

IRISH INSIDER

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THE
OBSERVER

THE IRISH GUARDS

Notre Dame's four-guard phenomenon
paves way to Final Four



COMMENTARY

Final Four competition poses challenge for Irish

Here come the Irish to the Final Four, and here come the nail-biting, down-to-the-buzzer games Irish fans have been waiting for since the tournament began.

It's about time they get a real soul-shaking 40 minutes of play in the most important part of their season.

These — potential — two games won't disappoint, whether the Irish reach their goal of tournament champions or if they fall short. Notre Dame has old conference tension to break open against Connecticut. This team is incredibly hungry for a championship, which will fuel them into the finals.

No matter the outcome, Notre Dame's season will end here with a pressure-filled contest, in the truest sense of the word. In entirely predictable fashion, all No. 1 seeds and the top four teams in the polls made it this far, and they promise to not make it easy for the Irish anymore.

Notre Dame won by 30 points or more in three of the four contests it took to get to Denver and was comfortably leading at halftime in two of those.

Sure, Cal was even with the Irish mid-game in the second round back at home to light a little fire under Notre Dame's feet. But after a good talking-to at halftime, the Irish escaped the pressure and unleashed the true character of their relentless defense, recorded multiple steals and rebounded better.

Now they are surrounded by the elite company that their play resembled all season, with teams they know, teams they have seen and teams that deserve to be there just as much as the Notre Dame deserves to be there.

Two of Notre Dame's three losses this season came at the hands of teams represented in the trifecta of tournament top-seeds, once faltering against all-too-familiar Connecticut in the postseason and letting Baylor taint the loss column on their record early last November.

These are teams that not only can beat the Irish, but have proven it as well. In the Final Four, there should not be any more blowout wins, no

more games where a combination of their usual rebounding techniques and good offensive management by each of their four guards on the court can run away with a lead as soon as the ball is tipped.

Against Maryland, they executed this perfectly with hardly a flaw in their play and structure, and a triple-double for Diggins. They made a victory over No. 2 seed Maryland, the ACC conference tournament champions who held an obvious height advantage, look far easier than expected. They ran away with the game like it was the first of the tournament, not a regional final where teams have to not only work hard and show poise, but fight off a team that shares the court as their relative equal.

Conference foe Connecticut will want to shake Notre Dame first, in their fourth and final time the Irish will play their Big East rival this season with the veteran team they have now. Senior guards Natalie Novosel and Fraderica Miller and graduate students guard Brittany Mallory and forward Devereaux Peters have one last chance to play the once-invincible team before they graduate. It follows that it will be either the most important

These — potential — two games won't disappoint, whether the Irish reach their goal of tournament champions or if they fall short. Notre Dame has old conference tension to break open against Connecticut. This team is incredibly hungry for a championship, which will fuel it into the finals.

or the second more important game of their last season with an Irish jersey on their backs.

In the Big East tournament final, Connecticut gave the Irish one of the rare chances to feel the real

and raw panic associated with losing. Not just a shot-for-shot final few minutes where the Irish had a chance to win, but the feeling of being down by 10 points or more and knowing that losing was inevitable.

They will see that same encompassing panic one more time, but now it will be magnified as the importance grows. If the Irish want to reach their goal of returning to South Bend and graduate this senior class with a national championship, they will need to show the utmost composure, even if they are down by 10.

One of the benefits of playing on a Final Four team is not having to play through many discouraging situations. But in this year's finals, stacked with the teams who have been on top all year, Notre Dame will need to learn how and learn it quickly.

Contact Molly Sammon at msammon@nd.edu

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.



Molly Sammon
Sports Writer

Irish enter semifinal rematch

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

For the second consecutive year, the Irish and the Huskies will face off in the Final Four with a berth in the national championship game on the line. In last year's semifinal, the two-seed Irish entered the game as the heavy underdogs, trying to prove they belonged among the game's elite.

What a difference a year makes.

No. 4 Notre Dame (34-3, 15-1 Big East) and No. 3 Connecticut (33-4, 13-3) both enter this year's Final Four matchup in Denver as top seeds. No. 1 Baylor and No. 2 Stanford also reached the Final Four as top seeds, making this the first Final Four since 1989 populated entirely by number-one seeds.

For the Irish, the arrival at Denver is a long-awaited achievement that brings relief.

