

Saturday BK Notebook

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NOTRE DAME, Ind. - Saturday marked the third practice of the first week of the 2013 spring season for the Notre Dame football team. It also marked the first contact practice of the spring for the Fighting Irish. Saturday was not so much about the contact though. Head coach Brian Kelly says Saturday's practice was more about the identity of his team.

"What I like about our group is the way they compete and practice. They're really focused," Kelly praised. "When you go into that room it's all football. There's no drama. There are no guys that are half-in and half-out. It's a real focused group."

Kelly said earlier in the week that one of the main focuses of the spring will be to determine depth throughout the roster, and he still plans to do that. However, with the loss of players like Manti Te'o (whom Kelly said was at Saturday's practice) and fellow captain Tyler Eifert, he also has to make sure his current squad is "coming together" in the proper manner.

"After the third practice it's pretty apparent that this is going to be a very locked-in, focused (and) disciplined group of guys," Kelly continued. "They pay attention to detail. They follow-up very well. We don't have a lot of sloppy, ball on the ground (and) guys falling around."

Kelly believes what he has seen from his team through just three practices is "setting the tone" for the way it will ultimately play. He believes the foundation of the program was laid over his first three years and came to fruition last season, but the specific identity he is indentifying now

is for the team that will ultimately take the field during the 2013 season.

Back To Contact

At least three Irish players, USC transfer running back Amir Carlisle, tight end Alex Welch and safety Austin Collinworth, have gone several months without contact due to injuries they sustained last year. All three were able to participate in Saturday's contact drills inside the Loftus Center.

Carlisle battled an ankle injury throughout last season after arriving from Los Angeles and was excited for his first contact of the spring.

"He did well," said Kelly of the 5'9, 185 pound back. "He's gonna be an exciting player. He's what we thought he was. He got injured (and) didn't really see any (playing time). He was limited by the ankle and the nerve that would not stop firing-up on him...everybody noticed No. 3. He's definitely gonna be a guy that impacts the program."

Welch suffered a torn ACL during training camp last August and had no hesitation on his first day of contact.

"He's good," Kelly said of Welch's health. "Physically he was in there taking a lot of reps. He was in our live three-on-three drill. There's rust in terms of alignments and some assignment stuff, but he's a tough Catholic League kid from Cincinnati, so he'll stick his nose in there."

More Tight Ends

With the loss of Tyler Eifert and his team-high 50 catches and 685 yards last season, Welch and other tight ends will have more opportunities in 2013. Do not expect Troy Niklas to be targeted 50-plus times though next fall.

"He will not be played the way we played Tyler Eifert," Kelly said of Niklas' future role at tight end. "He'll be more of an in-line guy. We feel like he's got a lot of skills - he can run and he's athletic (and) he's long. We won't utilize him in the manner we used Tyler Eifert, but he's got a unique skill set."

That "skill set" comes with a hulking 6'6, 259 pound frame that Kelly thinks will make him one of the best blocking tight ends whose speed still makes him a viable receiving option. The analogy Kelly used is Niklas is to New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski as Eifert is to fellow Patriot Aaron Hernandez.

Notre Dame's new tight end on the roster is former Irish basketball player Joey Brooks. The senior stands 6'5 and, true to his basketball background, is a more slender 222 pounds, but Kelly likes what he has seen so far.

"What I like about Joey is (he has) no hesitation," Kelly praised. "He's going in there. He's getting knocked around a little bit, but he's game. I'll give the kid credit, he's game. I didn't know whether he would be tough enough, but he's shown some good toughness and he's a pretty athletic kid, so we're gonna let him keep progressing."

Not Just Another Day

With the graduation of Kapron Lewis-Moore, Sheldon Day has new opportunity for more playing time on the defensive line next season. Day was an early enrollee at this time last year, and the Indianapolis native is going through his second spring with the Irish.

"He's got a unique first-step quickness and ability to get off blocks," Kelly said of Day. "Whether he's 6-foot-1 or 6-foot-3 or 6-foot-2, his skill set overcomes any lack of length at that position."

"There's nobody defensively that gets off blocks like Sheldon Day," Kelly continued.

Kelly said that for most players the only way to get them to get off a block is to "yell at them louder", but he said Day just has "an innate trait" to do it.

Day finished his freshman season with 23 tackles and two sacks.

Punts

The Irish must replace punter Ben Turk this spring and next fall, but Kelly does not place that high on his list of special teams priorities this spring.

"I'm focused a lot more on that being a unit that makes plays," Kelly began. "(It) hasn't made many plays. We haven't made big plays in coverage and we haven't made big plays in punt block. I've gotta spend more time on that."

Kicker Kyle Brindza may end up doing double duty with kicking and punting next fall.