

DEFENSIVE BACKS

Using three of the four secondary mainstays from the last two years won't be simple to replace. Still, safety is anticipated to be a position of strength.

The 6-4, 216-pound sophomore safety Kyle Hamilton already might be the best future pro prospect on the team. Among the 27 players signed by the Irish in 2018, junior Houston Griffith had the highest national ranking (No. 43) from Rivals. Adding Ohio State graduate transfer Isaiah Pryor is a huge bonus.

On the other hand, cornerback recruiting has been relatively sub-standard the past several cycles, and six of the current eight Fighting Irish corners have four years of eligibility remaining.

That's why the decision of Shaun Crawford to return for a sixth season of eligibility in 2020 was a boost to an otherwise green unit in need of veteran leadership. It would not be a surprise to see him elected as a captain this year.

Junior TaRiq Bracy has developed well his first two seasons, and added 10 pounds to enhance his 5-10 frame to 180 pounds. If Crawford and Bracy can stay healthy, too much too soon might not have to be placed on sophomores Cam Hart — converted last fall from wide receiver — Isaiah Rutherford and K.J. Wallace.

PHOTO BY ANDRIS VISOCKIS



POSITION BATTLE TO WATCH

Although some might contend it would be the safety spot opposite blooming sophomore star Kyle Hamilton, we anticipate both junior Houston Griffith and senior Ohio State graduate transfer Isaiah Pryor will be in a regular rotation, a la Alohi Gilman, Jalen Elliott and Hamilton in 2019.

The greater competition is finding a third cornerback to rotate with junior TaRiq Bracy and especially sixth-year senior Shaun Crawford, who has a long history of major injuries.

BY THE NUMBERS

2 Consecutive years (2018 and 2019) Notre Dame nationally finished No. 6 and No. 5, respectively, in pass efficiency defense. The 168.5 yards per game allowed through the air last season were the second fewest allowed by the program since the turn of the 21st century.

3.0 Pro Football Focus' passer rating at the end of the regular season for safety Kyle Hamilton when he was targeted — the best among all defenders in the nation with a minimum of 15 targets. He allowed merely seven completions on 22 targets, resulting in a meager 74 yards and no touchdowns.

7 Starts for Isaiah Pryor as a sophomore during Ohio State's 13-1 season in 2018, when his six passes broken up tied for the second most on the team. The former top-100 recruit's role diminished in 2019, so he preserved a redshirt year and graduated early to have two college seasons of eligibility remaining with the Irish.

BGI Editor Lou Somogyi's Take

"The two juniors we anticipate can break out the most in 2020 after setbacks in their careers are receiver Kevin Austin on offense and safety Houston Griffith on defense. Griffith should settle in at his more natural safety spot after working at nickel as a freshman and auditioning at boundary cornerback last spring."

WHO'S GONE

Jalen Elliott

Started all 39 games at safety the past three seasons during a 33-6 run, and served in a captain's role last year.

Alohi Gilman

Former Navy transfer and 2019 captain also started every game the past two years, logging the most tackles (174) in the secondary while also recording six forced fumbles.

Troy Pride Jr.

The four-year regular at cornerback started 32 career games while providing excellent speed and quality coverage skills.

WHO'S BACK

Sophomore safety Kyle Hamilton

The playmaking 2019 Freshman All-American finished seventh on the team in tackles (41), tied for second in passes broken up (six) and first in interceptions (four) — all while playing part time.

Sixth-year senior cornerback Shaun Crawford

Although he has missed 40 career starts with major injury setbacks, when he played in 2017 and 2019 he was a significant asset.

Junior cornerback TaRiq Bracy

Quietly led the team in passes broken up (seven) last year and recorded an impressive 90.7 tackling grade from Pro Football Focus while playing 467 snaps in 12 games (39 per contest).

SAFETIES COACH

Terry Joseph — 3rd Year

Now entering his 15th season of college coaching, Joseph has seen his safeties at Notre Dame thrive the past two seasons after previous stints at Power Five schools Tennessee (2010-11), Nebraska (2012-13), Texas A&M (2014-16) and North Carolina (2017). He added the title defensive pass game coordinator last year.



CORNERBACKS COACH

Mike Mickens — 1st Year

An All-America cornerback at the University of Cincinnati in 2007-08 with Brian Kelly as head coach, Mickens joined the Cincinnati staff in 2011 as a defensive assistant before moving to Indiana State (2012), Idaho (2013) and then Bowling Green, where he blossomed under then-head coach Dino Babers.

He flourished even more at alma mater Cincinnati under Luke Fickell, finishing 11-2 and 11-3 the past two years with final top-25 rankings.