"I feel like we have accomplished what we needed to," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "I think we would have been extremely disappointed had we not gotten this far. I think the expectation from probably November was that these are the four teams that were going to advance, and that is a heavy burden to carry throughout the year."

Despite the burden, the Irish managed to sustain success throughout the season, losing only to Baylor (38-0, 18-0 Big-12), Big East foe West Virginia and Connecticut.

In the tournament's opening rounds, the Irish made the most of their home-court advantage, and blew out 16-seed Liberty 74-43 before hammering out a 73-62 victory over eight-seed California.



ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory dribbles the ball during Notre Dame's 81-61 home victory over Akron on Nov. 11.

The Irish used a dominant defensive effort to get past five-seed St. Bonaventure, 79-35 in the Sweet 16, and crushed two-seed Maryland in the Elite Eight, 80-49.

"Our last game against Maryland seemed one of the best we have played this whole tournament, maybe all year, and we just have to really use that as momentum going into this game," Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory said.

The Irish must face a familiar foe in their Final Four matchup with the Huskies, who fell to the Irish twice in the regular season before denying Notre Dame its first-ever Big East tournament championship.

"We know them pretty well, they know us pretty well, so I don't think there is going to be a lot of mystery in the game," McGraw said. "I think it's a matter of who is going to play well, who is going to make shots, who is going to be able to defend a little bit better. The adrenaline will be flowing, I think anything can happen."

The Irish have plenty of prior experience and game tape to help guide them as they attempt

to replicate the successes from their two wins.

"[In our wins over Connecticut.] we were just clicking, especially on defense we were getting a lot of stops," Irish graduate-student forward Devereaux Peters said. "In the [Big East title] game, we were letting them do what they wanted to do ... and we let them decide what we were running [on offense] and we weren't as aggressive as we normally are, so that definitely has to change."

As they attempt to move past Connecticut and into the championship game, the Irish gain confidence from last year's tournament, Mallory said.

"Since we have been there before, we aren't as star-struck from the whole Final Four atmosphere," she said. "We are a little more relaxed going in, and just knowing what to expect."

The Irish will tip off with Connecticut at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at the Pepsi Center, as they try to advance to their second-straight national championship game.

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The fantastic four

Unique offensive system relies on guards' speed and versatility, produces strong results for Irish

By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Sports Writer

Notre Dame isn't running up the score for promotional McDonald's vouchers anymore, but its 29-point average margin of victory in the 2012 NCAA tournament is reminiscent of its dominant performance during the regular season. The Irish start only one player over six feet tall, and yet outscore opponents inside the paint on a regular basis, including a Maryland team that started three in the regional finals.

There are no secret plays, no "Hoosiers" halftime speeches — just Irish coach Muffet McGraw's patented four-guard offense that has foiled height-advantaged opponents all season long.

"The four-guard lineup, it's just so versatile," senior guard Natalie Novosel said. "Everybody can score — it's so balanced. You can just do whatever you want, but at the same time it's a system, so there's different options. One person goes backdoor, one person cuts back out. There's just so many different options and it's so balanced."

Averaging 15.3 points per game as Notre Dame's second-leading scorer, Novosel has developed into one of the nation's most efficient players and junior guard Skylar Diggins' number-one option under McGraw's signature offense. While winning basketball games has been the most obvious effect of McGraw's implementation of the four-guard offense, her underlying motivation is much simpler.

"Because I love a high-scoring game as probably the other three coaches in this [Final Four would agree]," she said. "It's so much more fun to watch. I think it makes the game so much more exciting for the fans when you see up-tempo scoring also with great defense."

Notre Dame's path to the 2012 NCAA tournament national title may be remarkably similar to its successful championship run in

2001, but the vehicle responsible couldn't be more different. Take away the loss to Connecticut in the Big East tournament finals, the rematch in the Final Four, the consensus First Team All-American and the Hall-of-Fame coach, and you're left with two very different offensive systems driving the Irish.

"I think the players are more complete players [now]," McGraw said. "You used to have the defensive specialists [like] the 3-point shooter who couldn't guard. I think players now are so much better and so much more capable of playing the game at both ends, and it's great for the women's game."

The point guard

Every team needs one, but the Irish happen to have the nation's best. Averaging 16.7 points and 5.8 assists per game, Diggins lifted Notre Dame over the Terapins with her first career triple-double to send the Irish to the tournament semifinals.

