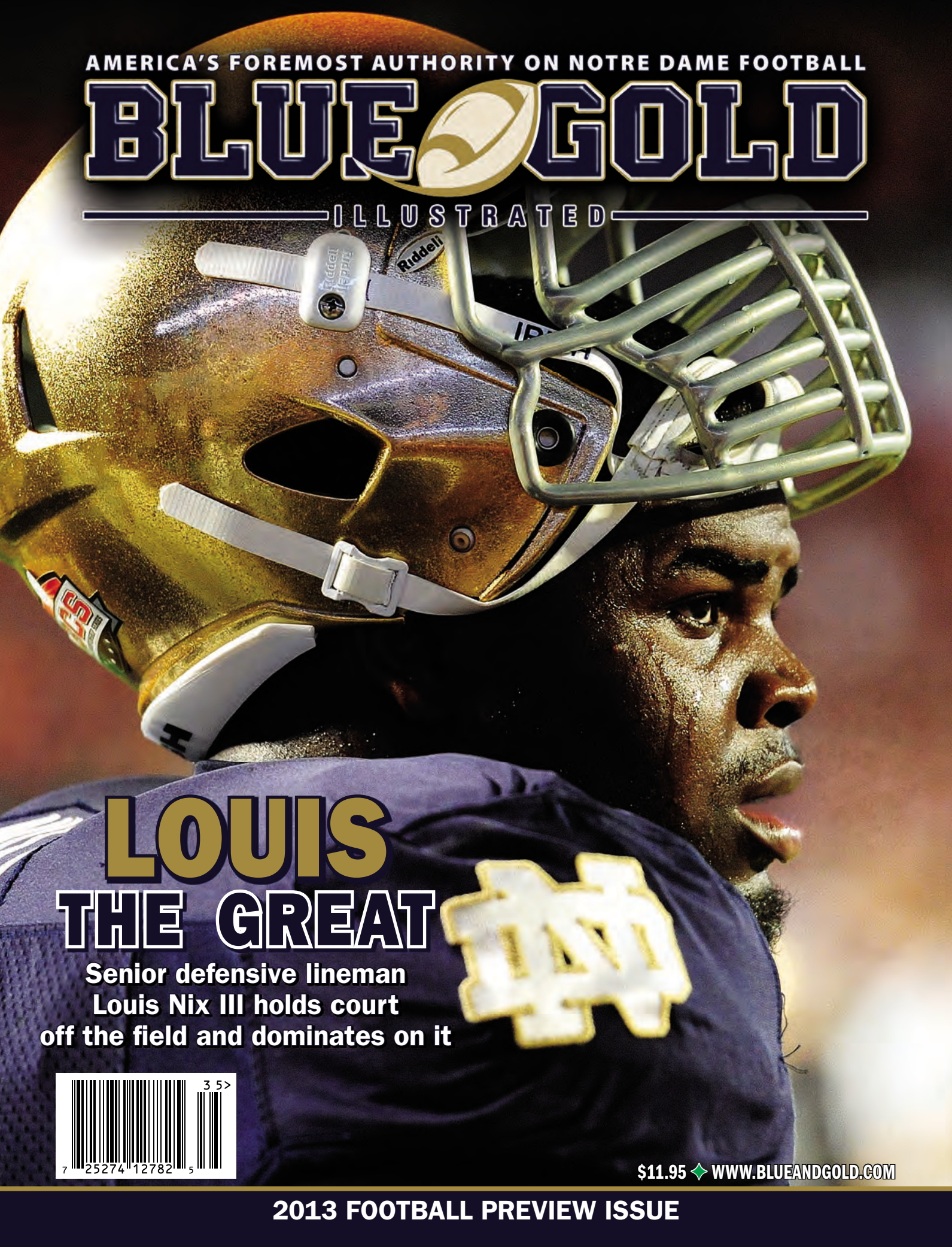


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LOUIS THE GREAT

Senior defensive lineman
Louis Nix III holds court
off the field and dominates on it

