

Navy 2013 Spring Preview

Written by Sean Stires

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Things run a little differently when it comes to football at the U.S. Naval Academy than they do at most other programs around the nation. Navy head coach Ken Niumatalolo knows he is never going to compete for elite five-star talent on the recruiting trail, so he and his staff have to do what they can to remain as competitive as possible.

For instance, Navy cannot redshirt a player, but they have a large influx of recruits at their disposal every year. Instead of receiving a "redshirt" a Navy freshman might instead be sent to the Navy Prep School as an alternative. Bill Wagner, who covers Navy football for the Capital Gazette, says it is not unusual to send 40 incoming freshman a year to the prep school.

"They send an entire football team to the prep school," Wagner said. "It's the only way that they can redshirt. They don't have redshirt years, so they can't do what every other college in America does. The only way they can get a year for them to develop is to send them to the prep school, and they play four or five games."

Of the 40 that go to the prep school, about 30 will be back with the regular Navy team the next year along with about 18 incoming freshmen. The process creates interchangeable depth, but will not help the Mids with their more pressing needs heading into spring practice this offseason.

The Midshipmen have to contend with significant offensive losses heading into spring practice. They lose the entire left side of their line with the graduations of left tackle Ryan Paulson and

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guard Josh Cabral, who Wagner said was their best lineman.

"It's pretty wide open," Wagner proclaimed when asked how the spring battle might go to replace Cabral on the line. "Thomas Stone was listed as the backup at both guard positions last year. Obviously, he had ascended, but he hadn't done anything to make himself the incoming starter."

"It's going to be a battle," Wagner continued. "They had a freshman named E.K. Binns who they are pretty high on. He probably could give Stone a run for his money in the spring."

Wide receiver Brandon Turner is gone as well. Navy's receivers are not typically considered a vital part of the option offense, but Wagner says Turner became a go-to guy at times.

"Toward the end of the season if they needed a play from the wide receiver position they threw it to Turner," Wagner said. "In the Army-Navy game he's the guy that caught the bomb deep down the right sideline that led to what proved to be the game-winning touchdown."

John Howell and Bo Snelson split time at one slot back position and must both be replaced. The other slot back, Gee Gee Greene, is also gone and is a much bigger loss.

"They are losing, by far, their most dynamic playmaking slot back," Wagner appraised of Greene. "They need to find another slot back that they can pitch the ball to and he's going to be a threat to really do some damage. He was their guy last year. He was the 'go to' guy."

Greene led Navy in rushing with 877 yards while averaging 7.3 yards per carry. He also had his team's second-most receiving yards with 309 on 18 receptions. Greene's 1,373 all-purpose yards (105.6/game) were 544 more than his next closest teammate for the season.

"They usually have one guy who is kind of 'the man'," Wagner continued. "On paper they guys they have coming back have been role players who when given spot duty have done ok, but it's

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a whole different story when you're playing more regular downs. Usually that slot back I'm talking about is also a passing threat."

Wagner said there is never a lack of young candidates to play slot back at Navy, but they are not usually viable options to play right away.

"They always have a boat load of slot backs," Wagner said of Navy's depth at the position. "Throw them in a hat, because there's not much difference."

Geoffrey Whiteside, Darius Staten, Marcus Thomas, and Ryan Williams-Jenkins all played last year and each figure to get a crack in the slot back rotation. There is also another element that leads to more playing time for Navy's slot backs.

"The biggest thing with Navy is their slot backs are so critical to blocking that young slot backs have a hard time seeing too much time, because they mess up in blocking," he evaluated. "The first thing you need to do is have a guy who's going to execute his blocking assignments, because 90-percent of the time he's going to be blocking instead of carrying the ball."

The Mids return two key members of their 2012 offense next season - quarterback Keenan Reynolds and fullback Noah Copeland. Reynolds is a rare freshman to start at quarterback for Navy whom Wagner believes has a chance to do "things no other Navy quarterback has done", considering he has three more seasons to run Navy's option.

Copeland was Navy's second-leading rusher with 738 yards. The QB and the fullback returning, along with three-fifths of the offensive line, give the Midshipmen a solid nucleus to build around in 2013.

Defense

Navy's losses on the defensive side of the ball are probably not as significant as on offense, but

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there are several spots that will need to begin to be filled this spring. Left defensive end Wes Henderson and inside linebacker Matt Warrick both started all 13 games for the Mids in 2012 and both have graduated.

Inside linebacker and captain Brye French, outside linebacker Keegan Wetzel, who Wagner said may have been their defensive MVP, and safety Tra'ves Bush have all graduated as well. There appear to be players ready to go at those spots though.

"I think they have some guys ready to step-in," Wagner said. "First and foremost, at the end of the year it could be argued that Cody Peterson was their best inside linebacker. He didn't start at the beginning of the year, but by the end of the year he was routinely leading them in tackles."

Peterson's 67 total tackles were the sixth-best by a Navy defender last fall. Warrick and Bush were first and second with 93 and 88, respectively.

"At the other (inside linebacker) spot they will need someone to step-up," Wagner continued. "All of the other returning players were third on the depth chart or lower. One inside linebacker spot is solid with Cody Peterson, but the other is a major question mark."

Special Teams

The Midshipmen return every specialist, including their long snapper, from last year's team. Marcus Thomas averaged 23.0 yards on 21 kick returns, while Shawn Lynch had a 9.4 average on 11 punt returns.

Nick Sloan handled all field goal and extra point duties, going 10-for-15 and 41-for-41, respectively. Colin Amerau averaged 60.7 yards on 63 kickoffs with 19 touchbacks, and punter Pablo Beltran punted 44 times for a 43.6 average.

Coaching Staff

Head coach Ken Niumatalolo is entering his sixth season as head coach at Navy. His coaching staff has remained virtually intact since his first season. In fact, only one assistant has left Niumatalolo's staff since he took over in 2008.

"Joe DuPaix was the slot backs coach and he left for BYU," Wagner recalled. "He is a Mormon and his dad had coached at BYU, so that was kind of a dream job for him."

The only other coaching staff change at Navy since 2007 was when Paul Johnson left to become the head coach at Georgia Tech. Niumatalolo is entering his 16th season overall as a member of the Midshipmen staff.