

## Irish NFL Draft Possibilities

Written by Sean Stires  
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The 2013 NFL Draft is more than four months away, but Notre Dame will not play Alabama in the BCS Championship Game for five more weeks, so that makes this a good time to look at where a few Fighting Irish players could end up going next April.

It would be a shock if Manti Te'o is not the first Notre Dame player to hear his name called in the 2013 draft. The senior All-American linebacker, who could end up with the Heisman Trophy in his hands later this week, is the surest of sure fire Irish players when it comes to this year's draft crop. There are a handful of Notre Dame players with remaining eligibility though who will have decisions to make soon about whether they will be back on campus next year or suiting up in NFL training camps next summer.

Like Te'o, tight end Tyler Eifert could have headed to the NFL last year, but he came back this season. He still has another year of eligibility remaining, but it seems a foregone conclusion that he has just one game left as a college player. Three other key players with draft decisions to make are running back Cierre Wood, left tackle Zack Martin and nose guard Louis Nix III.

For insight on these players in the upcoming draft we turned to two great NFL draft analysts not named Mel Kiper, Jr. They are [Bleacherreport.com](http://Bleacherreport.com) NFL Draft Lead Writer Matt Miller and [Walterfootball.com](http://Walterfootball.com)

NFL Draft Writer Charlie Campbell. Let's start with the more obvious:

### Manti Te'o

Te'o's stock is off the charts right now. He could have left for the NFL last year, but he came back and it has paid huge personal and team dividends this season. He was a likely late first to early second round pick last year, but he is currently projected as a top-10 pick in April.

"He has been such a force this year," Campbell said of Te'o. "He has played great run defense throughout his career, but the strides he made this last offseason to improve his ability to defend the pass have been just tremendous. He definitely turned himself into a weapon in the pass defense for the NFL. His ball skills, his instincts, the way he moves in zone, some man coverage ability. He's a three-down player and a three-down difference maker."

Campbell says his top 10 projection is a great credit to Te'o's skill, because the NFL's trend toward high power passing attacks makes it tougher for middle linebackers who do not have big sack totals to go so high. Miller, who says he thinks Te'o should win the Heisman, is among his own top-5 in terms of overall talent, but he does not know if he will actually go that high.

The needs of the team drafting always comes into play with such decisions and Miller sees Oakland and Cleveland as two potential landing spots for the Hawai'i native. The biggest knock on Te'o seems to be his ability to play in space, but Miller does not see that as an issue.

"I don't mind how he moves in space as much as some other people do," Miller said. "I think that at that point we're being overly picky about a guy who still had seven interceptions. He's shown that he can drop into coverage and I think he'll have an awesome platform to show that at the combine what he can do athletically. I think he'll wow a lot of people. I don't really think a lot about things like that."

"It can make a big difference, especially if you're talking about a team that likes to run a lot of Tampa-2 or zone coverage where he's going to be asked to drop and play in space," Miller continued of Te'o's pass coverage abilities. "If you look at a 3-4 team where he's gonna be just kind of a thumper on first and second down and maybe cover a tight end on third down I think he can develop there."

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Miller's bottom line on Te'o is he "dominated" between the hashes, which is the most important factor for an inside linebacker anyway.

"I think that he's the poster child for why players should come back even though they could go in the first round," Campbell added. "He really transformed himself to another level."

### Tyler Eifert

While Te'o's decision to come back for his last year in college has paid huge dividends, the same cannot immediately be said of Eifert – at least by looking at statistics alone. The tight end caught 63 passes for 803 yards and five touchdowns in 2011, but saw those numbers decrease to 44 catches for 464 yards and four TDs this season (all team-highs).

However, stats do not show the area where Eifert has made his biggest improvement to his all-around game.

"I've been impressed with him this year, because I think he's become a much better blocker," Miller said of the Ft. Wayne, Ind. native. "I thought there was a chance he would have come out last year and maybe would have been in the discussion to be the first tight end drafted. He's clearly the number one guy at the position this year."

"His run blocking really improved this year," Campbell agreed. "He did a good job of getting stronger and getting better technique in the ground game last summer and really showing that this season. I think he became a more well rounded and complete player and he's definitely helped himself by coming back."

