

# IRISH INSIDER

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THE  
OBSERVER

## TAKING CHARGE

Senior Scott Martin steps into leadership  
role, guides team into Big East tournament

## COMMENTARY

# Brey ranks as one of regular season's best

Mike Brey did not make it four of six Big East Coach of the Year awards Tuesday night. Instead, this year's honor went to South Florida's Stan Heath. By no means was Heath undeserving — Brey voted for him after all. But the award should have belonged to Brey.



**Douglas Farmer**

*Senior Sports Writer*

Of all the criticism the Irish coach has faced in his 12 years under the Dome, one thing can no longer be doubted: He is one of the best regular season coaches in the country.

Is that a back-handed compliment? Perhaps. But isn't a back-handed compliment better than no compliment at all?

Could this back-handed compliment have been delivered in years past? Quite possibly, but this year eliminated any shred of doubt from even the harshest of critics.

Is this the description Brey wants attached to his name? Doubtful, but this usually precedes those loftier accolades.

Notre Dame begins play in the Big East championships two days later than teams such as Pittsburgh and Connecticut because Brey's engineering avoided a down-year similar to the ones which struck the defending conference and national champions, respectively.

Pittsburgh's Jamie Dixon and Connecticut's Jim Calhoun joined the other coaches in the Big East to place Notre Dame ninth in the conference pre-season poll. Such a finish would have the Irish sweating come Selection Sunday. Instead, Brey can sleep easy Saturday night — no matter how his time in Madison Square Garden goes this week — knowing Notre Dame has a berth in the Big Dance.

In those same preseason votes, coaches selected Irish graduate student forward Tim Abromaitis to the preseason all-conference first team. Instead, Abromaitis only played two games this year. Following a four-game suspension due to a minor NCAA violation he averaged 14.0 points and 7.0 rebounds per game, all at the CBE Classic in Kansas City, Mo. Then, just after Thanksgiving, Notre Dame's best player, and to this day the one averaging the most points per game this season, tore his ACL and ended what should have been a campaign for the Big East Player of the Year award won by Marquette's Jae Crowder on Tuesday.

Without Abromaitis, the Irish could have packed in this season. That expected ninth-place conference finish had plummeted to a likely 11th or 12th, at best. Notre Dame was in serious trouble.

Except no one told Mike Brey. A week into 2012, Notre Dame stood at 9-6, with all six losses coming away from home. In the first of Abromaitis's two games this season, the Irish lost by 29 to Missouri. They followed that with a 20-point loss to Gonzaga and a 16-point shellacking from Cincinnati. Next up was a trip to Louisville. Few media members showed up, and even less expected the Irish to do so.

Except no one told Mike Brey. Notre Dame waltzed into the KFC Yum! Center and finagled a double-overtime win over the then-No. 11 Cardinals. Yet, the Irish were still in trouble. A split of a two-game home stand later left the Irish at 11-8, with a 3-3 record in the Big East. Undefeated, top-ranked Syracuse was coming to town. Teams who start poorly in the Big East don't have the luxury of soft games to make up the deficit. The Irish were not out of danger of watching their season disappear.

Except no one told Mike Brey. The Irish beat the Orange, sparking a not-to-be-forgotten court storming. The Irish went to Seton Hall and Connecticut, and beat them too, and for good measure, added six more conference wins to the streak. For a few brief moments, one Wednesday night, it looked as if a Big East regular season title was within grasp. Alas, Syracuse beat South Florida on Feb. 22, and kept on winning, but Notre Dame will gladly take its third-place finish. Yes, that is six spots better than the Abromaitis-led squad was predicted to finish.

Someone should be sure to tell Mike Brey.

Or, don't. Let's see what bliss this ignorance brings next.

Mike Brey is, without argument, a magician when it comes to regular season success. He took a down-trodden 11-8 team and led them to a 21-10 conclusion with a top-25 ranking.

If no one tells him, can he finally lead the Irish to Saturday night at Madison Square Garden, or, better yet, the first appearance in the NCAA's second weekend since the last of Matt Doherty's recruits left in 2003?

Perhaps Mike Brey knows the answer.

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

# Irish head to NYC for tourney



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

**Irish sophomore Eric Atkins attempts to finish a layup in front of a Marquette defender during Notre Dame's 76-59 win Feb. 4. The Irish and Eagles could meet again in the Big East semifinals.**

By ALLAN JOSEPH  
Editor-in-Chief

A year ago, an Irish squad that lost two senior leaders to graduation surprised many in the Big East by earning a 14-4 league record en route to a No. 2 seed in the conference tournament, where they were defeated in the semifinals by Louisville. This year, a Notre Dame team that lost veteran leaders to graduation, injury and early departure again exceeded expectations by earning a No. 3 seed in the postseason tournament — but this year, the Irish hope to go farther.

"We were so close [to the title game] last year and it still stings a little bit," senior guard Scott Martin said. "We still have that in our memory, so hopefully we can build on that."

The Irish (21-10, 13-5 Big East) struggled to find a rhythm in the early part of the season, highlighted by a 29-point loss to Missouri and a 20-point loss at Gonzaga at the end of November. After muddling through the early part of the conference slate, Notre Dame found its stride at the end of January when it upset then-No. 1 Syracuse 67-58 to kick off a nine-game winning streak, the longest league winning streak in program history. Now, Irish coach Mike Brey wants his squad to return to the mentality that helped his team hand the Orange their only loss of the season.

"You're kind of trying to get back into a frame of mind that you were in before the Syracuse game," he said. "Can you get back into that kind of practice routine ... and that kind of psyche where man, you really needed each other? That's the kind of mentality we have to have."

The late-season surge was enough to earn the Irish a No. 3 seed and double-bye in the tournament, just two wins away from the title game. Notre Dame has never appeared in the Big East tournament championship game, which traditionally has taken place on Saturday night.

