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The Full Manti

After spurning the NFL for one more year in South Bend and suffering a pair of heartbreaking personal losses, all-everything linebacker Manti Te'o has emerged as the physical and emotional center of an Irish uprising

Pete Thamel

On Sept. 12, three days before Notre Dame played Michigan State, the parents of Fighting Irish linebacker Manti Te'o woke him up with a 7 a.m. phone call from Hawaii: His grandmother, 72-year-old Annette Santiago, had died, of natural causes. Six hours later, while standing at his locker, Te'o got a call from his girlfriend's older brother, Koa, who sobbed, "She's gone."

Te'o had dated Lennay Kekua, 22, for nearly a year. She'd been hospitalized in California since an April 28 car accident left her on the brink of death. Two months after the accident, as she began to recover from her injuries, doctors discovered that she had leukemia and sent her to a new hospital with another daunting health issue.

As Lennay struggled to survive, Te'o developed a nightly ritual in which he would go to sleep while on the phone with her. When he woke up in the morning his phone would show an eight-hour call, and he would hear Lennay breathing on the other end of the line. Her relatives told him that at her lowest points, as she fought to emerge from a coma, her breathing rate would increase at the sound of his voice.

Te'o was devastated by the double dose of bad news, but he insisted on practicing that afternoon and addressed the team beforehand. "This is my family," he recalls saying. "I love each and everyone one of you. My girlfriend always told me, 'Send roses while they can still smell them, tell people you love them while they can still hear.'" Notre Dame fans donned tens of thousands of leis on Saturday to show support for Te'o, heeding his advice without having heard it. They know who is most responsible for the team's return to the top 10 for the first time since 2006.

In the wake of the deaths, Te'o had 12 tackles as the Irish dominated Michigan State 20--3. One week later, on the day of Lennay's funeral service, he picked off two Denard Robinson passes and forced two other interceptions as Notre Dame beat Michigan 13--6 to go 4--0.

Off the field, Te'o, who is part Samoan, is just as valuable to the team. He's helped create a culture of *uso*, a Samoan word for brotherhood, in the Notre Dame locker room. "Someday, when we are there holding up that crystal ball," says Irish athletic director Jack Swarbrick, alluding to the BCS trophy, "I want Manti to be here with us because the role he has played in leading us from where we were to where we are going has been indispensable."

Te'o graduated from Barack Obama's high school, practices Mitt Romney's religion and has postfootball career goals similar to Tim Tebow's. Named after a warrior in *The Book of Mormon*, he has an affinity for Pacific Ocean cliff jumping and endures the icy Midwestern winters by wrapping a towel around his face or walking backward into the wind.

He is the most recognized student on campus, known for greeting everyone—cooks, walk-ons and dorm neighbors—by name. "You never know what kind of impact you can have on someone," he says, "by just saying hello." If Te'o sees a student sitting alone at dinner, he'll invite him to his table. And he poses for so many pictures with other students that his teammate, roommate and best friend, wide receiver Robby Toma, refers to himself as "Manti's cameraman."

"There's a lot of emphasis on greatness on this level," says Father Paul Doyle, the rector of Dillon Hall and Te'o's former dorm neighbor, "but Manti is also focused on goodness."

The Tao of Te'o may best explain how he ended up in South Bend, a town that's closer to Madrid than to his hometown of Laie on Oahu. There were no geographic or religious reasons for Te'o to go to Notre Dame. He grew up dreaming of playing for USC, home of his idols

Junior Seau and Troy Polamalu. By his sophomore year at Honolulu's Punahou School he was yelling at opponents for running away from him on every play. As a senior he led Punahou to its first state title and was considered a top 10 recruit and the best linebacker in the class of 2009. He was so sought after that dozens of coaches, including USC's Pete Carroll and Stanford's Jim Harbaugh, trekked to Oahu to see him, and UCLA coach Rick Neuheisel jumped fully clothed into the Pacific off a 30-foot cliff near Te'o's home to impress him.

None visited more than former Irish assistant Brian Polian, who says he made 11 recruiting trips to Hawaii in a 15-month span. Te'o noticed. So did the United flight attendants. Says Polian, who is now at Texas A&M, "I kept getting the same crew, and they would say, 'Aloha, Coach, how we doing? Are we going to get the guy or what?'"

Te'o's official visit to South Bend was a disaster. He showed up for a late November weekend in jean shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt, sending the Irish staff scrambling to find him loaner jogging pants. It snowed 10 inches, Notre Dame lost to woeful Syracuse, and the Irish players got pelted with snowballs by fans. Te'o retreated inside at halftime, where he played Xbox with another recruit while occasionally glancing at the game. "It was horrible," he says, laughing.

