IN WHOSE HANDS?

Everett Golson, Malik Zaire look to break spring deadlock at quarterback
**COMMENTARY**

**Time to strike for Notre Dame**

Alex Carson  
Associate Sports Editor

At the sun sets throughout the United State on Jan. 1, 2016, the sports world’s eyes will be turned to Glendale, Arizona, where two teams will take the field for the national championship.

We don’t know who we’ll see on the Irish squad far from your normal one.

But when millions of people nationwide tune in that Monday night, what’s to say they won’t be watching the Irish?

Sure, we don’t often talk about five-loss teams as having national title aspirations, but last year’s five-loss teams as having nation-

On Tuesday, Notre Dame added family, literally and figuratively, when it land-

To make his name known to the Irish last fall.

That’s good, right?

Jaylor Smith might be the best linebacker in America. Joe Schmidt will return from his in-

That’s how good the Irish

But if Notre Dame contends for a national title, it’s because of the defense.

If cornerback KeiVarae Russell returns to the team, Notre Dame will put 11 players on the field to open the year who have starting experience.

The Charlotte, North Carolina-native Okwara, who checks in at No. 179 in the Rivals250, is Notre Dame’s fifth commitment in the class of 2016. At 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds he is listed as a linebacker but projects more as a defensive end.

He’s long, but he’s going to take some time to develop, especially for Irish recruiting expert Andrew Ivins said. “But he’s the type of kid you can’t pass over in the South, with schools like Clemson and Georgia coming after him.”

It was along the offensive line, however, where Notre Dame scored its first com-

This is Brian Kelly’s most tal-

There are those of the author views expressed in this column are those of the author.

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

Contact Brian Plamondon at bplamond@nd.edu

**Okwara pledge brings 2016 commitments to five**

BY BRIAN PLAMONDON  
Sports Writer

When offering scholarship

Ben Bredeson or a Liam Eichenberg, that’s your two future tackles,” said Ivins, who is an analyst for the Rivals affiliated Blue & Gold Illustrated. Bredeson and Eichenberg are two top Irish targets, ranked as the No. 3 and No. 37 offensive tackles by Rivals, respectively. Both players were on campus this past weekend.

After Kraemer, Notre Dame didn’t secure a com-

For students and parents to store their

When the Irish trot on the field on Jan. 11, the defend-

The entire receiving corps is good in pass protection, but he has great instincts. He’s quick when he needs to be, and he can make a hit.

Pledging along with Love on March 21 was Illinois native and two-star cen-

“Store My Stuff” offers an online system that secures space and schedules pick up and delivery of dorm to storage.

You can also pack up, pick up and deliver your own “stuff” to our facility located at 903 South Main Street in South Bend.

We pick up and deliver back to you at a cost of only $50 per month for the storage and $250 for pick up and delivery per student (this will make your Dad very happy).
Football is a game of numbers.

Touchdowns, field goals, safety, turnovers, yards per game, carries, receptions — these all have values that can be added and subtracted, and they lead to the total tallies in the win and loss columns.

For Notre Dame, a team with hopes each year of keeping that loss column clean, the quarterback duel has become more than a choice between two simple numbers, 5 and 8. It's come down to something of a science.

"What we're doing is quantifying it as much as we can, the competition," offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mike Sanford said April 1. "Statistically, they're getting graded on every rep. We want those guys to feel like there's accountability for every rep that they take."

The Irish coaches expect their players to keep their grades up in the classroom, and now they want their starters to make the cut on the field as well this spring — even though head coach Brian Kelly said the final decision probably won't be made until fall camp.

Sanford explained that the system essentially rewards or penalizes quarterbacks on if they did their job on a play and said he hopes the new system will keep the competition from turning into a controversy between graduate student Everett Golson and junior Malik Zaire.

There's not going to be any quarterback full autonomy." There's not going to be any right concept. … We don't want to get paid to make decisions; I'm glad I don't have to make the decisions.

While Kelly said he wouldn't be surprised by anything a college-age player does, he does not foresee handing the starting job to Zaire based on Golson's absence.

"It's a double-edged sword because if he makes a ton of progress then he believes he's the offensive coordinator at the line of scrimmage, or he believes he's the play caller," Sanford said. "We want him to be a great quarterback, get us out of danger problems; when there's an overload pressure, get us the right protection, get us the right concept. … We don't want to give him full autonomy or really any quarterback full autonomy."