"[Getting to Saturday night] is something that's been a goal for us," Martin said. "Most of the year, we've talked about it

as one of our points of emphasis this year, just trying to get there."

In the quarterfinals, the Irish will face the winner of the South Florida-Villanova game, which took place after this Irish Insider went to print. The Irish beat the Bulls 60-49 in their only meeting this year, a Jan. 10 meeting in Purcell Pavilion. Despite his team's familiarity with the South Florida squad, Martin said the Irish are well aware of the challenge the Bulls would pose.

"They're big ... and they rebound well, which is something we kind of struggle on at times," Martin said. "But we're just excited to get out there and get to work and get kind of a routine before we play Thursday."

Notre Dame won a 74-70 overtime thriller at Villanova on Feb. 18, a victory marked by a late comeback to earn the seventh of nine consecutive league wins.

No matter the opponent, the venue might be the single biggest challenge the Irish face. The Irish are 55-45 all-time in

Madison Square Garden, but lost their only contest there this year and have notoriously struggled to shoot accurately in the famously round arena, especially in the Big East tournament, where the Irish are 8-16 all time.

Brey said that while his team has struggled there in the past, last year's quarterfinal game showed Notre Dame is capable of success in the Garden.

"You've got to get past that psychologically," he said. "We were in a good rhythm last year ... maybe that's what I'll talk to [my team] about."

Martin said he and his teammates will try to do exactly what their coach has told them to do.

"There's always in the back of your head that we've dropped some games there and haven't shot the ball particularly well," Martin said. "It's still a basketball court. We try to enjoy it and relish the moment, but try to get some wins too."

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# Captain comeback

Senior guard Scott Martin leads youthful Irish squad through rough times, into No. 3 seed at tourney

By ERIC PRISTER  
Senior Sports Writer

The Irish started the season short on leadership with just two senior returning starters. But when fifth-year forward Tim Abromaitis went down with an ACL tear, senior guard Scott Martin had to start taking charge — and taking charges.

“I think I had to be even more vocal when [Abromaitis] went down because you lose that voice on the floor,” Martin said. “He was so big for us in every aspect of the game that there’s a lot of open air out there, and I felt like I had to pick up the slack a little bit.”

Abromaitis entered the season as the de facto leader of this year’s Notre Dame squad after averaging 15 points and six rebounds per game in 2010-11. But he missed the first four games of the regular season because of an eligibility violation during his redshirted second season with the Irish. After returning for two games, Abromaitis tore his ACL in practice, ending his season.

Martin was forced to pick up the slack and became the lone Irish captain before sophomore guard Eric Atkins was given the honor midway through the season. And while Martin ranks just fourth on the team in points per game and third on the team in rebounds per game, Irish coach Mike Brey said he cringes ev-

ery time he has to take the captain off the floor.

“He has a really amazing basketball IQ,” Brey said. “He really knows the game. If there’s a smarter basketball player in the country, I want to see it. I really value that. He has great input here in practice, in scouting reports, bringing up questions. He’s really helped our younger guys’ basketball IQ. [Junior forward and All-Big East second-team selection forward] Jack Cooley’s [success] this year has a lot to do with Scott Martin being his partner on the back line and talking to him and getting him confident and helping him. He’s a big, big factor.”

But Martin is not just a vocal leader. He regularly guards the opponent’s best big man and unofficially leads the nation in charges taken.

“I don’t really think about it too much,” Martin said of taking charges. “You just try to make the right play at the right time, and if I feel like I can get one, I try and get one. I just try to not move and hope for the call.”

“We work on it in practice. Coach is always talking about trying to get charges and being in the right place, so it’s definitely something we work on. But you have to have a feel for it, and I think that just comes with me being old.”

Martin’s career at Notre Dame was rocky from the outset. The 6-foot-8 guard from

Valparaiso, Ind., transferred from Purdue after his freshman season and so had to sit out his entire sophomore season. Then during preseason practices heading into his junior year, Martin tore his ACL and missed the entirety of his second season with the Irish.

Martin was finally eligible and healthy last season and became the fifth starter on a senior laden team. He averaged just under 10 points per game and played more than 30 minutes per contest, winning the teams Most Improved Player award. But this season Martin said he had to change his on-the-court demeanor because now he was the most experienced player on the court.

“I think I’m more vocal than I’ve ever been, and I just try to lead through example,” Martin said. “If something needs to be said, it’s my responsibility to step up and say it. I need to speak a little bit more than I have in the past.”

The leadership role could not have come at a more difficult time, Brey said. Notre Dame started slowly and dropped its first four road games by an average of 15 points per game. Martin struggled with the rest of his team on the court, but Brey said he kept his focus and attitude strong.

“I think he was in a fog a little bit [when Abromaitis went down],” Brey said. “He was down for a couple days. But one of the things I respect about Scott is when [Abromaitis] is gone, he’s out there leading a bunch of puppies around that are running into each other, and he’s not playing very well. And yet his demeanor at practice on a daily basis was pretty consistent, as far as helping, leading and being upbeat. I don’t know if I’ve had a captain who’s had



JULIE HERDER/The Observer

Senior guard Scott Martin drives against a DePaul defender during Notre Dame’s 84-76 win Feb. 11.

to lead in a tougher situation than Scott Martin, and he absolutely delivered.”

Martin played an important role in Notre Dame’s turnaround. He recorded back-to-back double-doubles in wins over Louisville and South Florida, games which Brey said really started Notre Dame’s winning mentality.

The senior captain also scored 13 against Syracuse, handing the Orange their only loss of the regular season and beginning Notre Dame’s school-record nine-game Big East winning streak. It was his 3-pointer as the shot clock expired in the second half that put a dagger into the No. 1 team in the country.

