



NOTRE DAME, Ind. - The first "major" news of Notre Dame's 2013 spring football practices was revealed on Wednesday. Stephon Tuitt, who led the Fighting Irish with 12.0 sacks last season, had offseason surgery.

"He had a sports hernia," Irish head coach Brian Kelly announced after Wednesday morning's practice. "We went in there and they did some work on him. He feels great. We'll probably get him (back) the latter end of spring ball."

Tuitt was on pace for most of the season for a monster sack total, but he managed just 3.5 of his 12 sacks after Oct. 20. He did not record a sack in three of Notre Dame's final six games, including the BCS Championship loss to Alabama.

"The last half of the season he really struggled with it," Kelly explained. "He fought through it, but it was something that needed to be repaired."

The procedure was performed before spring break and Kelly says the recovery time is a four-week process. Tuitt is currently in week two, so he still has plenty of time to get back in action.

Tuitt managed to bulk up from 303 to 322 pounds prior to his surgery. He spent at least the first part of Wednesday's practice wearing his jersey and a pair of gold shorts while riding a stationary bike during the team's defensive drills portion of practice.

While Tuitt was at the practice, a couple notables were absent. Freshman early-enrollee offensive lineman Steve Elmer was gone due to illness. Kelly says he received an early morning text message alerting him of that news.

Defensive lineman Kona Schwenke had to miss part of the practice session, because he returned back to campus late from spring break earlier this week.

"Kona was flying standby from Hawaii and missed class on Monday," Kelly said of the junior. "He had some makeup work to do."

Schwenke was not in attendance for the first 30 minutes of Wednesday's practice, which was the only 30 minutes the media was allowed to see, but Kelly says he did arrive and participate before it concluded a little after 10 a.m.

Strolling Along

The last time the media got to see Kelly in action at practice was during brief glimpses prior to the BCS title game in Miami. Prior to that it was seven months ago during fall training camp last August. Kelly can be a vocal presence, but he looked more introspective Wednesday morning as he moved around watching various players.

"What I wanted to do was get around and observe some of our injured players and see what they looked like coming back for the first time," said Kelly of his early practice mode. "I wanted to see some of our younger players."

"For the first two or three days and probably until we get into next week, I want to be able to

float around and have a real good sense and feel for some of our players that we're counting on to be in key roles for us."

Two specific players Kelly had his eye on were cornerback Lo Wood and safety Austin Collinsworth. The defensive backs missed all of the 2012 season with Achilles and shoulder injuries, respectively. Collinsworth later suffered a back injury during his recovery process in the fall.

"I like the way Lo Wood looked," Kelly said of what he saw from the returning DB. "Obviously, competition at the cornerback position is always good for your team."

"I think Collinsworth moved around very well," the head coach continued. "He's a smart player and it's good to have a veteran player with a lot of smarts. He can play a number of positions for us."

Wood's injury last season severely hurt the defense's depth and versatility. He was slated to start opposite Bennett Jackson and when he went down it thrust freshman Kei'Varae Russell into a starting spot. Russell performed well, but Wood's return opens new possibilities for the defense.

"You want to be able to play nickel and dime (but) we couldn't even get into dime last year," Kelly said of Wood's ripple effect on the defense. "We couldn't put four potential corners on the field, so it just opens up your defensive playbook a little bit more to match-up."

The prime example Kelly gave was playing Oklahoma last year. The Sooners' four wide receiver sets begged for the ability to play more dime coverage, but instead Dog linebacker Danny Spond had to stay on the field to play more coverage.

Amir A-Go Go

There was a player on the offensive side of the ball though who is yet to wear an Irish uniform on game day that really caught Kelly's attention.

"I think the guy of all the injured guys that stands out to me was Amir Carlisle," Kelly proclaimed. "He's got a gear. He's got a high level where he's really gonna be able to help us."

Carlisle transferred to Notre Dame last summer after spending an injury riddled freshman season at USC. He was able to practice sparingly last fall, but never saw game action. Carlisle figures to fill the versatile role in the Irish backfield vacated by Theo Riddick.

"I definitely can see us playing Amir and another back at the same time," Kelly said of Carlisle's role potential. "He's a very good pass catcher (and) he's got good ball skills. I could see us getting him the football in a number of different ways with another running back on the field."

Smith In The Slot?

Spring is a time for experimentation and the wide receiver position is already proof of that. Kelly said on Tuesday that safety C.J. Prorise will "cross train" at receiver this spring. Senior flanker Daniel Smith also lined up in the slot at times on Wednesday.

"As you know, we like Danny with his size (6'4-213 pounds), but we also like his ability to block," Kelly began when asked if slot could be a new full-time spot for Smith. "So, moving him around closer to the ball gives us a bigger body if we're having a hard time, let's say, matching up against a bigger guy like a Danny Spond."