The point guard leads the Irish attack with her exceptional vision, quickness and versatility. "Sky's the general of the court," Novosel said. "She just knows where everybody is — that's her job and she does it flawlessly. She's just really aware and does things really well."

Unlike a traditional Princeton offense that features four guards simultaneously directing the offense, Diggins' ability to dictate the Notre Dame offense on the court makes McGraw's system unique. The head coach said she has complete faith in Diggins to make the right pass, take the right shot and manage the game by herself.

"I give her complete control. I try to help her if I feel like she needs it, but she generally makes great decisions," McGraw said. "I really let her have a lot of flexibility to do what she can do because she's so talented and hard to guard."

In addition to letting Diggins facilitate her offense, McGraw

added the coaching staff selects specific plays in particular to signal Diggins it's her time to take over a game. Diggins said the degree of flexibility granted to her by McGraw has been a developmental process.

"I have the green light. I think it's lime-green now in my junior year," she said.

The offensive threat

Named the Big East's Most Improved Player in 2011, Novosel has elevated her game to another level in her final season in uniform. The talented guard led the Irish in scoring in victories over California in the regional quarterfinals and St. Bonaventure in the regional semifinals, including a 28-point performance against the Golden Bears.

A native of Kentucky, Novosel said the four-guard system rattles opponents by creating mismatches that are difficult to guard and even harder to prepare for.

"Guards are quicker, faster, sometimes craftier with the ball, so I think it definitely creates a lot of problems for different people, especially those who are used to playing against two posts inside," she said. "Especially in transition, guards can coast down the court, and that's really tough to match up against."

McGraw said the luxury of having two prolific scorers in Diggins and Novosel prevents opponents from successfully double-teaming on defense.

"They're both just really tough matchups," she said. "They can score in a lot of different ways. They can score off the dribble, they get to the foul line and they make great passes."

The wild card

Sophomore guard Kayla McBride sat out the second half of the 2010-2011 season to attend to an off-the-court issue, watching Notre Dame's run to the national title game from the bench.



MATT SAAD/The Observer

Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters shoots a layup during Notre Dame's 80-49 defeat of Maryland in the Elite Eight.

In her first NCAA tournament game, she paced the Irish with a team-high 15 points in Notre Dame's victory over Liberty in the first round.

Afterwards, Liberty coach Carey Green called her the "wild card" of Notre Dame's offense.

"I think the four-guard look really makes it tough for that fourth defender for the other team. Kayla McBride's a tough matchup because she can go on the perimeter and hit threes, she can drive the ball and she can do so many things," McGraw said. "So if you try to put a post on her, she can take advantage of that."

Two seasons ago, 2010 graduate Lindsay Schrader served a similar role as a guard who could score in the frontcourt while remaining a shooting threat on the perimeter. However, McBride's defensive skill and 3-point shooting ability makes her even more versatile.

"K-Mac shoots a lot of threes and Lindsay really didn't, but she can still bang inside like Lindsay did," Diggins said. "It's different components."

The specialist

Ranked sixth all-time in program history with 150 career 3-point field goals, graduate student Brittany Mallory serves as Notre Dame's most potent threat behind the arc. Despite her recruitment by McGraw for her exceptional 3-point shooting, Mallory's experience in the four-guard system and off-ball movement has made her invaluable on the court.

"Brittany's the stabilizing force. She's the smart one," McGraw said. "She's going to go backdoor, she's going to make a great cut. She's going to tell everybody to be in the right spot and make sure everybody's doing what they're supposed to be doing."

Mallory said the offense can't function properly if Notre Dame relies too heavily on the three-point shot. Rather, McGraw's system flourishes when the guards spread the floor and allow Diggins to find the open shooter or cutting player.

"When we spread the floor, that creates opportunities for driving, and when Sky drives everyone's going to look at her," she said. "We just have to look to get open and allow her to get us the ball."

The forward

Graduate student forward Devereaux Peters serves an important role as Notre Dame's lone conventional post player, attracting defenders to free up perimeter shooters while finding the backdoor cutters. An athletic forward like Peters who can run the floor and rebound makes McGraw's offense that much more effective.

"The guards really play well through me," Peters said. "We have found our niche, where we know each other and we play well together. I move a bit quicker than a lot of the posts, so it works to our advantage in our case."