Martin was surrounded by inexperience — Notre Dame’s four other starters averaged just 36 minutes per game among them. But for new starters like freshman guard Pat Connaughton, Martin was just the type of leader they needed.

“The energy he brings and his desire to win has sparked me because I’m the same way: I want to win, whatever it takes, and that’s what he wants to do,” Connaughton said. “I know he’s been that guy, the one who’s really helped us get over the hump, especially in the tough times. Even if he was having hard times, he was helping us help the team. Him and [Abromaitis] both, just being the fifth-

year seniors, even though [Abromaitis] can’t play, have really helped us skyrocket into the team we are now. He took on the role better than he would have if [Abromaitis] was playing.”

Martin said that for the younger players, he had to be a more vocal leader and give more instruction to his teammates.

“It’s an overall mentality that I try to have,” he said.

“You try to keep everybody in the right spots and the right places, but I think a lot of it is vocally just yelling at guys, telling them, ‘Get here and get there,’ and then calming them down when things need to be calmed down.”

Martin and the Irish turned their season around, but now have more to prove in the Big East tournament. Last season, Martin excelled in Madison Square Garden, scoring 11 points in Notre Dame’s quarterfinals win over Cincinnati and then exploding with 23 points and eight rebounds in its semifinals loss to Louisville. As this year’s tournament approaches, Martin said he just hopes he can channel some of that success.

“You try to ride any positive momentum you can get, so hopefully I can use it for momentum and replicate it,” he said.

*“I think I’m more vocal than I’ve ever been, and I just try to lead through example. If something needs to be said, it is my responsibility to step up and say it.”*

Scott Martin  
senior guard

*“I don’t know if I’ve had a captain who’s had to lead in a tougher situation than Scott Martin, and he absolutely delivered.”*

Mike Brey  
Irish coach



KEVIN SONG/The Observer

Senior guard Scott Martin dribbles around the perimeter during Notre Dame’s 71-53 win over Rutgers on Feb. 15. Martin scored seven points and recorded two rebounds in the win.

Contact Eric Prister at [epriester@nd.edu](mailto:epriester@nd.edu)



**No. 22 Jerian Grant**  
So. guard, 6'5"  
12.5 points per game  
4.9 assists per game  
2.8 assist to turnover ratio  
Four games with 20 or more points

A streaky and lanky sophomore, Grant has emerged as a viable scorer after not playing last season. The Bowie, Md., native earned a spot on the All-Big East rookie team after a year in which he scored in double figures in 24 of Notre Dame's 31 games. Grant's smooth 3-point shot and desire to take the last-second shot could be critical for the Irish.



**No. 0 Eric Atkins**  
So. guard, 6'1"  
12.4 points per game  
4.1 assists per game  
1.3 steals per game  
39.4 minutes per game in Big East play

A speedy and durable sophomore, Atkins has provided a steady and reliable point guard for the Irish in a topsy-turvy regular season. The Columbia, Md., native and tri-captain has topped 30 minutes of playing time in all but two games this season and provides Notre Dame with another capable perimeter shooter.



**No. 24 Pat Connaughton**  
Fr. forward, 6'5"  
6.9 points per game  
4.5 rebounds per game  
Seven games with 10 or more points  
Started last 12 games

An athletic and versatile freshman, Connaughton has forced his way into the starting lineup in the latter half of the season with not only his scoring ability but also his rebounding prowess. The Arlington, Mass., native has struggled in the last four games, registering only 15 points as the Irish split their final two games.



**No. 14 Scott Martin**  
Sr. guard, 6'8"  
9.5 points per game  
5.5 rebounds per game  
1.7 assists per game  
43 percent from the field in Big East play

An experienced and savvy senior, Martin has been solid for the Irish all season long, starting every game he has played in. The Valparaiso, Ind., native and Purdue transfer is not flashy by any means but can fill up the stat sheet in a variety of ways. The tri-captain has also provided invaluable leadership off the court.



