that had been aggravating him since the previous summer. In the seventh game of the season against USC, Lombard re-aggravated the injury, which required immediate surgery.

Just as the Alabama loss served to motivate Lombard, the back injury inspired the then-senior to rehab and return the following season.

“It was tough sitting out and having to watch the guys that you play with for two years from the sideline,” he said.

Following the long rehabilitation during this past offsea-son, Lombard experienced another setback when he un-expectedly injured his wrist during spring practice.

“It was definitely a kick in the stomach, and I kind of felt like I couldn’t catch a break,” Lombard said. “But you just have to try and stay positive.”

And again, the lineman ex-hibited the toughness that has been a defining characteristic of his career at Notre Dame, as he fought through the wrist injury to prepare for the 2014 opener against Rice.

Currently building on an already impressive career this season, Lombard could be a mid-round pick in the upcom-ing NFL Draft, according to DraftCountdown.com analyst Scott Wright.

However, when asked about hearing his name called in the draft, Lombard remained expressionless and remained razor-focused on his team’s upcoming opponents.

“That’s been the mindset going into the year, and all throughout it,” he said. “I’ll worry about that when it’s time to worry about that.”

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Martin follows in brother’s footsteps as captain

By GREG HADLEY
Associate Sports Editor

For most of their childhood, senior offensive lineman Nick Martin and his brother Zack just couldn’t get along. They bickered and fought constantly, with Zack often getting the better of his little brother.

“I hated him,” Nick joked. “Well, no, I never hated him. We definitely fought a lot when we were younger though.”

Things changed quickly, however, when Nick joined Zack on the offensive line of Bishop Chatard High School’s football team in Indianapolis. Through football, the brothers found common ground and became so close that when Zack left for Notre Dame, Nick followed two years later.

“We don’t have a (sibling rivalry),” Nick said. “The day I started playing high school football it really just clicked. … He’s why I came here.”

Together, Nick and Zack helped anchor the offensive line for the Irish in 2013, starting the first 11 games of the season at center and left tackle, respectively.

Nowadays, things have changed. Zack departed Notre Dame at the end of last season and was picked in the first round of the NFL Draft by the Dallas Cowboys, where he now starts at right guard.

“It’s definitely weird, not having him around,” Nick said. “But it’s also great. He’s doing great things. I’m proud of him. I knew the whole time how good he was.”

Meanwhile, Nick has stepped up, not only to fill his brother’s spot in the lineup, but also to take on a leadership role for an offensive line that lost three of last year’s starters and went through a midseason shuffle that changed almost everyone’s role along the line.

That leadership role for the offensive line expanded at the beginning of the season when Irish head coach Brian Kelly announced that Martin would serve as one of the team’s four captains.

“During summer practices, I just sort of became the leader of the O-line,” Martin said. “[I] just started running drills, and that snowballed into me becoming a captain and a leader for the whole team.”

Three games into the 2014 campaign, Kelly overhauled the line, which had allowed six sacks, including four to Purdue on Sept. 13. He shuffled four players into new positions and brought in a new center while Martin switched to left guard.

While the move was difficult for Martin, it is something he said he has learned to take in stride. After sitting out his freshman season, the 6-foot-4, 293-pounder spent his sophomore year mostly playing special teams while backing up the tackle positions. A year later, he shifted to starting center for the first time in his career.

“It’s actually a great experience,” Martin said. “You want to be able to play as many positions as possible. I had never played center before last year … and I fell in love with it immediately. But you’ve got to move around. You’ve got to put what’s best for the team first, and I’m playing guard, and I’m starting to get the hang of that. So it’s nice to play multiple positions.”

The Irish have also had to adjust to the return of senior Everett Golson to the quarterback role. While Golson missed the 2013 season, the offensive line worked with the now-graduated Tommy Rees, who tended to stay in the pocket, Martin said.

“It’s definitely different,” he said. “They each have their strengths, and we just need to adapt to them. The biggest difference is the play extension. You’re blocking all seven, your man takes off and gets behind you, Everett is going to extend the play. You just block for him, because he’s going to make a big play.”

Despite the numerous changes, the line remains close as a unit, Martin said.

“We’re the tightest group on the team,” he said. “We’re always with each other and doing stuff together inside of football, outside of football, whatever. A lot of food is involved. I live in a house with [senior offensive linemen Matt Hegarty and Conor Hanratty], and we’re always bringing over the younger guys and just hanging out, barbecuing, really anything.”

Most of Martin’s leadership style comes from what he learned from Zack when he was an underclassman adjusting to college life, he said. Apart from helping him adapt to the speed of college football, Zack also provided Nick with an example of the strong friendships the team can build, he said.

