

Spring Preview: Linebacker

Written by Sean Mele
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When a position group returns 75 percent of their starters from the year before, it's generally considered a positive when preparing for the upcoming season. Notre Dame's linebacker corps may be the exception to that rule when trying to figure out a way to replace all-everything inside linebacker Manti Te'o. Regardless of Te'o's off the field issues or what round he may slip to in the NFL draft, there's no denying the emotional impact he had on the field during the Irish's improbable run to an undefeated regular season and subsequent trip to the national championship game. Defensive coordinator Bob Diaco needs to develop a plan that makes up for the 113 tackles and seven interceptions Te'o left behind in 2012.

Notre Dame's 3-4 scheme is divided up into two inside linebackers (called MIKE and WILL) and two outside linebackers (called CAT and DOG). Te'o was the MIKE linebacker and due to his ability to play both the run and pass he never came off the field. I wouldn't have taken him out unless he couldn't walk either, but the residual effect of his skill and durability was that his backups, Jarrett Grace and Kendall Moore, never really saw the field except in special teams situations.

So now the Irish are looking to replace one of the best players in the history of the program with two extremely inexperienced players. Grace is well liked by the coaching staff and many feel at least on paper he'll be able to slide right into MIKE this spring. Moore has never really threatened to be Te'o's backup and was listed third on the depth chart behind Grace the entire 2012 season. These two will battle it out for the right to be named starter, but if the cream doesn't rise to the top don't count out the possibility of some position shuffling moving forward.

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The WILL linebacker role has been shared the past two seasons by a couple of familiar names in seniors Dan Fox and Carlo Calabrese. Both are returning for their fifth and final year of eligibility next season and provide good depth and experience on the inside. Fox is better in pass coverage while Calabrese is more effective against the run, but both are capable of performing their required duties no matter what comes their way.

My thought process for Fox and Calabrese is we may see them split apart by the end of spring practice with one staying at WILL and the other moving to MIKE if Grace and Moore don't give Diaco what he's looking for as Te'o's replacement. They were both asked back for a fifth year for a reason and I believe some of it had to do with the insurance policy they provide in knowing the system and the possibility of both of them starting in 2013. This will only happen if Grace and Moore fall flat on their faces, but you never know what can happen over the course of 15 practices.

The Irish have two good ones at CAT and DOG in returning starters Prince Shembo and Danny Spond. Shembo had an extremely productive 2012 junior year at CAT with 7.5 sacks and a team-leading 12 quarterback hurries. He was solid against the run as well and provided great support on the edge. I believe he's clearly the starter next fall and will continue to be subbed in for by sophomore Ishaq Williams. Williams saw limited action last year behind Shembo, although it was during meaningful times of the season. Many Irish faithful hoped he would have his breakout year in 2012 and even though he improved as the season progresses, it wasn't enough to steal minutes from Shembo. Sophomore Anthony Rabasa will look to earn some playing time at CAT this spring and could give Williams a run for his money as Shembo's backup. Rabasa has barely sniffed the field the past two seasons and will be looking to make a name for himself over the next month.

Spond returns to DOG this spring and many believe he has taken to the toughest position on the defense like a fish to water. For most of the 2012 season he showed his ability to cover just about anyone in space and provide support against the run. The junior won high praise from his coaches and earned the unofficial "unsung hero" award of the Notre Dame defense due to all the little things he did throughout the year that never showed up on the stat sheet. Ben Councill was set to share a few reps here and there with Spond as the season progresses, but Spond played so well (even as a nickel back) that he hardly ever came off the field. Councill was relegated to special teams and the sophomore never saw any valuable time the rest of the season. True freshman Romeo Okwara did enough his rookie year to be listed third on the depth chart behind Councill and found himself seeing limited action in all 13 games, mostly on special teams. Okwara is a good player who will be right on top of Councill to push him should he slip as Spond's backup.

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I realize this is a spring preview and I shouldn't talk about him because he's not an early enrollee, but I believe five-star linebacker Jaylon Smith is going to throw a monkey wrench into the DOG rotation this August. If I were Councill, Okwara, and even Spond, I wouldn't take Smith lightly because although he might not be ready to start in 2013, there's a darn good chance he's going to be taking away playing time from somebody. The competition at DOG will heat up this spring, but it's going to be an oven at preseason camp.

If everything works out like the Notre Dame coaching staff wants it to, I think we'll see Grace at MIKE with Fox and Calabrese continuing their job-share program at WILL. CAT and DOG will remain the same with Shembo and Spond once again getting the nod at their familiar roles. I'm not ruling out anyone working into the rotation as a backup and with players like Rabasa, Councill, and Okwara fighting to make a difference there should be plenty to look for starting Wednesday. The value of spring practice cannot be undervalued when trying to develop depth for the Irish at positions like linebacker.