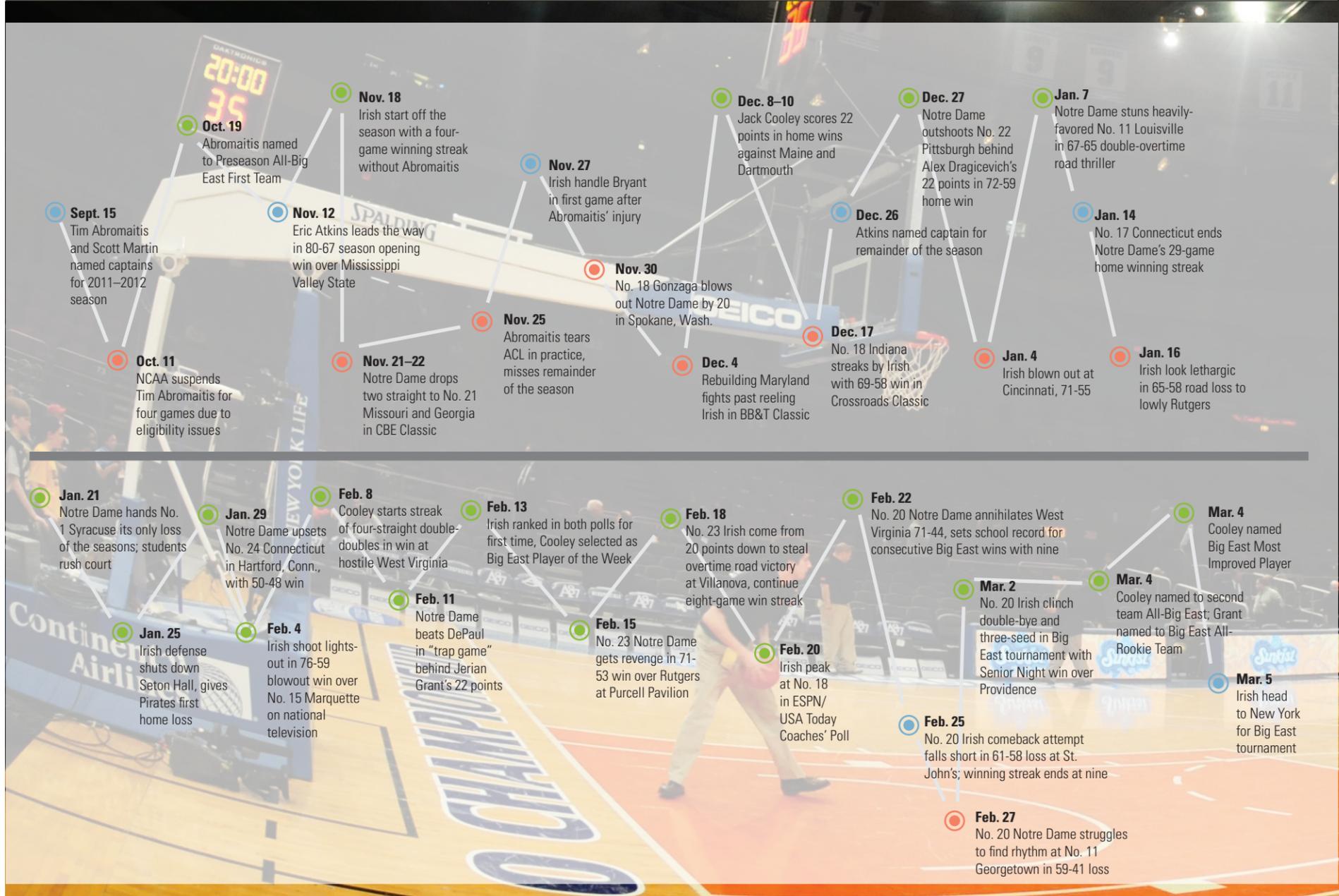
**No. 45 Jack Cooley**  
Jr. forward, 6'9"  
12.5 points per game  
9.2 rebounds per game  
62 percent from the field  
12 double-doubles

A physical and talented junior, Cooley — an All-Big East second team selection — has provided an interior scoring threat for the Irish this season. The Glenview, Ill., native and Big East Most Improved Player has averaged just less than 18 points per game in the final eight games, racking up six double-doubles in that stretch.



**No. 12 Alex Dragicevich**  
So. guard, 6'7"  
7.0 points per game  
1.9 rebounds per game  
1.2 assists per game  
34 percent on 3-pointers

A long and rangy sophomore, Dragicevich has slipped into a sixth man role for the Irish during the final half of the season. The Northbrook, Ill., native will rely on his 3-point shot as he battles Connaughton for playing time in the postseason. Dragicevich tallied double figures in the season finale for the first time since December.



- Sept. 15** Tim Abromaitis and Scott Martin named captains for 2011-2012 season
- Oct. 11** NCAA suspends Tim Abromaitis for four games due to eligibility issues
- Oct. 19** Abromaitis named to Preseason All-Big East First Team
- Nov. 12** Eric Atkins leads the way in 80-67 season opening win over Mississippi Valley State
- Nov. 18** Irish start off the season with a four-game winning streak without Abromaitis
- Nov. 21-22** Notre Dame drops two straight to No. 21 Missouri and Georgia in CBE Classic
- Nov. 25** Abromaitis tears ACL in practice, misses remainder of the season
- Nov. 27** Irish handle Bryant in first game after Abromaitis' injury
- Nov. 30** No. 18 Gonzaga blows out Notre Dame by 20 in Spokane, Wash.
- Dec. 4** Rebuilding Maryland fights past reeling Irish in BB&T Classic
- Dec. 8-10** Jack Cooley scores 22 points in home wins against Maine and Dartmouth
- Dec. 17** No. 18 Indiana streaks by Irish with 69-58 win in Crossroads Classic
- Dec. 26** Atkins named captain for remainder of the season
- Dec. 27** Notre Dame outshoots No. 22 Pittsburgh behind Alex Dragicevich's 22 points in 72-59 home win
- Jan. 4** Irish blown out at Cincinnati, 71-55
- Jan. 7** Notre Dame stuns heavily-favored No. 11 Louisville in 67-65 double-overtime road thriller
- Jan. 14** No. 17 Connecticut ends Notre Dame's 29-game home winning streak
- Jan. 16** Irish look lethargic in 65-58 road loss to lowly Rutgers
- Jan. 21** Notre Dame hands No. 1 Syracuse its only loss of the season; students rush court
- Jan. 25** Irish defense shuts down Seton Hall, gives Pirates first home loss
- Jan. 29** Notre Dame upsets No. 24 Connecticut in Hartford, Conn., with 50-48 win
- Feb. 4** Irish shoot lights-out in 76-59 blowout win over No. 15 Marquette on national television
- Feb. 8** Cooley starts streak of four-straight double-doubles in win at hostile West Virginia
- Feb. 11** Notre Dame beats DePaul in "trap game" behind Jerian Grant's 22 points
- Feb. 13** Irish ranked in both polls for first time, Cooley selected as Big East Player of the Week
- Feb. 15** No. 23 Notre Dame gets revenge in 71-53 win over Rutgers at Purcell Pavilion
- Feb. 18** No. 23 Irish come from 20 points down to steal overtime road victory at Villanova, continue eight-game win streak
- Feb. 20** Irish peak at No. 18 in ESPN/USA Today Coaches' Poll
- Feb. 22** No. 20 Notre Dame annihilates West Virginia 71-44, sets school record for consecutive Big East wins with nine
- Feb. 25** No. 20 Irish comeback attempt falls short in 61-58 loss at St. John's; winning streak ends at nine
- Feb. 27** No. 20 Notre Dame struggles to find rhythm at No. 11 Georgetown in 59-41 loss
- Mar. 2** No. 20 Irish clinch double-bye and three-seed in Big East tournament with Senior Night win over Providence
- Mar. 4** Cooley named to second team All-Big East; Grant named to Big East All-Rookie Team
- Mar. 4** Cooley named Big East Most Improved Player
- Mar. 5** Irish head to New York for Big East tournament

**Douglas Farmer**  
Senior Sports Writer



When it comes to Madison Square Garden, common sense and recent history say don't put too much faith in Notre Dame. The sight lines simply mess with Irish shooters' mojo.

