

Army Offensive Coordinator Cody Worley

<https://youtu.be/UrZ4BFLZKwI>

Army Linebacker Brett Gerena

<https://youtu.be/rLTk6QS-onM>

Army Offensive Lineman Will Jeffcoat

<https://youtu.be/wSBkOPsbjZA>

Army Slotback Noah Short

<https://youtu.be/cixW8f5qyaw>

Unbeaten Army Gears Up for Saturday Night Showdown Against No. 6 Notre Dame at Yankee Stadium

By John Chuhran
CaMMVets Media

West Point., N.Y. – For the Black Knights of Army, Saturday night will provide the chance they have been waiting for.

Sure, there's nothing like THE game, the 125th Army-Navy Game set for 3 PM on Dec. 14 at Northwest Stadium in Landover, MD. That annual skirmish in the battle for the Commander-In-Chief's Trophy always is the focus of both teams and Academies, and it draws a national spotlight as a struggle for athletic military supremacy. But this Saturday night, Army will fight for something different – national respect and recognition.

This week, the undefeated No. 18 Black Knights (9-0) face off against a legendary football powerhouse, No. 6 Notre Dame (8-1), in a 7 PM battle at Yankee Stadium to be nationally televised on NBC TV. While Army has occasionally played nationally ranked teams in the past, those games have ended in disappointment for the better part of three decades. Most recent examples were a 28-21 overtime loss to No. 5 Oklahoma in 2018 and a double-overtime 24-21 loss to No. 7 Michigan in 2019. So, it didn't surprise Army head coach Jeff Monken that the Black Knights, despite their unblemished record as one of just 3 unbeaten teams in the land, were made 16-point underdogs by the Las Vegas oddsmakers.

"We've got more guys on our team from the state of Texas than any other state right now," Monken said. "That's our most well represented state and we don't have a guy on our team that got offered a scholarship by North Texas. In my mind, that makes us an underdog every week because we play (against) good players and good coaches. It's really hard to win a college football game. And it's hard at Army to win a

football game.

"Our guys have to embrace the fact that we have to execute our assignments and our fundamentals at a really high level and try to do that better than anybody else. Some players can rely on talent. They might not play with good fundamentals on a certain play - run the wrong route or play the wrong gap - but they can still make a play because they're talented. We don't have guys like that, so that makes us an underdog all the time. We've got to practice and play with absolute exactness. If we don't, we're going to get embarrassed. That's who we are. So I embrace that.

"It does not mean we're devoid of talent. We've got talented players on our team. We do. But more talented than Notre Dame? Collectively as a football team? No. It takes 11 guys on each play. One guy can't win the game by himself. So we've got to play 11 guys together doing their job. And hope it's good enough."

Because of the expanded 12-team FBS playoff schedule, the game carries added significance. Both teams need a win to claim one of the 12 spots; a Notre Dame loss would give them a second loss and cause them to slip from the top 12, while an Army loss would knock them from the unbeaten ranks and cause them to fall from No.24 in the rankings.

In an attempt to open the playoffs to teams outside the Power Four conferences, the 12th playoff spot was reserved for the highest ranked team not from those leagues. The Group of 5 mid-major conferences have all of the strong contenders for the final spot and this year it looks likely to come down to just two teams struggling for the selection.

Currently, No. 12 Boise State (9-1 with the lone loss coming against No. 1 ranked Oregon) is ranked ahead of Army, but a win over Notre Dame (because it is ranked 8th and Army would still be undefeated) should enable the Black Knights to leapfrog the Broncos (who finish the year playing unranked Wyoming and Oregon State).

Army would still have to defeat Texas San Antonio in its last regular season game and top Tulane in the American Athletic Conference championship game to remain undefeated (the 125th Army-Navy game occurs after the FBS seeding occurs) and gain a spot in the playoffs, but first things first - everything stays alive with a win over the Notre Dame, but FBS playoff hopes will end with a loss.

"Notre Dame is college football," said Army head coach Jeff Monken. "Their history in this game goes as far back as the game itself. It's just a great opportunity and I'm excited for our players. I know that they are too, but it's a football game that we've got to prepare for and try to win. And that's what we're doing. We're just trying to get our team prepared.

"Our players always work really hard, they always practice hard. We're going to have to play very assignment-sound football - block the right guy and play the right gap and cover the right receivers and play well fundamentally. Block, tackle, take care of the ball. All those things need to happen for us to have a chance to win. So, it is exciting, but it's an opportunity for us to try to beat one of the best teams in college football."