“Just going off to college and having family there made the transition unbelievable,” Nick said. “I became friends with all of his friends. … Leadership-wise, he also taught me a lot of things: consistency, how to lead by example, when to speak up and when not to. [I] just really watched him.”

Together, Nick and Zack are just the second pair of brothers to both be named captains in program history. That, combined with the year they spent starting together, is an experience Nick said he still does not fully appreciate yet.

“Starting alongside him was unbelievable,” Nick said. “That’s one of those things that probably won’t hit me until we’re older, especially now that I got the chance to be a captain. That, too, probably won’t hit us until we’re older.”

The similarities between Nick and Zack do not end there. With an extra year of eligibility remaining, Nick said he plans to return for another year at Notre Dame. If he is named captain again, he will join Zack in the elite group of two-time captains.

After college, Nick said he plans to once again follow Zack, this time into the NFL. Is another reunion along the same offensive line in the cards for the two?

“That’s the dream.”

Contact Greg Hadley at ghadley@nd.edu
McDaniel’s dedication stands out on field

By MIKE GINOCCHIO Sports Writer

He runs angry.

It’s the first thing you notice
about Irish senior running back
Cam McDaniel as soon as he
receives the handoff. He runs
straight into the breach with an
audacious approach. Rather
than dance away from contact
or attempt to outrun an oppo-
nent, he seems to actively seek
defenders out, almost as if he is
daring someone to bring him
down. It’s less like watching
a running back and more like
watching a cannonball fire.
And even then, it’s hardly a vic-
tory for the defender to make
the tackle: McDaniel might
have been brought down, but
he will have made you regret it.

“I’ve just always tried to be
aggressive when I run the foot-
ball,” McDaniel said. “I mean,
early on, I used to watch old
highlights of NFL Hall of Fame
running back] Earl Campbell
because I was a big Texas fan.”

Has he ever been told of his
running style?

“I’ve had a few people tell me
that before,” McDaniel said
with a smile.

Still, it can be jarring to watch
the 5-foot-10, 205-pounder
launch himself into the fray,
absorbing contact with a terri-
fic crack, doing whatever he can
to get a few yards for the Irish
and wear the defense down at
the same time. Yet those who
know him know that’s just
how he’s always been — full
speed ahead.

“My family and friends,
I think they have a deep
understanding and apprecia-
tion of my passion for the game,”
McDaniel said. “And they just
try to support that in whatever
way possible. I know that my
mom and my wife in particular
get a little bit nervous watching
me play, but you’re always go-
ing to have that.”

For the longest time, it looked
like McDaniel was going to carve
a comfortable niche in the Irish
program as a dependable
power running back. Then
a funny thing happened during
his junior year: he got famous.

The first moment was cap-
tured on video. The camera fo-
cused on the Irish running back
as they prepared to run
through the “gauntlet,” the ma-
chine used by running backs
during fall preseason practice.
The “gauntlet” is an ominously
looking station with rubber-
ized pads, intended to simulate
defenders’ arms swatting at the
ball in close quarters. It looks
more like a painter’s scaffold-
thing than a running back drill,
yet it is something that run-
ning backs like McDaniel have
gone through countless times
in their careers.

But there was one problem
as McDaniel prepared to run
through this one. It was set up
backwards.

“We were in the middle of fall
camp, [and] it’s really hot, it’s
humid, and I’m the first one up
in line,” McDaniel said, a grin
slowly forming on his face at
the memory. “I didn’t even no-
tice [that it was backwards].
You can’t really tell unless you
look at it close.”

The coaching staff made the
call for McDaniel to begin the
drill, and he ran forward.

“I never really run through
one that only goes one way,”
McDaniel said. “So I go to run
in it, and access denied.

“Next thing you know, you’re
an Internet sensation.”

McDaniel’s teammates im-
mediately worried whether he
was all right. Once it was clear
that he was fine, if slightly
dazed, they started laughing.
McDaniel, true to form, sim-
ply shook it off and got back to
work ("Now we have one that
goes both ways," he later said).
But his bout with Internet fame
wasn’t quite finished yet.

The second moment oc-
curred during the USC game
on Oct. 19, 2013. Though the Irish
won the game 14-10, what ev-
everyone remembers is a particu-
lar photo. There is McDaniel
mid-carry, holding the ball
in tight to his chest as he hops
over a pile of bodies behind
him. A Trojan defender is trying
to bring him down. His helmet
has been knocked off, and in-
stead of catching a grimace of
disappointment on his face is a
slight smirk.

“Little did McDaniel know,
things were about to explode.