This year won't be any different in that regard, but what will differ is the quality of opponent.

Notre Dame does not need to shoot all-that well to beat the likes of South Florida and even Marquette. If the Irish play solid, fundamental basketball, they will advance to Saturday.

As for next weekend, it will likely be the last of the year for the Irish. It all depends on the draw, but if a Long Beach State or a Drexel appears opposite Notre Dame, such as it ends.

**BOTTOM LINE: Syracuse 74, Notre Dame 59**

**Eric Prister**  
Senior Sports Writer



It has been a magical season for Notre Dame in a completely different way than it was last year. Last year, five senior starters came together, nearly won the Big East and earned a No. 2 seed in the NCAA tournament. This year, one senior starter and a multitude of new faces fought through early-season struggles and did something no Notre Dame team had ever done before, winning nine straight conference games.

The postseason will not be as kind to the Irish and getting past Marquette will prove to be too much.

Unless they earn a very favorable draw, the NCAA tournament will prove to be much of the same, as the Irish will struggle to get through the first round before losing in the second. Despite this, the season should be considered a success.

**BOTTOM LINE: Marquette 63, Notre Dame 59**

**Allan Joseph**  
Editor-in-Chief



It's one of those things that makes no sense, but is fact nonetheless: Notre Dame is no good in Madison Square Garden.

Maybe it's the bright lights, maybe it's the perfect circularity of the arena or maybe it's the gigantic Reese's billboard underneath the scoreboard. Whatever it is, the Irish always struggle in

the Garden.

I don't think this team will flame out in its first game of the tournament — they're too solid for that — but I don't see them reaching the title game either.

The Irish will fall to Marquette in the semifinals due to some untimely cold shooting, but it won't derail all hopes of a deep run in the NCAA tournament.

**BOTTOM LINE: Marquette 68, Notre Dame 60**



No. 7 seed Louisville (22-9, 10-8):  
Last meeting vs. ND: Jan. 7 67-65  
2OT Loss  
The Cardinals enter the tournament ranked 19th in the country, yet have not beaten a ranked Big East team this year. Louisville lost a double-overtime thriller Jan. 7 to the Irish, which gave Notre Dame its first road win of the year. Senior forward Kyle Kuric (12.9 points per game) and junior guard Peyton Siva (5.4 assists per game) lead coach Rick Pitino's squad and will face Seton Hall on Wednesday. The Cardinals are a balanced group with three scorers averaging double figures, but enter the tournament on a two-game losing streak.



No. 11 seed Rutgers (14-17, 6-12):  
Last meeting vs. ND: Feb. 15 71-53  
Loss, Jan. 16 65-58 Win  
The Scarlet Knights were off to one of their best starts to Big East play in conference history after beating the Irish on Jan. 16 before losing eight of their next nine, which included a six-game skid. But the Rutgers season has a few bright spots: big wins over then-No. 10 Florida and then-No. 8 Connecticut in late-December/early January. Freshman guard Eli Carter (13.5 points per game) leads the agile four-guard Rutgers offense, which gave the Irish fits in the teams' first meeting.



No. 4 seed Cincinnati (22-9, 12-6)  
Last meeting vs. ND: Jan. 4 71-55  
Win  
The Bearcats, led by sophomore guard and All-Big East second team

selection Sean Kilpatrick, won five of their last six games of the season to claim the No. 4 seed in the Big East tournament. Cincinnati enters the tournament ranked 15th (out of 16 teams) in field goal percentage, clocking in at 42 percent. They also rank dead last in free throw percentage at 64 percent, which could be a key factor late in close games. Senior forward Yancy Gates leads the Bearcats on the boards, collecting nearly 10 rebounds per game.



No. 5 seed Georgetown (22-7, 12-6)  
Last meeting vs. ND: Feb. 27 59-41  
Win  
The Hoyas, who boast the second-best scoring

defense in the Big East, head to New York on the heels of a 14-point loss to Marquette, the difference between a No. 2 and a No. 5 seed. Senior guard and All-Big East first team selection Jason Clark leads Georgetown in scoring, averaging more than 14 points per game. The Hoyas also rank second in the conference in field goal percentage, converting on 46 percent of their attempts from the floor. Junior forward Hollis Thompson stretches the court for the Hoyas and leads the league in 3-point percentage at nearly 46 percent.



No. 2 seed Marquette (25-6, 14-4):  
Last meeting vs. ND: Feb. 4 76-59  
Loss  
The Golden Eagles are ranked ninth in the country

and rightfully so, winning 13 of the last 15 games. The Irish interrupted Marquette's seven-game winning streaking Feb. 4 at Purcell Pavilion behind freshman forward's Pat Connaughton's 23 points, but the Golden Eagles will surely be out for revenge. Led by their All-Big East first team seniors Darius Johnson-Odom (18.3 points per game) and Jae Crowder (17.6 points per game), expect the Golden Eagles to come out firing, knowing this may be the program's best chance for its first Big East title. If both teams win today, Notre Dame and Marquette will meet in Friday's semifinals.