This year, Army carries its first 9-0 record since 1949 into the contest at the Big Ball Yard in the Bronx. And the Black Knights have a realistic chance of grabbing their first win over the Fighting Irish since 1958 - the year Pete Dawkins became Army's last Heisman Trophy winner. Dawkins is a relevant reference because the current Army squad has its own star, senior quarterback Bryson Daily, who won't win the Heisman Trophy but has been the team leader and top performer and will likely earn some Heisman votes. He has already been named a finalist for the Maxwell,

Davey O'Brien, and Walter Camp Player of the Year awards.

Daily has been, to quote Yankees outfield legend Reggie Jackson's description of himself, the straw that stirs the drink. He has been the dominant player on a dominant Army team, rushing 174 times for 1062 yards and 21 touchdowns, and completing 29 of 51 passes for 644 yards and 7 TD. He broke the Army single-season team record for TD scored and TD responsible for in Army's seventh game of 2024 and continues to add to his totals in every game he plays.

"We've had a lot of guys play quarterback here that I think are really good players," Monken said. "They've been really varied in their skill sets and their running styles and running what they were best at. I think for Bryson, one, he's a really good leader. He's tough and he's rugged. And our players respect that and our guys value that. They admire tough people, physical players. He's just one of the boys when it comes to playing like that. I think our guys respect the way he runs the football and the fact that he's a physical player.

"But he also can throw the football. He can make the throws that we need in this system. He's made some really good throws and is confident doing that. He's a complete player in our system and that's what's made him so valuable this year to our team - all those things."

Army raised some eyebrows in the football world with its most recent victory two weeks ago at North Texas. The Mean Green entered the game with the No. 3 ranked offense in the country, averaging 40.6 points per game (sixth best in FBS play), 527.6 yards per game in total offense (third in FBS), and 371.6 ypg in passing offense (second in FBS). Daily, who had missed the previous game with a foot injury, showed no rust, rushing 36 times for 153 yards while scoring both of Army's touchdowns in a 14-3 win. He directed a masterful, relentless, clock-chewing attack that enabled Army to retain possession for a whopping 41:37. With the score 10-3 and 10:38 on the third quarter clock, Daily began arguably the best drive of his career, a brilliant 21-play, 94-yard effort that lasted 13:54; it was the longest drive by any of the 133 FBS teams this season. He concluded the attack with a two-yard lunge into the end zone to make it 14-3.

As good as the Black Knights were, the game almost got away from them. Entering the contest with just a single turnover for the season, Army gave up two - Daily's first interception of the year on the opening drive of the third quarter, and halfback Kanye Udoh's fumble midway into the final stanza.

Thankfully, Army's nation-leading Red Zone defense continued to rise to the occasion. In a short field, Army's disciplined play by teammates who have played alongside each other for several years can reduce the advantage opponents have in terms of speed, power and athleticism. The cadets mounted a first-quarter stop inside the Army 10 and forced North Texas to settle for a field goal. The Mean Green crossed the Army 20 three more times and each was stopped. In the second quarter, Army displayed inspiring team tackling and took over on downs on the Army 2, and in the fourth quarter, Army defenders Donavon Platt and Justin Weaver made end zone interceptions on the final two North Texas drives.

"The last game sticks in my craw a little bit," Monken said. "We can't turn the ball over. We certainly cannot turn the ball over this Saturday and hope to win. We saw what they did with turnovers this past Saturday against Virginia (Notre Dame forced five and won 35-14). I mean, they capitalized."

Leading the Notre Dame attack is QB Riley Leonard, a prolific passer (167 completions from 258 attempts for 1,789 yards and 12 TD with 4 interceptions) and an effective runner (104 carries for 641 yards for 13 TD). Leading the ground

attack is Jeremiah Love (114 carries for 720 yards and 12 TD with 18 catches for 161 yards and a TD) with strong support from Jadarian Price (67 carries for 487 yards and 4 TD). Top receivers are Beaux Collins (30 catches for 390 yards and 2TD, Jaden Greathouse (24 for 327 and a TD), and Jayden Harrison (15 for 191 yards and a TD).

"They've got a really good offensive line," Monken said. "They're very skilled at receiver - long, physical tight ends. Their running backs do a great job of running downhill. They have good vision, they've got speed, they run away from people. Their quarterback, he's a really good thrower, a long body kid, very comfortable in the pocket. And if you just saw him throwing the ball and that's the only film you had, you wouldn't necessarily think, oh, this guy's a running quarterback. But they have designed runs for him. And when he scrambles and gets out of the pocket, he's a really good runner.