Regardless of position, McGraw said her players' laser-like focus and motivation to return to the national championship game, coupled with their ability to coach themselves on the floor, set this year's team apart.

"This is a team that has taken ownership. They're accountable for each other, they help each other," she said. "They feel like they're coaches on the floor. When they see things they'll talk about, 'Hey, why don't we try this? This looks great. I see this. This is going to work.' I think it's a real team effort."

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MATT SAAD/The Observer

Irish sophomore guard Kayla McBride drives to the basket during Notre Dame's 80-49 victory over Maryland in the Elite Eight in Raleigh, N.C. McBride had 16 points in the game.

BAYLOR

38-0, 18-0

BRITTNEY GRINER

23.4 ppg, 9.4 rpg,
199 blocks

ODYSSEY SIMS

14.8 ppg, 4.4 apg, 114
steals, 1.62 assist/TO

DESTINY WILLIAMS

10.2 ppg, 9.2 rpg

KIMETRIA HAYDEN

7.5 ppg, 4.1 rpg

BROOKLYN POPE

7.5 ppg, 5.5 rpg

TEAM – 78.9 ppg, 18.4 apg, 45.3 rpg, 8.55 steals,
+26.9 margin

THREE-POINT .337

OPPONENTS 52.0 ppg

STANFORD

35-1, 16-0

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE

22.5 ppg, 10.3 rpg, 49
steals, 1.8 apg

CHINEY OGWUMIKE

15.3 ppg, 10.3 rpg, 44
blocks, 47 assists

TONI KOKENIS

9.5 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 3.6 apg,
53 steals

JOSLYN TINKLE

8.9 ppg, 5.5 rpg, 45 blocks,
48 assists

AMBER ORRANGE

4.9 ppg, 2.6 rpg, 3.1 apg,
40 steals

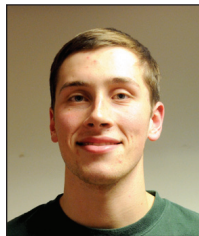
TEAM – 76.8 ppg, 16.8 apg, 43.4 rpg, 6.72 steals,
+22.2 margin

THREE-POINT .316

OPPONENTS 52.22 ppg

Joseph Monardo

Sports Writer



One of the best teams in the country this year, the Irish have played some of their best basketball the last two times out. Also promising, the Irish seem to have the upper hand in the matchup with Connecticut, having won two of three meetings this season and currently on a mission to avenge their Big East championship game loss to the

Huskies. Diggins and Peters will lead the Irish on both ends as they overcome UConn and move on to the finals against Baylor. The Irish will have their hands full with the Bears, but their penetrating style will put Griner on the bench with foul trouble early while McBride jumps out to a hot start. Ultimately, Griner and the rest of Baylor will be too much for Notre Dame to contain as the Irish finish as runner-ups for the second straight year.

Molly Sammon

Sports Writer



Notre Dame might know Connecticut better than Connecticut knows Connecticut. They've got it down by now, they knew what it took to beat them twice in the regular season, and they got a chance to see what they needed to change in their loss at the Big East Tournament final — keep Connecticut from going on huge runs and they will make it to the finals with no trouble. Baylor will beat Stanford with no obvious problems. The Cardinal regular season schedule was too weak for them to be able to break a team like Baylor's 38-game win streak. Baylor's junior center Brittney Griner and the Bears will see the Irish in the final game on Tuesday. Irish coach McGraw walked away from that game knowing her team didn't defend the entirety of the Baylor offense well enough, so they will improve this time.

Matthew Robison

Sports Writer



The Irish have had Connecticut's number this season, beating the Huskies in two of three matchups. The only Connecticut victory came in a virtual second home game in the Big East championship. Diggins, Peters and the Irish will send Auriemma, Hayes and the Huskies packing after the national semifinal. But, as much as I would like to see Muffet McGraw and Notre Dame win another national title, I really don't see anyone getting past Baylor this year. Brittney Griner and the Bears dominated the Irish in the first matchup this year. While I don't see it being another dominant performance, I think Baylor is just too big and strong for Notre Dame's post players. I hope the Irish prove me wrong, but Baylor will edge Notre Dame in a close one.

