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Unlike his college head coach, Notre Dame running back Cierre Wood is headed to the NFL. Wood is a senior who still had a year of eligibility remaining had he chosen to use it.

“Having to make a decision like whether to stay in school or leave to pursue a lifelong dream of playing in the NFL is never simple,” Wood said on Monday in a university release. “I had to weigh many factors over the last month, but ultimately it came down to what I felt was the right decision that would most benefit my family.”

The Oxnard, CA native had a career year in 2011, when he rushed for 1,102 yards and nine touchdowns while splitting time in the Fighting Irish backfield with Jonas Gray. Wood rushed for just 740 yards and four touchdowns this past season as he shared time primarily with Theo Riddick, who led the Irish with 880 yards and five touchdowns after switching to running back from receiver in his senior season.

Wood gained 2,447 yards in his three years on the field (he did not play as a freshman in 2009) to end his career as Notre Dame’s seventh all-time leading rusher.

“Cierre has been an important member of our football team in my three years at Notre Dame and I appreciate all he did to help get our program back on top,” Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly said of Wood. “I wish him well in the future and hope he has a successful playing career at the next level.”

ISD spoke to two draft analysts last month about Wood's NFL possibilities. One was Bleacherreport.com NFL Draft Lead Writer Matt Miller, who believes now is as good a time as any for Wood to declare for the draft.

"I think with running backs if you have a draftable grade you should probably come out," Miller said. "Because you can always improve your stock at the combine. Those added 300 carries next year could really hurt him."

Both Miller and Charlie Campbell of Walterfootball.com believe Wood is a likely fifth or sixth-round NFL pick. His biggest NFL liabilities are considered to be blitz pick-up and his receiving skills. Wood had 27 receptions for 189 yards in 2011, but he had just four catches for 27 yards this season as Riddick became ND's receiving target out of the backfield.

With both Wood and Riddick gone in 2013 that leaves George Atkinson III as Notre Dame's only real experienced back. Atkinson was third on the team this season with 361 rushing yards. He also scored five touchdowns. The current sophomore will be joined by classmate Cam McDaniel and incoming recruits Greg Bryant and recent commit Tarean Folston in the battle for backfield time next season. USC transfer Amir Carlisle and sophomore-to-be Will Mahone will also figure into the mix. Bryant and Folston are considered two of the top running back prospects in this year's recruiting class.