"That's the concern - not letting him out of the pocket because, when he does, he just tucks the ball away and runs through people. I'm really impressed with him as a player, really impressed with him as a runner. Like I said, he makes all the throws, but not every quarterback can run the football like he does. A running quarterback in a system like theirs where they throw it and can hurt you throwing the football is really difficult to defend. It just forces us to play another gap and to stop another threat. What a great unit they've got."

Defensively, the Fighting Irish are led by Jack Kiser (52 tackles) and Drayk Bowen (48), with the secondary anchored by Xavier Watts (37 tackles and 4 interceptions), Adon Shuler (27 and 3) and Leonard Moore (28 and 2). As a team, Notre Dame has grabbed 14 interceptions this year.

"If they're not the best defense in the country, they're certainly one of them," Monken said. "So, it's a great challenge. I've talked to a lot of people about this game and they had a lot of questions about the physical disparities between their team and ours, and that's real.

"I can thank my mentor and former head coach, Paul Johnson, as he always said, 'they got 22 Parade (magazine) All-Americans. We got 22 guys that have marched in a parade.' So the difference between them and us, it's a long way. We know the challenges that are going to be there, the defensive front that they have. It's everybody - all 11 guys are secondary guys. They're athletic. They're fast. We don't match up physically. So what we've got to do is execute at a really high level, doing what we do."

The keys to an Army victory will likely be 1.) protecting the ball and yielding no turnovers on offense, 2.) slowing down the game with long possessions that leave the Fighting Irish with little time and few opportunities to score, 3.) applying close pass coverage that prevents Notre Dame QB Leonard from finding a deep receiver, and 4.) again demonstrating the nation's leading Red Zone defense to cause turnovers and stop Notre Dame from getting touchdowns.

Achieving the first two objectives should come down to the effectiveness of Army's offensive line, which this week was named one of the 10 finalists in voting for the Joe Moore Award presented to the top offensive line in college football as voted by an expert selection committee.

The Black Knights have earned the recognition. Under the direction of assistant head coach/offensive line coach Mike Viti and offensive line coach Matt Drinkall, Army has rolled out the same five starters in every game this season - LT Connor Finucane, LG Bill Katsigiannis, C Brady Small, RG Paolo Gennarelli, and RT Lucas Scott. The group has been paving the way for the rushing attack that is averaging

334.9 rush yards per game, leading the FBS by more than 66 yards per game. The ground game also averages 6.2 yards per rush, third in the FBS. As a unit, Army ranks No. 1 in the entire FBS in run blocking grade on PFF (88.3) and the Army offense is ranked as No. 1 overall offense by PFF in FBS as well (95.7).

Currently, center Small is graded as the 3rd best center by the sports analytics service Pro Football Focus (80.1) and RT Scott is graded as the 2nd best offensive tackle by PFF (90.6).

As a unit, Army ranks No. 1 in the entire FBS in run blocking grade on PFF (88.3) and the Army offense is ranked as No. 1 overall offense by PFF in FBS as well (95.7).

Providing tight defensive coverage against opposing passing targets has been an essential part of the Army defense this season. The Black Knights have 14 interceptions in 2024 and deep coverage is led by safeties Casey Larkin (33 tackles, 4 Tackles for Loss, and 3 INT) and Max DiDomenico (39, 1 TFL and 2 INT), and cornerbacks Justin Weaver (24, 2 TFL and 2 INT) and Jaydan Mayes (15, 2 TFL and 3 INT). They will have to play at their best to halt the Notre Dame attack.

Finally, the Army defensive line and linebackers will need to close the gaps provided by Notre Dame's huge offensive line and stop Fighting Irish efforts to reach the perimeter and cut up field. Andon Thomas (59 tackles, 1 tackle for loss, 1 INT, and .5 of QB Sack), Kalib Fortner (54 tackles, 8 TFL), Brett Gerena (34, 4 TFL, 3 Sk), Chance Keith (27 and 1 Sk), Kyle Lewis (24, 4 TFL and 4 Sk), Elo Modozie (22, 5 TFL and 4.5 Sk), Kody Harris-Miller (22, 5 TFL and 2 Sk), and Eric Ford (17, 3 TFL and 2 Sk) will be tested from the opening kickoff to the final click of the clock.

The defense appears to have an extremely difficult task. But two weeks ago, the unit held the No 3 ranked offense in the country to just a field goal. Keeping Notre Dame from scoring less than 20 points is possible, but it would require precise execution of the fundamentals and no mistakes.

Can Army do all four things? Yes, but the Black Knights must be nearly perfect to succeed. Will that happen? We'll find out on Saturday night.

(-CaMMVets-)

© CaMMVets Media