

Can Manti Make Heisman History?

Written by Sean Stires

Thursday, 06 December 2012 12:56



The Heisman Trophy ballots are in. Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o hopes to make history this Saturday night by becoming just the second defensive player ever to win what has long been considered college football's top honor.

Te'o, along with quarterbacks Johnny Manziel (Texas A&M) and Collin Klein (Kansas State), were named the three finalists for the award on Monday. Even if the Fighting Irish linebacker does not join Michigan defensive back Charles Woodson as the only defensive players to win the Heisman, he could still make Heisman history with a runner-up finish.

The only purely defensive player to finish second in the Heisman ballot was 32 years ago when Pittsburgh defensive lineman Hugh Green was the runner-up to George Rogers of South Carolina in 1980.

USC quarterback Matt Barkley, Michigan's Denard Robinson and Wisconsin running back Montee Ball were all on Heisman watch lists at the start of the season, while Te'o was merely in the conversation for more conventional defensive accolades like the Nagurski and Butkus Awards (both of which he won earlier this week).

The fact that Te'o is even in New York this weekend for the Heisman ceremony is a tribute to how crazy this year's Heisman race has been. At least that is how Chris Huston, the "Heisman Pundit" from the web site Heismanpundit.com sees it.

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“I think if everything had gone on a more conventional basis Te’o would not have gotten to New York,” Huston said. “He probably would have finished sixth or seventh or something around there, but he has directly benefitted from the drop-off in a lot of these players.”

Te’o’s improbable run from dark horse to Heisman finalist this season has amounted to a college football perfect storm. It began with a national writer claiming Notre Dame’s ‘irrelevance’ and has steamrolled into Te’o leading the Irish to a 12-0 record and will culminate with a spot in the Jan. 7 BCS Championship Game against defending national champion Alabama.

“There’s always been that debate – is Notre Dame relevant? Well, I think we’ve answered that pretty resoundingly,” Huston said emphatically. “In the process, wins are the ultimate metric by which players are deemed worthy in the Heisman, along with their production.”

“When voters went looking for a Heisman candidate they did see Notre Dame and they did see a star linebacker,” Huston continued. “They have latched onto him (with) him being one of the prime catalysts for that undefeated season.”

Huston, a life-long Heisman buff, has had a Heisman vote since 2009. That season saw the closest Heisman ballot ever, when Alabama running back Mark Ingram edged Stanford bruising back Toby Gerhart by all of 28 points. In fact, a total of 159 points separated Ingram from Texas quarterback Colt McCoy in third place.

“What really happened in that one was (Ndamukong) Suh of Nebraska completely threw a wrench into the works for the race in the last game,” Huston recalled of Suh’s performance in a head-to-head matchup with McCoy in the Big 12 Championship Game. “He ended up winning the Southwest region over McCoy, which was McCoy’s home region. If Suh doesn’t have that game then McCoy wins the Heisman I’d say.”

Suh joined Ingram, Gerhart and McCoy in New York that year to become the first defensive player since 1997 to earn a nod as a Heisman finalist. LSU’s Tyrann Mathieu joined the short list of defensive players to become Heisman finalists last year. Like ’97 winner Charles Woodson, Mathieu had the added dimension of returning kicks to bolster his resume, while Suh

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and Te'o earned their merit solely with defensive statistics.

Geography always plays a big part in how Heisman votes are cast and they will come into play when the results are announced Saturday night in New York. Huston expects Te'o to have done very well in the Midwest, where the likes of Ohio State quarterback Braxton Miller and Wisconsin running back probably took votes away from Manziel.

"The vote's gonna be decided by the far west, the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast regions," Huston speculated. "In my experience the Northeast region is filled with more national type (media) people. It's New York and Bristol based – ESPN, Sports Illustrated and the (TV) networks. These are people who aren't necessarily Northeast people, but they just live there."

"They have more of a national outlook," Huston continued. "They tend to go for the trendy winner type. In this case I think they're probably gonna go for Manziel, although I think Te'o will do very well, because of Notre Dame being such a prominent fixture in the media and the Northeast being (an area with Notre Dame alumni)."

