

## Spring Preview: Quarterback

Written by Sean Mele

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What a difference a year makes. It doesn't take much to recall Notre Dame's quarterback competition that began last spring and at the same time, which horse you backed to win the race. Whether it was the accurate, but turnover prone veteran Tommy Rees or the young, but talented upstart Everett Golson, everyone seemed to be emotionally connected to the outcome. Articles were written, message boards were muddled with speculation, and although after the spring game there was a general consensus as to who the starter should be, nothing was officially announced until August.

Fast-forward a year and the only quarterback conversation you're hearing as of late is about the one who isn't even going to be on the team anymore. Golson seems to have cemented himself as the 2013 starter after a 2012 campaign that proved he has what it takes to be a player his teammates will get behind and follow just about anywhere. It may have taken him half a season to get to that point, but the kid who played against Michigan clearly isn't the same as the one who played against USC or Alabama.

The 6-foot, 185-pound first-year starter completed 59 percent of his passes while throwing only six interceptions last season. That's half an interception per start, which is above and beyond the expectations anyone could have for a rookie quarterback. He was also an efficient runner who pressured opposing defenses with his ability to extend drives with his feet. If you take the number of times he was sacked and subtract that from his rushing attempts you'll find that he averaged over five yards per carry. Considering many believe a player makes his greatest improvement after his first year of competition, the best is yet to come for Irish fans when it pertains to Golson's future.

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It's not all sunshine and lollipops for the Myrtle Beach, S.C. native and there are aspects of his game he needs to work on this spring. The good news is he'll be used to offensive coordinator Chuck Martin's style of offense and what the expectations are within the system. Golson will be able to hit the ground running and there'll be no new lingo or anything of that nature he'll have to learn. The base offense should be second nature and with a year under his belt hopefully that will lead to different nuances of the playbook being showcased. Whatever those wrinkles are remains to be seen, but I'm willing to bet getting him more involved in the zone option is one of them.

One of the things Golson struggled with on a consistent basis in 2012 was touch throws that required the arc of the football to be above 20 yards. Whether it was a goal line fade or deep post he lacked the touch required to consistently complete those passes. The biggest culprit for his spike of inaccuracy was how often he under-threw those routes. He obviously has the arm strength to get the ball downfield, but time after time he caused the receiver to slow down and come back to the football. This also gave the defensive back a chance to make a play on the ball.

If I was coaching the former Myrtle Beach High School star I would tell him on every deep route he throws I want the ball overthrown. That should be his mindset – heave that ball just about as far as you can and let the receiver run under it. If it's overthrown and falls incomplete, so be it, at least it wasn't intercepted and you gave the receiver a chance to use his speed to catch up to it. Besides delving deeper into the offensive playbook, his #1 goal coming out of spring practice should be his ability to throw a better deep ball and short fade.

Tommy Rees was the consummate professional during the 2012 season and he wore his dedication to being a loyal teammate like a badge of honor. From his troubles with the law to being supplanted as the starter by a freshman it could have been very easy for him to turn away from the positive and focus on the negative aspects of his life. Never once did he complain or play the "why me" card and was available to Golson as a mentor or to take snaps in key situations throughout the entire year. You learn a lot about a man when he's faced with adversity and I believe last season we learned Rees is a class act.

I believe the 6-foot-2, 210-pounder from Lake Forest, Ill. will remain the number two quarterback behind Golson. Irish head coach Brian Kelly trusted him enough to drop him into several pressure-packed situations in 2012 and that won't change moving forward. He knows the offense and is able to put the team in the best possible play at the line of scrimmage. The soon-to-be senior is one of the best backup quarterbacks in the country and I would venture to guess he has the most starts of any second-stringer as well. He's an extremely capable and

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reliable veteran whose entrance into a game should resonate a sense of calmness toward the Irish faithful.

Andrew Hendrix will remain the third team quarterback and he's more than capable of filling that role. The chance remains he'll beat out Rees for the second spot, but I believe that's unlikely to happen due to Rees's performance as a backup last year. Still, there may a few short yardage situations where Hendrix's running ability may take precedence over Rees's and if Golson is unable to go the 6-foot-2, 220-pound junior from Cincinnati may fill a certain niche rather nicely.

There has been some speculation as to whether or not this spring Luke Massa will move back to quarterback from receiver now that Gunner Kiel has decided to transfer. My take on the situation has to do with how quickly true freshman Malik Zaire can pick up the offense. Keep in mind we're talking about a fourth string quarterback, but if Zaire proves to be efficient enough to learn the basics then I believe Massa stays at receiver. If Zaire has trouble learning the offense, which I don't believe he will, then Massa will be made available if Golson, Rees, and Hendrix all go down with injuries.

I don't think it should be overlooked that no matter how well Zaire picks up the offense the ultimate goal should be to redshirt him for the 2013 season. If there's a rash of injuries late in the season and the choice is between Massa and Zaire I believe Massa would get the nod in order to preserve Zaire's redshirt.

The spring should prove to be uneventful as far as Notre Dame quarterbacks are concerned and for most of us that's a good thing. With the pressure of whether or not he'll be starting pretty much dissipated, Golson will be ready to pick up where he left off last season and charge full speed ahead into the next month of practice. This will give him the opportunity to build on what he thrives at and improve those areas he's weak. The end result should be a better, more confident and experienced quarterback heading into the 2013 season.