Meanwhile Irish coaches invited a representative of the LDS church in neighboring Mishawaka to help Te'o feel at home. Still, Te'o was set to pick USC until his English teacher showed the movie *Dead Poets Society* in class. He related to one character who struggled to make a choice, which led Te'o to pray for clarity when the movie ended. In the next hour he had three interactions that persuaded him to switch to Notre Dame. First was a call from his dad about an e-mail from Notre Dame coaches; then there were two conversations, one with his coach, Kale Ane, and one with someone connected to Punahou's athletic department, about creating his own legacy at Notre Dame instead of becoming the next somebody at USC.

Te'o took all that serendipity as a sign from God, and now he's grateful for the outpouring of support from Notre Dame fans. "It means so much to me that people care about Manti and not necessarily number 5," he says. "If I leave any kind of legacy, it's that what's important to me is family and the memories and the relationships I've built with people."

Since this century started, things haven't gone well for Notre Dame football. The Irish have had more than twice as many coaches (five) as 10-win seasons (two). They have been heavily criticized for the George O'Leary résumé fiasco, the death of student videographer Declan Sullivan in a tower collapse and the allegations of sexual misconduct lodged against a player by a St. Mary's College student who committed suicide soon after.

Through all the firings and controversies, Notre Dame became less of a program. A place known for its tradition of excellence kept falling further into mediocrity. After the dismissal of coach Charlie Weis at the end of the 2009 season, Swarbrick took a group of football players to dinner to discuss the attributes they wanted in a new coach. Swarbrick will never forget what Te'o said: "I want someone who demands more out of us."

The AD found that quality in Brian Kelly, who had mastered the nuances of running a college team during successful stints at Grand Valley State, Central Michigan and Cincinnati. Kelly says he inherited a Notre Dame program that had "air coming out of the tires in a lot of areas" and had been run more like a professional club. Players were going outside of Notre Dame's sports medicine program for surgery, eating on their own and going their separate ways off the field.

The coach has stressed fun, putting a pool table in the football facility and establishing a weekly Ping-Pong ball trick-shot competition, the winner of which is posted on YouTube. He instituted a training table for team meals. And he tapped into the school's traditions to provide motivation. "A lot of the collateral areas that make you a strong program had to be addressed before we even got to the players," Kelly says. "While we were bridging that, we had Manti Te'o, who saw it all. I remember his comment to me: 'It's fun to be part of a college football team.'"

Te'o has more than done his part in the locker room, embodying the Hawaiian traits of humility and family. He is delighted that his teammates now refer to each other as *uce*—Samoan slang for *bro*—and relish the meaning of the word. Te'o and Toma, his roommate and fellow Punahou alum, invite teammates over for dinners of Spam and eggs—"that is my weakness, Spam and Pam," Te'o says with a laugh—and host games of spades nearly every night. "There's just more of a closeness with this team," says Toma, one of the Irish's most reliable wide receivers. "We're actually having fun again."

Te'o's leadership by example reached a high point when he decided to forgo first-round NFL money and return to South Bend for his senior year. One presentation he sat through with his parents, Brian and Ottilia, showed that staying in school could cost Manti \$4 million. Brian and

Ottilia are both in education, and Manti is the oldest of their seven children. (One brother, Brian Jr., passed away at three months old.) "We had never seen that many commas before," Brian says.

Manti's reasons for returning will inevitably be used as an Irish recruiting pitch for years to come. He told students at a pep rally at Dillon Hall, "You're the reason I'm coming back."

Te'o also wanted something else: to experience Senior Day with his parents. At the end of his junior season, he watched as Steve Filer, a five-star linebacker who never panned out and tore his ACL as a senior, took the field for the last time. "I saw Steve crutch out there and the joy that his parents had in their eyes," he says. "That's when I realized, 'Mom and Dad, it doesn't matter. I want to share that with you.'"

Te'o will graduate in December with a 3.3 GPA and could be a star in his major, design, if he chose, according to one of his professors, Robert Sedlack. Maybe someday, but Te'o's first stop is the NFL, where he projects as a top 15 pick. One scout compared him with the Patriots' Jerod Mayo. "He's the type of linebacker people are looking for nowadays," says an NFL general manager. "He can play three downs and on special teams."

When he finishes with football, Te'o plans to return to Hawaii and start a foundation to provide athletic opportunities for kids. Like Tebow, he wants to use football to improve the lives of others. But wherever his career takes him, Te'o says, he'll never forget the gesture Notre Dame fans made last Saturday night, following the Michigan game. After midnight had passed and the tailgaters had left, the faithful piled the leis on the statues of Dan Devine, Lou Holtz and Knute Rockne outside the stadium. On a cold autumn night in South Bend, with Notre Dame's football fortunes finally revived, the leis were a tangible sign that Te'o had linked the program's glorious past with a promising future.

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