Yesterday we took a look at expected numbers for the offensive side of the ball in 2014 recruiting. Today we'll take a look at the defensive side of the ball. Notre Dame continues to build both talent and depth on the defensive side of the ball, but to get to the level of having great defenses every season they'll need to continue to stock this side of the ball every year with both talent and numbers. 2013's class of defensive signees was impressive, but Bob Diaco and staff need to continue to build here to be able to play with the very best teams.

The National Championship game showed Irish fans that Notre Dame isn't quite at the level to play with the very best team. While I think there were valid reasons for their struggles, and Notre Dame's defense played their worst game of the season, I don't believe, even if they played their best game of the year, that they could've beaten Alabama on that night. The Crimson Tide was bigger, stronger and had much more depth. Nick Saban has a three-year head start on Brian Kelly and his staff, but to catch Saban and Alabama, Notre Dame has to make sure they follow last year's great class with another this season, and like many more in the future.

Defensive Line (4)

I subscribe to the theory that you can never have enough of a good thing, and elite defensive linemen change a defense. Notre Dame has a few currently on the roster but they need to add more. We saw how quickly Notre Dame's fortunes would change when a guy like Kapron Lewis Moore was out of the game, and by the way, he won't be in the game next year as he's graduated and will move onto the NFL. Someone will have to replace him, and due to poor

recruiting over the years, there doesn't appear to be anyone of his caliber ready to step in at this current time. Maybe someone will develop between now and the first game in 2013, but I doubt the Irish will be able to find someone with the brute strength of Lewis Moore, and the reason why is the lack of good recruiting at the position in 2010, Kelly's first recruiting class, and Weis' last.

I have four listed here, and I think it's important they get four. The Irish have played great defense lately. They have some legitimate stars and future first-round picks in Louis Nix and Stephon Tuitt. Both come from SEC country, so this should be a fairly easy sell. They landed Vanderdoes and Rochell last year, two elite players who were offered by everyone. The Irish staff should be able to roll this success into another successful defensive line recruiting season.

When looking at positions, I think it's important the Irish land another big body who can and will play nose guard. With Vanderdoes' quickness, he may end up being a dominating defensive end, if you can find someone who can be an immovable force inside at nose guard. If you can find a true, legit nose guard in this class, it will give Notre Dame a lot of flexibility with Vanderdoes.

I also think you need one lightening-quick pass rusher who will be a legitimate defensive end, and not a blown-up CAT linebacker. This person will have to be able to handle the pounding inside, but also be able to generate great pass rush, like Stephon Tuitt can.

For the other two slots, I like "tweeners." I like guys who could play either nose guard or defensive end, but most specifically are capable of generating a pass rush as defensive end. 2014 commitment Jay Hayes appears to be this type of a player. This is why guys like Tony Springmann and Jacob Matuska are important to the program. They'll likely stick around all five years if needed, and they'll be physically ready to perform if and when they're called upon. So a "project" type of guy in this group, who will redshirt but has all the physical tools to be a great player is key.

Ultimately you'd love to get at least one five-star, two high four-star players, and then a projectable guy who you can develop.

Linebacker (4)

Again, poor recruiting and not filling needs are the reasons for the high numbers here. The Irish coaching staff has signed just two "true" inside linebacker prospects in the previous three recruiting cycles----Jarrett Grace and Michael Deeb. And they're both projected to play the same position, MIKE linebacker. Doug Randolph may end up inside, but most didn't project him to be an inside backer. Is that his best position, or are the Irish going to have to "rob Peter to pay Paul" in this situation?

To be fair, the cards really went against the ND staff last year with two de-commitments at the position, but you have to be able to overcome these issues.

In regard to position, I have three for inside backers and one for outside backer. Of utmost importance is to sign two true WILL linebackers. It would be nice to sign a third backer who has the toughness and size to play MIKE, but could also play WILL……always easier said than done, but Notre Dame did just have the runner-up Heisman Trophy Candidate, and likely first-round pick in Manti Te'o. They're also playing great defense, and the opportunity to play early and often is there. Greer Martini is already committed in this class, and he could be the "tweener" you're looking for. He seems to read offensive flow very well and can diagnose and shed blocks. He was an important pickup for ND as now it allows them to focus on two truly elite players at inside backer who can compete with Martini.

While the number is small (1), I think the single-most important position for this 2014 recruiting class might be this lone signee. Notre Dame likely has their "DOG" backer of the future in Jaylon Smith (although he could be a CAT). The guy playing opposite of him is going to be very key to the future of the Irish defense. If you can get very athletic and physical on the outside, your defense is going to be very good. ND landed the first piece last year in Smith. This year it's vital they land the second piece to play opposite Smith. If this person plays CAT, size and SPEED are very important.

The Irish were not a great pass-rushing team last year despite finishing No. 22 in sacks last year. They registered one sack against Stanford, two against Oklahoma and USC and none against Alabama. The number of 34 total is respectable, but against the very good teams the ND pass rush was non-existent at times. That can't continue if ND wants to have any chance of beating the very best teams consistently. Notre Dame has a lot of bodies at the CAT position, but they don't have a lot of productivity. Prince Shembo finished with 7.5 sacks, which isn't

terrible, but with his quickness, he should have had more. Nobody else at the position had a sack. While sacks don't count pressures, truth be told, we just didn't see much pressure against the better teams, and it really impacted the rest of the defense.

It's very important Notre Dame lands a dominant pass rusher at the CAT position this year, as well as at defensive end. Improving the pass rush is the next step to becoming a better defense, in my opinion. So if you're keeping score, a dominant pass rusher and defensive end and CAT linebacker are the two most important signees in this class, in my opinion.

Defensive Back (2)

I don't remember the last time I wrote this type of article and said Notre Dame only needs to sign two defensive backs. There have been many times they only ended up signing two, but in this cycle, they really only need two, and that's because they've done a good job of filling both needs and numbers at both the safety and corner position thus far under Brian Kelly. That doesn't mean they can relax because they still haven't signed a truly elite corner at this point. They have signed some very good ones, but they haven't nabbed that five-star, can't-miss prospect yet at corner.

The Irish need to be patient and persistent at DB recruiting. Two corners would be ideal. One, like Cole Luke, who can run with anyone in the country is the most important thing. A true five-star shut-down corner is what the ND staff really needs to focus on, in my opinion. Two would be even better. Usually the Irish like bigger corners, so someone could switch to safety down the road if there is a need at the position, but it's important that both signees have the ability to play corner in this 2014 class.

Specialist (1)

Notre Dame will need to focus on a kicker/punter in this class. Which position is more important likely will depend on the potential of 2013 preferred walk-on kicker/punter Andrew Antognoli. Chances are he likely won't be able to both kick and punt at an elite level, and he is more considered a punting prospect, so an elite kicker is very important in this class, but one who can also punt would be ideal.

Overall, the Irish should be in line for another good recruiting class in 2012. They've jumped out early with close to 90 offers to some of the nation's top talent, and that number will certainly increase over the next two weeks. They seem to be in a good position with a number of elite players and nice role players thus far in the process. If Notre Dame remains patient, they could be challenging for a top five finish again, which is something they really need to do to stay on track to be in the BCS hunt every year.