

## SPECIAL TEAMS



JONATHAN DOERER

PHOTO BY ANDRIS VISOCKIS

BGI Editor  
Lou Somogyi's Take

"In 50 years of watching Notre Dame football, kicker Jonathan Doerer's leg power could be the strongest we've seen. To Doerer's and the staff's credit, he learned last year how to shorten his stride with his 6-3 frame to maximize distance on his kicks without sacrificing accuracy."

A year ago at this time, Notre Dame's special teams were viewed with much trepidation after the graduation of record-setting four-year starters Justin Yoon at kicker and Tyler Newsome at punter.

Instead, the combination of junior Jonathan Doerer at kicker and freshman Jay Bramblett at punter was one of the top surprises of the season.

This spring the attention is more on finding answers in the return game and finding a new long snapper — although incoming freshman Alex Peitsch was ranked as Kohl's Professional Camps' No. 1 long snapper nationally.

However, Peitsch is not an early enrollee, so don't count out junior Michael Vinson (6-2, 224), brought in as a preferred walk-on in case of an injury to three-year starter John Shannon (2017-19).

Either way, Notre Dame should have options there and also with another preferred walk-on in sophomore kicker/punter Harrison Leonard, who provided quality competition to Doerer last preseason.

What also can't be overlooked is the graduation of wide receiver Chase Claypool and safety Alohi Gilman, standouts on special teams coverage and examples of placing huge value in the kicking game.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**2** Consecutive years (2018 and 2019) Notre Dame's special teams finished No. 24 nationally in the Fremeau Efficiency Index (FEI) stats by Football Outsiders that rank all 130 Football Bowl Subdivision teams.

This takes into account myriad factors, including field position.

The Irish had placed No. 61 in 2017 and No. 81 in 2016 when special teams setbacks cost them dramatically in at least five losses.

**4** Teams that placed in the top 20 last year in both kickoff return defense and punt return defense: Notre Dame, Arkansas, Ohio State and Penn State. The Fighting Irish were No. 18 against kickoffs and No. 15 versus punt returns.

**70** Yards in punt returns by the opposition during the 13-game 2019 season, or just 5.4 yards per game. That was a testament to punter Jay Bramblett's hang time that either resulted in 24 fair catches or helped Notre Dame's coverage team to position itself for quick tackles.

POSITION BATTLE  
TO WATCH

Who will be the punt and kickoff return men?

Quietly, the graduated Chris Finke finished 23rd nationally in punt returns in 2018 with a 9.8 average, and last year he was 19th with a 9.0 figure. Wide receivers Lawrence Keys III and Joe Wilkins vied for the role last season as sophomores, and fellow receiver Kevin Austin could this year.

Keys led the Irish in kick returns last year with a 19.4 average on 10 tries, but then yet another sophomore receiver in 2019, Braden Lenzy, was used in the Camping World Bowl. The speedster demonstrated his burst on his three returns for 71 yards, highlighted by a 29-yard run.

Running backs Jafar Armstrong (three for 46 yards) and Kyren Williams (two for 35 yards) also have received auditions on kickoff returns.

## WHO'S GONE

## John Shannon

The starting long snapper from 2017-19 bypassed his fifth season of eligibility, graduating in December and moving on to a career in law.

## WHO'S BACK

## Senior Jonathan Doerer

Enjoyed an outstanding debut as a starter in 2019, converting 17 of 20 field goals, highlighted by 3 of 3 beyond 40 yards in a 30-27 win at USC, all 57 extra points and excelling on kickoffs. Sheer leg power earned him the spot, and realistically could make him an NFL prospect next spring, but his consistency was even more important.

## Sophomore Jay Bramblett

A quality freshman year saw him average 39.4 yards on his 63 punts, with a long of 61 yards. He also served as the holder for Doerer.

## SPECIAL TEAMS COORDINATOR

## Brian Polian — 4th Year

Also the recruiting coordinator, Polian served in the same capacity during the five-year Charlie Weis era (2005-09) prior to working at Stanford and Texas A&M, and then serving as head coach at the University of Nevada from 2013-16.