BOTTOM LINE: Baylor 76, Notre Dame 68

BOTTOM LINE: Notre Dame 75, Baylor 72

BOTTOM LINE: Baylor 81, Notre Dame 76

NOTRE DAME

34-3, 15-1

SKYLAR DIGGINS

16.7 ppg, 5.8 apg, 3.3 rpg, 2.6 spg

NATALIE NOVOSEL

15.3 ppg, 4.1 rpg, 47 steals, 1.9 apg

BRITTANY MALLORY

5.8 ppg, 2.6 rpg, 2.0 spg, 2.2 apg

KAYLA MCBRIDE

11.7 ppg, 4.6 rpg, 1.6 spg, 1.8 apg

DEVEREAUX PETERS

11.8 ppg, 9.4 rpg, 1.9 blocks per game, 2.1 apg

TEAM – 79.2 ppg, 18.1 apg, 41.1 rpg, 13.0 spg, +27.7 margin

THREE-POINT .346

OPPONENTS 51.5 ppg

UCONN

33-4, 13-3

MOSQUEDA-LEWIS

15.0 ppg, 5.4 rpg, 1.7 apg, 46 steals

TIFFANY HAYES

14.8 ppg, 5.8 rpg, 3.4 apg, 82 steals

BRIA HARTLEY

13.9 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 3.7 apg, 69 steals

STEPHANIE DOLSON

10.2 ppg, 5.9 rpg, 1.8 apg, 53 blocks

KELLY FARIS

6.6 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 4.3 apg, 77 steals

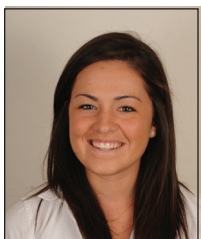
TEAM – 76.4 ppg, 18.8 apg, 41.6 rpg, 11.38 steals, +30.4 margin

THREE-POINT .352

OPPONENTS 46.1 ppg

Kelsey Manning

Sports Writer



The Irish have come up against the Huskies eight times in the post-season, six in the Big East tournament, and twice in the Final Four. And the Irish have lost every one of those contests — aside from the two Final Four matchups. Notre Dame will make that count 3-0 on Sunday led by continued strong postseason play from Diggins. But

in the championship, the Irish will not be able to derail Baylor from the first 40-0 season in NCAA basketball history. The last time Notre Dame matched up with the Bears, Griner dropped 32 points, 14 rebounds and six blocked shots. While the Irish have certainly improved defensively since then and will not allow Griner that kind of statline again, Baylor will simply prove too tough and too big for ND and its four-guard system.

BOTTOM LINE: Baylor 84, Notre Dame 78

Chris Masoud

Senior Sports Writer

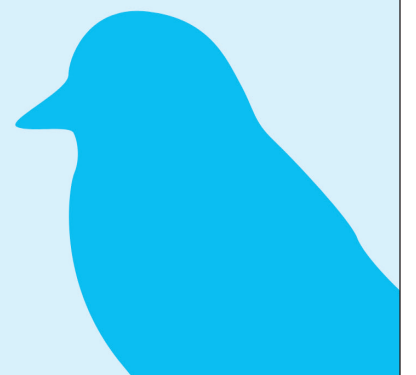


Conventional wisdom suggests the team that has not lost a game all season, Baylor, led by a national champion coach, Kim Mulkey, and powered by the sport's best player, 6-foot-8 Brittany Griner, will not lose in Denver. But Stanford's senior forward Nnemkadi Ogwumike is quietly putting together the best performance in the NCAA tournament thus far, averaging 28 points per game after

leading the Cardinal to 28 regular season wins against just one loss. But Notre Dame and Connecticut are peaking at the right time. Despite a first half scare against Kentucky, the Huskies rallied against the Wildcats to reach the Final Four, while the Irish thoroughly pounded Maryland in the Elite Eight. Losing to UConn in the Big East tournament finals was the best thing that happened to Notre Dame, who will start a new winning streak against the Huskies instead of trying to extend an old one to five.

BOTTOM LINE: Stanford 76, Notre Dame 68

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Notre Dame-Connecticut rivalry gains added significance

By MATTHEW ROBISON
Sports Writer

Notre Dame and Connecticut renew their Big East rivalry Sunday night in what will determine the premier team in the conference.

For the last two decades, Connecticut has dominated the Big East. However, recently — and especially this season — Notre Dame has made its claim as the new face of the conference.

In the regular season, the Irish knocked off the Huskies twice, once at Purcell Pavilion and once at the XL Center in Storrs, Conn.