Campbell believes having a quarterback learning as the season progressed hurt Eifert's overall numbers, but says his route running and reliability are obvious. Campbell projects Eifert to go somewhere between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> overall picks, which puts him in the late first to early second round. Miller sees very little downside to Notre Dame's all-team receiving tight end when it comes to NFL potential.

“With him the only thing that holds me back a little bit is I don’t think he’s a great athlete,” Miller estimated. “People are going to want to make the (New England Patriots Rob) Gronkowski comparisons because they’re similar in size and they are both good blockers, but I don’t know that he’s as athletic in space. I don’t know that he has that quick change of direction, but I think overall he’s a very good tight end and a day one starter.”

Miller says he would not be surprised if Atlanta grabs Eifert at the end of the first round with future Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez getting ready to retire soon.

### **Cierre Wood**

After Eifert, Wood would seem a fairly sure bet to pack his bags and head for the NFL. Wood shared time in the backfield with Theo Riddick this year and saw his rushing total slip from 1,102 yards and nine touchdowns last season to 740 yards and four TDs this year. Campbell and Miller disagree on where Wood will go on draft day. Campbell has him slotted in the third or fourth round, while Miller believes it will be more like the fifth or sixth based on Wood’s inconsistencies.

“When I look at running backs I try to think what does this guy do great, like how would I sell him to a team or front office,” Miller said. “With Wood he’s solid, but there’s nothing that he does exceptionally well. I think he’s just another guy. In the NFL, especially at skill positions, that usually means you’re a late round pick.”

Wood’s off the field issues that landed him a two-game suspension to begin the season do not help, but he has two on-field flaws that are likely to be an even bigger issue for NFL teams: his receiving skills and blitz pick-up as a blocker.

“That limits you,” Miller stated. “Maybe he’s a first and second down runner, but if you can’t catch and I’ve not seen him block a whole lot – you’re limited and when you’re limited and you don’t have any excellent traits otherwise that’s when guys start to fall.”

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“If there’s a running back that can’t contribute in blitz pick-up and as a receiver it limits the offense,” Campbell added. “Defenses know when that guy’s in the game he’s probably going to get the ball, because his team doesn’t trust him in pass protection. It’s an indicator as to what the play’s going to be and coaches hate that obviously.”

Wood’s receiving totals dropped dramatically this year due to Riddick’s presence out of the backfield. He had 27 receptions for 189 yards in 2011, with merely four catches for 27 yards this season.

Despite all that appears to be working against Wood, Miller does not think the California native would benefit by returning to Notre Dame in 2013.

“I think with running backs if you have a draftable grade you should probably come out, because you can always improve your stock at the combine,” Miller explained. “Those added 300 carries next year could really hurt him. Like (Wisconsin running back) Montee Ball last year, I felt like he should have just come out and look what happened he got hurt and there were some off the field issues and his stock hasn’t gone up even though he set a college football record.”

Miller went on to explain that rather than take the burden of the extra carries in college, Wood can instead get paid \$350,000 a year to develop his receiving and blocking skills as an NFL backup.

### **Zack Martin**

Now we’re getting to the meat and potatoes. With center Braxton Cave and guard Mike Golic, Jr., both fifth-year seniors, both definitely gone next year the Irish would be in bad shape heading into 2013 needing to replace three members of a very good offensive line. The loss of Martin would be felt even more considering he mans the left tackle spot on the line.

That’s the bad news. The good news is both Campbell and Miller agree that Martin is good, but not quite ready for the NFL. Campbell sees Martin’s size (6-foot-4, 305 pounds) as his biggest current detriment, considering the prototype NFL tackle is closer to 6-foot-6 and 320 pounds. He

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used Te'o as an example of how Martin could benefit from another year in college.

"Manti Te'o's a better player this year than he was last year and he was a better player last year than he was in 2010," Campbell began. "I think Martin would be the same way, and they have an outstanding coaching staff there. They're gonna get him ready. They're gonna help him improve in spring ball and in training camp."

"I think adding the size and just the overall technique as a pass protector," he continued. "He'll be even better and his draft standing will improve by coming back to Notre Dame."

Miller thinks Martin would excel in the pre-draft interview portion of the NFL combine, but sees inconsistencies in Martin's overall game that could be polished with one more year at Notre Dame.

"From game to game he is a little bit of a different player," Miller said of Martin. "I like that he's played so well in their system, because I actually think that what they do up front is going to translate really well to the next level. He's one of those guys that's probably a little bit more prepared than some of these spread option type kids that we see coming out."