“My friends and family
started getting calls from ev-
everybody,” McDaniel said.
“Just random places and news
broadcasters from all over the
world, wondering, ‘Who is this?
And it just ended up be-
ing a freak thing. Gained like
10,000 followers on Twitter.”

Through it all, McDaniel
keeps a relaxed approach to
how it turns out. After all, what are
the odds of becoming
an Internet sensation twice
in one season?

“It doesn’t bother me; it’s
just part of the experience,”
McDaniel said. “I always told
people that hopefully I’ll make
a SportsCenter highlight reel
where it’s not having to do with
something that’s absolutely
outlandish. It may not be here;
we’ll see.”

But all of these things that
happened to McDaniel last
year pale in comparison to one
very important moment in his
life this past offseason: he got
married.

“I met Stephani going into
my senior year of high school, that
summer,” McDaniel said of his
now-wife. “She was ... she was
just an amazing girl. We were
friends at first, and soon after
that, I realized that she was
something special. She went
to Texas A&M, so we did long
distance for two-and-a-half years.
Then after I proposed to her,
which was May 18, 2013, she
ended up transferring to Bethel
College, which is like 10 min-
utes away (from Notre Dame.)
She finished there in three years.
We got married May 17, 2014, back in Dallas.

McDaniel said he looks to
the future with anticipation.
Off the field, he and Stephani
are expecting their first child.
Considering the fearless way he
has approached life so far and
the success he has found, it is
little surprise that he continues
to dream on the field.

“I'm looking to extend my
football career and go on to play
in the NFL," McDaniel said. "At
least to give it a shot and see
how it turns out. And so that is
taking precedence for me right
now.

Attending Notre Dame as a
student is hard enough.
Balancing that with being a
member of the football team is
harder, juggling that in addi-
tion to being married and soon
to be a father is almost more
than one can fathom handling.
It isn’t something McDaniel
said he takes lightly.

“It’s sometimes overwhelm-
ing,” McDaniel said. “But you
kinda just take it as it comes, and
when you sign up to be a
student-athlete at Notre
Dame, you sign up for a huge
obligation. Sometimes you
don’t realize just how big an
obligation that is when you
get into it. But you figure that
one out pretty quick. And I did.
There were times that
were really tough, you know?
But it’s just something that
takes a lot of diligence and
discipline, and if you stick to
it, it’s possible.”

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Plantz lives out dream, earns scholarship

By DANIEL O’BOYLE
Sports Writer

From the very start, Tyler Plantz’s dream was for Notre Dame. As the son of former Irish offensive lineman Ron Plantz, the graduate student running back said his father made sure that he would grow up supporting the Irish. “We started coming to games at a young age, and from there, we were wearing the jerseys, and we’d watch the game every Saturday,” Plantz said. “We always just kind of grew up a Notre Dame family, and I always had the goal of going to Notre Dame.”

Plantz received offers from multiple Ivy League schools and one school in the Mid-American Conference, but he said he always knew that he’d rather fulfill his ultimate goal by walking on at Notre Dame. “The one thing in the back of my mind for everything I did was trying to get to Notre Dame,” he said.

And when the time came for him to make his first appearance for the Irish, Plantz said the experience was something he couldn’t believe. “It was pretty surreal,” he said. “Actually, the first play I don’t remember — I was so excited and the adrenaline was pumping so fast, but really it was the pinnacle of a dream come true. Finally getting on the field was one of the coolest, if not the coolest, experience of my life.”

Plantz’s commitment to Notre Dame goes far beyond his appearances on the football field, having made appearances for the Irish club rugby team and in intramural football as well as reaching the quarterfinals of Bengal Bouts in 2013. “I’ve always had the mentality my whole life, of not just playing Notre Dame football, but an overall love of Notre Dame,” he said. “Just my whole life, I’ve had this undying love for the University, so being involved in things outside of football has opened up my experience here, and I’ve been able to meet some amazing people.”

Having spent most of his high school career playing linebacker in position in which he registered 287 tackles in his final two years at Providence Catholic High School in Illinois, Plantz said he needed time to adjust just to playing running back. However, he said it has made him a better player in the long term. “It was a lot tougher at first, being on the opposite side of the ball,” he said. “I always played playing linebacker, trying to make tackles, but it’s actually pretty exciting, getting to run with the ball in your hand and play on the opposite side, scoring touchdowns.”

“There’s definitely a different feel for the game, but it really helped me to understand both sides of the ball, and it could become the next step, where if I want to become a coach, I have a feel for how to play defense, how to play offense and how to bring those skills together.”

