

Christian French heads west to Oregon

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 09 December 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 December 2010 11:47

Kennedy senior Christian French said he fell in love with each school he visited.

When he visited Notre Dame, he wanted to join the Irish. When he visited Iowa, he wanted to become a Hawkeye. When he visited Oregon, he wanted to be a Duck.

“Every school I went to, I wanted to go there,” he said.

“You have to find a school that makes you feel as comfortable as possible, and also a school that feels like home,” he said. On Wednesday night after basketball practice, he finally decided he wanted to play college football at the University of Oregon. He made the announcement Thursday afternoon at a press conference at Kennedy.

Oregon is undefeated (12-0), ranked second in the country and headed to the national championship game Jan. 10 against top-ranked Auburn (13-0) in Glendale, Ariz., but French said Oregon’s success this season was not the decisive factor. Iowa and Notre Dame are headed to bowl games with 7-5 records.

“That really had nothing to do with it,” he said. “You really can’t base a decision on a school being No.1 right now.”

French demonstrated a flair for the dramatic at the press conference. Somebody placed caps from Oregon, Notre Dame and Iowa on the table before the press conference began, and when French was ready to announce his decision he reached for the Iowa cap and acted like he was picking the Hawkeyes.

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He stopped, smiled, grabbed the Oregon cap and put it on.

“That was just a dramatic effect,” he said. “I didn’t want to offend anybody by doing that.”

Oregon coaches visited French here four times. Oregon Coach Chip Kelly came to Cedar Rapids for an extended visit Tuesday, and the next night French picked the Ducks.

“When they came here, I felt right,” he said. “They answered all my questions, they answered all my parents’ questions thoroughly. They came here with a plan.

“It’s not like the other schools didn’t,” he added, not meaning to offend anyone.

French was joined at the press conference by his mother, Caroline Luter-French; his step-father, Russell Dobbins; his father, Cherokee French; and his step-mother, Nicole French. Kennedy Coach Tim Lewis also sat at the table with French and his family.

French, 6-foot-6, 230 pounds, will be joining Oregon as a tight end. He called Tom Osborne, who will be his position coach at Oregon, with the news that he’ll be heading west.

“He was very fired up. Very fired up,” said French, an all-state pick this season. “He said he was driving and he almost crashed when he heard the news.”

French also called Notre Dame and Iowa with the news. “It definitely was hard,” he said.

“This is killing him,” said Lewis. “He’s such a good kid. He hates to let people down. He had to make those calls.”

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French wouldn't say if Iowa or Notre Dame finished second.

"There was no second," he said. "It was that hard of a decision. Everybody was neck and neck."

Iowa recruited French as a wide receiver and Notre Dame wanted him as a linebacker.

French said he considered many factors being make a final decision, such as location, education and the overall program.

"I felt I had to go away to grow up," he said. "In order for me to be a man, I have to grow up and make my own decisions. I had to do what was best for me."

French did not join the football program at Kennedy until the 10th grade. He preferred basketball when he was younger and did not play football in middle school or as a freshman.

Herschel Dixon, his best friend, convinced him to join the Kennedy football team as a 10th grader. Lewis quickly promoted French to the varsity, skipping the sophomore team.

"That was a big surprise," said French.

He was a free safety for Kennedy as a sophomore and junior, but switched to outside linebacker as a senior. He saw spot duty as a wide receiver, but did not make major contributions on offense as Kennedy went 7-5 and reached the quarterfinals of the Class 4A playoffs.

Lewis said Oregon uses its tight end as a flanker, running underneath routes and reverses. "I think he's got a great shot at that position," said Lewis.

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French could move to defensive end or outside linebacker if need be, according to Lewis.

French is the second nationally ranked Metro recruit to announce for an out-of-state school this year. Linn-Mar basketball star Kiah Stokes picked the University of Connecticut last month.

jim.ecker@metrosportsreport.com