Both Miller and Campbell agree that Martin is a likely third to fourth round pick if he opts to declare for the draft, but they disagree on where he will likely play in the NFL.

"He could move inside (to guard) in the NFL if a team, especially a passing team, and in a passing driven league you need good guards as pass protectors," Campbell estimated. "It helps your pass protection having a player who has played on the edge going inside. It should be a smooth transition for a guy like Martin."

While Campbell could see Martin making a complete position change, Miller would not rule out a move from left to right tackle.

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“It’s tough to tell,” Miller began. “That’s one of those things that it’s easy to say a guy plays left or right, but then when they get out there it can be a tough transition. I like for kids to stay where they are at least early on and then after a year or two you think about switching them.”

Miller added that it is easy for a premium position like left tackle for a player to get over drafted because of a team’s need, and all the top players at offensive tackle this year are underclassmen.

### Louis Nix

While Martin’s loss would be big for the offensive line, the loss of Nix would be the biggest literal and figurative loss for the Fighting Irish if he is not back in 2013. Nix came into the season as a player known more for his unique personality, but the “consistency” Brian Kelly was looking for has turned him into a force on the field this season.

“I’ve been getting asked a lot about him from agents as well as guys wanting to know where I have him,” Miller said of Nix. “I put him in the third round with some movement there. I think mid to late second round would be a possibility.”

“There’s a lot of potential there and there’s a lot to like,” Miller continued. “He’s done a really good job of keeping Te’o clean this year. That size and his ability to anchor – that’s a premium in the NFL. With so many teams going to a 3-4 defense, that only increases his value, so I think he could come out of Notre Dame with a third round grade and maybe move himself up.”

Campbell is high as well on the junior nose guard who did not play at all as a freshman in 2010.

“He’s just so disruptive at the point of attack,” Campbell began while speaking glowingly of Nix. “Looking at his stat line, there are a lot of games where he doesn’t have big numbers and he only has two sacks on the season, but that does not tell the story with him. He’s a phenomenal player.”

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Just how high is Campbell on Nix? You might want to sit down for this one Irish fans.

“I have him in the first round of my 2014 mock draft,” Campbell proclaimed. “I have him going 13<sup>th</sup> overall in the most recent update. I definitely think he has first round potential. He’s just so disruptive at the point of attack.”

Miller does not see Nix’s stock rising as high as Campbell believes it could if the big man comes back to Notre Dame for one more year, but he does still foresee first round possibility.

“In his situation I actually think he would benefit from coming back,” Miller said of Nix. “It’s a strong defensive tackle class (for the 2013 draft) and he could come back and put another year of quality film together and he might be a late first round pick (in 2014) if he stays healthy. He’s in a good situation to come back and be a leader on that defense and really move his stock up.”

Miller added that what keeps a ceiling on Nix’s draft stock is his low sack total. Nix has just 2.5 sacks in his career, with 2.0 coming this year. Interior linemen who tend to be high first round picks, like Ndamukong Suh and Gerald McCoy, tend to have high sack totals when they are in college. However, Campbell still likes what he sees from Nix in that department and sees just the need for minor adjustments at the next level.

“I think the one thing that will help him in the NFL is improving when teams run directly at him,” Campbell commented. “A lot of defensive tackles in the college game have that transition in the NFL, because the guards and centers are so big, and the bump blocks in the NFL, which is when you’re getting say a guard blocking you up high on the chest and the center’s crashing in on the hip – that’s a block that defensive tackles really dislike.”

Miller listed Pittsburgh, Baltimore and San Francisco as possible future homes for Nix, because they re teams that will need to upgrade at nose guard soon.

A major x-factor in the entire draft discussion is the BCS National Championship Game. The names Notre Dame and Alabama on the marquee are already bringing premium ticket prices

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and the game could end-up being the most watched college football game ever.

Fans won't be the only ones watching the game either. NFL executives will be watching closely as well, and big or bad individual performances on either side of the ball could send a player's stock either soaring or crashing.

"That's kind of the interesting dichotomy of the scouts versus the coaches and the GMs and the decision making of the draft," Campbell said. "The coaches and GMs, the guys that don't follow these players every day for years like scouts do, they get more caught up in those national championship games. They have more clout over the final decision than the scouts do, so a big game against Alabama will definitely help any Notre Dame draft prospect."