

Notre Dame freshman DeShone Kizer learning as a backup quarterback

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For all but about the final 30 minutes of practice on Wednesday, Toledo (Ohio) Central Catholic football coach Greg Dempsey welcomed a de facto quarterbacks coach of sorts, former Central Catholic star DeShone Kizer.

Kizer knows a lot about the school's offensive system, having started at Central Catholic for three years. The current Notre Dame freshman is playing behind a guy – Everett Golson – who is on the periphery of the Heisman talk, giving him a daily dose of one of the nation's best. During ND games, Kizer is intricately involved in Brian Kelly's play-calling as one of the QBs charged with signaling in plays from the sideline.

So when Kizer swung by school this week while home on break, pupil, at least for a little bit, turned mentor.

"When he comes in, that's all he wants to do is talk football now – what he sees and what they do and why you do it," Dempsey said. "I learn a lot from talking to him now."

The knowledge Kizer has gleaned since enrolling at Notre Dame probably won't bring about tangible results this season in terms of playing time. Golson is the established starter, redshirt freshman Malik Zaire the clear No. 2 and Kizer the No. 3, with the hope that injuries don't necessitate Kizer having to play this season in order to keep four years of eligibility remaining.

But when Kizer's eligibility clock does begin ticking, he'll become one of the curiosity factors on the Irish. It would be a surprise if Golson doesn't return for a fifth year in 2015, meaning the race next spring and fall is for the job Zaire currently holds, that of the guy who gets tapped to go in if Golson gets hurt or to provide mop-up duty.

Right now that guy is Zaire, but can it be Kizer?



DeShone Kizer

Notre Dame quarterbacks coach Matt LaFleur, left, walks with DeShone Kizer (14) before practice at Notre Dame on Saturday, August 9, 2014, in South Bend. (SBT Photo/GREG SWIERCZ)

“The kid’s No. 3 right now but I think he has potential to be No. 1 when Everett leaves,” CBS Sports Network recruiting analyst Tom Lemming said. “The key is always to redshirt your freshman year. That’s the smart thing. Kizer will be a freshman again next year and then you’ll see what he can do, but I think he’s got excellent talent.”

Assuming that Golson does return, the battle will be for No. 2. Yes, Zaire would figure to have the inside edge considering he’s held that role all season, but it’s not something chiseled in granite.

“He’s a guy that I wouldn’t rule out just yet as a potential guy,” 247Sports director of recruiting Steve Wiltfong said. “I don’t know how he’s done as a true freshman in practice this year, but he’s going to have a chance to get a lot of reps in the spring and compete for the No. 2 job. I would assume Everett’s going to be back, but I guess you never know anymore, but Kizer’s going to have a chance to compete with Malik Zaire, and why can’t he be the next guy at Notre Dame?”

Last week, Kizer was the Florida State guy at Notre Dame. He was tabbed by defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder to serve as a Jameis Winston double while the Irish prepared for the Seminoles.

“He is, in the classroom setting and in the meeting room in particular, very, very knowledgeable about the game of football,” Notre Dame offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock said. “I love his football intelligence. As we move forward – hopefully we won’t need to use him this year – but I think he’s gaining some valuable experience being in the atmosphere like he was last Saturday night, being able to travel with us, knowing the gameplans every week, and then last week actually being able to go down and emulate a pretty good quarterback and get a chance to play a little quarterback himself. He’s coming along really well.”

Talk about next year, though, is put on a backburner, at least in terms of what the coaches tell the backups.

“I think we talk about more than anything, with him and Malik both, is you guys have to prepare as if you’re the starter,” Denbrock said. “You’ve got to put yourself in a position where, if we point the finger in your direction, you know the gameplan well enough that you can put this team on your shoulders and go out there and play quarterback. Those are the things we talk about more than next year.”

This season Kizer serves as one of the play-signalers while Zaire charts each play in terms of what he sees – coverages, fronts and adjustments. Denbrock said Kizer’s gameday role helps keep him engaged in the game while Zaire, if he is forced to enter, knows what the defense is doing that day.

Still, sideline standing can cause itchy feet, i.e. thoughts of transferring. Lemming pointed to former Irish quarterback Gunner Kiel, who left following his freshman season and is now excelling at Cincinnati, as an example. Things are working out for Kiel, but had he remained patient, he believes Kiel could have

started last year when Golson was sidelined because of an academic matter. Lemming also pointed to the success enjoyed by the last two Heisman winners – Winston and Johnny Manziel – both of whom sat as freshmen but won the award as redshirt freshmen.

“I think it’s par for the course, where you’re a freshman quarterback and you’ve got a couple guys ahead of you and you redshirt, you’re forgotten when you redshirt,” Lemming said. “Notre Dame doesn’t have a whole lot of depth at quarterback, so all these kids have to be ready. I think Brian Kelly is doing the right thing by sitting him out for the year, letting him get acclimated athletically and academically, come back much more mature next year just like Golson did, like all quarterbacks just about do.”

Kizer does have some advantages on the other two. At 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds, Kizer has four inches on both Golson and Zaire. Contacts in Toledo told Lemming last year that Kizer is the top prospect to come out of the city in 30 years. Wiltfong says that LSU really wanted Kizer.

What he doesn’t have is experience, although he gained some last weekend.

“He talked about the (Florida State game) being one of the most amazing experiences he ever had,” Dempsey said. “He got to realize what big time really was, not that he didn’t realize it standing at Notre Dame Stadium. He said, ‘Coach, that was as intense of a situation I’ve been in, and I wasn’t even playing.’”