After three years as a walk-on, Plantz was awarded a scholarship for this season in August, as part of the last announcement of scholarship players, and he said this experience was another of his highlights at Notre Dame. “When the coach got up and announced my name for a scholarship, it was one of the coolest things in the whole world,” he said. “Not only that, but I had to go to their office, and that they recognized me, but most importantly, my teammates did. I got a huge roar from those guys who were all giving me hugs and high-fives.”

Plantz said his time as a walk-on allowed him to understand the experience of some of the younger walk-on players and that he hoped he could act as a leader to them.

“These guys definitely don’t get the recognition of a lot of people — a lot of them aren’t traveling to the games on Saturday, but they have that mentality every day that they’re going to work hard every single day and seeing these guys progress, not just in football, but in what they do after football, is one of the coolest things about being here,” Plantz said.

Plantz said his future remains open, and although he is studying finance, he still hopes that he might be able to find a career related to football. “Honestly, I love playing football, and I love being around football, so I can definitely see myself taking the coaching route,” Plantz said. “But also, as a finance major, I can see myself also taking financial consulting or something in that direction. Honestly, the doors are still open.”

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Rabasa grows into leadership role on defense

By SEAN KILMER
Sports Writer

The life of a freshman football player at Notre Dame is hectic. Luckily for senior defensive lineman Anthony Rabasa, the older players looked out for him when he was a freshman. [Former Irish linebackers] Dan Fox and Carlo Calabrese are two guys I’m still pretty close with,” he said. “They showed me as a freshman what to do and what to expect.”

Now Rabasa said his role has shifted. “It’s funny, now that I’m a senior, I can tell which [freshman] are struggling, having a hard time and all that kind of stuff,” Rabasa said.

In appreciation of what older players did for him, Rabasa said he has become a mentor to some of the younger players. “I’m just trying to help out the younger guys, especially off the field,” he said. “I mean, on the field, these kids are ballers. They’re all ballers. But for off-the-field stuff, like when they have to handle school and football and being away from home, of some of the guys come up to me, and I talk to them. I feel good to be that helping hand.”

On a defense with so many young players, his presence both on and off the field is valued. Rabasa said he feels like when they have to handle their moves, and it feels good. Definitely good to be that helping hand.”

Even with so many young players, his presence both on and off the field is valued. Rabasa said he has the whole team know anyone can talk to him anytime, and they take advantage of his generosity. Rabasa said his outgoing personality helps him maintain his off-the-field presence. “I can blend with any group, and there’s not one type of group that I hang out with the most,” Rabasa said. “I know them all, and I get along with all of them pretty well, so I would say I’m pretty good off the field with that.”

So far this season, the defense has played better than many expected, and Rabasa said he attributes the unit’s performance to its commitment. “We’ve just committed group and we want to win, and we know what it takes to win,” he said. “We don’t have a lot of veterans, and we’re a very young team. But we’re a very hard-working team and our entire team just has that motivation to go chase it. We want to play. We love to play fast, hard and aggressive, and that’s what we do every weekend. We can do it week in and week out, and we’re just having a great season so far.”

After his freshman season ended prematurely with a shoulder injury, Rabassa struggled to find a position in former Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco’s 4-3 scheme. Rabasa said he knew he had a clean slate when Diaco left this offseason for the head-coaching job at Connecticut. New defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder’s 4-3 scheme further improved his chances of enlarging his role. Rabasa said he has felt a difference this year compared to the last three.

“Whenever he does after his time here, Rabasa said he will never forget the memories he has created, especially during the game at Florida State. “Florida State, oh my goodness, that was insane,” he said. “The atmosphere there — you could feel it. It was so live, and you felt everybody’s breath, and everybody chanting and all that stuff. That was nuts.”

“[Attending Notre Dame] is a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” he added. “Everywhere you play is a national spotlight. I will never forget walking through that tunnel and playing amazing games on that field in front of 80,000 people.”

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Irish graduate student running back Tyler Plantz watches during warmups before a 43-40 loss to Northwestern last Saturday.
Riggs makes immediate impact in first year

By ISAAC LORTON
Assistant Managing Editor

Editor’s Note: A version of this article originally appeared in the Sept. 26 edition of The Observer.

A fiery red-headed boy, dressed in Notre Dame gear can up to Cody Riggs outside the Main Building on Wednesday afternoon and yelled, “High five!”

With his hand extended above his head, he leapt to meet the hand of the chuckling graduate student corner.

“It’s a lot of fun,” Riggs said. “So many young fans here at the games, especially when you go through the [player] walk. [There are] a lot of little kids and a lot of really loyal fans here. They have been a part of this community for a long time, and it’s a great fan tradition.”

