

## Tall Order For Grace

Written by Sean Mele  
Saturday, 23 March 2013 14:40

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NOTRE DAME, Ind. – Jarrett Grace has the most unenviable job of any player who hopes to earn a starting position on Notre Dame's 2013 defense - he has to attempt to replace legendary linebacker Manti Te'o. Although a daunting task for some, Grace sees it as more of a defense trying to produce similar results of those achieved in 2012, rather than one player trying to replace another.

"People have put a lot of hype on that position because Manti had such a tremendous career and received a lot of well-deserved accolades," Grace said last night after practice. "But I don't feel like there's a ton of pressure on me individually. At the same time our defense wants to be of the same caliber or better than a year ago, so I feel there's pressure on everyone and not just an individual position."

"As you go from season to season teams change, the dynamic is different and new leaders will step up," he continued. "I feel like new leaders will emerge and take ownership of the defense. I mean everyone strives to be *that* guy, but you don't have to play outside of yourself to do that. Just play within the game and do everything you're taught and if you do that you'll emerge as a leader."

Is the junior from Cincinnati ready for that title? He believes he will be, just maybe not right away.

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“I feel like I’m learning right now,” Grace explained of whether or not he’s ready to take on the role of *the* leader. “The spring is a perfect time to master everything and once I do that I feel I could be poised to be the leader of the defense, but I’m not going to say one way or another right now because you never know how things will turn out. That’s the goal though - you want to lead the Irish defense because that’s very, very special.”

If and when the 6-foot-3, 248-pounder takes on that responsibility remains to be seen, but he knows how he’ll do it when the time comes.

“The way I like to be led is probably a little more verbal than anything else,” Grace stated. “Which is funny because that’s the opposite of the way I like to lead – which is by action. I get out on the field and I like to run around and I really enjoy practice and every aspect of being out there. I like encouragement and someone telling me what needs to be done, whereas as I will show you what needs to be done by just doing it.”

The former Colerain High School product will have plenty of opportunity to show what he can do and you can almost count on him seeing the field this season. The matter of how much is still in the works as he battles two familiar Fighting Irish veterans for playing time on the inside.

“I’m not really sure,” Grace said about what the linebacker rotation will look like in the fall. “Obviously with Fox and Calabrese as fifth year guys they have a lot of experience, so you know they’ll play a lot. At the same time, I’d like to be valuable enough to play in any situation. Coach Diaco knows us better than we know ourselves and he won’t put us in any situations where we can’t succeed.”

“Everybody would like to demonstrate their ability to play in every situation,” he continued. “I’m going to work towards that and improve every facet of my game whether it’s playing the pass or the run. Ideally you want to be the guy who plays every down, but I’m still a young player who’s learning and growing.”

Having to rely on anyone too heavily is contrary to what Irish defensive coordinator Bob Diaco preaches to his player. Grace appreciated his philosophy and how it creates a sense of accountability position by position.

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“It’s good because I feel if someone’s under the pressure cooker too much they can crack,” Grace explained about Diaco’s emphasis on team rather than individuals. “So having that team atmosphere where we’re always talking about the ‘brotherhood’ gives you a lot of confidence. You know you’re one of 11 out there on the field and you don’t have to be anything other than who you are. You just play your position and do your role and that’s what’s important.”

Even if he’s still trying to process some of the mental pieces of inside linebacker, he put the work in the weight room to make sure he was ready physically. Of course, as most Irish players do, the credit is directed toward one very important man.

“I put on about 10 pounds and I’m sitting at about 250 right now,” Grace said. “I definitely think it’s a direct result of Coach Longo’s strength program. He worked us hard and we condition hard this offseason. There’s a lot of competition now and that’s probably what drove the improvement. Guys were really pushing each other because I wasn’t the only one that gained - there was a multitude of guys who also gained physical strength and size.”

“When you’re working that hard you’ve got to fuel the machine,” he continued. “So I’m eating a lot more and eating the right things as well. It paid off for me.”

As with most players, the need to get bigger and stronger is always a goal, but for Grace it has to be with his athleticism in mind.

“I could definitely get heavier,” Grace stated with a smile. “I feel good right now and I have the same speed that I’ve always had. I’m still very lean, so hopefully in the future I can put on even more weight, as long as it’s good weight and I’m building strength.”