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SHANE CONLAN HOPES TO HELP NITTANY LIONS SLOW DOWN TESTAVERDE

Shane Conlan wants to make one thing perfectly clear.

"The first thing that's important to get across to people is we're not going to stop him," the Frewsburg native said. "Hopefully we can slow him down to get our offense on the field because I think our offense can move the ball on their defense."

The "him" Conlan is referring to is Heisman Trophy winner Vinny Testaverde, the Miami quarterback the Penn State Nittany Lions must contain in Friday night's Fiesta Bowl.

"Right now we have two strategies," the All-America outside linebacker said. "We have one to go get him with a blitz and we have another one to sit back and defend the pass."

Testaverde was the national leader in passing efficiency this season with a mark of 165.8, connecting on 63.4 percent of his pass attempts for 2,557 yards and 26 touchdowns. He was intercepted just nine times.

But Testaverde's passing ability isn't the only thing that concerns Conlan.

"Obviously he's a great quarterback - he won the Heisman and his throwing ability is awesome - but he scrambles well," Conlan said. "We have to keep him in the pocket. If we keep him in the pocket and don't let him out of the pocket, I think we'll be all right. But when he gets out and breaks contain, there's a lot of stuff that can happen. Everything gets out of wack."

When he has run with the ball, Testaverde has been successful as his four rushing touchdowns attest.

As a team, the Hurricanes ranked 13th in total offense (412.18 yards), sixth in passing offense (281.4 yards) and second in scoring offense (38.2 points).

Conlan wouldn't specify what his role will be in the Nittany Lion defensive scheme.

"It's going to be fun," he said. "I was surprised where they have me this time, but they don't want me to say anything."

In last year's Orange Bowl, Conlan helped blunt Oklahoma's powerful wishbone attack with six unassisted tackles, including three for losses, and he also recovered a fumble.

"Obviously, I'd like to intercept a pass," he said. "That would be great. I'll be in a position to do that more so than any other time...without giving anything away."

But the pass isn't the only arsenal in Miami's attack, Conlan said.

"They definitely can run the ball," he said. "I look for them to come out running. They're going to see what they can do on the ground first. I just imagine that's what they're going to do."

Alonzo Highsmith (442 yards), Warren Williams (399) and Melvin Bratton (380) lead the Hurricanes' rushing attack.

"I think we'll be prepared because we're a good run-defensive football team," Conlan said. "We have to take the running game away from them. If they can run and then pass every so often, that's going to really hurt us. So I think if we can take them right out of their running game, then we can prepare a little more, expecting the pass on each play."

Testaverde has a wealth of receivers to throw to, including Michael Irvin, who caught 53 passes during the regular season.

"The athletes on the team can strike so quickly," Conlan said. "Their backs are breakaway runners, obviously their quarterback can throw the ball and their wideouts have blazing speed. You can't give up the quick ones (touchdowns). They're going to score, we know that, but we've got to make them earn it. We've got to make them hurt. When they catch the ball, we just have to go in and rock them, make them cough up the ball."

The Penn State offense wound up the season ranked among the nation's top 20 Division 1A teams in two offense categories - scoring offense (14th at 29.6 points per game) and rushing offense (15th with an average of 240 yards per game).

Quarterback John Shaffer had the best year of his Penn State career in several categories, including yards gained passing (1,510), completions (114), completion percentage (55.9) and touchdown passes (nine). In 204 passing attempts, Shaffer had only four interceptions.

Tailback D.J. Dozier was the team leader in both rushing (811 yards/4.7 average) and receiving (26 catches/287 yards). The Lions' one-two fullback combination of Steve Smith and Tim Manoa combined for 908 yards on the ground (Manoa 546, Smith 362) and five touchdowns. Sophomore Blair Thomas, who averaged 8.4 yards on 60 carries, had a 92-yard run, longest in Penn State history, and was second in the nation in kickoff returns, including a 91-yarder for a touchdown against Pitt.

Conlan hopes for a low-scoring game, but doesn't expect one.

"Realistically, we just want to win," he said. "It doesn't really matter, high or low. Defensively speaking, we want it to be a low-scoring game, but I can't really see it being that low because they're going to score. I just hope we can slow them down."

The Nittany Lions were among the best defensive units in the country, placing third in rushing defense (69.7 yards), third in scoring defense (11.2 points) and 11th in total defense (283.4 yards).

Conlan led the team in tackles with 79 and topped the team in tackles for losses with eight, good for 22 yards in losses.

Fellow linebackers Don Graham, Trey Bauer and Pete Giftopoulos also had outstanding years. Cornerback Duffy Cobbs had four pass interceptions to lead the secondary, while safety Ray Isom, a second-team Associated Press All-American, had three thefts and led the defensive backs in tackles with 56.

Tim Johnson, another All-America, was tops among the down linemen with 33 tackles. Bob White, Johnson's teammate at tackle, had 31 stops and was second in sacks with eight.

Miami was equally tough defensively, finishing sixth in total defense (262.4 yards), 10th in

passing defense (136.9 yards) and fourth in scoring defense (12.4 points).

The unit is led by All-America Jerome Brown, a 285-pound package of speed and power. Defensive end Dan Stubbs was the Miami leader in quarterback sacks with 17 for a club that dumped the passer 49 times. Middle linebacker George Mira wound up as the Cane's leading tackler with 117, including 17 in the impressive victory over Oklahoma at the Orange Bowl.

Safety Bennie Blades was the national leader in pass interceptions with 10, averaging 12.8 yards per interception return.

On special teams, the Lions got a strong year from place kicker Massimo Manca, who broke the team record for consecutive PAT's, hitting a perfect 37 for 37 to push his mark to 70 straight. He also hit on 14 of 23 field goal attempts. Punter John Bruno averaged 40.9 yards on 65 punts, with a long of 55 yards against Rutgers. Bruno had seven punts inside the 20-yard line and nine others wind up inside the 10.

Miami also has a strong kicking game with Punter Jeff Feagles, who averaged 40.4 yards, and placement specialist Mark Seelig, who was 6 for 14, and Greg Cox, who was 4 for 7.

The importance of the game isn't lost on Conlan, who still remembers the Lions' near-miss in their national championship shot against Oklahoma.

"Number one, I hope we win and number two, I just hope I play as well as I can play, whether its 10 tackles or what", he said. "I hope I walk off the field with nothing left, that I left it all on the field, gave it everything I had. Whether I get a lot of the big sacks or big interceptions, that doesn't matter. Number one is I just hope we win."