

# RUNNING BACKS

A lot comes down to whether Jafar Armstrong can emerge as the next breakout senior running back under head coach Brian Kelly, or if highly touted freshman Chris Tyree can become a 2020 difference maker at approximately 180 pounds.

Kelly has had a strong history of seeing senior backs flourish at Notre Dame after a relatively undistinguished first three years, or while playing other positions: Jonas Gray (2011), Theo Riddick (2012), C.J. Prosise (2015), Dexter Williams (2018) and Tony Jones Jr. (2019), who rushed for a team-high 857 yards and 6.0 yards per carry after entering the year with 624 and 4.9 through his first three seasons.

A year earlier, Williams had 641 rushing yards through his first three seasons and then, despite missing the first four games, finished with 995, 6.3 yards per attempt and 12 touchdowns as a senior.

Armstrong's strength and conditioning work plus energy level has been lauded, but injuries each of the past two years hindered him. At this point, everyone has more of a complementary or niche role as opposed to one standout, lead back.

Notre Dame also is showing interest in Stanford graduate transfer Trevor Speights (363 yards, 3.8 yards per carry), despite the presence of five backs with at least two years of eligibility.

JAFAR ARMSTRONG



## Brian Kelly's Take

"You can't just be the offensive coordinator and the quarterback coach. You've got to have great relationships with the offensive linemen, the offensive line coach, the running backs, the running back coach, all of them. [Tommy Rees] commands the room. He has really good interpersonal skills. He has a good sense and awareness, and he's going to do a great job at the position in which he's been hired for."

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

## WHO'S GONE

### Tony Jones Jr.

Bypassed his fifth season of eligibility after rushing for a team-high 857 yards, 6.0 yards per carry and six touchdowns in 2019, and adding 15 catches for 104 yards and one score.

## WHO'S BACK

### Senior Jafar Armstrong

His 505 career yards on the ground are the most among current Notre Dame running backs, but he totaled only 122 last season at 2.7 yards per attempt.

### Junior C'Bo Flemister

Finished with the second most rushing touchdowns last season (five) among the running backs, but averaged a modest 3.4 yards on his 48 carries.

### Junior Jahmir Smith

Had the second most rushing yards in 2019 among Fighting Irish running backs with 180 and two touchdowns, but over the final four games totaled only seven carries for zero yards.

### Sophomore Kyren Williams

Saw action in the first four games of the season, carrying four times for 26 yards, catching one pass for three yards and returning two kickoffs for 35 yards before the coaching staff decided to redshirt him.

## RUN GAME COORDINATOR/RUNNING BACKS COACH

### Lance Taylor — 2nd year

Promoted to run game coordinator this winter, Taylor began his career as a graduate assistant (2007-08) under newly hired Alabama coach Nick Saban, and then served under College Football Hall of Fame mentor Jerry Moore at Appalachian State.

In between his three-year stop with head coach David Shaw at Stanford (2014-16) — where he instructed a couple of Heisman Trophy runners-up in Christian McCaffrey and Bryce Love — Taylor was a wide receivers coach for the Carolina Panthers, first as an aide in 2013 and then as the leader for the wideouts in 2017-18.



## POSITION BATTLE TO WATCH

Because no one on the current roster has established himself yet as a lead back, it's about somebody proving he can be counted to consistently provide a quality 10 to 15 carries a week. Otherwise, this will remain a backfield by committee.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**0** Running backs on the spring roster who were rated as four-star prospects, never mind the rare five-star, coming out of high school. That changes in June when freshman speedster Chris Tyree enrolls as a top-100, four-star figure.

Prior to Tyree, Notre Dame had to shift Jafar Armstrong from wide receiver and Avery Davis (now at slot receiver) from quarterback to build the numbers.

**3.97** Yards per carry the 2020 running back roster is averaging for its 247 career attempts. To be College Football Playoff caliber, that figure collectively needs to get to at least the 5.5 level.

The top two or three running backs during Notre Dame's 12-0 regular seasons together averaged 5.69 (2012) and 5.65 (2018) yards per carry. The 10-3 team in 2015 was at 6.84, and the 10-3 edition in 2017 was 6.96.

**75.5** Rushing yards averaged by the Notre Dame running backs during the final six regular-season games in 2019: 453 yards on 134 carries for merely 3.38 yards per carry.

During this period, quarterback Ian Book paced the team in rushing most of the time and finished second overall (546 yards) at the end of the year.