



NOTRE DAME, Ind. - It would be hard to tell by walking outside the walls of the Guglielmino Athletics Complex, but spring football practice is about to begin at Notre Dame. The Fighting Irish will hold the first of 16 spring practices on Wednesday (the first official day of spring), but the temperatures around South Bend are hovering in the 30s on the eve of spring camp.

Irish head coach Brian Kelly spoke with the media for more than 45 minutes on Tuesday as he prepares to put his team through his fourth spring drills. Getting to year four as head coach at a program is something Kelly has not done at his last two stops - Central Michigan and Cincinnati - as he moved on each time after three successful seasons.

"You know what you've got," Kelly said of preparing for the unfamiliar year four. "You don't come in here going 'if this happens...'. You really know what you have and you can really identify the things you need to work on."

"When you have the protocols and the process in place on a day-to-day basis and the expectations have already been set it allows you to really work on the development of your football team."

Former captains like Manti Te'o, Tyler Eifert and Kapron Lewis-Moore are all gone and a new group of leaders is taking over as the team prepares for work on the field in 2013.

"For me, it is about developing the identity of this football team," Kelly began on what his primary goals are over the next five weeks. "Developing the leadership within the group and certainly, the players that are on hand during the spring are the primary focus in developing our depth for 2013."

Kelly says he wants to have his depth from "within the ranks" of the current roster set when spring practice ends. Incoming freshmen, who will arrive on campus this summer, would then "fill-in at the back of the line" during fall training camp. He says the freshmen who are good enough would then "move up the ranks".

Gunner Is Gone

Kelly confirmed for the first time since ISD broke the news last week that freshman quarterback Gunner Kiel will transfer at the end of the current semester.

"He is no longer part of the program," Kelly said bluntly. "We worked on his release last Friday in terms of compliance. I think we've got a 10-day window to get that taken care of. We tried to get that all accomplished last week."

Kelly would not speak specifically about any limitations on where Kiel, who enrolled at Notre Dame in Jan., 2012, could transfer, but says they did come to a mutual understanding.

"I think the schools that he was looking at were in line with the schools that I thought were appropriate relative to who was on our schedule," Kelly said.

The Irish head coach said he was not completely surprised that Kiel decided to transfer, but added his only surprise came from an opportunity he told Kiel he would have this fall.

"We had kind of created an opportunity for him to compete in the spring," Kelly intimated. "So, maybe (I was) a little surprised from that standpoint, because he was actually told that he would be given an opportunity to compete."

Kelly says Kiel is still attending class on the Notre Dame campus and will complete the current semester before transferring.

Getting Healthy

Kelly says the development of the current team began two weeks after the Irish played in the BCS Championship Game with weight training and conditioning. Many players have already shown tremendous growth over the last two months.

The roster that was distributed to the media at Tuesday's press conference included a number switch for Louis Nix (No. 1 from No. 9), but it also included the heights weights of Irish players from last season. Kelly ran through an update on the progress of several players (in parenthesis are the number of times a player can now bench press 225 pounds).

Mark Harrell is up 15 pounds to 305. Conor Hanratty is up 10 pounds to 309. Chase Hounshell is up 20 pounds to 275 (21). Ben Councill is up 16 pounds to 248. Jarrett Grace is up 13 pounds to 248 (22+). George Atkinson is up 11 pounds to 217 (19). Lo Wood, who tore his Achilles last fall, is up 14 pounds to 209. Chris Brown is up 10 pounds to 190. Troy Niklas is benching 225 27 times.

Kelly also said that running back Amir Carlisle, who transferred from USC last year, is at 100-percent health after sitting all of last season. He also expects tight end Alex Welch, who suffered a season-ending knee injury during fall camp, to be a "veteran presence" this spring.

Wood and safety Austin Collinsworth, who had shoulder surgery last summer, are both cleared to play this spring. Safeties coach, Bob Elliott, who had a kidney transplant, is also back and coaching full-time.

