

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

Defensive line recruiting and development spearheaded by veteran line coach Mike Elston has become one of the most consistent strengths in the program under head coach Brian Kelly.

Not so long ago, a four-star prospect such as Hunter Spears would have been at least with the No. 2 unit the moment he stepped on campus. Yet this spring the rising sophomore Spears was shifted to offense, in part because of the quality depth where he wasn't even on the two-deep.

Last year the defensive line lost two NFL-caliber ends in Daelin Hayes and Julian Okwara to injuries, yet didn't miss a beat. Ten different players rotated in for at least 114 snaps, not even including Hayes' 97 before his injury.

While the depth is promising again this year to keep bodies fresh, someone does need to emerge as a consistent bellwether figure.

In the same way that Jerry Tilery busted through with a first-round campaign in 2018 (the first by a Notre Dame defensive lineman since 1997) and Khalid Kareem did so with an exceptional and consistent Defensive MVP performance in 2019, if Hayes, fellow graduate student Ade Ogundeji or someone else can have that one reasonably healthy and consistent year to be a linchpin along the Irish defensive line, it would go a long way toward another potential 11- or 12-win outcome.

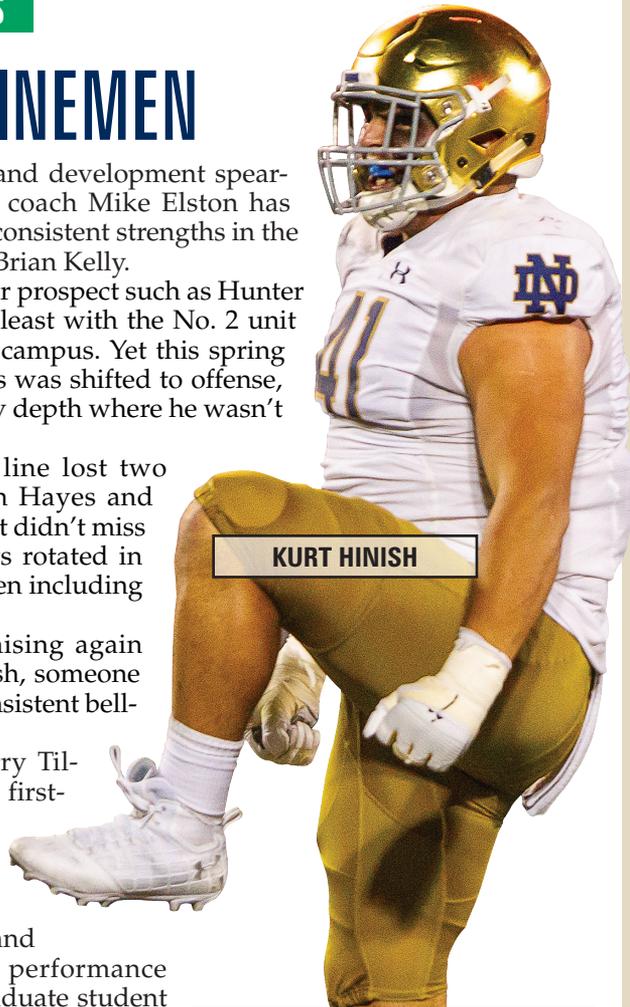
PHOTO BY MIKE MILLER

BY THE NUMBERS

5 National ranking of the Notre Dame defense last season in the Fremeau Efficiency Index (FEI), after placing 16th during its College Football Playoff campaign in 2018. During the 2014-16 era it had been 65th, 58th and 54th, respectively.

17 Defensive linemen on scholarship this spring, 10 of them at end and seven in the interior. This includes three freshmen early enrollees in ends Jordan Botelho and Alexander Ehrensberger, plus Rylie Mills, who lined up as a tackle in the first spring practice.

139.0 Rushing yards per game allowed by Notre Dame over the final 11 games in 2019 after permitting an alarming 249 and 212 in the first two contests versus Louisville and New Mexico. This included a 281-yard performance by Navy — but that was 79 yards under its nation-leading 360.5 average during a 52-20 Irish victory.



KURT HINISH

POSITION BATTLE TO WATCH

The interior likely will continue its four-man rotation with Kurt Hinish and Jacob Lacey at nose tackle, and then Myron Tagovailoa-Amosa and Jayson Ademilola at three-technique.

Where it could get interesting is with sophomore defensive end Isaiah Foskey. At 6-5, 255 pounds, he possesses the size and physicality to spell Ade Ogundeji at strongside end, but his quickness and range — his blocked punt at Stanford when the Irish were trailing 17-7 turned around the game — also could make him effective at vyper.

One way or another, a role should be found for him.

WHO'S GONE

Khalid Kareem

Defensive MVP of 2019 was a consistent force, including 10 tackles for loss and team highs in QB hurries (11) and sacks (5.5).

Julian Okwara

Senior year was cut short by an ankle injury at Duke Nov. 9, but he still could be selected in the first three rounds of the NFL Draft.

WHO'S BACK

Senior nose tackle Kurt Hinish

Started all 13 games last season (433 snaps) while tag-teaming with freshman Jacob Lacey (247 snaps) at demanding position.

Senior defensive tackle Myron Tagovailoa-Amosa

His 477 snaps in 2019 are the most among any returning lineman for the Fighting Irish in 2020.

Fifth-year senior vyper Daelin Hayes

Medically redshirted last year with shoulder surgery, he leads all active Irish linemen in career tackles (78), stops for loss (14.5), and sacks (6.0).

Fifth-year senior strongside defensive end Ade Ogundeji

No returning Notre Dame lineman last year posted more tackles (34), tackles for loss (7.0) and sacks (4.5), plus three forced fumbles.

Junior defensive tackle Jayson Ademilola

Averaged about 20 snaps per game, with his 25 stops (4.0 for loss) the most among 2019 Fighting Irish interior linemen.

DEFENSIVE LINE COACH

Mike Elston — 11th Year (9th with defensive line)

No football assistant at Notre Dame has had a longer on-field streak/tenure with the Irish since linebacker coach George Kelly's 17 consecutive seasons from 1969-85.

Overall, this is the 17th straight season Elston — the program's associate head coach — has been with head coach Brian Kelly, and the defensive line has consistently remained a team strength in both recruiting and production.



BGI Editor Lou Somogyi's Take

"Notre Dame has developed a pattern of bulking up outside linebacker recruits for the Vyper end position. Graduate student Daelin Hayes is the starter there after enrolling as an outside linebacker, just like junior backup Ovie Oghoufo. Now, freshman Jordan Botelho appears to be on a similar course at a position that requires much versatility."