

Face-Off Classic: 3 goalies take it and dish it out, too

By Edward Lee

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Playing goalkeeper on the Division I level should come with hazard pay. Just ask Scott Rodgers, Tyler Fiorito and Brian Phipps.

During a scrimmage this past fall, Rodgers, a senior at Notre Dame, absorbed a 105-mph shot off his right biceps. Fiorito, a sophomore for Princeton, started all 16 games last season despite a bruise running the entire length of his inner left thigh. And Phipps, a Maryland senior, has torn the anterior cruciate ligament in both knees in four years.

"It definitely wears on you," Fiorito said of the position. "By the end of the season, your body takes a toll from standing in there every day. It isn't always fun for a goalie, but it's how you get better."

When these three are in goal, it usually isn't fun for opposing offenses, either.

Rodgers, Fiorito and Phipps will take center stage Saturday when the Konica Minolta Face-Off Classic descends on M&T Bank Stadium. The tripleheader includes Phipps and the No. 7 Terps taking on Atlantic Coast Conference rival and No. 6 Duke at 11 a.m.; Fiorito and the No. 8 Tigers trying to upset No. 5 Johns Hopkins at 1:30 p.m.; and Rodgers and the No. 4 Fighting Irish meeting No. 10 Loyola at 4 p.m.

The three goalies have contrasting styles and physical frames, but there is one common thread, according to ESPN analyst Quint Kessenich.

"All three have a pretty good presence, a certain confidence and swagger," said Kessenich, an All-America goaltender who helped Johns Hopkins capture the 1987 national championship. "The type of presence that a quarterback has in the huddle, and I think all three guys have that sense about them."

Just a second-year starter, Rodgers is considered the top goalie in the country. Succeeding former All-American Joey Kemp, Rodgers finished last season first in Division I in both goals-against average (6.14) and save percentage (.663).

Rodgers, 6 feet 4 and 260 pounds, is a huge obstacle for opposing shooters. In Notre Dame's season-opening 11-7 upset of the then-No. 1 Duke on Feb. 20, several Blue Devils were taken aback by his size.

"I've known [senior attackman] Ned Crotty from the All-American game back in our senior years at high school, and the first thing he said to me when we talked before the game was, '[My God], the rumors are true,' " Rodgers said. "I was just laughing it off. But I think it can be kind of surprising to a shooter. I had four or five stuffs inside of 5 yards against Duke where I used my size and played the angles. I just think guys aren't used to seeing that, so when they shoot, I don't think they're prepared for it."

If the Fighting Irish intend to silence last year's critics who questioned the strength of the team's 15-0 regular-season record, they will likely need strong performances from Rodgers, who has not surrendered 10 goals in a game since becoming a starter at the beginning of the 2009 season.

Notre Dame coach Kevin Corrigan said Rodgers is not feeling anxious about being scrutinized.

"I think the most pressure comes when you feel like you're not prepared or you haven't done something or you're unsure about something," Corrigan said. "We've got an experienced defense in front of him. He's done the work that he needs to do, and the guys around him are working extremely hard. So I don't think he'll feel any too great of pressure."

If Rodgers is the king, Fiorito has been tabbed as the heir apparent.

The native of Phoenix in Baltimore County and a McDonogh graduate ranked fourth in goals-against average (7.40) and 11th in save percentage (.587) in his first year of college lacrosse.

While honored to be included in the conversation on top players in the nation, Fiorito pointed out that he allowed 14 goals in the Tigers' three-goal victory over then-No. 8 Hofstra on Saturday.

"This past weekend, I didn't have my best game, and it's all about learning from that and making up for it," he said. "I know a lot of people have high expectations for me, but I think I have higher expectations for myself than anyone can possibly give me. I had a pretty good freshman season, and I'm looking to build off of that. So all the people who have been building me up, it's great that they've noticed, but from Day One since I stepped onto campus, my first goal was to start and my second goal was to improve as much as I can. That starts with save percentage, and that starts with goals allowed."

Princeton coach Chris Bates said he has been impressed with Fiorito's temperament .