No. 1 seed Syracuse (30-1, 17-1)  
Last meeting vs. ND: Jan. 21 67-58  
Loss  
The Orange, the only team in Big

East history to lose just one game during the entire regular season, bring the rare combination of size and depth to the court. Sophomore center and Big East Defensive Player of the Year Fab Melo anchors Orange coach Jim Boeheim's famed 2-3 zone while senior guard Scoop Jardine directs the offense. Neither Melo nor Jardine had an impact in the first meeting with Notre Dame. Sophomore guard and Big East Sixth Man of the Year Dion Waiters is one of two Syracuse players to average more than 10 points — senior forward Kris Joseph is the other — but Syracuse is able to employ a 10-man rotation.



No. 14 seed Villanova (12-18, 5-13):  
Last meeting vs. ND: Feb. 18 74-70  
OT Loss  
The Wildcats enter the tournament

after a disappointing regular season after being picked to finish eighth preseason. Villanova failed to record a win against its seven ranked opponents and endured three losing streaks of at least three games. Junior guard Maalik Wayns (17.5 points per game) joins Irish junior forward Jack Cooley on the All-Big East second team and leads a young, yet talented Wildcat offense. Villanova blew a 20-point lead at home to the Irish on Feb. 18, even with 24 points from freshman forward JayVaughn Pinkston.



No. 6 seed South Florida (19-12, 12-6 Big East)  
Last meeting vs. ND: Jan. 10 60-49  
Loss  
The Bulls, who boast

the conference's stingiest defense, sit squarely on the NCAA tournament bubble heading into the Big East tournament and likely need a strong showing to earn a bid. A surprise in the Big East this year, South Florida has struggled to score, averaging fewer than 60 points per game. Despite its gaudy Big East record, South Florida has collected just two wins over ranked opponents this season and employ a balanced scoring attack that features five players averaging more than eight points — but no players averaging 10 or more points per game.

**Andrew Owens**

Associate Sports Editor



Once again, Notre Dame enters the Big East tournament with high expectations. Once again, Notre Dame faces questions about its futility in the Big East tournament and at Madison Square Garden in general.

What better way for the Irish to celebrate the last year of the Big East as we know it than to exorcise their demons and make it to the Saturday

final for the first time ever?

Unfortunately for Irish coach Mike Brey's squad, I don't see it happening. Despite being the beneficiaries of the easiest path possible to the championship game, I expect Marquette to exact revenge against Notre Dame in the semifinals.

With two or three wins this week, the Irish can transform a memorable season into a magical one.

**Matthew DeFranks**

Sports Writer



The Irish, who have overcome obstacle after obstacle, feel like a team of destiny. Lose the reigning Big East Player of the Year? No problem. Lose your senior captain and best player to a season-ending injury? No problem. Lose road games by 20 points? Not an issue, either.

But I don't think all the intangibles are enough to bring home Notre

Dame's first Big East championship. I do think the Irish overcome their shooting woes in Madison Square Garden and slip by Marquette in the semifinals. But I do not see them taking a conference title from a deep Syracuse team that will have stalwart center Fab Melo this time.

Think Jim Boeheim hasn't shown footage of the Orange's only loss of the year over and over and over again? Think again.

**Andrew Gastelum**

Sports Writer



The Irish were not supposed to get a double-bye. They weren't supposed to go on a nine-game winning streak. They weren't even supposed to be considered for the NCAA tournament.

But something tells me this Irish team has peaked and it isn't entering the Big East tournament on the best of terms with two losses and an unimpressive Senior Night win.

Meanwhile, No. 9 Marquette looks poised to win its first Big East title. With All-Big East first team seniors Darius Johnson-Odom and Jae Crowder, this may be the only shot at the title for a while. Also, the Golden Eagles remember how it felt to be blown out on national television by the Irish. But if the Irish can knock down shots at a decent rate, watch out. They aren't supposed to win, but that hasn't stopped them this season.

**BOTTOM LINE: Marquette 75, Notre Dame 67**

**BOTTOM LINE: Syracuse 68, Notre Dame 57**

**BOTTOM LINE: Marquette 62, Notre Dame 54**

## Cooley develops into All-Big East selection



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Irish junior forward Jack Cooley attempts a hook shot over a Providence defender during Notre Dame's 75-69 win March 2.

By ANDREW OWENS  
Associate Sports Editor

Jack Cooley lives life in a ho-hum way, adhering to rhythm and routine rather than spontaneity, so the way he found out he received Big East second team honors Sunday should surprise no one.

"I'm ... disappointed in my team, because I found out from my best friend ... because I don't check Twitter or Facebook," the junior forward said. "I woke up at 12:15 [p.m.] and didn't have any texts, but my best friend texted me 'congrats' [at 12:30] and I was embarrassed and asked, 'For what?'"

Now in his third year at Notre Dame, Cooley has transformed himself from a Luke Harangody look-alike into one of the best players in what is typically regarded as the nation's top conference.

"I'm really proud of Jack," Irish coach Mike Brey said. "He certainly was probably a candidate for first team, but I'm kind of happy he isn't first team. He still needs to have things to shoot for. But from where he came from in the fall to being a second-team guy, I'm very, very proud of him and I know he's proud of himself, and he's earned it."

During the regular season, Cooley averaged 12.5 points per game and 9.2 rebounds per game, numbers that reached 14.6 and 10.2, respectively, in Big East play. What is most remarkable, however, is that he was even in a position to hang with the big boys of the Big East.

Last summer, Cooley was diagnosed with a condition that limits his blood from processing and delivering oxygen, raising doubts about his endurance and ability to play extended minutes. He answered that challenge by starting in 28 of 30 games in which he played and registered 32.7 minutes per game in conference play. He even recorded a season-high 44 minutes in the double overtime victory over Louisville on Jan. 7.

When his condition was announced in November and Notre Dame suffered several embar-

rassing non-conference defeats, it was borderline unfathomable that Cooley could wind up on the Big East's second team and be named the conference's Most Improved Player.