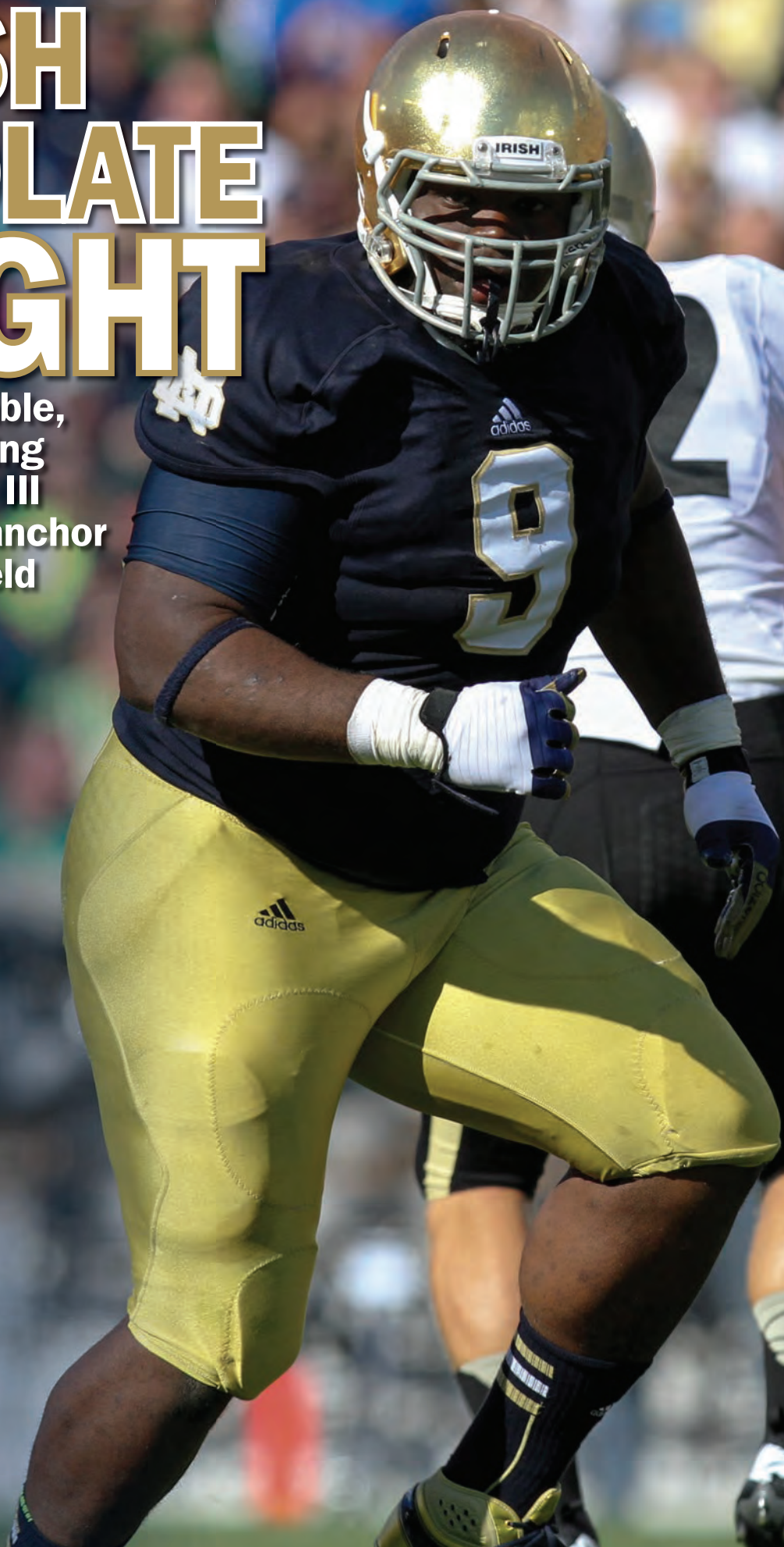


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2013 FOOTBALL PREVIEW ISSUE

IRISH CHOCOLATE DELIGHT

Unpredictable,
entertaining
Louis Nix III
provides an anchor
on the field





BY LOU SOMOGYI

"Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." — Forrest Gump

Recent Notre Dame football players can identify with the fictional movie character from 1994. Their box of "Irish Chocolate" comes in the form of 6-2, 347-pound — or somewhere in that zip code — senior nose guard Louis Nix III, who provides the Fighting Irish locker room with myriad flavors.

Some are sweet, others quite tart, and there also are different combinations in his box.