That won't keep Zaire from being surprised by anything a college-age player does, he does not foresee handing the starting job to Zaire based on Golson's absence in South Bend.

"He's had his best spring since he's been here," Kelly said last Saturday of Golson. "He's fully engaged in everything that he's doing. It's the best that I've seen him do the things that we've asked him to do since he's been here. … But there's no indication that anything that he's done would mean that he's just doing this as a way to go somewhere else. If I sensed it at all, I wouldn't've pulled the plug on it myself because we're wasting our time."

Golson himself has remained mum since the bowl game, declining to talk with reporters, but Kelly said he trusts his quarterback's decision.

"He doesn't want to do media and stuff like that because he's focused on his academics and graduating, and I'm OK with that," Kelly said Saturday. "I'm fine with that. He's had his share of living in the bright lights of it."

Sanford said he's noticed that commitment in Golson as well, even in just the few weeks that make up the spring practice.

"The thing about Everett that I've been so appreciative of is his buy-in," Sanford said April 1. "Everett's been outstanding in the meeting room environment. He's been taking unbelievable good notes, attentive. He's very engaged in the mental side of the game, and then at practice he's self-correcting."

Golson has 23 career starts under his belt compared to Zaire's one, but an array of late-season fumbles in 2014 proved he's far from a perfect quarterback. Kelly said Golson's presence has been a point of emphasis this spring.

"I would say that Everett's done a great job in the pocket," Kelly said Wednesday. "He's really progressed in the area that we've asked him to. … He's had a really good spring, and I expect him to have a good spring game as well."

As with Zaire, Sanford said he's trying to tone down Golson's egomess in certain situations.

"I think for Everett, it's just sometimes he gets so excited when there's a wide-open throw that he might jump the gun. But he's seeing and what he's thinking. Like, 'Why did you go to that, Everett?' I'm glad I don't have to make the decisions because both of them are great quarterbacks."

Kelly added the Irish want a leader who will be willing to give his all to collect a win each Saturday.

"They're just looking for somebody that is committed and somebody that is going to help them be successful, so that all they want from a quarterback," Kelly said Saturday. "So the quarterback here at Notre Dame is gonna be somebody that's 100 percent committed to winning, and both of those kids are, and as long as they are, they're gonna embrace whatever's out on the football field."

Even with a close decision ahead of him and his staff, Kelly said he knows they have irreplaceable talent from both candidates — no matter what the final numbers say.

"In terms of depth, I don't know that anybody has a better situation than we do with the two quarterbacks that we have," he said.

Contact Mary Green at mgreen@nd.edu

By MARY GREEN
Assistant Managing Editor

Irish junior quarterback Malik Zaire (8) looks on while graduate student Everett Golson (5) prepares to toss a pass during a drill at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday.
There can be little doubt Notre Dame is in prime position for a successful 2015, at least when compared to last year’s late-season collapse. Brian Kelly returns too many battle-tested starters to reasonably expect otherwise.

But what should worry Irish fans are the players on the opposing sidelines; Notre Dame’s opponents next year are underwhelming, and that could hurt the Irish in the long run. Unlike last year, there is no potential statement game, no Florida State-on-the-road opportunity. The margin for error is razor-thin. Lose once, to Clemson on the road or USC at home, and the Irish will be out of the College Football Playoff hunt. And as improved as the team may be, I don’t see Notre Dame running the table.

For the Irish, the knocks taken in 2014 will translate into a strengthened defense in 2015, which is led by a key group of upperclassmen. However, they are backed by a sophomore corps that has game experience under their belts. That experience will be invaluable — last year’s struggles proved that.

The big questions for the Irish are on offense, beginning with the starting quarterback, where there’s still no clear front-runner. Up front, the offensive line returns just two starters from last season, which will spell some early-season difficulties. Once the line and the eventual quarterback find their groove, a tough three-game stretch in October against Clemson, Navy and USC could strike at the wrong time to ruin Notre Dame’s plans for the College Football Playoff.

While all eyes are on the quarterback, the biggest key for Notre Dame is its defensive health. Linebacker is the deepest position on the defensive side of the ball, and the defensive line is experienced at the top of the depth chart, but a loss or two here will spell trouble. A question mark remains over the secondary as well.

For the Irish, the knocks taken in 2014 will translate into a strengthened defense in 2015, which is led by a key group of upperclassmen. However, they are backed by a sophomore corps that has game experience under their belts. That experience will be invaluable — last year’s struggles proved that.