The graduate student himself was once that little kid, coming to Notre Dame to watch his uncle, former Irish receiver Bobby Brown, play in Notre Dame Stadium against Michigan State in 1997. Since then, Riggs has had no issue fitting into the Irish defense or the Notre Dame community, despite his four years at a different university.

“It means a lot to me to be a part of [this community],” Riggs said. “I have kind of been a part of it since my uncle came here. I used to come to games. I almost came here but now I am finally officially a part of the community, and it feels great.

Riggs’s story is not one of finally fulfilling a family dream, following in his uncle’s footsteps, he said, but rather a story of him learning and doing what was best for his future, while continuing to play football at a high level. Riggs originally visited Notre Dame in 2010 on his first recruiting trip, with his uncle at his side. Many speculated he would end up at Notre Dame, but eventually the Fort Lauderdale, Fla. native decided to stay in state and attend Florida to play football under then-head coach Urban Meyer and then-defensive coordinator Charlie Strong.

“My uncle never really pressured me into coming here,” Riggs said. “He just explained the good things that come with going to Notre Dame. He always let it be my decision. He was really happy the second time around. First time around, I’m sure he was upset.

“But like I’ve said before … Florida was the perfect fit for me. Urban Meyer knew my family from before; it was close to home, and I had a really good relationship with Charlie Strong. Those were the reasons I went there.

Brown said that he never pushed Riggs towards attending Notre Dame and that he felt Florida was best for his nephew at that time. He said that Riggs picked up on things around him and always came to his own informed decisions.

“Throughout the process I wanted to be sure to let him know what the positives were about Notre Dame,” Brown said. “But overall, I wanted to make sure I didn’t pressure him. I wanted him to make his own decision.

“I think his decision [to attend Notre Dame] was for all of the right reasons,” Brown said. “It shows how mature he is. He understood the opportunity to get a Master’s [degree] was something that he shouldn’t take lightly.”

At Florida, Riggs earned his degree in family, youth and community sciences. Riggs had one more year of eligibility after he missed most of the 2012 season with a foot injury, and he said he wanted to continue his education with a Master’s program for his remaining year. Riggs said Notre Dame was the best fit for his final season.

“It was an opportunity for me — before I even knew I was coming to Notre Dame — to do my fifth year elsewhere. I had been in [the Florida] program for four years. I thought about leaving and going into the (NFL) draft last year, but I said, ‘I’m gonna go somewhere else and do my fifth year and get a Master’s somewhere else, and finish my college career.’

Riggs is studying business management at Notre Dame, with the aspirations of possibly starting or working for a non-profit organization, he said.

“I wanted to either own a non-profit one day, hopefully, if I’m playing that long,” Riggs said. “Or I wouldn’t mind working for one, whether it be in a position of operations or programming.

Riggs said it was not easy for him to leave Florida, but he made the decision with his life after football in mind.

“I wouldn’t say I had regrets leaving Florida, but I have always felt bad about it,” Riggs said. “Just the fact that I had to leave a situation where I was a starter and the coaching staff was depending on me to be a leader. Of course I feel bad about that, but I explained to them that this decision was best for me. Some people may look at it as a selfish decision, but it was something that was the best for my future.

“My Master’s degree is very important. It allows me to have something to do after football. I always like staying busy, and it means a lot to have something to fall back on after I’m done playing football.”

Although Riggs will only be at Notre Dame for a single year, Irish secondary coach Kerry Coooks said he was eager to have an experienced defensive back among the young Irish secondary.

“(Riggs) was one of the best free-agent pickups that I’ve been associated with,” Coooks said at Notre Dame’s Media Day on Aug. 19. “You got a guy who has experience playing in the SEC, he’s got experience playing corner, he’s got experience playing safety, he’s got experience playing in big games, so he’s got a great feel and understanding for the game.”

When it was announced Riggs would be attending Notre Dame in February, Irish head coach Brian Kelly praised Riggs’s football knowledge and work ethic.

“Cody Riggs is an outstanding player,” said Kelly in a Feb. 19 press release. “He played a ton of football at Florida, having started at both safety and cornerback. Cody definitely brings veteran leadership and versatility to our team and defense.

“He will help us immediately but, more importantly, Cody is a great kid with a tremendous focus on both football and academics.

Riggs proved to be correct in saying the Irish would need Riggs’s knowledge and leadership immediately, as junior corner KeiVarae Russell was withheld as part of an investigation into suspected academic dishonesty and graduate student safety and captain Austin Collinsworth was injured for the team’s first three games. Riggs has been a steady and solid presence in the Irish secondary with these absences. He has seven tackles and one interception through the team’s first three games. Riggs said the transition into the Irish defense was a relatively smooth one because it played a similar style to Florida.