"Louis is a lot of different characters — it's like knowing multiple people," explained senior Cat linebacker Prince Shembo of the man whose adopted moniker became "Irish Chocolate" by his sophomore year at Notre Dame. "Some days he's very sarcastic, and some days he's very serious. Some days he won't talk to anybody, other days he wants to talk to everybody.

"It depends on the day of the week what kind of Louis you're going to get."

The chameleon-like characteristic is what probably prevents Nix from being a predictable, no-doubt-about-it leader of the 2013 football program from Monday through Sunday the way inside linebacker Manti Te'o was last year. Consistency day in and day out is the bedrock of Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly's operation, but that hasn't always been Nix's approach.

"I have a serious side, but you know me: I don't like to show it too much," Nix said. "I think you'll know when I'm serious when it comes to game plan, when it's game time or when I'm at a test, or anything like that.

"You'll know when I'm locked in and I'm ready to go. But I like to keep everything funny and happy and not be too serious all the time."

Nix might even hold the unofficial Notre Dame record among scholarship players for most numbers worn, from his unglamorous No. 67 as a struggling scout team freshman, to requesting No. 9 in 2011-12 to honor his "Big Brother," 2008-10 tight end Kyle Rudolph, who turned pro after his junior season, to requesting No. 1 for his senior year.

"No real reason," Nix replied this spring when asked of his latest numerical change. "I thought it would be entertaining to see a big guy with a smaller number. Never seen it before, so why not?"

When Kelly was asked during the 2013 spring which players might fill the leadership

Nix could become just the third player in the last 25 years to lead the Irish defensive linemen in tackles for three straight seasons, after making 45 and 50 stops in his first two seasons.

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

void on defense vacated by Te'o, spirited and vocal line leader Kapron Lewis-Moore and traffic-cop secondary leader Zeke Motta, the head coach's train of thought first turned to senior cornerback Bennett Jackson and Shembo.

Surprisingly, Nix's name was not mentioned, even though he combined the physical prowess (and then some) of Shembo with the vocal and intense fire of Jackson. It wasn't necessarily an indictment of Nix as a leader, but a testimony that he is ... different.

"Louis is his own personality," Kelly summarized. "He's a fierce competitor — but we're not going to ask him to give any Knute Rockne speeches either before the game or during the game. I think he knows that about himself."

The one day of the week when there has been no ambiguity about Nix is football Saturdays in the fall. That is the day when teammates and Fighting Irish coaches can comfortably project what they're going to get from Nix: dominance and game-changing ability in the trenches.

Such play over the past two seasons has earned him notice as one of the elite figures in college football's trenches. Unless junior defensive end Stephon Tuitt also opts to turn pro following the 2013 campaign, Nix is projected to become Notre Dame's first first-round draft pick along the defensive line since Renaldo Wynn in 1997.

Listed as the No. 7 prospect on ESPN draft guru Mel Kiper Jr.'s "2014 Big Board," Nix also was No. 8 in this spring's SI.com mock draft for 2014 and No. 16 on CBS Sports' list.

Sweet & Sour

It takes all kinds of personalities to comprise a championship team: star power and role players; foot soldiers and generals; leaders by example and break-the-mold personalities; comic relief and quiet assassins ...

Nix is all of above, and then some.

Traditionally at Notre Dame, a football player plays the politically correct role to a tee in public interviews: conservative, measures every word, emphasizes fundamentals and technique, etc. Nix doesn't necessarily follow the rules in the unofficial handbook, neither on the field nor in the media room.

"Everyone listens to Louis because he thinks outside of the box," Shembo said. "He's not going to give you the answer you're probably going to expect. The way Louis is, he'll be politically incorrect."

"I even follow him on Twitter," fifth-year senior offensive left tackle and fellow All-American candidate Zack Martin said with a chuckle. "He's funny, and he's goofier than people think. He's a big social media guy."

Nix's 23,300 followers on Twitter, as of mid-June this year, is double that of anyone



Nix is projected to be the first Notre Dame defensive lineman selected in the first round of the NFL Draft since 1997, and has been rated as the seventh-best draft eligible player available by ESPN analyst Mel Kiper Jr.

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

else on the Notre Dame team. But more often he will convey his messages in person and with blunt force.

