



FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. – Gunner Kiel is taking his role of playing the part of Alabama quarterback A.J. McCarron in preparation for Monday night’s BCS National Championship Game well beyond just wearing McCarron’s number 10 jersey during practice.

“I kind of get in his stance,” Kiel said during Saturday’s Media Day at Sun Life Stadium. “Lately in practice, I’ve been wearing what he wears with the arm sleeve and all of that stuff.”

“It makes the practice fun. It makes the guys laugh and all of that stuff. It makes the other scout team guys enjoy the practice that much better.”

But Kiel (pictured) knows his look isn’t as important as the one he gives the Irish defense.

“I’m just trying to do what I do, just trying to complete balls and try to make the defense better and prepared for the game,” he said.

In his studies for his latest role, Kiel has developed a respect for McCarron.

BCS Media Day Notebook

Written by Christian McCollum
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“He’s a great quarterback honestly,” Kiel said. “He controls the offense very well, he’s a winner. Alabama’s won championships. He controls his team and he reflects a lot of good leadership and gets things done.”

After an eventful recruitment, Kiel enrolled at Notre Dame in January as the nation’s top-ranked quarterback, but it didn’t take long to see that he wouldn’t be in the mix to play as a true freshman. Instead, Kiel has embraced the role as the Irish’s scout team quarterback.

“To get the opportunity to be a different quarterback is fun,” he said. “You have to enjoy the small things.”

Despite not seeing the field this year, Kiel said being a part of a team that has made it to the title game and getting to play against what he called the nation’s best defense has exceeded any expectations he had for his first year in college.

Still, he can’t wait for his chance to compete again this spring.

“To get the opportunity to play is huge and to show my talent around the coaches is something I’m striving for.”

FRESHMEN PLAY DIFFERENT ROLES: Like Kiel, freshman offensive lineman Mark Harrell and freshman running back Will Mahone are preserving a year of eligibility while working on the scout team.

“It’s a great experience,” said Harrell of being on a team that is ranked number one in the nation. “It’s good to be a part of. You couldn’t ask for better freshman year.”

He’s made the most of his freshman year.

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"I've gotten a lot better with my fundamentals," he said. "I've been trying to give the defense a look on the scout team and I've tried to improve my game against these guys who are so good and so talented."

Mahone admitted that it was tough when he first learned he wouldn't be seeing the game field this season.

"It's been a learning experience," He said. "It was hard at first, but I'm enjoying it now and taking it in stride.

"I slowed down and thought about the bigger picture and not the now."

Mahone says he's improved thanks to veterans like Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood. He sees the game as a college running back now and is looking forward to the spring as well.

"I'm definitely excited, but I'm really excited for this game first," he said.

Meanwhile, freshman receiver Chris Brown has had the chance to get on the field as a rookie.

"It's been great," he said. "It's great coming in and being able to be a part of a winning team straight out of high school. It's fun to take in and I'm just learning on the way."

Brown had one of the season's biggest plays, a 50-yard reception in the fourth quarter of the Irish's win over Oklahoma. The game was tied 13-13 when Brown recorded the first catch of his career, which set up the go-ahead touchdown.

"I was just happy that my coaches believed in me," he said. "They told me I could help them in this offense and I was just ready to do my part."

CIERRE FOCUSED ON GAME: Irish running back Cierre Wood will have an important decision to make on whether or not to go to the NFL or return for a fifth year at Notre Dame in the weeks after Monday's game, but that's not his focus now.

"We'll go over what we think is important," said Wood. "When I feel the time is right, that's when the decision will be made.

"I know it's important, but the game is important. The league will always be there. It was here before I was born and it will be here when I'm dead and gone. Right now, I'm not thinking about it. I'm thinking about the game and that's all that's important right now."

REES GOES ALONG WITH ROLE: Tommy Rees' role as Notre Dame's "closer" earlier in the season just sort of happened, according to the junior quarterback.

"I think it kind of got crafted a little bit," he said. "It was never anything that was discussed or talked about. It came up a few times and worked out. I'm just glad that I was able to make the most of my opportunities and help this team win games.

"I was willing to play any role to help this team win."

Rees would have loved to been able to earn his starting job back, but he's not about to complain.

"It's been a great, great season," he said. "Team goals come first and being able to go 12-0 in the regular season has been great.

"My individual goals and aspirations have to be put aside a bit. I've had some great moments this year and been able to make the most of my opportunities. The relationships that this team

has with each other is what we're going to take away from the year."

While Rees has been credited with some of Golson's development during the course of the season, he was quick to push the credit back to his replacement.

"Everett's continued success has a lot to do with how he's grown up," said Rees. "All of the credit is due to Ev and he's done a phenomenal job."

CARLISLE WILL BE READY TO GO: Amir Carlisle hoped to make an immediate impact this season after transferring from USC, but a broken ankle that was complicated by nerve damage put those plans on pause.

By the midway point of the season, Carlisle was told he'd be sitting out this year.

"It was disappointing, but I knew it was part of God's plan," said Carlise, who began practicing after the USC game.

He's feeling good now and is already looking forward to getting back on the field.

"I'm around 95, 100 percent," he said. "I've been practicing, feeling good and I'll be ready for spring ball."

Carlisle hopes to fill the role that Riddick played this year and line up at running back and receiver.

"That's my goal," he said. "He's been a great influence and a great mentor for me and hopefully I can fill in that role next year."

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Carlisle would have loved to have the chance to play a game like this, but still feels grateful.

“I wish I could be out there, but it’s still been a great experience just being a part of this team,” he said.

And he also feels like now he’s where he belongs.

“I couldn’t be happier than where I am.”

LO UPDATES STATUS: Cornerback Lo Wood has been out all year after rupturing his Achilles in August and is hoping to return this spring.

“I’m at the halfway point with my recovery,” said Wood. “I have to wait and see after six months and see if I’ll be back for spring ball or if I’ll have to wait until next year.

“I feel very good. I got a lot of progress done. I’m starting to do some agilities, so I’m moving up right now.”

Wood admitted it was hard at times to watch the games right after his injury, but is excited about the team’s season.

BADGER ENJOYS HAPPY RETURN: Irish safety Chris Badger enrolled early as part of Brian Kelly’s first recruiting class. He enrolled in January of 2010, but went on a two-year Mormon mission following his first semester of college.

“It was really great,” Badger said.

Badger received updates and articles on the team from his brother via email about once a week, but never watched any games.

“When I was a missionary in Ecuador, that was my focus 100 percent, just helping people there and spreading the Gospel,” said Badger.

But he was still excited to return and couldn’t wait to get back on the football field.

“Coming back, it was cool to hear everyone’s stories and all of the cool things that had happened,” he said. “The first practice, I was so excited. Every day I’d go to work and when I would go to bed at night in Ecuador, I would dream about playing.”

Some Mormon players have done missions before starting their careers while others departed after a season of college ball. Badger believed that enrolling early and leaving before the fall of his freshman year gave him the best of both worlds, a taste of college football without wasting a year of eligibility.

Badger, 21, will have four more years of eligibility after this season and believes his maturity will help him down the road. And he wouldn’t change a thing about his mission.

“I definitely have no regrets. It was the best time of my life.”