The big questions for the Irish are on offense, beginning with the starting quarterback, where there’s still no clear front-runner. Up front, the offensive line returns just two starters from last season, which will spell some early-season difficulties. Once the line and the eventual quarterback find their groove, a tough three-game stretch in October against Clemson, Navy and USC could strike at the wrong time to ruin Notre Dame’s plans for the College Football Playoff.

While all eyes are on the quarterback, the biggest key for Notre Dame is its defensive health. Linebacker is the deepest position on the defensive side of the ball, and the defensive line is experienced at the top of the depth chart, but a loss or two here will spell trouble. A question mark remains over the secondary as well.

For the Irish, the knocks taken in 2014 will translate into a strengthened defense in 2015, which is led by a key group of upperclassmen. However, they are backed by a sophomore corps that has game experience under their belts. That experience will be invaluable — last year’s struggles proved that.

The big questions for the Irish are on offense, beginning with the starting quarterback, where there’s still no clear front-runner. Up front, the offensive line returns just two starters from last season, which will spell some early-season difficulties. Once the line and the eventual quarterback find their groove, a tough three-game stretch in October against Clemson, Navy and USC could strike at the wrong time to ruin Notre Dame’s plans for the College Football Playoff.
Notre Dame's success will be defined by a five-game stretch. In a game that seemingly everyone forgets about, Georgia Tech visits Sep. 19. The Irish have struggled in the past with Navy's triple-option offense; Tech's is better. Then after a chance to rest up against lowly UMass, Notre Dame will head to Death Valley on Oct. 3 for its toughest road test, Clemson. From there, perennial rivals Navy and USC — the best team on the schedule — come to town.

Remember that Brian Kelly's teams have won just once the week after playing Navy. If they make it through that stretch, the Irish will have Pittsburgh and Boston College salivating at the thought of ruining a perfect campaign.

This is Brian Kelly's most talented team yet. But I'm not convinced they can avoid last year's fatal mistakes.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 10-2

Redemption will be the mantra this season. Notre Dame returns every important piece from last year's disappointing finish but has the 31-28 bowl win to build on. In order to have success, Brian Kelly must settle on either Everett Golson or Malik Zaire as the starter rather quickly in fall camp; nevertheless, expect both to see time. Whoever is running the show will have a talented offensive line in front of him and one of the deepest receiving corps in the nation.

The defense will be much improved, although the secondary is still a question mark. The Irish are lucky they first face Texas, which should find its groove later in the season. If they can squeeze by, they should be undefeated until the gauntlet in October that includes Clemson and USC. This team is better than 2012's, but the Irish will get tripped up at least once along the way.

REGULAR SEASON RECORD: 11-1
Loaded linebacking group leads Irish defense

By ZACH KLONSINSKI
Sports Editor

Entering the 2015 season, Notre Dame finds itself in a refreshing situation: It might just have too many bodies at linebacker.

After a year in which graduate student linebackers Jarrett Grace and Joe Schmidt missed all or significant parts of the season with injuries, the Irish entered spring ball with three starting spots and seven potential bodies to fill them.

In the absence of Grace and Schmidt last season, junior linebacker Jaylon Smith was thrust into running the defense, while classmates Onwuasom and sophomores Greer Martini and Nyles Morgan all saw significant time on the field. The inexperience showed.

Over the final five games of the regular season — beginning with Navy, when Schmidt went down — Notre Dame allowed an average of 43.4 points per game and went 1-4. Until that point, the defense had surrendered only 19.1 points per game while leading the Irish to a shutout win over Michigan and a 6-0 start to the season before the loss at Florida State.

However, the younger players gained valuable experience on the field. “Not really a bad taste, just a learning experience,” Smith said March 18 of last season. “We kind of had our defining moment, playing LSU and just understanding what the key was, and it’s everybody buying in and playing together, playing selfless.”

On the down side, in Notre Dame’s scheme, only three linebackers are on the field at once, and with the addition of freshman early enrollee Te’von Coney, the Irish are now two-deep plus one this spring, creating a logjam particularly stuck at middle linebacker.

“I think that Nyles gained experience last year, so going into his second year, we feel much better with him,” Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder said March 23. “… I expect all three of them [Grace, Schmidt and Morgan] to play a lot.”

