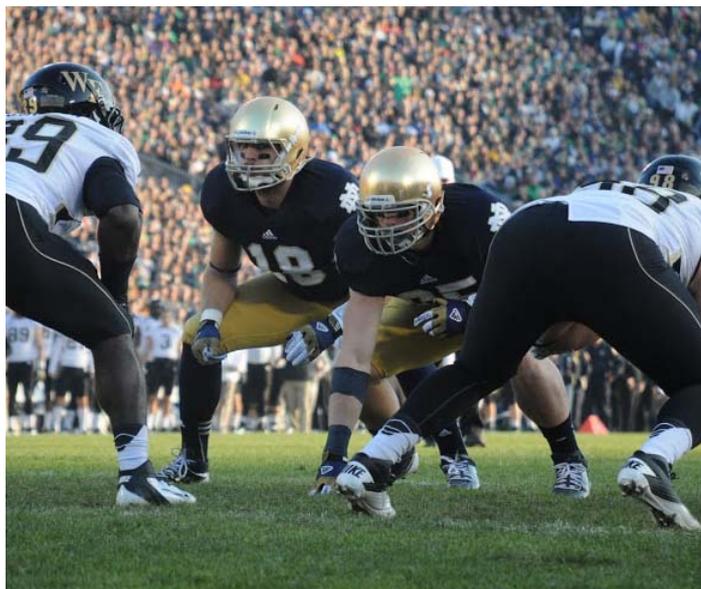


Spring Preview: Tight End

Written by Sean Mele
Friday, 15 March 2013 10:27



There's no replacement on the Notre Dame roster for All-American tight end and soon to be first-round draft choice Tyler Eifert – there just isn't. There may be one down the road in Mike Heurman or Durham Smythe, but at present time no single player will be able to reproduce his productivity, especially in the passing game.

So after that little tidbit of depressing news, what's the plan moving forward?

A good start would be to take a page from what the Irish wide receivers did last season when they lost a superstar to graduation – make it a group effort. It's not realistic to expect one person to fill Eifert's shoes, but with five tight ends on the roster everyone can do their part to equal or even surpass his numbers. If the tight end rotation ends up being comprised of three players next season that would mean each of them would have to tally around 17 receptions apiece for the entire year. That's less than two catches a game and would total 51 catches, which is one more than Eifert had in 2012.

With the departure of Eifert it will be interesting to see during spring practice if Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly and offensive coordinator Chuck Martin continue to use tight end heavy sets as they often did last season. On downs when the offense stayed on schedule (first and 10, second and medium, third and short) it was rare not to see two tight ends on the field. One of those tight was always Eifert and the other was usually Troy Niklas. Now that Eifert is gone I would tend to lean toward Niklas taking on that role while Ben Koyack or Alex Welch becomes the number two. On paper that looks good, but whether they embrace those roles and execute on the field is a whole other story. If they don't, we could be looking at a bunch of single tight

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end sets with multiple wide receivers in 2013.

Niklas proved himself to be a dominant blocker at the point of attack and on the perimeter in 2012. The 6-foot-7, 260-pounder from Fullerton, Calif. had a bit of a hiccup against Stanford, but he learned from the experience and improved tremendously week in and week out. The sophomore has really soft hands for his size and although he caught only five passes last season he'll see more balls in the spring and next fall. I don't believe he has the overall athleticism Eifert possesses and I wouldn't expect him to move around as much within the offense, but as an inline blocker and someone who can set the edge I wouldn't want anyone else but Niklas.

If there was a player on Notre Dame's offense who faded quickly as the season progresses it was Koyack. The Oil City, Penn. product had a couple of dropped passes early and his blocking left a lot to be desired. He especially struggled blocking in space against defensive backs and linebackers, which was where he was usually assigned with Niklas handling the inline duties. The 6-foot-5, 253-pound sophomore was used sparingly the last 10 games of the season and to see him on the field for any meaningful snaps was rare. The good news is the spring will present a chance for him to redeem himself and prove to the coaching staff that more than anything else he can be a consistent and physical blocker on the perimeter. Once he proves he can block then he can show them his hands are better than they were in 2012. Koyack has the opportunity to see a ton of playing time next season, but he has to show he can handle his responsibilities during the next 15 practices. If he doesn't he will find himself doing more of the same from last year – sitting on the bench.

Welch had broken into the tight end rotation last summer before tearing a ligament in his knee and subsequently sitting out the entire season. The junior from Cincinnati would have split time with Niklas as an inline tight end and would have seen significant action. The usual questions linger when a player comes off a serious injury like he had with the biggest being whether or not he'll be back to where he was before that fateful day in August. The beauty of spring practice is the opportunity it will provide for the 6-foot-4, 250-pounder to test his knee's readiness and gauge how far along he is in terms of recovery. He has good hands and is an excellent blocker - hopefully he'll be able to pick up where he left off last year and provide some serious depth and talent to his position.

Heurman is an early enrollee who'll get a chance to show his stuff in less than a week. With only three tight ends in front of him and a tendency for the Irish coaching staff to utilize multiple tight end sets, he has a real shot of seeing time if he can handle it physically. The 6-foot-4, 215-pounder must show that he can block. His route running and pass catching ability is

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secondary to his blocking at this point of his college career. If he can't prove he can block he won't have a chance at seeing the field in 2013. If he's physical and tenacious and ends up being a better blocker than Koyack then he has a real chance of making a major contribution.

Tight end will be an intriguing position to watch this spring and when it's over will there be anyone who has the versatility Eifert had in not so much his productivity, but where he lined up on the field. Is there a current tight end who can line up at five different positions the way Eifert did or will that part of the offense dissipate into thin air? I believe there isn't and the only time we'll see a tight end in the slot or out wide is when they're blocking. Will the coaching staff look to the wide receivers to play multiple roles instead? All are questions that linger, but will soon be answered. I just think the tight end position will look more traditional in the Notre Dame offense than it has in recent years.