“We’ve played them before,” graduate student guard Brittany Mallory said. “We know what to expect. They know what to expect. So it’s just going to be a good challenge.”

Connecticut got revenge for its two defeats this season when it beat Notre Dame, the Big East regular-season champion, in the conference championship game in Hartford, Conn.

“We beat them twice this year and they have beaten us once so it is an equal matchup,” senior guard Natalie Novosel said. “Going in, it is just going to be all about heart.”

When asked how the loss to the Huskies in the Big East title game will carry over into Sunday, the Irish said they will use it as a means of motivation.

“In a way it is a blessing in disguise,” Novosel said. “We look at it as a revenge game, and we usually do well in revenge games.”

Sunday night’s matchup figures to be the most heated contest of the rivalry to date. Last season, the Huskies swept the Irish in two regular season meetings and beat them in the Big East championship game. In the Final Four, the Irish finally got a win against Connecticut, beating the Huskies to advance to the national cham-

pionship game against Texas A&M.

The Huskies were the No. 1 overall seed, had four-time All-American and AP Player of the Year Maya Moore and were thirsty for a rematch with Stanford, who ended their 90-game winning streak earlier in the season. But Notre Dame came out strong and held on to a 72-63 win, ending a 12-game skid by the Irish in the series.

After the game, it seemed as though Notre Dame had already won its championship — it had beaten Connecticut. The Irish then went on to lose to the Aggies in the title game.

“Last year with Maya Moore, they were the team to beat, we were the underdog,” McGraw said. “We were coming in off the Tennessee win off a high. Nobody expected us to be there.”

This year, Notre Dame might be even hungrier. But Connecticut has been here before. It may not have a single go-to scorer like Moore or Tina Charles, but Huskies coach Geno Auriemma knows how to prepare his players for big games.

“I think when we played UConn, we’ve had a lot of different games with them,” McGraw said. “Stefanie Dolson has really beat us. Bria Hartley’s beat us. I think different people have stepped up in different games and played really well. When you’re playing a team like Connecticut, they’ve had such an equal opportunity team that any one person can step up on a given night and play extremely well.”

Facing such a versatile lineup, the Irish cannot be complacent with their two victories over the Huskies this year. A national championship is the goal.

“Now, people expect us not just to be there, but to win,” McGraw said.

“We beat them twice this year and they have beaten us once so it is an equal matchup ... Going in, it is just going to be all about heart.”

Natalie Novosel
senior guard



MATT SAAD/The Observer

Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel takes a shot during Notre Dame’s 72-63 victory over Connecticut in a 2011 Final Four matchup. Novosel scored 18 of her 22 points in the second half.

The Notre Dame-Connecticut rivalry has reached new heights. The two teams are not only competing for Big East dominance but national

renown. When the ball is tipped Sunday night, it will no longer be about a conference, a rivalry or a history. It will be about two teams’ relentless

pursuit of a national championship.

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Check out more coverage at ndsmcobserver.com

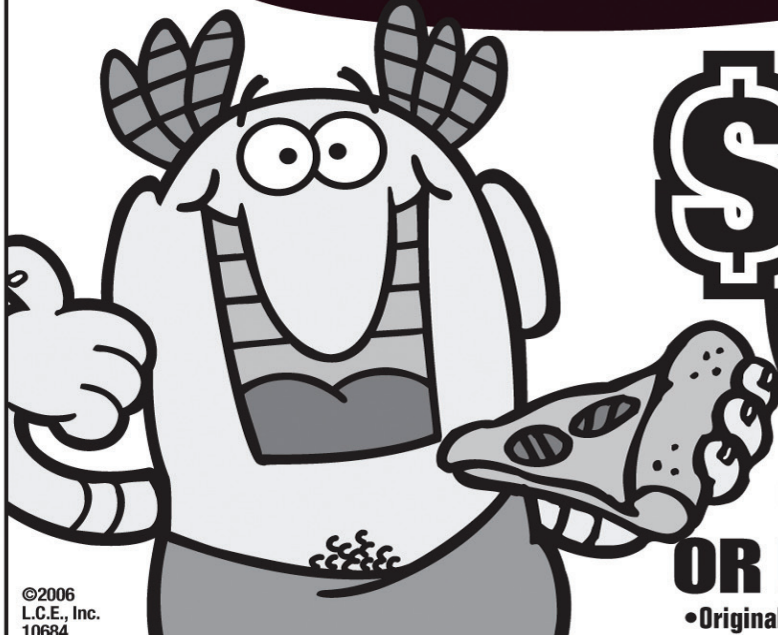


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Diggins leads Irish in title hunt



ASHLEY DACY/The Observer

Junior guard Skylar Diggins plays defense during Notre Dame's 81-61 victory over Akron on Nov. 11 in the Purcell Pavilion. Diggins had 21 points, seven assists and four steals in the season opener.