“The defense is very similar to where I came from,” Riggs said. “Careers are very aggressive in this defense, which is something I was used to at Florida and which is why I fit so well into this scheme.”

However, Riggs said he does not get by on talent and tenacity; he watches as much film as he can in order to prepare.

“I put in a lot of work,” Riggs said. “Even though I’m studying all of the time [for my Master’s], I still find time to study for football, and I always have questions for the coaches. I try to be a step ahead of everything.

“I watch a lot of film throughout the week. I try and see what they do in certain situations especially on third downs, because teams have go-to plays. I try to study those and anticipate those. I try to take guess out of it.”

Brown said he and Riggs often have conversations about the “nemesis” relationship between receivers and corners, which Riggs said helps his play. Brown added that his nephew has a great intelligence and unyielding approach when it comes to football.

“I remember at 11-years-old, he was well beyond his years in terms of his football IQ,” Brown said. “He continues (to be) a very smart football player. … He can go into any situation one-on-one presnap, knowing what the receiver is thinking and then in the midst of the [route] knowing what a receiver is trying to do against him. It’s a game of chess out there.”

That mental ability has helped key Riggs’s play on the perimeter through the first quarter of the season, helping him integrate seamlessly into the Irish secondary. Looking at his transition from the big-picture perspective, Riggs said it might have been inevitable that he ended up in South Bend.

“Looking at it now, it fits pretty well here,” Riggs said. “Especially with the coaching staff, the players and the environment here. Maybe I was meant to be here. Maybe it was going to happen eventually.”

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The observer

being on big-name, nationally times and won a state champi-
during his senior

being football for Keenan, a team he

byobobso

1616

official coordinator Brian VanGorder and former de-

The Observer File Photo

ernie soto is no stranger to

moment during his time on the

football team was the 2012 game against Stanford, which Notre

during his freshman

during his senior

By MICHAEL IVEY

ernie soto is enrolled in the college of engineering as a chemical

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your day doing that, and trust-

during the summer of 2014,

Although he said he had to

Tony Springmann transitions from player to coach

By DANIEL O'BOYLE

During the summer of 2004, before a down of football had

Tony Springmann found out that his days playing for Notre Dame were over.

Irish senior Tony Springmann pushes a USC offensive lineman during a 22-13 win against the Trojans on Nov. 24, 2012.

as a medical hardship player and

The year I was on the team they were contenders, and the year

By MICHAEL IVEY

sports Writer

When you're with all your teammates here in the summer, it's a cool experience," Soto said. "Being here and just going about your day, working out and then hanging around with your team mates during a nice summer day, it's pretty memorable." Soto said he credits current Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder and former defen-
sive coordinator Bob Diaco and the culture they created during their tenures as having the biggest impact on him during his time with the team. "Being able to play football for them has been absolutely incredible," Soto said. "They go about their day being a man about every way you can possibly be, and it makes you want to try to achieve to be that profession-

They have that determina-
tion that rubs off on you, and that seeps down your throat.

You can't be a good football team without a good culture and a strong foundation, and that's what they build every single day, even if it's something like a simple meeting for special teams or something like that," Soto said. They also helped push him to be a better form of himself. "It's not just about being the best kid on the field; it's about being the best kid in the classroom," he said. "An interesting point they made to me was it's not even just that, it's being the best brother you could be, being the best boyfriend you can be, anything you can possibly be you always have to be on your toes and you always have to do it better than you did the day before. Because it ultimately comes down to either you're go-
ing to get better or you're going to get worse, and if you go about your day doing that, and trust-
ning the other 10 guys around you, you'll be fine." Soto is enrolled in the College of Engineering as a chemical engineering major. He is currently applying to medical school.

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Tony Springmann, one of

Kapron-Lewis, 

Zeke Motta and defensive lineman
doboyel@nd.edu

Dwenger high school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which had already

He’s a new perspective and that he feels he can use this to help some of the younger players.

"It was a little weird at first," he said. "At first, it was sort of awk-
ward to get over at the beginning of the season, but now it’s fluid, there’s a rhythm to it, and there’s an expectation every day you have to live up to, but it’s a lot of fun." Springmann also said recent experience with the team gives him a new perspective and that he feels he can use this to help some of the younger players.

"My goal this season is to get our team to a point where we have a lot of young guys, to be the best that they possibly can be by being a mentor, a role model and just whatever I have to do," Springmann said.

"It’s been rewarding because I can’t physically be playing, so seeing some of the other guys learn and work on obstacles that I used to on a daily basis has been really rewarding," he added. "It’s refreshing." Springmann arrived at Notre Dame in 2011 from Bishop Dwenger High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which had already produced 13 players for the Irish in previous seasons — tight end Tyler Eifert, who was a junior when Springmann arrived, and recent fifth-year senior who was a senior. Springmann said he felt that knowing some players before he arrived helped him when he was starting out.

