



ISD's latest Notre Dame opponent preview features Pittsburgh – an opponent the Irish have played on a regular basis. The Panthers will still pop-up on Notre Dame's schedule in the future when the school's ACC agreement kicks-in, but what has become an annual meeting will soon end since the Panthers are themselves set to join the ACC.

Pitt went 6-7 in its first season under head coach Paul Chryst, including a 38-17 loss to Ole Miss in the BBVA Compass Bowl on Jan. 5. The Panthers are pretty set on the defensive side of the ball heading into this spring's practices, but there is a ton of turnover, especially at the skill positions, on offense. Jerry DiPaola of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review provided a ton of insight into where the Panthers' biggest questions lie this offseason.

Offense

There are immense holes to fill for the Panthers on offense after a so-so season. Three offensive linemen, two receivers, the team's leading rusher, and quarterback Tino Sunseri are all gone from the 2012 squad.

"I think people are happy to see Tino Sunseri gone," DiPaola said candidly of the quarterback's departure. "He wasn't the most popular player. He was very indecisive most of his career. He didn't play well as a junior, because he wasn't suited for that Todd Graham (read option) offense."

ND Opponent Spring Previews: Pitt

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 07:55

Sunseri had his best overall statistical season at Pitt in his swan song season. The Pittsburgh native passed for 3,288 yards while completing 65% of his passes and fires 21 touchdowns with just three interceptions.

“He just couldn’t make the big play,” DiPaola continued. “He never in his entire Pitt career led a fourth quarter comeback. Any game Pitt was trailing going into the fourth quarter in his entire three years as a starter they never ended up winning.”

Fifth-year senior Tom Savage could be Sunseri’s heir apparent in 2013. Savage earned Freshman All-American honors after throwing 14 touchdowns and passing for 2,211 yards as a freshman at Rutgers in 2009. He transferred to Arizona in 2011 after suffering a 2010 injury. He sat again at Pitt this year after enrolling as a walk-on.

“He looked to me during training camp who probably had the strongest arm on the team,” DiPaola appraised of Savage. “It was much stronger than Tino Sunseri and stronger than the freshman Chad Voytik.”

Voytik was recruited out of Tennessee by former head coach Todd Graham (now at Arizona State) and is more a fit for that kind of offense than the pro style employed by Chryst. The redshirt freshman is expected to battle with Savage and early enrollee Tra’von Chapman for the starting job this spring.

The offensive line loses three starters from the 2012 team, including guard Chris Jacobson and center Ryan Turnley. There is not a lot of depth within the ranks to replace the three outgoing linemen. DiPaola says Pitt’s two returning starters, Matt Rotheram and Cory King, are “average” players.

“They’ve gotta find depth on the offensive line,” DiPaola exclaimed. “Not just depth but starters – guys that can step in and play. Adam Bisnowaty is a guy I think they’re gonna depend on to step in and man one of those tackle positions.”

ND Opponent Spring Previews: Pitt

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 07:55

Bisnowaty, a 6'6" 275 pound Pittsburgh product, redshirted this past season, but DiPaola says he has heard great things about him from Pitt players since his arrival. The Panthers also have five incoming offensive linemen in 2013 that average 313 pounds.

Running back Ray Graham, who gained 1,042 yards with 11 TDs in 2012, is gone as are wide receivers Cameron Saddler and Mike Shanahan. Devin Street will lead the receiving corps in 2013 and could be joined by freshman Tyler Boyd, while Rushel Shell (641 yards, 4 TDs as Graham's back-up) is expected to slide up and into the starting running back position. DiPaola says the finding new receivers is more pressing this spring than at running back.

"Getting Devin Street back is important," DiPaola said. "He had a very good redshirt junior year this past season. If he had decided to go to the NFL Draft it would have been a disaster for Pitt, because they really don't have that much behind him."

Shanahan led the Panthers with 983 receiving yards, a 15.9 reception average and six touchdowns in 2012. Street was second to Shanahan with 975 yards and five touchdowns, while tallying a team-best 73 receptions.

Defense

The Panthers only lose two defensive starters from what ended up being the third ranked total yardage unit in the nation last season. They are defensive end Shane Hale, a five star recruit who never played much until his final year, and safety Jarred Holley – a three-year starter at the position.

DiPaola believes Todd Thomas, who is a hybrid defensive player ala Jamoris Slaughter, could be an option at safety.

"He can really run," DiPaola noted of the 6'2", 215 pound Thomas. "He was a really good wide receiver in high school, but they turned him into an outside linebacker at Pitt. He looks like the kind of guy who could cover wide receivers or tight ends with his speed and athleticism."

ND Opponent Spring Previews: Pitt

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 07:55

Redshirt freshman Jevonte Pitts is another player DiPaola says could battle for time at safety this spring.

Special Teams

Saddler handled the bulk of the punt returning in 2012, but he was suspended for the last two games and Donald Jones did "ok" as his replacement according to DiPaola, who thinks the incoming freshman Boyd could be the answer there.

"He's a guy who could really run if they get him out in open space," DiPaola offered.

Saddler is Pittsburgh's only special teams loss heading into the spring. Cornerback Lafayette Pitts was Pitt's primary kick returner last fall and he is expected to keep that job next season.

Coaching Staff

Chryst returns all but one member of his coaching staff from his first season as Pittsburgh's head coach. The only loss is defensive coordinator Dave Huxtable.

"They weren't sorry to lose him," DiPaola said candidly of Huxtable's departure from the Steel City. "He was a little bit abrasive – a little bit rough on the players. He took a job at North Carolina State actually before the bowl game, so he's been gone for almost a month."

Chryst is yet to hire Huxtable's replacement, which makes that hire a top priority before spring drills begin. Chryst and his offensive coaching staff are back though, and DiPaola saw a lot of cohesiveness there last year, especially with offensive coordinator Joe Rudolph.

ND Opponent Spring Previews: Pitt

Written by Sean Stires

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 07:55

“There were a lot of times this season that I was shocked at how open some of these wide receivers and tight ends were,” DiPaola commented. “I think that has to do with Chryst being a very good play caller and doing his homework and figuring out the best way to attack a defense. I think they did that really well in certain instances this season.”

Notre Dame travels to Pittsburgh on Nov. 9 to face the Panthers next season.