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Did Notre Dame have the fax?

It'll be a question Irish fans will probably be asking for years when it comes to the recruitment of California defensive lineman Eddie Vanderdoes.

His hand may have been tipped unintentionally, but the 6-foot-2, 305-pounder from Placer High School's commitment to the Irish at 8 p.m. (EST) on National Signing Day was the recruiting version of a walk-off home run for Notre Dame.

Vanderdoes' impact on the class in terms of rankings, potential and actual substance cannot be overstated and he was wanted badly, but the Irish would have been content with the two prospects who had signed up months earlier.

Jacob Matuska wanted to play tight end, but he wanted to play for Notre Dame more. The 6-foot-5, 240-pounder grew up an Irish fan despite living in Columbus, Ohio. Matuska would even make sure he was wearing his Notre Dame tie when Ohio State and other schools started dropping by Bishop Hartley High School to check in on him early in the process.

Notre Dame offered back in March, but the Irish made it clear they were offering him as a

defensive end, not a tight end. They could have been vague and talked about how Brian Kelly recruits big skill athletes and he could eventually flip to offense, a la Troy Niklas, but the Irish took an entirely different approach.

Notre Dame got Matuska on campus for a mini-Junior Day in early March and let defensive line coach Mike Elston explain exactly how the Irish viewed him and why they believed he'd be a great fit for their plan.

After the visit, Matuska's father asked his son to picture what colored uniform he viewed himself wearing in college and where he wanted to get his college degree. It took Matuska only a couple of days to decide he wanted to wear blue and gold and get a degree from the University of Notre Dame. He was the second prospect to jump on board, joining offensive lineman Steve Elmer who committed six months earlier.

Isaac Rochell said he was high on Notre Dame from the beginning, but people were wondering when he cancelled a trip to South Bend for the Irish's Junior Day to go to Vanderbilt instead. Concerns were quickly erased though when the Georgia defensive lineman made the trip to South Bend a week later and left with the Irish as his clear leader.

Notre Dame fans were again a bit worried though about why a prospect who said he was 99 percent sure he'd commit hadn't done so a couple months after that first visit. Turns out, Rochell just wanted to be 100 percent sure. He returned to campus in June and two days after leaving, offered his pledge to the Irish.

The Irish always stayed on the lookout for other defensive linemen and there was a good chunk of time when it seemed that gaining a pledge from New Jersey's Al-Quadin Muhammad was a mere formality. Academics turned that formality into a virtual impossibility in December.

By that time though, the Irish were already lurking around Vanderdoes, a five-star that hadn't even listed Notre Dame in his top five prior to giving USC his commitment in the summer. He'd later deny it, but it was clear Vanderdoes had been in contact with Notre Dame long before he acknowledged that he'd decommitted from the Trojans.

Strengthened by their performance during a perfect regular season, the Irish had Vanderdoes' full attention and in December, Mike Denbrock was able to secure a pledge for an official visit. The five-star would take officials to USC, UCLA and Alabama as well.

Heading into his trip to Notre Dame, it was clear Vanderdoes enjoyed his UCLA visit, but it was also obvious USC was fading fast.

Denbrock did his job getting him to South Bend, but once Vanderdoes was there, it was up to defensive coordinator Bob Diaco and Elston to sell him on their fit. Vanderdoes was amazed by what he saw during chalk talk sessions with the Irish defensive coaches. He also realized he fit in well with the current players on the Irish roster.

Distance would never be a deciding factor in his decision, but it was still an issue to be considered. Louis Nix addressed that as someone who had gone through that and was going through that. All of Vanderdoes' questions were answered beyond his satisfaction.

He took his final visit to Alabama and while he definitely enjoyed it, he knew it wasn't the right fit for him. Still, heading into the final weekend of the process, common wisdom had Vanderdoes staying out West at UCLA.

Then the night before signing day, dribs and drabs of information started coming in that not only did Notre Dame have a shot, it was emerging as the favorite behind the scenes. The Irish made sure Vanderdoes knew he'd be given everything he needed to succeed on and off the field in South Bend and he was convinced.

Notre Dame was the public frontrunner by the time Brian Kelly stepped to the podium for his National Signing Day press conference at noon on Wednesday and that belief was only strengthened by the fact that Vanderdoes' name appeared at the bottom of the university's press release, all by itself without a bio.

Notre Dame's media relations staff quickly retrieved the releases and acknowledged a mistake had been made. But how had a mistake like that been made?

Did Notre Dame already have a signed National Letter of Intent from Vanderdoes, but wanted to give him his chance to announce at his press conference eight hours later? Or somehow did an uncommitted, unsigned prospect's name end up on a list along with 22 other signed prospects, one that didn't include a committed prospect who'd yet to sign?

It doesn't matter when the Irish got that fax now. All that matters is they got it.

Still, it's a fun question to ask.