"The guys I knew at Bishop Dwenger... really made a dif-
ference in my coming here," Springmann said. "They were definitely an influence, and they were close friends of mine."

From there, after not seeing any action game in his fresh-

man year, Springmann was able to play a part in all 13 games of Notre Dame’s 2012 run to the BCS National Championship Game. Over the course of the 2012 sea-

son, Springmann recorded 11 tackles, along with sacking for-

mer Michigan State quarterback Andrew Maxwell.

Springmann said he looks back fondly upon 2012 and en-

joyed being able to play a part in such a successful season.

"It was a lot of fun," he said. "Like any season, it has its ups and downs, but the season on the whole was a lot of fun, and the guys made it a lot better."

Springmann said that af-
ter this season, he hopes to give something back to the community by working with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) and teaching in under-

Development Program, so I’ll be

"I was really excited. I thought before he would consider his long-term plans.

"I was admitted into the ACE teaching program, so I’ll be teaching for two years, and then from that point, I’m still not sure, but I have a couple of different options," he said.

Currently, though, Springmann said he is enjoying being able to continue his involvement with the team even after discovering he would no longer play. In par-
ticular, Springmann said being able to continue to work with the players and everyone involved with the program has been a highlight of his year.

“My favorite thing about Notre Dame and about Notre Dame football is the people," he said. "The people really make this pro-

gram what it is."

I was close to a lot of older guys here when I was a freshman and a sophomore. Guys like [for-

mer Irish receiver] Robby Toma, [safety] Zeke Motta and [defen-

"Now, I’ve really been enjoying working with [defensive line-

man] Andrew Trumbetti, one of the freshmen — that’s been a lot of fun.”

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Irish senior safety Ernie Soto trots onto the field before Notre Dame’s season opener against Rice, a 48-17 win, on Aug. 30.
By RYAN KLAUS
Sports Writer

For graduate senior defensive lineman Justin Utupo, coming back for a fifth year at Notre Dame had always been the plan. “I just always knew I was going to come back,” Utupo said. “As soon as I didn’t play my freshman year, I knew I would have an extra year of eligibility, and I knew I would use it to come back and play because this is where I committed. I wasn’t going to go anywhere else.”

His final season marks the culmination of an up-and-down career for Utupo. Since arriving at Notre Dame in 2010, the Lakewood, California, native hasn’t regularly been a part of Notre Dame’s defensive rotations. Although he has gotten consistent special teams playing time since his sophomore season in 2011, it was not until 2013 that Utupo registered his first tackle.

One of the big challenges of Utupo’s career has been being able to find a steady position on defense, he said. Utupo came out of high school as an accomplished defensive lineman but was smaller than the typical Notre Dame defensive lineman. Utupo switched to the linebacker position during his sophomore and junior seasons. Though Utupo was open to the change, he said his preference has always been to play on the defensive line.

“I like standing up and trying something new, but if you haven’t played linebacker in your high school years, it’s hard trying to pick it up at the next level, especially when it requires you to cover fast and good receivers,” Utupo said. “I liked it, but my natural position is always having my hand on the ground.”

In addition to the challenges of working to earn playing time and having to switch positions, Utupo dealt with a suspension for violating team rules at the beginning of the 2012 season. “It definitely hurt,” he said. “I lost the chance to be in the two-deep at the beginning of the year. I bounced back though, which is what you have to do when you take a step back.”

After switching back to defensive line before the 2013 season, Utupo saw an increase in playing time that resulted in him registering the first seven tackles of his career. In particular, he was given more opportunities when fellow defensive lineman Sheldon Day, Louis Nix and Ishaq Williams battled injuries late in the season. “Last year, I was kind of an as-needed guy,” he said. “When they went down, it’s the next man up. That’s what they preach here. There can’t be any drop-off between the first guy and the next guy that comes in. You have to produce at that same level.”

Though Utupo has still not been the beneficiary of consistent opportunities on the defensive line in the 2014 season, his playing time overall has increased, highlighted by his first career start against Navy on Nov. 1.

In a 49-39 win over the Midshipmen, he recorded the first interception of his career. Among other highlights for Utupo this season was his performance in Notre Dame’s 31-0 victory over Michigan on Sept. 6, which included his first career sack.