Although it’s year two playing in VanGorder’s defense, the linebacker group is now headed by Mike Elston, who is in his first year at the position after leading the defensive line since 2010. The transition to Elston from former Irish assistant Bob Elliott, who moved to an off-field role as special assistant to the head coach this year, has been a smooth one by all accounts.

“The exciting thing for me is that it allows me to focus more on the whole part of the defense, from run defense to coverage, and that’s exciting,” Elston said March 23. “I’m familiar with that, and I’ve played that, and I’ve coached that role before.”

“… We have a great group of guys to work with, so that transition has been pretty easy,” Smith said he agreed from a player’s perspective.

“The comfort is definitely there,” Smith said of VanGorder’s defense. “We have experienced guys now. We’re getting healthy again. We still love the defense.

There’s so many tools. “ … [Elston] was my recruiting coordinator, so I always had that close relationship, but I’m happy for him being able to expand his role and try out something he hasn’t done since, I believe, Central Michigan.”

VanGorder began spring practices with working with Elston and the linebackers, the group he coached last season, to help smooth the transition.

However, as time has gone on he said he has started walking around to visit the other defensive groups as well.

As to how to clear the gridlock inside, VanGorder has also discussed cross-training Smith and Schmidt beyond the middle linebacker position.

During last Saturday’s scrimmage, Morgan (Mike), Onwuasom (Jaylon) and Smith (Will) took the first team reps, while Grace, Martini and Coney made up the second rotation, respectively.

Schmidt, a natural Mike, was cleared for non-contact drills last Saturday, though it remains to be seen where VanGorder and Elston throw him into the mix as well.

“We’ll work Jaylon around. Of course, Joe Schmidt will cross-train. He knows all the positions of linebacker,” VanGorder said. “Probably midway through [spring], three-quarters of the way through, we’ll cross-train Jaylon a little bit.”

Contact Zach Kloonsinski at zklonsin@nd.edu

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

NEW JOB. NEW RIDE.
199% APR NO PAYMENTS FOR FIRST 6 MONTHS

Congratulations graduated! Ride off to your new job with an auto loan from Notre Dame FCU.
Call 866-231-8467 or visit us online at NotreDameFCU.com/GraduationOffer to start your new career in style! Offer ends May 31, 2015.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

APR is annual percentage rate. Loan is subject to credit approval. Actual interest rate and amount will be $15,095. The calculated APR on a 5-year loan with an interest rate of 1.74% would be 1.99%. Interest will accrue on the entire loan amount during the six month deferral period. After six months, interest will accrue on the unpaid balance. The minimum loan amount is $1,000 and the maximum loan amount is $25,000. The maximum term is 7 years. Loan is subject to credit approval. Annual percentage rate (APR) is the rate used to calculate the interest due on a loan, expressed as a percentage. The APR may be higher than the stated or initial rate because it reflects the effective cost of credit, including the interest rate and loan fees. The APR for a 5-year term at 1.74% is 1.99%. The APR for a 7-year term at 1.74% is 2.33%. The APR for a 10-year term at 1.74% is 2.56%. All loans are subject to the University’s lending standards and are independent of the University. The University reserves the right to change the rates, terms, and conditions of the program at any time. The University is an Equal Opportunity Lender and Equal Housing Lender.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

APR is annual percentage rate. Loan is subject to credit approval. Actual interest rate and amount will be $15,095. The calculated APR on a 5-year loan with an interest rate of 1.74% would be 1.99%. Interest will accrue on the entire loan amount during the six month deferral period. After six months, interest will accrue on the unpaid balance. The minimum loan amount is $1,000 and the maximum loan amount is $25,000. The maximum term is 7 years. Loan is subject to credit approval. Annual percentage rate (APR) is the rate used to calculate the interest due on a loan, expressed as a percentage. The APR may be higher than the stated or initial rate because it reflects the effective cost of credit, including the interest rate and loan fees. The APR for a 5-year term at 1.74% is 1.99%. The APR for a 7-year term at 1.74% is 2.33%. The APR for a 10-year term at 1.74% is 2.56%. All loans are subject to the University’s lending standards and are independent of the University. The University reserves the right to change the rates, terms, and conditions of the program at any time. The University is an Equal Opportunity Lender and Equal Housing Lender.
It was the big question mark in the back. The one area where Notre Dame’s defense was constantly lacking, injured or both. The place where the Irish were exposed again and again last season. The secondary.