Sophomore defensive end Jarron Jones affectionately capsulated Nix as the kind of "bully" that everyone needs. Unlike Nix, who had to undergo serious diet changes and conditioning drills as a freshman just to make it through practice, Jones — who played in the U.S. Army All-American Bowl — passed the "eye test" his rookie year with his robust 6-5, 299-pound frame. Nix then tested his mental toughness.

sity and skills of the college game.

"He uses it against me, though. He says 'It's because I was 368 pounds, but you, you just suck!'" said Jones, who began making some headway the latter part of spring. "Him ragging out on me, I'm seeing my game pick up through that."

"I don't like getting picked on by Lou because he's the loudest person in the locker room. If he picks on me, everybody's going to hear it, and everyone's going to start laughing. ... Some people just have different ways of showing love."

"All the other stuff that goes on during the week, the chatter ... let Louis be Louis. His teammates know that on Saturday he's a ferocious competitor."

HEAD COACH BRIAN KELLY ON NIX

"He's the 'tough cop,'" Jones said. "I still love him. He looks out for me a lot. I look at him like an older brother — you don't like him sometimes, because he picks on you, but he still looks out for you, he still helps you get better."

Like Nix, Jones did not play as a freshman while trying to assimilate into Notre Dame's culture and especially acclimate to the inten-

Nix admits he would be one who subscribes to former Army, Indiana and Texas Tech basketball coach Bob Knight's recently released book, *The Power of Negative Thinking*. In a nutshell, Knight describes how "the everyone gets a trophy" philosophy that is infiltrating society is quietly making people soft.

"I say that to a lot of people," Nix said of his



motivation tactic with Jones. “It’s just tough love. I love my guys. Me, I’m not the guy on the sideline that says, [imitating a meek voice while politely clapping his hands], ‘Let’s go team, we can ...’ I say, ‘Suck it up ...’

“That’s the type of guy I am. I’m not the nice one. I’m the one that says a lot of negative stuff just to get in somebody’s head and make him say, ‘I don’t suck.’

“I’ll say, ‘You suck, [linebacker Jarret] Grace!’ — and he comes out and proves me wrong. That’s what I like, and he does the same to me. Well, actually he says, ‘Come on, brother!’ He’s that [positive] kind of guy. I think it works on both ends.”

Grace admits he plays football with an unbridled joy and attempts to convey nothing but positives to his teammates. Thus, Nix’s persona provides the complement.

“You need a balance,” Grace said. “You can’t always just have someone pushing positive reinforcement. Sometimes you need somebody to get under your skin a little bit, that gets to your core a little bit. He does it for everyone, he does it to me, and it really helps.

“You would like to see him sometimes say some nice things, but he says what needs to be said, and he’s not afraid of doing that. That’s one thing guys respect a lot about him.”

That and the fact that he backs up his talk. No one can be a leader without providing indisputable evidence of his own produc-

tion. Nix’s value as an anchor in the middle was ironically most evident when the Irish fell behind Pitt 20-6 in the second half of the ninth game. Having spent a couple of days in the infirmary with an illness that left him somewhat doubtful to suit up, Nix wasn’t able to start. The Panthers, led by running back Ray Graham’s 172 yards rushing, took advantage of his absence. Once he forced himself into action in the second half, the momentum changed, and the Irish rallied to victory in the third overtime.

“All the other stuff that goes on during the week, the chatter ... let Louis be Louis,” Kelly said. “His teammates know that on Saturday he’s a ferocious competitor.”

“Whatever he does is working,” Notre Dame defensive line coach Mike Elston said of Nix’s personality. “They love him, and they also know what he’s going to be on game day.”

‘I Needed A Change’

Nix brings a similar kind of fire at nose guard that College Football Hall of Fame inductee Chris Zorich did as a sophomore for the 1988 national champs. Growing up impoverished on the south side of Chicago, Zorich brought an infusion of a rage and fire to a program that was often accused of being “soft.” His personality created a needed trickle-down effect.

Likewise, while growing up in Jacksonville, Fla., Nix lived in a three-bedroom home with his mother Stephanie Wingfield, who worked in a hospital cafeteria, and with many of his 11 younger siblings and half-siblings. His high school, Raines, was “99 percent black,” according to Nix, and attending an in-state school — he had originally committed to Miami — seemed inevitable.