By KELSEY MANNING
Sports Writer

In the midst of racking up nominations for every major national player-of-the-year award, earning spots on three different All-America teams, recording her first career triple-double and claiming the title of Most Outstanding Player of the Raleigh Regional, Irish junior point guard Skylar Diggins remains focused on one thing — winning it all.

"We are not just here to participate," she said. "We are not just happy to be here. We want to win it."

This attitude has been evident in Diggins' postseason performance, as she posted her first career triple-double in No. 4 Notre Dame's 80-49 rout of No. 5 Maryland in the Raleigh regional final March 27.

Diggins finished the game with 22 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds along with five steals — she was the game's top performer in all four categories. The feat marked the 13th triple-double in NCAA tournament history, and only the second in a regional final. Diggins also achieved the third triple-double in Notre Dame history, and the first ever in postseason play.

In the wake of the win over Maryland to advance the Irish to the Final Four for the second straight year, Irish coach Muffet McGraw recognized the profound mark Diggins has had on the Notre Dame program.

"This puts us in more elite company," she said. "This is something that [Diggins] has brought to our program. I think we now have a place with all the elite programs in the country, and I couldn't be prouder of that."

Diggins has been showered with national honors, most recently earning a spot on the John Wooden All-American

Team and the 10-player United States Basketball Writers Association All-American Team. These selections indicate the finalists for player-of-the-year awards from both organizations.

But despite all the individual attention, Diggins said her focus is on winning a championship, where it has remained since last year's loss in the final.

"The loss against Texas A&M has been in our mind for a year now. [We were thinking] 'When is a championship going to [come]? When is the tournament getting started?'" she said. "I think we tried to win a championship against Arkansas Pine-Bluff right on the tip [in the first game of the season.] It's good for us to finally be back here, and get into the last hurrah with the team. And with this team, it is kind of bittersweet, because we are at the end of the season with this team. But that gives us more reason to play for."

With that in mind, Diggins currently has her gaze set firmly on No. 3 Connecticut, who the Irish will face in the tournament semifinals in what will be the teams' fourth matchup of the year. Brushing off any notion of the difficulty of beating a team three times in one year, Diggins said she and the team are using the same approach they have all year — one game at a time.

"I don't think [the difficulty of beating a team three times

in one year] matters. I think it is hard beating them once, especially a team like that," she said. "It's the game to get to the championship, so I don't think it matters who we are playing. The fact that it is UConn, I think we both have some familiarity [with each other]."

In a Wednesday teleconference, Huskies coach Geno Auriemma was asked what concerns him the most about playing Notre Dame.

"The most, everything," he responded. "This is the eighth time we're playing them in 12 months, and it's crazy, isn't it? I mean, it's just ridiculous. Everything. Everything. I think if you stripped them apart as a team and all the components, you would find they don't have any weaknesses, and you can't say that about a lot of teams."

Some of that praise can definitely be attributed to Diggins, he said.

"Certainly Skylar Diggins is playing unbelievable basketball right now," Auriemma said.

Diggins will try to continue this trend, as Notre Dame looks to advance to the national championship game for its second-straight year. And as the Irish take on Connecticut to earn that right, they will look to their junior point guard, who will — as always — have her eye on the prize.

"We know what it is like to get there, but we don't know what it is like to win it," Diggins said. "So it'll be great for us."

"The loss against Texas A&M has been in our mind for a year now. [We were thinking] 'When is a championship going to [come]? When is the tournament getting started.'"

Skylar Diggins
junior guard

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Clockwise from left: Sophomore forward Natalie Achonwa handles the ball for the Irish during an 80-49 victory over Maryland in the Elite Eight; Notre Dame huddles before its Elite Eight matchup; the Raleigh regional-champion Irish celebrate their victory over Maryland on Tuesday.



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