

LINEBACKERS

A year ago at this time, the linebacker spot was easily the top question mark on the team. Stalwarts Drue Tranquill and Te'von Coney had graduated, and rover also had a vacancy because Asmar Bilal was moving inside, which was met with skepticism.

The position group ended strong, with first-time starter Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah displaying future All-America skills, highlighted by making ESPN's All-Bowl team with his dominant performance in the Camping World Bowl 33-9 win versus Iowa State.

While Owusu-Koramoah is a prototype at the hybrid part linebacker, part safety, part nickel position, perhaps an even greater surprise was then junior classmate Drew White emerging at middle linebacker despite missing almost all of spring drills.

Both return in 2020, and the competition for the third linebacker position at Buck is wide open. In the past, Tranquill and Bilal shifted from rover to Buck to fill the void, but there were no indications of such a switch in the first practice this spring.

Rising junior Paul Moala provides strong depth at rover, and so do classmates Jack Lamb and Shayne Simon on the inside, although both have been rehabilitating injuries from last November.

Lamb and Simon both signed as top-100 prospects who have been trying to find their niche but have been hampered by injuries. Lamb was a regular in dime packages prior to his injury.

They can take heart knowing that current senior White also had one injury setback after another — including missing the last 13 spring practices last year after a skiing accident during spring break required shoulder surgery — before breaking through in the lineup.

The Fighting Irish also signed four linebackers in the 2019 class to provide extra competition to the ranks.

PHOTO BY ANDRIS VISOCKIS



**JEREMIAH
OWUSU-KORAMOAH**

POSITION BATTLE TO WATCH

Who will replace Asmar Bilal at Buck linebacker?

Senior Jordan Genmark Heath, who excelled as a freshman safety in the 2018 Citrus Bowl win over LSU, was the first to line up at the position in the team drills. However, that was primarily because juniors Jack Lamb (torn hip muscle last November) and Shayne Simon (dislocated patella in November) were sidelined while in rehab. Both were top-100 recruits now trying to vie for more playing time, and Lamb was expected to return later this month.

Sophomore Marist Liufau is a dynamic young talent who was specifically used on special teams last year against the top foes while still preserving a year of eligibility.

Same with classmate Jack Kiser, who worked at rover last year.

What if junior Bo Bauer is good enough to start at Mike linebacker — could that shift incumbent Drew White to Buck?

Stay tuned.

BY THE NUMBERS

8 Combined tackles heading into last season by then juniors Drew White at Mike linebacker and Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah at rover — and all of them were by White. Last year in first-time starting roles they combined for 160 stops, 21.5 tackles for loss and 7.5 sacks.

10 Linebackers among the 11 on scholarship in 2019 have at least two years of eligibility remaining, and all four of the sophomores have four after getting a redshirt season preserved in 2019. That was a primary reason why no linebacker was signed — a rare occurrence — in the 2020 recruiting cycle.

28 Stops recorded by Mike linebacker Bo Bauer last year as a sophomore even though he actually took only 91 snaps on defense. That's because his 13 tackles on special teams led the team (Owusu-Koramoah was second with seven) and earned him Special Teams Player of the Year honors.

BGI Editor Lou Somogyi's Take

"Along with safety Kyle Hamilton, senior rover Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah might be the best archetype for his position on defense. We thought he might shift to Buck linebacker like past rovers Drue Tranquill (2018) and Asmar Bilal (2019) did, but his skill sets in coverage and against the pass fit well where he is."

WHO'S GONE

Asmar Bilal

Enjoyed a strong fifth-year senior season at Buck linebacker with 79 tackles (10 for loss) after shifting from rover.

WHO'S BACK

Senior rover Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah

Demonstrated play-making ability and versatile skills in his first season of action last year, tying for the team lead in tackles (80) and sacks (5.5), and placing first in stops for lost yardage (13.5).

Senior Mike linebacker Drew White

Despite missing the final 13 spring practices in 2019 because of shoulder surgery, he won the middle linebacker role and tied Owusu-Koramoah for most tackles on the team.

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR/LINEBACKERS COACH

Clark Lea — 3rd Year

Coming from Wake Forest with defensive coordinator Mike Elko in 2017, Lea earned enough rave reviews for his work to be promoted to defensive coordinator in 2018 after Elko departed for Texas A&M.

Since then, he has become one of the nation's most esteemed and effective coordinators. The College Football Playoff team in 2018 finished 16th nationally in defensive efficiency, and last year's unit was fifth in that category.

