

Zaire's Got Goals

Written by Christian McCollum
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When [Malik Zaire](#) was a ninth-grader at Archbishop Alter in Kettering, Ohio, his parents sat him down and asked him what he wanted to accomplish as a high-schooler.

His parents had already defined the family's priorities by sending him to Archbishop Alter instead of a closer school with a greater athletic tradition.

"It showed him how important it was because he had heard about Alter when he was younger," his father, Imani Zaire says. "First and foremost, it's education first."

Academics didn't really need to be discussed, so that conversation a few years ago focused on what Zaire wanted to accomplish as an athlete in high school.

"He wanted to be an All-American, he made that," his father says. "He wanted to earn a Division-I scholarship, he's done that."

"He wanted to make All-State, he's done that. All of these things, he set a goal for he did. He wanted to go to the Elite 11, he made that. He wanted to not just make it, but be in the top 11, he's done that. That just tells you that whenever he sets his sights and mind on something, he's going to work until he gets it."

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Zaire's next goal is to compete as a quarterback at Notre Dame and he'll get a headstart as he will enroll in college along with five other fellow 2013 Irish commits next month.

"That's the perfect scenario because he wants to get in and hit the ground running," his father says. "He's focused on that and he's ready to go."

Zaire swatted down rumors of him possibly having second thoughts about his decision to go to Notre Dame, but the strength of his commitment to the Irish is something that's made his father proud.

"There have been other schools that have really, really been trying to pursue him and get him to change his mind," Imani Zaire says. "He's been convicted since day one, so I'm excited about that and the fact that he's getting out early and starting in January."

Zaire made the decision to go to Notre Dame for several reasons.

"I think part of it is the legacy and the history of the school," his father says. "He just wants to be a part of it and he realizes that this is bigger than football. The fact that he has an opportunity to go to a fine institution like that with all of its history and making relationships and contacts while he's there makes this a lifelong deal. It's not just a four-and-done and hopefully getting to the league. It's about the education and lifelong relationships. He's excited about it."

Some of Zaire's high school teammates' parents attended Notre Dame and have talked about the benefits of graduating from Notre Dame. The fact that the Irish are ranked number one in the country and will be playing for a national championship a week before Zaire enrolls does make it sweeter, but he hasn't had any regrets since pledging in March.

"He wouldn't change if they gave him a million bucks," his father says.

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Before deciding what school to choose, Zaire wanted to be sure he'd have a chance to compete for a starting position and Irish head coach Brian Kelly and offensive coordinator Chuck Martin assured him of that.

"He has a good relationship with both Coach Kelly and Coach Martin," Imani Zaire says. "They're telling him, 'All we want you to do when you come in is compete. We think you have the tools to do well. If you go ahead and trust us and trust yourself, you're going to have an opportunity.' That's all Malik ever wanted.

"You're not going to find a fiercer competitor than him."

Imani Zaire likes the offense that the Irish run and has been impressed with the way Everett Golson has run it.

"There's a balance with a good running game and Everett is doing all of the right things," he says. "He's not doing anything to put the team in a bad light. Of course being a young kid, he's going to make a mistake here or there, but he's managing the game.

"Coach Kelly is a genius about how he's used him. He's not going to let him get outside of his abilities. I know Coach Kelly wants that fast, track pace for the offense, but Everett is doing well. He keeps it within what the coaches have asked him and he's been doing well."

But Zaire isn't going to be afraid to compete with Golson or current freshman Gunner Kiel over the next few years.

"He's not worried," Imani Zaire says. "Of course you hear all of the noise, 'Oh, he'll never play now.' Or, 'He'll play in three years and you can't forget about Gunner.' I probably buy into that more than Malik. Malik ignores that stuff.

"He knows that it's going to be tough because it's not just getting adjusted to the football

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program, but getting adjusted to the school as well. He's going to do well."

Enrolling early will help him get adjusted to school and competing at the Elite 11 this summer has helped satisfy Zaire's competitive spirit. He'll have another chance to do so at the Semper Fidelis All-American Game in a couple weeks.

"He wants to compare himself, I think all kids do, against the big-name boys with the big arms," his father says. "This kid will compete with anybody. He's not afraid of anything.

"He wants to continue to show the world that, I'm here to stay and I can play this game. I'm tough enough, my arm is only going to get a little better and I understand the game even more. That's what they really like about him at Notre Dame too. He understands the game, he understands defenses.

"He amazes me with how much his football IQ has grown over the last few years. That's one of the things that Coach Martin and Coach Kelly really like about this kid."

Now Imani Zaire is looking forward to seeing his son take the next step in his career.

"I'm really excited about it. Sometimes it feels like a dream come true. I'm proud of the fact that he's has grown by leaps and bounds."