

The Best Athlete At Notre Dame?

By Lou Somogyi

Who is the best athlete on the current Notre Dame football team?

Survey the players and the two most common answers are Rhema McKnight on offense and Victor Abiamiri on defense.

Upon further inspection, though, junior wide receiver Jeff Samardzija is not only the most versatile athlete on the Notre Dame campus but also one of the school's elite two-sport standouts over the past 25 years (see sidebar).

■ After snaring 24 passes for 327 yards his first two seasons, Samardzija is on the threshold of moving from an ancillary to lead role his final two years. The process began with three receptions in the opening-game 42-21 victory at Pitt, highlighted by a diving 19-yard scoring reception for his first career touchdown.

"I didn't really put a time (table) on anything," reflected Samardzija on his first score. "You just have to know that at any time your number could be called...if you let an opportunity like that slip away, you don't know when you're going to get another chance."

■ Selected as Freshman All-American by *Collegiate Baseball* magazine in 2004, Samardzija excelled on the mound as a

sophomore last spring with an 8-1 record and 3.89 ERA.

Yet it was in center field where the Valparaiso, Ind., native earned first-team all-state honors in high school after batting .481 with eight home runs and 50 RBI. He can't be an everyday player for Paul Mainieri's program because of his commitment to football spring practice, but pitching is Samardzija's hobby in the spring.

"I'm very blessed that people let me do both sports," Samardzija said. "It's not my call. Coach Weis doesn't have to let me do that. All I can do is play hard for him in football and give him the confidence to put me out there."

■ Oh, by the way, Samardzija's spring-time sports activities aren't limited to football and baseball. He's already been part of one Bookstore Basketball championship when he teamed with Carlyle Holiday and D.J. Fitzpatrick a couple of years ago (three football players are allowed per team) and could have been part of another had his squad not had to forfeit its semifinal game because of other commitments that day.

Playing against fellow students in the 600-plus-team tournament is an annual highlight for Samardzija, who has wowed audiences with his hops.

"They pay so much attention to you and what you do on Saturday," said Samardzija of his opportunity to compete on the asphalt court against others in the student body. "Sometimes as a football player you get out there and mingle too much because your time is so constrained."

■ Did we also mention that as a 12-year-old Samardzija was an Indiana state runner-up in his weight class in wrestling?

"No way!" laughed offensive coordinator Mike Haywood while trying to envision the doe-eyed Samardzija on a wrestling mat.

"Maybe he wrestled his brother," added tight end Anthony Fasano.

"I just wanted to try it," Samardzija said of his abbreviated wrestling career, "but I grew up too fast in my weight class."

■ After starting his athletics career in youth soccer at age 5, Samardzija soon laced up the ice skates too. His father, Sam, was a standout hockey player at Merrillville (Ind.) High, where he played a few games in Notre Dame's Joyce Center, before participating several years in semipro hockey in the Chicago area.

"I tried hard to convert him into a hockey player, but he'd rather play in the snow than skate," recalled Sam Samardzija of the early sessions on an outdoor basketball court that would freeze up in the wintertime. "He was a horrible ice skater, but he's really good on roller blades, so I'm trying to figure that one out."

"I still ice skate, but I think I got a little too tall and my center of gravity was a little too high," said the younger Samardzija of his interrupted hockey career. "I'm kind of a weird little specimen in the family. No one else is over 6-foot-1 but somehow I got to be 6-5."

When nine-time Stanley Cup champion coach Scotty Bowman spoke briefly to the

Notre Dame football team prior to the Sept. 6 practice, Samardzija was maybe the only player on the roster who had an appreciation — and antipathy — of his presence.

"I grew up as a (Chicago) Blackhawks fan and his teams always beat up on my Hawks," Samardzija smiled.

So what has been a greater thrill for Samardzija, earning a win on the pitching mound or tallying his first score in football?

"They're different to describe," he said. "Baseball is a little more methodical so it

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kind of sneaks up on you. But scoring on a big play, making a big catch or winning a big football game is second to none in any category.

"It's kind of weird though because you have to be just as excited to get ready for the next game as you are winning a game. When you dwell too much on some things, then you might forget about other things."

In Joe Tiller's Purdue offense, Samardzija would be a candidate to catch 70 balls in a season. He's likely not going to have that amount in Weis' proven, share-the-wealth system, but Weis has been elated since the spring at the prospect of having rangy receivers that he didn't possess in the NFL.

With the skills and work ethic to thrive in Weis' offense, Samardzija could be to the 2005 campaign at receiver what senior Matt Shelton was in 2004. Shelton came out of nowhere to be the team's most pleasant surprise, but knee surgery last winter might limit what he can accomplish in 2005. Samardzija could pick up the slack — and then some.

"It all depends on the other team we're playing," said Samardzija, downplaying his role. "It's a week to week approach and if I, and the receivers as a whole, can build confidence in Coach to sling it around a little bit, then that will be good for us. Either way, we're going to block hard every game and make big plays."

The more you get to watch Samardzija, the more his stature as an athlete grows.

"He's one of those guys who could take up golf or tennis for the first time and be good right away," said junior offensive tackle Ryan Harris.

And speaking of other sports...

"People ask him all the time, 'What sport do you want to play in the pros, football or baseball?'" said Sam Samardzija. "His pat answer now is, 'I want to play tennis.' He doesn't own a racket, but his stepmother is a very good tennis player, so that might be next."

Tennis, anyone?