New Kids On The Block

Notre Dame's five freshman early enrollees are on the spring roster. Quarterback Malik Zaire is listed at 6'0, 196 pounds. Wide receiver Corey Robinson is 6'4, 190. Lineman Steve Elmer is 6'5, 308. Tight end Mike Heurerman is listed at 6'3, 216 pounds, but Kelly said he has already added close to 15 pounds since his arrival. Receiver James Onualu is listed at 6'1, 207 pounds.

"James Onualu has been outstanding," Kelly said of what he has seen from the receiver from Michael Floyd's high school alma mater. "He's such a conditioned athlete. He's physically strong. He's 215 pounds. He can play with the veterans right now in terms of conditioning and weight training and going every rep."

Kelly says he has been "very impressed" with Heurerman and he thinks Elmer can "compete" from a physical standpoint.

On The Line

The top three priorities Kelly listed for this spring are determining who will take Braxton Cave's spot at center, the continued evolution of quarterback Everett Golson and the running back position.

"The first thing we have to do is find that center position," said Kelly. "(We have to) really lock that center position down. We've got three guys that we feel physically are capable of playing that position. I think that battle kind of takes itself as the primary battle."

Nick Martin, Mark Harrell and Matt Hegarty are the three players Kelly listed who will compete for the center spot this spring. He says once that spot becomes firm; the right guard position vacated by Mike Golic, Jr. will "take care of itself". Hanratty and the two players who do not "stick at center" are all options to play guard. Christian Lombard, who is listed as a guard/tackle on the spring roster, is another option according to Kelly.

Golson's Growth

Quarterback was the big story heading into last year's spring camp, and it continued into fall after Tommy Rees was suspended for the 2012 season-opener. It took nearly 30 minutes on Tuesday for the first question about Everett Golson to come up though.

Golson made 11 starts last season, including the BCS Championship Game against Alabama. He completed nearly 59-percent of his passes for 2,405 yards, 12 touchdowns and six interceptions. Any possible quarterback controversy there might have been this spring was averted when Kiel decided to transfer.

"I don't think there's a question, the development of Everett Golson now will be consistency week-in and week-out," Kelly said. "Getting us in the right protections, playing at a tempo and a pace that we can control the football game at the pace that we want to play at."

"He's been great to work with," Kelly continued. "His attention to detail (and) just his absorbing of things have all come together."

The other area where Golson continues to show growth is in his leadership. Veterans were more natural in that spot last season, when the "freshman" emerged as the starting quarterback. Zach Martin is the only returning captain in 2013, and Golson's leadership will be even more important in his second year starting at quarterback.

"He's stepping out front," Kelly said of Golson's growth as a leader. "He's leading workouts with the players when the coaches can't be there - whether it be one-on-one or seven-on-seven. He's active in meetings."

The one area where Kelly still needs to see "growth" from Golson is in the literal sense. The slight quarterback is up only about two pounds to 188 according to Kelly, who would like to see Golson at least closer to 193 by the time the season kicks-off on Aug. 31.

"He's working at it," Kelly commented of Golson's frame. "He's stronger there's no question. We'd like him to continue. That's gotta be a big point of emphasis."

Kelly added Golson is a "picky eater" who must continue to eat better, but says the quarterback knows what he needs to do to add the extra "coat of armor" to his body to better handle the physical demands of playing on Saturdays.

CJ Prosise

A position change could be coming for the defensive back. Kelly says he will cross train at wide receiver and safety this spring.

"We're doing it because we got a glimpse of him during bowl practices," Kelly said. "We had him at wide receiver and really loved his ball skills. He's a big kid. He's 218 pounds. He's got strong hands."

Joey Brooks

The former Notre Dame basketball player is listed at 6'6 and 223 pounds and will wear number 81 as he auditions this spring for a chance to play tight end for the football team.

"The kid has worked really hard," Kelly complimented of Brooks. "We like his attention to detail. We're gonna give him a fair opportunity. He's an extremely athletic kid. Here's the bottom line - he's willing. He's willing to do whatever we ask him to do. It'll be fun to watch him go in there and compete and we'll give him an opportunity to do so."