Remarkably, not only did he end way up in the North with Notre Dame, but he committed at a time between head coaches, with Charlie Weis just fired and Kelly not yet hired. He was amazed when several Notre Dame assistants, who didn’t know if they would even have jobs, still recommended the school to him for reasons beyond just football.

“I talked to Coach [Tony] Alford the same day [of Weis’ firing], and he said he might not be working at Notre Dame, but he feels like that’d be a good place for me,” Nix recalled.

Shortly afterward, he stunned the recruiting world by committing to a program way out of his comfort zone and with no head coach.

“I needed a change from where I was,” Nix explained. “It wasn’t milk and honey growing up; it was a lot of struggle. This was a place I knew would help me out. It would build me as a person, build me as a player, and overall just build my life and help my family out.

“I came here because of that, and people

FOLLOW YOUR NOSE (GUARD)

If a single most important ingredient for a base 3-4 defense can be targeted, it’s the man in the epicenter of impact, the nose guard.

Notre Dame has had its share of recent standouts there with current San Francisco 49ers player Ian Williams (2007-10) and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers’ Derek Landri (2003-06). Yet no one has fit the classic massive, fireplug profile like current senior Louis Nix III with his 347-pound, or thereabouts, frame, after checking in at 326 last fall.

“Who knows?” replied Nix this spring of what his weight really is. “People ask for my weight, I just throw some random numbers out there. Realistically, I would love to play at 280, but I’ll take 340 any day.”

The Notre Dame defense will be putting a lot on his shoulders this season the way it did in 2012 when Nix was the anchor in the middle of the nation’s No. 1 scoring defense during the regular season. That group was a fortress against the run, limiting the opposition to 92.4 yards per game on the ground.

Nix was to the Fighting Irish defense what 360-pound Terrence “Mount Cody” Cody was to Alabama’s 2009 national champs. Others racked up the big numbers while Cody had a modest 28 tackles, but he was the linchpin along the line of scrimmage that made everyone else more effective.

What is somewhat surprising is that for the second year in a row, Nix led the Notre Dame defensive line in tackles with 50. A year earlier his 45 also paced the line.

Nix could become only the third Notre Dame player over the last 25 years to lead the linemen in tackles three years in a row. The others were College Football Hall of Fame member Chris Zorich (1988-90), another nose guard, and current New York Giants mainstay and regular Pro Bowl performer Justin Tuck (2002-04).

The nose guard is usually the facilitator or assist man for others, the one designated to tie up blockers so the linebackers can run relatively freely to make plays. Dominance at the point of attack can’t necessarily be measured with individual data. Nevertheless, that doesn’t prevent Nix from making his own share of plays.

“If he’s not making the play, he’s helping the play,” Notre Dame fifth-year senior offensive tackle and All-American candidate Zack Martin said. “He’s just an impact player that can make a difference in a game.

“We see it every day in practice — you can’t block him with one person. When he gets going, you can’t stop him. You put two people on him, it’s going to free up a linebacker.”

“Without him, there are a lot of runs that wouldn’t be stopped,” junior defensive end Stephon Tuitt said.

“He’s the best nose guard in the country,” said Notre Dame defensive line coach Mike Elston. “He changed a lot of games, just was very disruptive, and I’ve very proud of that progress for him.”

— Lou Somogyi

helped me to change: the students, the fans, the alumni. You meet a lot of people who say, ‘I came from where you came from, and if you just keep pushing you’ll be successful.’ That’s what I’ve been doing and it’s been true



Nix's work in the classroom this semester helped him win a bet with head coach Brian Kelly and earned him one play at quarterback during the team's spring game in April. He scored on a two-point conversion.

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

up to this point. I just want to keep working hard."

It didn't take long upon Nix's arrival to recognize he might be a Florida fish out of his warm waters. Daily calls to his mother about returning home were met with her warnings that quitting would not be an option.

"It was a culture shock to me," Nix said. "I wasn't used to different varieties of people at one school. As I got in, I was nervous and thought I wouldn't fit in. I wanted to go home, be around my mom and my family, go back to a Florida school.

"But people started to protect me, kept pushing me and telling me, 'This is a good decision for you,' I instilled in my heart that this is the best decision for me. I just kept going. When you put me in a place now, any place, I think I can thrive."

