

Mayock On Eifert & More Irish Players

Written by Sean Stires

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The 2013 NFL Scouting Combine begins this weekend at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. The first positions to be put under the microscope of NFL coaches and executives are tight ends, offensive linemen and kickers. Those players will have their workouts this Saturday, with other positions taking their turns Sunday-Tuesday.

Former Notre Dame tight end Tyler Eifert is NFL Network Draft analyst Mike Mayock's top rated player at the position. Stanford's Zach Ertz, rated the number one tight end by other experts, is at No. 2 on Mayock's board, followed by San Diego State's Gavin Escobar, Travis Kelce of Cincinnati and Florida's Jordan Reed.

Eifert and Ertz, who are both listed by their former schools at 6-foot-6, are considered the cream of the crop in this year's tight end class. Mayock discussed both of them during a pre-combine conference call with media around the country this week.

"Both those kids are talented," Mayock began when asked about Eifert and Ertz. "Both those kids are what today's tight ends are all about - an ability to move around and do different things. They're both big enough to line-up in-line if you ask them to."

Eifert is coming off a final season at Notre Dame that saw him pass Ken MacAfee to become the school's all-time leader in receptions (134) and yardage (1,779) for a tight end. His 2012 numbers (44 receptions, 624 yards, four TDs) were down a bit when compared to his stellar

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2011 campaign when he had 63 receptions for 803 yards and five touchdowns, but Mayock thinks Eifert shined in another important area for a tight end.

"I thought Eifert did a better job blocking this year than he did in past years and (did) a little better job than Ertz did," Mayock commented. "(Ertz) was more of a move guy. If you asked me to rank them today it would be Eifert first, because I could line him up in-line, even though he's not a stone killer, trust me he's not. But, he can at least play leverage and block in-line. However, both of their strengths are in getting down the field and catching the football."

Ertz had 66 catches for 837 yards and six touchdowns for the Rose Bowl champion Cardinal in 2012. In 36 games at Stanford he had 109 receptions, 1,373 yards and 15 touchdowns. The third tight end in the mix at the top of the heap is Escobar, who played for the lower profile Aztecs. Escobar led SDSU with 42 receptions for 543 yards and six TDs

"It's going to be interesting to see how the three run against each other, because they're all clumped together by most teams right now," Mayock said. "From my perspective, you watch Ertz, you know they move him all over the field, what's he run? Is he a 4.68 guy or a 4.53 guy? I think the speed is going to be important for all three of those tight ends."

Two NFL.com mock drafts have Ertz going to the Chicago Bears with 20th pick in the first round. The highest projection for Eifert is with the 27th pick to the Houston Texans, while two other mock drafts have Eifert going to the Atlanta Falcons with the 30th overall pick. Escobar is not currently projected in any of the mocks as a first round possibility.

St. Louis, which picks at No. 16 and No. 22 in the first round, has a need for a tight end, and Mayock believes one of the tight ends could go there.

Mayock has two other former Notre Dame players, safety Zeke Motta and center Braxton Cave, ranked as the fifth-best players at their respective positions heading into the combine.

Mayock's safety rankings start with Kenny Vaccaro of Texas, then Florida's Matt Elam and Johnathon Cyprien of Florida International. LSU safety Eric Reid is Mayock's fourth-ranked

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safety, with Motta rounding out his top five at the position.

"He's a 218 pound kid that has a passion for the game," Mayock praised of Motta. "(He) works out as hard as anybody I've ever seen. He's a great teammate and understands the game. He doesn't have as good movement skills as (former ND safety) Harrison Smith did a year ago, but he's a tough kid that will play on all four special teams and two years from now will probably start for somebody."

Mayock believes Vaccaro will go somewhere within the top-20 picks of the first round. He believes Elam could go anywhere from the end of the first to the middle of the second round, with Cyprien going in the middle to the end of the second round and Motta going late in the third or in the fourth round.

An interesting "wild card" at safety in Mayock's view is former LSU star Tyrann "Honey Badger" Mathieu, who was a cornerback and dynamic return man for LSU's national runner-up team in 2011, but missed all of 2012 when he was kicked off the team.

"My gut tells me he's a better football player than he is an athlete," Mayock said of Mathieu. "He's small and I'm not sure he's going to run real well. I think teams are going to end up looking at him as kind of a nickel and a kick returner."

"Most teams that I've talked to have him more like in the fourth round. They don't think he's very big, they don't think he's going to run very fast and he's had off the field issues. That could change with a really good time.

Cave is Mayock's fifth-ranked center behind Wisconsin's Travis Frederick, Cal's Brian Schwenke, Alabama's Barrett Jones, and USC's Khaled Holmes, respectively. Offensive line is a position that Mayock sees a lot of depth in this year's draft, and he projects Cave as a fifth-round pick despite his high position ranking.

"Braxton's one of those guys who doesn't look quite as good in individual drills as he does when there are 22 people on the field," Mayock explained. "He loves the weight room (and is) a smart

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kid. He's a prototypical center as far as being able to set pass protections."

Former Irish running backs and roommates Theo Riddick and Cierre Wood are both hoping to make names for themselves this weekend as well. Riddick led the Irish with 190 carries and 917 yards this year after working as a slot receiver for two seasons. Mayock says he could bump up to the late third round, because of his dual skills.

"I thought Theo Riddick just did a great job this year," Mayock praised. "Because he's got experience now at tailback and at slot back I think his value has as that third down change of pace guy has been enhanced."

Wood rushed for just 742 yards in 2012 after going for 1,102 yards in 2011. Mayock sees him as a fourth round pick at best due to his deficiencies as both a consistent blocker and pass receiver.

Mayock has Manti Te'o rated as the second-best inside linebacker heading into the combine. [CLICK HERE](#) for a detailed rundown of Mayock's thoughts on Te'o as well as his top-rated inside linebacker, Alec Ogletree of Georgia.

The NFL Scouting Combine continues on Sunday with quarterbacks, running backs and wide receivers. Linebackers and defensive linemen will be evaluated on Monday, Feb. 25. Defensive backs conclude the combine on Tuesday, Feb. 26. NFL Network's coverage of the event will include 25 cameras and provide more than 60 televised hours.