Much to the chagrin of Notre Dame fans, Huston predicted a win for Manziel last week. The Texas A&M QB, who rushed for 1,181 yards and 19 touchdowns and passed for 3,419 yards and 24 more TDs with just eight interceptions, would become the first freshman to ever win the Heisman. Some consider Manziel, who redshirted last year, a 'freshman' in name only, but semantics aside, he would become the first player with three remaining seasons of eligibility at the time of his win to claim the Heisman.

Huston's Heismanpundit.com includes a list of what he calls "The 10 Heismandments". "The more Heismandments that apply to a player in a given season, the better his chances are of winning," according to the site.

Heismandment No. 6 reads "The winner cannot be considered an obvious product of his team's system." The case can be made that Manziel is a "product" of A&M head coach Kevin Sumlin's system, especially considering the video game numbers (5,631 yards and 48 TD passes) Kase Keenum put up under Sumlin last year at the University of Houston (this is Sumlin's first season as A&M head coach).

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However, Manziel is not perceived as a “system quarterback”, and Huston says that is the redshirt freshman’s reality this year.

“It’s all about perception,” Huston began. “It’s the difference between BYU and Texas Tech. BYU had a system in place. Everybody has a system. It’s whether you’re seen as transcendent of the system or whether you’re seen as just a cog.”

“The BYU quarterbacks, Jim McMahon and Steve Young, were seen as great quarterbacks, who were in a great system. They weren’t seen as great quarterbacks because of the system. Whereas as places like Texas Tech and Hawaii – those quarterbacks weren’t on their own seen as great quarterbacks, because there wasn’t that kind of validating experience later in the NFL or in the draft to show these guys didn’t necessarily need the system to be great.”

Huston added that Sumlin’s system is not seen as enough of a gimmick to assume that “anyone” could perform in it the way Manziel did this year. Manziel also has the added running dimension that Keenum and before him Heisman winner Sam Bradford lacked when Sumlin was his offensive coordinator at Oklahoma.

The 10th Heisman amendment states “The winner must be likeable”. Te’o more than has that and the Heisman’s mission statement that reads “The Heisman Memorial Trophy annually recognizes the outstanding college football player whose performance best exhibits the pursuit of excellence with integrity” covered.

Those “morals clauses” (which would also play into Klein’s favor) have some Te’o supporters unsettled, because they do not more heavily tip the scales in the linebacker’s favor. They would point out that Te’o recently won the ARA Sportsmanship Award, while Manziel’s June arrest for his part in a fight and using a fake ID went largely unaddressed in Heisman conversation.

“My philosophy is I don’t assume anybody is a great person or a bad person,” Huston said. “I think the Heisman voters, as long as you’re not an obvious creep, they’re gonna give you the benefit of the doubt.”

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“The integrity thing is definitely something that is desirable; it’s good to have, but it’s also very much in the eye of the beholder,” he continued. “The voters don’t weigh that stuff as much as heavily as they do the stuff on the field. It’s just very hard to quantify how good somebody is. We’re depending on the reporters who spend 20 minutes with these guys to tell us how good they are.”

How good Te’o has been on the field is impossible to argue. His 103 tackles rank just 59th in the nation, but most of the 58 players ahead of him on that list are on teams that will be watching bowl games rather than playing in them this month and next. The biggest knock on Te’o’s playing ability coming into the season was as a pass defender, but he ranks second in the FBS with seven interceptions. The next best total for a linebacker is four.

When all is said and done Huston does not expect this weekend’s Heisman vote to be nearly as close as that 2009 decision that saw Ingram win the Heisman and go on to help his team win a national championship. The Heisman Pundit expects Manziel to win by a ‘comfortable’ vote.

“I think it will be a little bit on order of the margin in 2007 when (Florida quarterback Tim) Tebow won,” Huston predicted. “Tebow won by about 250 points over (Arkansas running back Darren) McFadden.”

Tebow used 50 total touchdowns that season to become the first sophomore to ever win the Heisman. Huston sees a runner-up finish for Te’o this Saturday, with K-State’s Klein in third place.

“I think Manziel wins comfortably,” Huston said. “It’s not going to be close, but it’s not going to be a landslide.”

Whether or not Te’o wins, he has already made history.