A year after being shredded for 22 passing touchdowns and 2,878 yards through the air, though, the Irish end spring practice with clear favorites to start at the cornerback and safety positions.

Junior Max Redfield and senior Elijah Shumate both started at least 10 games at safety last year, but both also saw the bench in some way more knowledgeable,” VanGorder said. “Not getting a lot of panicked snaps from them. They’re playing much more confident.”

Head coach Brian Kelly also said he was pleased with the safeties’ play throughout the spring but highlighted an area they still had room to improve upon.

“Defensively, I think we’re seeing both of safeties — I would like them to communicate a little bit more demonstratively, more vocally louder — but it’s night and day compared to their recognition of what’s happen out there and how they’re seeing things,” Kelly said.

For VanGorder, the importance of being vocal on the field is especially important for safeties, whom he said he considers “the quarterbacks of the defense.” Redfield said he has worked on developing that aspect of his game this spring.

On the right side of the field, junior Cole Luke virtually has one cornerback spot locked down after starting all 13 games last season. While he deferred to the now-graduated Cody Riggs in 2014, Luke has stepped up to lead the cornerback corps.

“Cole’s tremendous,” new Irish defensive backs coach Todd Lyght said. “Right now, he’s our No. 1 corner, doing a great job of showing the other younger players what it takes to be successful. … The way he goes about everything in his approach — I mean, he’s very attentive in meetings; he’s a leader in our group during individual periods. … I really like the way that he’s stepping up in a leadership role.”

But while Lyght and VanGorder expect players like Redfield and the vocal presences in the center of the field, they said Luke’s leadership style is based more on example.

“I think his leadership comes in the way [young players] know what he’s doing,” VanGorder said. “He’s a quiet communicator, but they trust that he knows the defense well. He’s a very bright player, so he’s a different kind of leader for us.”

The only uncertainty remaining is the second cornerback spot. KeiVarae Russell, who missed all of last season due to the investigation into academic dishonesty, is expected to return to the Irish in the fall, contingent on his academic work.

But until he does, the Irish have played junior Devin Butler and sophomore Nick Watkins. While Lyght and VanGorder both said they liked the physical skills of each player, they still want to see continual development.

“When I watch Devin and I watch Nick, these are guys with tremendous talent, tremendous playmaking ability, and you see them flash,” Lyght said. “But consistent-ly, they don’t do it at a high level enough consistently that we could be really, really successful.”

The most senior member of the secondary, graduate student Matthias Farley, will fill in wherever needed this season. VanGorder said. Trained at both safety and cornerback, Farley is most likely to see time in the nickel package, a valuable position only a veteran could take on, Lyght said.

“Does he do a great job of understanding the 2-3 exchanges, which is very difficult for young players, where offenses like to move guys around, and you lose leverage on the 2-3 exchange,” Lyght said. “I think he does a good job communicating with the inside linebackers of how they’re going to play those 2-3 exchanges, and so I think that he’s going to be a really big part of what we’re going to do this year.”

Despite the trials of last season, Redfield said the secondary has come together as a unit and bought in to the defensive system.

“We’re all in it together,” Redfield said of his message to younger players. “Everyone has a role that is going to contribute to the team, and if we’re not all on the same page, then it’s not going to work.”

Contact Greg Hadley at ghadley@nd.edu

By GREG HADLEY
Editor-in-Chief

Secondary all but solidified after spring
Sophomore punter/kicker Tyler Newsome follows through on a field-goal attempt at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday.

Irish offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mike Sanford watches as junior quarterback Malik Zaire winds up for a pass during Notre Dame’s practice last Saturday at LaBar Practice Complex.

Junior receiver Torii Hunter Jr. runs forward after grabbing a pass during a drill at LaBar Practice Complex last Saturday. Hunter Jr. recorded seven receptions and a touchdown in the 2014 season.

Irish graduate student quarterback Everett Golson hands the ball off to junior running back Greg Bryant during a March 27 practice.

We’re now leasing for 2016-2017! Apply and sign your lease online today:
IrishRowApartments.com

• Individual Leases
• Fully Furnished Units
• Inclusive Rent Package
• Modern Fitness Center
• Bike Storage
• Free Tanning
• Seconds Away from Campus
• 40” Flat Screen in Living Rooms
• Exciting Community Events
• Free Resident Parking
• Community-wide WiFi
• Private Washer and Dryer