"The only person who called that I'd get Big East team was [former Irish guard] Ben Hansbrough, who actually Facebook-messaged me before the season and told me that I should be really disappointed if I don't get at least Big East [second] team and then [it] happens ... I'm extremely excited and happy," Cooley said. "To think at some parts early in the season that this would happen now, it's just incredible."

Cooley said he is disappointed in himself for not earning Big East first team honors, but that it will drive him to improve for his senior campaign.

"I definitely use it [as motivation]," he said. "I wouldn't consider myself better than anyone on the first team. The choices that were made to pick that team were great and I think they all were justified. So I just use it more as motivation than disappointment."

For now, though, Cooley is less concerned with next season than with the task at hand: helping Notre Dame overcome its typical struggles in Madison Square Garden.

"[It's] a little bit [of a psychological hump], but this year we've done a lot of things that have never been done before, so we have that edge," he said. "It's a little different because it is the Garden. It's a pretty big deal. You just have to get through it and play as a team and remember it's just another arena and just go out there and play hard."

Cooley said he regards the tournament as a proverbial reset button, with each squad starting on a level playing field.

"The season was good, but now it's over," he said. "Everyone gets going in the postseason, everyone has something to prove and everyone has to go out there and reprove we're a good team and just start over."

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## Young guards earn playing time

By MATTHEW DeFRANKS  
Sports Writer

Entering this season, sophomore guard Alex Dragicevich and freshman guard Pat Connaughton were unproven and unknown. They combined for zero starts, 20 points and 62 minutes of playing time.

Now, the youthful duo has combined for around 14 points and 45 minutes — per game — in helping provide much-needed depth for a thin Notre Dame squad hampered by the loss of graduate student Tim Abromaitis.

"It makes the team totally different [if five or six players are producing]," sophomore guard Eric Atkins said. "If one of them can provide us with some big time minutes and big time stats, it really boosts everyone's confidence. To see one of them hit a couple of threes, it just really keeps everything flowing well."

The pair of inexperienced guards has largely fought for playing time all season long, with Dragicevich earning the starts early and Connaughton garnering the starts lately.

"We need both of their punches," Irish coach Mike Brey said. "At times, we've had Alex here for the most part and Pat on the road. A couple games, we had them sharing pretty well — one scored eight, one scored seven. That's important for us."

While each player averages a modest seven points per game,

they have both had standout performances this year.

Dragicevich's signature performance came in Notre Dame's 72-59 win over then-No. 22 Pittsburgh. The Northbrook, Ill., native poured in a career-high 22 points, including four 3-pointers.

Since that game, however, Dragicevich has dipped into double figures just once. He had 12 points in the regular season finale against Providence.

"Their production definitely helps us, and gives us another dimension," senior guard Scott Martin said. "It's a little bit more of an inside-out presence. We focused so much on getting the ball to Jack last game, and [Dragicevich] hit a couple of big ones to stretch it out for us. So I think they just make us that much tougher to guard."

Dragicevich has shot well from behind the arc this season, knocking down 34 percent of his 3-pointers. Brey said he credits Irish assistant coach Martin Ingelsby with Dragicevich's improvement from a year ago, when he averaged just 1.4 points per game.

Brey also said the coaching staff must use a different approach with Dragicevich.

"I'm tired of telling him [not to overthink plays]," Brey said. "I don't want to meet with him too much because then he starts analyzing everything we talk about."

Connaughton, meanwhile,

has stepped into his role seamlessly, playing a big role in Notre Dame's upset of then-No. 1 Syracuse. His two 3-pointers early in the first half set the tone for the Irish and energized the capacity crowd at Purcell Pavilion.

The Arlington, Mass., native also propelled the Irish to victories against Marquette and Villanova. Against the Golden Eagles, he recorded his first double-double with 23 points and 11 rebounds.

In the overtime road win over the Wildcats, Connaughton knocked down seven 3-pointers while also snatching nine rebounds. Since that game, however, he has scored just 13 total points in four games.

Brey said a goal of his heading into the Big East tournament was to get both Connaughton and Dragicevich going.

"I think Alex's frame of mind is good," Brey said. "What I need to do is get Pat prepared. This is his first postseason. He's logged a lot of minutes and there's been a lot of responsibility, and I almost want to get him re-energized this week."

After the 75-69 win over Providence, Brey said he toyed with the idea of shuffling Dragicevich into the starting lineup in place of Connaughton.

"I think we'll stay with what we have," Brey said. "My gut tells me, after thinking it through over the weekend, that we stay the course and get Pat going and bring Alex off the bench."

Connaughton, Dragicevich and the rest of the Irish will look to capture the school's first Big East title this weekend in New York's Madison Square Garden.

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# Atkins, Grant compliment each other in Irish backcourt

By ANDREW GASTELUM  
Sports Writer

Opposites somehow attract. Welcome to the Notre Dame backcourt, where confident meets bashful and intense fuses with reserved. But sophomore guards Jerian Grant and Eric Atkins are united by the game, a game once started on D.C.-area playgrounds, which now magically finds itself heading north to Madison Square Garden.

"Before the game, it's mostly like, 'Wow, you're playing in the Garden,' but once the game starts it's just another basketball game in an arena against another team," Grant said. "The big hype about the Garden is before the game, but during the game it is just basketball."

Madison Square Garden is basketball's Acropolis — the almighty center of the basketball world — which, according to Atkins, provides the ultimate challenge.

"It's an unbelievable feeling playing at the Garden under those lights," Atkins said. "It's a little bit more pressure because of the mystique of the whole place. We just have to be focused out there and focus on basketball."

These two guards have shown nothing but focus on the court all year, culminating in Irish coach Mike Brey naming the soft-spoken Atkins captain midway through the season and Grant being named to the All-Big East Rookie Team on Monday.

