

ND Players React To Wittek's Comments

Written by Sean Stires

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NOTRE DAME, Ind. – Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel has been on media lockdown all season long. The redshirt freshman, aka “Johnny Football”, vaulted into the Heisman Trophy conversation nearly two weeks ago when he led his team to a shocking 29-24 upset of then No. 1 Alabama, but head coach Kevin Sumlin is yet to allow his precocious QB the chance to speak to the media all season.

Based on the swirl the comments of USC redshirt freshman Max Wittek caused this week, maybe Sumlin’s choice is wiser than many would have first thought.

Wittek, himself a redshirt freshman, is set to start for the injured Matt Barkley at quarterback when No. 1 Notre Dame ends its regular season this Saturday. He made the following comments on a Los Angeles radio station this week:

“We’re gonna play our offense,” Wittek began. “Whatever coach (Lane) Kiffin feels comfortable giving me. If he wants to air it out let’s air it out. If he wants to pound them on the ground let’s do that. Like I said, I’m gonna go out there (and) I’m gonna play within myself within the system and we’re gonna win this ball game.”

The first three and a half sentences is pretty innocuous stuff, but it’s the last seven syllables have Wittek in a class with Joe Namath in the current sports media cycle. Talking heads from east to west have taken Wittek’s words “we’re gonna win this ball game” as a guarantee from

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the youngster.

In this age of internet, social media and ESPN it never takes long for such "gotcha" news to travel. Irish defensive end Kapron Lewis-Moore actually heard the news the old fashioned way when he got a phone call from his sister. He told her to "chill" and hardly shocked by Wittek's words.

"What do you expect," Lewis-Moore asked a group of reporters rhetorically on Wednesday. "You don't expect him to say that we're gonna lose. I think people are really making it a bigger deal than what it is. He's a confident quarterback and you want to play for a confident quarterback. Him coming out and saying he's gonna win...that's what you want out of your quarterback."

"It's not hanging-up in the locker room. It's no bulletin board material. We know about it. You just kind of shrug it off and then go to work."

While Lewis-Moore heard the comments from his sister, Fighting Irish center Braxton Cave first saw Wittek's "guarantee" on Twitter. Like his defensive teammate, Cave was hardly moved by what he read.

"He's not gonna sit there and say that they're gonna lose," Cave said. "Any guy who's competitive is gonna go out there and motivate his team and try and get a win. That's really not a big deal. We're gonna continue to prepare the same way and just go out there and execute."

Broadway Joe guaranteed the New York Jets would beat the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III. His was a simple boast that could hardly be mistaken "I guarantee it," Namath said in his Miami poolside chat with reporters. Wittek's comments this week make him anything but "Hollywood Max" though.

"It's whatever," Fighting Irish safety Zeke Motta said when asked if Wittek's was a guarantee. "If I was on that team I'd want my quarterback being confident too. You can say what you want, but he's gotta have some sort of motivation trying to go into this game and to get everybody else

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fired-up. I think at the end of the day he's got nothing to lose, so that's a little more dangerous than when somebody calculates what they're doing."

"That's good for him," Notre Dame cornerback Bennett Jackson commented. "He's a confident kid. You gotta be a confident kid when you're playing at such a high level. That's his opinion and it really doesn't have any effect on me. We're gonna come and show up regardless."

Notre Dame nose guard Louis Nix III is known to have his own knack for words and he puts neither a negative connotation nor derives any extra motivation from what Wittek said this week.

"He probably just mis (spoke) a few words, who knows," Nix said. "I don't try to take comments that people say (to heart), because sometimes people speak out of turn and people try to boost it up. If he said it, he said it. If he didn't mean to, he didn't mean to. I don't really care. I'm just going out to the Coliseum to try to play some good football."

Nix added Wittek's comments do not change his approach to this Saturday's game at all.

"I look at it the same as I did with Pitt or BYU or Michigan or Stanford," Nix said. "I just wanna go out there and do my job and hopefully we get a win."

Former Irish head coach Charlie Weis was more a "bulletin board guy" than Brian Kelly, whose message to his team has always been about focusing on what they can control. Who knows if Weis would have deemed "we're gonna win this ball game" as bulletin board worthy, but it is obvious that Irish players have their focus in a different place as they prepare for their last step toward playing for a national championship.

"The biggest thing coach Kelly always says is avoid the noise and I guess that goes in that category," Cave said. "If someone's gonna talk we're gonna go do our talking on the field. People can say what they want, but the game is where it's gonna be decided."