

# WIDE RECEIVERS

There is an abundant buffet with the 2020 receiving corps, but will there be a main dish such as Chase Claypool last season and Miles Boykin in 2018 with their combination of size, physicality, hands and consistent playmaking?

Northwestern graduate transfer Ben Skowronek has had the most collegiate production with 110 catches — but that was not in this offense.

Junior Kevin Austin has the most potential star power — but he's coming off a year's suspension, although he still was allowed to practice.

Junior Braden Lenzy provides a game-breaking dimension — but durability for a full season must first be proven.

Junior Lawrence Keys III has been classified by head coach Brian Kelly as a prototype slot — but he must first seize the position. The team also could look at splitting backs out more or using double-tight-end alignments regularly.

Jordan Johnson will arrive in June as the first Fighting Irish five-star recruit at receiver since Michael Floyd in 2008 — but he did not enroll early this January while classmates Jay Brunelle and Xavier Watts did. Plus, freshman receivers have been broken in slowly under Kelly. Equanimeous St. Brown caught one pass as a 2015 rookie, Claypool five, Boykin was redshirted, and even future first-round selection Will Fuller had only six.

With so many questions still to be answered at receiver and running back, it will be all the more important for third-year starting quarterback Ian Book and a veteran line to assert leadership and production to help enhance those areas.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**4** Different positions senior Avery Davis has auditioned at with his move to slot receiver this spring. He enrolled as a quarterback, tried cornerback and played running back, where he wasn't a natural but was effective in space with 10 catches for 124 yards and two scores in 2019.

**19.96** Yards averaged by Lenzy on his 27 touches as a sophomore. The speedster provided explosiveness with his 11 catches averaging 23.1 yards and his 13 carries coming out to 15.4 yards per attempt. In the Camping World Bowl win versus Iowa State, he also was used on kickoffs and averaged 23.7 yards on three returns.

**110** Receptions (for 1,417 yards) at Northwestern by graduate transfer and former captain Ben Skowronek from 2016-19. That's almost triple the combined 40 by Notre Dame's returning wideouts (for 746 yards).



BRADEN LENZY

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

## POSITION BATTLE TO WATCH

There should be plenty of reps to go around at all three wideout positions, but the boundary (W) spot has featured three consecutive NFL picks in Equanimeous St. Brown, Miles Boykin and, expected this April, Chase Claypool. That position has been the centerpiece of the Fighting Irish passing attack.

Fifth-year senior Javon McKinley and junior Kevin Austin have had unfulfilled, enigmatic careers so far, but need to seize the opportunity presented there this year.

## WHO'S GONE

### Chase Claypool

The 2020 Team MVP was the get-out-of-jail card for quarterback Ian Book, snaring 66 passes for 1,037 yards (15.7 yards per catch) and a team-high 13 touchdowns.

### Chris Finke

Slowed early in the year with an injury, he finished third in receptions with 41 for 456 yards (11.1 yards per catch) and four scores.

## WHO'S BACK

### Fifth-Year Senior Javon McKinley

Former top-100 recruit made his first career receptions last season as a senior, and finished with 11 catches for 268 yards (24.4 yards per grab) and four touchdowns.

### Junior Braden Lenzy

The top vertical threat on the team averaged 23.1 yards on his 11 catches with two touchdowns and also ended up as the third-leading rusher (200 yards on 13 carries, 15.4 average, two touchdowns) on jet sweeps.

### Junior Lawrence Keys III

Succeeds the graduated Chris Finke in the slot, where he grabbed 13 passes for 134 yards (10.3 per catch) last year.

### Junior Kevin Austin

Suspended from participating in game action last year, the 6-2, 210-pound Floridian has the makings to be the top go-to figure this season.

## WIDE RECEIVERS COACH

### DelVaughn Alexander — 4th year

Enters his 25th year of coaching after his previous five-year run at Arizona State (2012-16), and also five years at the University of Wisconsin (2007-11).

His coaching career began at alma mater USC in 1995 and included a stint at UNLV with (2000-02) with his college head coach John Robinson. He also served as a recruiting coordinator at Oregon State (2003-04) and worked for Jim Harbaugh at San Diego (2005-06).



## Brian Kelly's Take

"[Braden] Lenzy was making catches all over [the first practice], improving the things he worked on last year, which was those congested catches and tough-ball catches, the balls behind him. He made those today."