"I'm really proud of [Grant]," Atkins said. "He really deserves to be on the All-Rookie Team. He played well all year for us and took really big shots at big times. Also, he had a really good assist-to-turnover ratio [11th in the NCAA]."

Meanwhile, Grant couldn't accept all of the credit for his team-leading 12.5 points and 4.9 assists per game. Being thrown into the starting

lineup and playing 35 minutes per game — without missing a single one — would make a sizeable dent in most players' rookie seasons, but Grant had a mentor in Atkins who went through the trials of Big East action last season.

"[Eric] has meant a lot [to me]," Grant said. "He has shown me a lot and taken the pressure off of me and is able to help me out. He is a huge part of my game."

"[Eric has helped] just learning how to play both ends because almost every night you are playing against a guy in the Big East that can score. Being able to play the game defensively and offensively and put the game together [is key]."

While Atkins builds his own legacy, Grant is trying to separate himself from a path seemingly already paved for him. Grant's father, Harvey, was the 12th pick in the 1988 NBA draft, while his uncle Horace won four NBA championships — three as a part of Michael Jordan's Bulls. Although not known for their assists, twin-brothers Harvey and Horace may have passed their desire to win and competitive edge to the 6'5" Jerian.

"Even on the playground, when the last basket came up I want[ed] the ball. When it comes down to your team needing a basket and your team needing a win, I want the ball in my hands," Grant said. "[It comes from] just watching basketball so much and knowing the best players have the basketball in their hands. I just want to be that guy at the end who helps the team."

Even when Grant took the year off last year due to a guard-heavy lineup, he would still take the clutch, last-second shots in



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

**Irish sophomore guard Eric Atkins attempts a layup during Notre Dame's 75-69 win over Providence on March 2.**

practice, much to the jovial chagrin of other Irish players.

"Last year [Brey] would run game situations and he'd have [Grant] take the shot and we'd be like, 'J's not even playing this year, coach. Did you know that? He can't do that in a game,'" junior forward Jack Cooley said jokingly. "And he'd hit it, and if he didn't he'd be really mad at himself. From that point on I knew when next year came around and when he was allowed to play, coach knew something."

While Grant wants the ball in his hands for the final shot, Atkins will assuredly make the stellar pass to his roommate (see the final minutes against Villanova). Atkins has seen an enormous jump in his production this season, which includes averaging 12.4 points and 39.4 minutes per game in Big East play — which means he is on the bench for only 36 seconds per game.

Against DePaul on Feb. 11, the duo combined for 27 points in a 50-point second half. On Feb. 18 against Villanova, Atkins led the charge with 17 points. Not to be outdone, Grant answered back the next game with 20 points against West Virginia on Feb. 22. While remaining unselfish, forthcoming teammates, the roommates have developed an uncanny on-the-court rivalry of sorts.

"We talk about how many assists we get and how many

rebounds we get. He has more rebounds than me, which is not supposed to happen," Grant said while cracking a smile. "It's a little rivalry for sure."

Familiar rivalry or friendly competition, the two are instrumental cogs in Brey's plan for success.

"The B-W Parkway guards are going to be a key," Brey said. "There is no question they give us a confidence and they make plays for us. Really, they were the ones when we won at Louisville, which was kind of a big light bulb going on. Those were the guys that kind of made us believe down the stretch and into overtime."

Dubbed the B-W Parkway guards for the famous Washington D.C. highway, a mere 21 miles separate Columbia and Bowie, Md., the hometowns of Atkins and Grant. The duo even faced off in an AAU championship with their Washington D.C. club teams in high school. At Notre Dame the guards are joined under one jersey but they never forget their roots.

"Coming from the same place makes our relationship easier," Atkins said. "We knew each other before coming into here, but it transitioned here. And coach [Brey] giving us the confidence and being from the same area as well helps us while we are on the court. It's really nice to have."

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SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

**Irish sophomore guard Jerian Grant drives to the basket during Notre Dame's 84-76 over DePaul on Feb. 11.**

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From upper left, clockwise: Freshman guard Pat Connaughton attempts a shot during Notre Dame's 71-44 win over West Virginia on Feb. 22; sophomore guard Eric Atkins tries to corral a loose ball during Notre Dame's 79-65 win over Providence on March 2; sophomore guard Alex Dragicevich drives to the basket during Notre Dame's win over Providence.

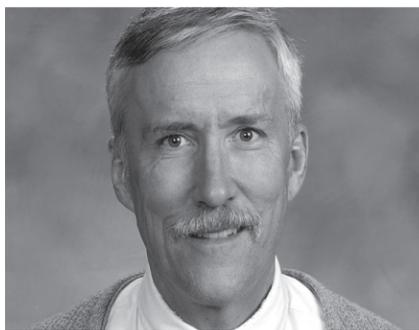
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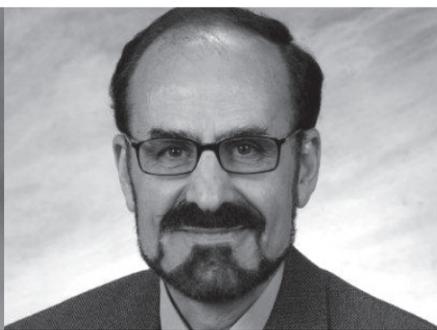


**J. Matthew Ashley**

Prof. Ashley's scholarly interests include political and liberation theology, Christian spirituality, and the dialogue between theology and science.

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**Nasir Ghiaseddin**

Prof. Ghiaseddin's expertise is in the areas of Management Information Systems, Decision Support Systems, Pattern Recognition, and Expert Systems.

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**Dan Graff**

Prof. Graff teaches American history, in particular, courses focusing on the histories of labor, race, gender, and politics.

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