Outside of his own performance on the field, Utupo said he has recognized the importance of being a leader, which results from being one of the few graduate students on the team. “I feel like the grandpa of the group,” he said. “I’ve experienced the last four years, and I know what everyone else is going through and what they’re going to go through. It’s just nice for me being there with experience that I can help the younger guys and everything that they do, whether it’s on the field or off the field. I embrace being that grandpa figure.”

Away from the football field, Utupo received his undergraduate degree in anthropology last May. He currently is taking three graduate classes and said he hopes to be accepted into and receive his master’s degree through the Alliance for Catholic Education. When asked what he would consider his favorite moment of his career in a Notre Dame uniform, Utupo thought back to the 2011 season when he got on the field for the first time against Michigan.

“I’ll never forget that,” he said. “It was at the Big House; it was loud, and [overall] was such a big game.”

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‘Grandpa’ Utupo earns increased playing time

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Beyond Civility: Addressing the Crisis in American Public Discourse
John Duffy, The O’Malley Director of the University Writing Program; Associate Professor, Department of English

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IRISH STUDENT DEFENSIVE LINEMAN JUSTIN UUTOPO WAITS FOR THE NEXT PLAY DURING NOTRE DAME’S 49-17 WIN AGAINST RICE ON AUG. 30.
Irish senior linebacker Ben Councell (30) and freshman safety Drue Tranquill (23) attempt to block a punt by Stanford fifth-year senior Ben Rhyne during Notre Dame’s 17-14 win Oct. 4.

Irish senior quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to senior running back Cam McDaniel in a victory against Rice on Aug. 30.

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Pondering the ‘what-ifs’ of class of 2011 recruits

Irish head coach Brian Kelly spoke Tuesday about the "fine line" that exists in college football, one that has his team either seven points away from a 9-1 record or 10 points away from a 5-5 record, depending on how you view the proverbial glass.

Kelly's statement about how the fine line makes college football such a high-stakes game also translates to recruiting classes, which can turn from a group brimming with potential and the hope of being the team's next leaders to an unremarkable unit, with just a few injuries, deflections or struggles on the field.

Of course, Kelly also said such scenarios can be mitigated by consistency in recruiting across all classes. And for the most part, the Irish have done that — their recruiting classes during Kelly's tenure have been ranked Nos. 18, 9, 18, 5 and 11, respectively, according to 247 Sports.

But the high school class of 2011, made up of 13 team members who will celebrate their Senior Day on Saturday, doesn't bear much resemblance to the ninth-ranked, 23-member class that was widely seen as a good haul — Kelly's first full-scale recruiting class since he was hired near the tail end of the 2010 recruiting cycle for the class of 2010. The class of 2011 in many ways illustrates Kelly's point about the fine line that exists in big-time college football.

Granted, the class has had plenty of successes. Three of its members — Stephon Tuitt, Troy Niklas and George Atkinson III — are currently in the NFL. Tuitt with the Steelers, Niklas with the Cardinals and Atkinson with the Raiders. Their college careers didn't necessarily go according to plan — Niklas transitioned from outside linebacker to tight end before his sophomore year and Atkinson bounced around from running back to receiver to kick returner, never really finding a true home, but they for the most part lived up to expectations.

Then there are the current team contributors — Everett Golson, Kyle Brindza, Matthias Farley, Ben Koyack and Matt Hegarty come to mind. This group also includes two team captains in Nick Martin and Cam McDaniel. And it must be noted that one of the biggest influences in the class is a guy who wasn't awarded a scholarship upon high school graduation — Joe Schmidt, who was a preferred walk-on, if you haven't already heard. While many in this group have been beset by injury, turnovers or struggles recently, they still form the backbone of the class, players who stayed the course and will most likely leave Notre Dame with a degree in hand and a wealth of football memories and experiences.

And these experiences have been a constantly recurring theme in the college careers of players like Jarrett Grace, Ben Councell and Chase Hounshell.

And for varying reasons, some due to depth, others due to scheme, some players just haven't found their particular niche within the class and have struggled to see the field — Josh Atkinson, Jalen Brown and Anthony Rabasa come to mind.

In short, Notre Dame's high school class of 2011 is probably what fans of a major college football program should expect to see — I'm sure the senior classes at Alabama or Ohio State have also been hit hard by players leaving early, injuries and some underperformance.

But it also is interesting to play the "what-if" game and wonder what the stakes could have been Saturday had guys like Lynch and Tuitt stayed all four years or Daniels and Williams played this season or Springmann to hang up his cleats after his sophomore season.

Likewise, injuries have been a constantly recurring theme in the college careers of players like Jarrett Grace, Ben Councell and Chase Hounshell.

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Those few factors might have been enough to put Notre Dame on the right side of that fine line, the one between legitimate championship contender and playoff also-ran.

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