"Different guys have different personalities, especially in goal," Bates said. "Tyler doesn't get rattled. He didn't play a wonderful game in our first game, but he doesn't lose his composure. Yeah, he's pretty mature from that standpoint. He's got a very short memory, and he's been a very good goalie for a lot of years."

Like Rodgers and Fiorito, Phipps is entering his second season as a full-time starter, but he has taken a different route.

The Annapolis native and Severn graduate started 13 games as a freshman but rotated with former teammate Jason Carter for the next two years. The undisputed starter this season, Phipps has posted a 10.05 goals-against average and a .474 save percentage in two games.

Phipps understands that his play could be critical for a Terps squad lauded for having one of the more explosive offenses in the country.

"I put that pressure on myself anyway," he said.

"I'm the last line of the defense, so when they score, it's technically my fault. I think as a goalie, you need to put the pressure on you and play better because if you don't play well, you're probably not going to win. As a goalie, I think there's a lot of pressure on you just for being a goalie. I like having the pressure on me. I don't let anyone put that pressure on me. I put that pressure on me."

Maryland coach Dave Cottle said he thinks Phipps will regain the spotlight this season.

"I will say this: I think in his first year, he got attention because people thought he was pretty good," Cottle said. "I think his attention was probably diminished by us playing two guys. As a senior, I think you'll see him step right back up and he'll get in the middle of the mix."

Quint Kessenich's analysis

Quint Kessenich knows a thing or two about goalies. The ESPN analyst is a former All-America goalkeeper who helped Johns Hopkins capture the 1987 national title. Here is his breakdown of Notre Dame senior Scott Rodgers, Princeton sophomore Tyler Fiorito and Maryland senior Brian Phipps.

Scott Rodgers, Notre Dame

Strength: "Rodgers is a physical beast between the pipes like we've never seen before, and to combine that height [6 feet 4, 254 pounds] with an athletic skill set like he has is just absurd. He's just gargantuan; there's no other way to explain it. The goal looks tiny for shooters, and he moves well, and they defend well according to his strengths. Notre Dame forces people to weak-angled shots down the alleys. So they defend perfectly for a goalie of that size. He's just bigger than anything we've seen."

Weakness: "I think out of the goal, in terms of ground-ball play and clearing. He can become a little more active. He tends to be very conservative."

Tyler Fiorito, Princeton

Strength: "He covers a lot of goal. He's got that ability to make the midrange save because he's got a nice combination of intuition, positioning and really quick hands. What surprised me last year was that he didn't get overpowered. Many freshman goalies will get overpowered in their first year, and I never really saw that from him. He's matured. When he transferred from Boys' Latin [to McDonogh], he stayed back a grade, so he's physically mature and strong. I think that was another reason why he was able to step in and play immediately last year."

Weakness: "He's got a little hitch occasionally. He goes down to his knees a little too much. He's just got to hold his positioning a little longer. At times, he kind of bails out and goes down. And then, the other would be that on some of his outlet passes, he doesn't move his feet and just tries to lob the ball over the riding attackman instead of resetting his feet and getting on his toes and throwing the ball around that rider. That's just a lazy habit that a lot of goalies have."

Brian Phipps, Maryland

Strength: "He really understands the game. I think he's got a really good mind for the game and a really good mind for shooters. He's not going to wow you in any of the departments, but I don't think he's got a hole either. I think he's steady, consistent, makes the big save, understands the game, rarely gives up a really soft goal."

Weakness: "Phipps has to prove that he's in the upper echelon. Here's a guy who split time last year until the end of the year. So he's got a lot to prove in terms of playing a full 60 minutes until the end of the season and over the course of a whole season at a high level. I would compare him to more of a middle reliever who posted good numbers in middle relief. But he's going to be on the hill from innings one to nine every game this year, and that's a significant challenge."

Konica Minolta Face-Off Classic

Saturday@M&T Bank Stadium

- No. 6 Duke vs. No. 7 Maryland, 11 a.m.
- No. 8 Princeton vs. No. 5 Johns Hopkins, 1:30 p.m.
- No. 4 Notre Dame vs. No. 10 Loyola, 4 p.m.