Although Nix did submit his name into the 2013 NFL Draft for evaluation, the temptation to take the money and run was marginal. It evaporated when, this time, his mother would call him daily with a reminder: "I can't wait to walk on the field for you for Senior Day [Nov. 23, 2013, versus Brigham Young]."

She was unable to do the same for Nix's Senior Day in high school because of her work schedule. When she heard her son walked on to the field alone, she was crushed.

"It played a great role in my decision to come back," Nix said. "She cried when she wasn't able to do it in high school, but it was the best decision to make because she had to provide for me and my brothers. I'm on a bigger stage now, and I think she'll really appreciate it."

A month later, Nix will be on his biggest stage of all because he is on pace to receive his undergraduate degree in film, television

and theatre, where his goal is to eventually get into broadcasting.

Like Te'o a year earlier, Nix is easily reconciled with the fact that if he were to suffer a major injury his senior year, he could still live with his decision of not going for the financial windfall.

"I don't believe in that," Nix said of the risk of injury. "If it happens, it happens. You can't predict the future. I just said, 'I'm too close. I'm right here to getting my degree. I went to school for these years, fought my butt off to get decent grades and get over a 2.5 grade-point average [a B-minus average]."

"Why give up now at this point?" I could still play this game in college at a school that I love, and why not get my degree? That's been the main concern in my head."

Moving Forward

It's hard to believe now, but a year ago at this time Nix's classmate, Kona Schwenke, was listed ahead of him, or at least as the "co-starter" at nose guard. Nix got the message.

"Sometimes talent is just not enough," he said. "At that point, he was working harder than me. I understood. There was no drop-off when he went into the game or when he went into practices. I had no hard feelings about it."

Nevertheless, it did get his attention.

"Nobody wants to get a spot taken," said Nix, who led the line in tackles a year earlier. "I felt embarrassed ... [Schwenke] was a good player, I'm not embarrassed by that. Just embarrassed that I let myself down, I wasn't working like I should have ... I just started working harder."

According to Elston, Nix's impact went beyond just what he did on Saturdays, but also his daily habits from Sunday through Friday.

"Everybody's looking at the big picture idea, but, Louis came to work every day with a small picture mindset, and that's why he's the kind of player he is right now," Elston said.

That's why Nix's current focus remains on the here and now, not potential future riches.

"Coming off that ass-whooping against Alabama, we just want to get back on track and focus and make our way back to the national championship game, and hopefully do a better job and put on a better performance for everybody to look at," Nix said.

Nix was not necessarily displeased with his effort against the Crimson Tide and even offered some perspective on how much the program has grown through his first three seasons.

"I think we showed a lot of people we're making a lot of progression from two or three years ago when we were losing to Tulsa," Nix said. "Now we're losing to Alabama in the national championship game. I see things coming along, so I'm not too worried about it. Hopefully we just keep pushing and making strides to get back to the national championship game.

"I can't tell you how to get to the next level because I haven't been there yet, but just keep progressing and building our brotherhood, just keep sticking with the game plan, just keep eating what Coach [Bob] Diaco and Coach Elston and all the defensive coaches are feeding us.

"No one stays the same. No team stays the same; no one person stays the same. We just keep working together."

No one can foresee what will be in Notre Dame's 2013 football box, but one way or another, it should have its share of Irish Chocolate Delight. ♦

NIX-ING THE DROUGHT

From 1967-97, 11 different Notre Dame defensive linemen were selected by the NFL in the first round, the most among any Fighting Irish position group. Since then, not one Notre Dame defensive lineman has been taken in the top round.

Senior Louis Nix III and junior Stephon Tuitt have a chance to end that drought. Here is a look at each position group and when Notre Dame last had a first-round choice.

Position	Player (Year)
Quarterback	Brady Quinn (2007, No. 22)
Running Back	Jerome Bettis (1993, No. 10)
Wide Receiver	Michael Floyd (2012, No. 13)
Tight End	Tyler Eifert (2013, No. 21)
Offensive Tackle	Luke Petitgout (1999, No. 19)
Offensive Guard	Aaron Taylor (1994, No. 16)
Center	Jeff Faine (2003, No. 21)
Defensive Line	Renaldo Wynn (1997, No. 21)
Linebacker	Bob Crable (1982, No. 23)
Safety	Harrison Smith (2012, No. 29)
Cornerback	Tom Carter (1993, No. 17)

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