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Women's Basketball

Notre Dame 83, Connecticut 75

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Title time



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Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel and junior guard Skylar Diggins celebrate Notre Dame's 83-75 victory over Connecticut as Huskies coach Geno Auriemma looks on. Novosel had 20 points, Diggins added 19 of her own and graduate student guard Brittany Mallory scored seven points in overtime to send the Irish back to the title game.

By MATTHEW ROBISON
Sports Writer

DENVER — With 11 seconds to play in the second half, Connecticut guard Kelly Faris hit a free throw that would have ended Notre Dame's season. With the Irish down two points, Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins received the inbound pass, took it coast-to-coast, and missed a layup, a miss that would have ended Notre Dame's season. Struggling through defenders, senior guard Natalie Novosel recovered the miss and sent the game to overtime, keeping Notre Dame's season alive.

Behind two key three-pointers from graduate student guard Brittany Mallory and some clutch free throw shooting, Notre Dame (35-3) dominated the overtime period to advance to the national championship game for the second time in two years, winning 83-75.

"[The win] means so much for our program, our team, our fans," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "It's so great for Notre Dame and I'm so blessed to be representing such a great school."

Early in the contest, Connecticut (33-5) got everything

it wanted on the offensive end. Sophomore center Stefanie Dolson overpowered Notre Dame's post players, sliding off ball screens and knocking down layups. The Huskies also repeatedly beat the Irish on backdoor cuts to take command of the contest.

Momentum swung early in the second half when Dolson was whistled for her fourth foul only three minutes into the period, forcing her to sit the majority of the half. She finished with a team-high 20 points and nine rebounds.

"She really played well," McGraw said. "We were really happy when she got that third foul and had to out of the game because we were having trouble guarding her."

Even with Dolson on the bench, the Irish failed to pull away from the Huskies, and Connecticut stayed within striking distance the entire game. In a frantic final 90 seconds of regulation, Notre Dame almost gave the game away.

"We really struggled to take care of the ball with a couple

of big turnovers at the end of regulation," McGraw said. "But we really kept our poise [in overtime] and did a better job."

Novosel was the hero in regulation, and Mallory was the hero in overtime. The graduate student sharpshooter scored seven points in the extra five minutes and carried the Irish with her calm demeanor.

"It's so great for Notre Dame and I'm so blessed to be representing such a great school"

**Muffet McGraw
Irish coach**

"We didn't want this to be our last game," Mallory said. "We were tired and we fought. I'm just so proud of this team."

Four players for the Irish scored in double figures. Novosel led the charge with 20 points and seven rebounds. Diggins scored 19 points, and

graduate student forward Devereaux Peters added 17 points and a game-high 12 rebounds. Sophomores Kayla McBride and Natalie Achonwa each added eight points.

Overcoming the disadvantage she faced in the post with an opponent three inches taller than her, Peters controlled the glass. As a team, the Irish pulled down 20 offensive rebounds.

"The rebounding was really important," Peters said. "I think the guards came in and crashed, tipped some balls and got real key rebounds towards the end of the game."

McGraw complimented her team's heart in not

letting the late comeback by the Huskies faze them and answering with a big performance in overtime.

"They just don't quit," McGraw said. "They just keep on going. They have the maturity, the poise, and that calm, that calm that Brittany [Mallory]

brings."

For their part, the Notre Dame players made it clear they play for their coach.

"We play this game for her," Diggins said. "And this team, we want to get it. We're hungry. We told her at the beginning of the game: We didn't have you in the last game in the Big East tournament; we're going to have you this time."

Diggins said the win in the national semifinal was even more gratifying coming over conference rival Connecticut.

"I think it's great for the Big East," Diggins said. "Two straight years, two Final Four teams ... But this is great. Yes, it's that much sweeter because it's UConn."

Notre Dame is now 3-0 all-time in national semifinals against the Huskies. The Irish knocked off Connecticut to advance to the title game last year, as well as in 2001's Final Four en route to a national crown.

The Irish will face Baylor in the national championship game at 8:30 p.m. Tuesday. The game will be aired on ESPN.

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By the numbers

- 3
- Notre Dame pulled away from the Huskies in overtime on the strength of three 3-pointers, including a duo of shots from graduate student guard Brittany Mallory from beyond the arc.
- 8
- Connecticut and the Irish have played eight games in the last 14 months. The Irish have won four of the last five games, with two of those wins coming in the Final Four.
- 16
- After falling behind by three early in the overtime period, Notre Dame scored 16 points to put distance between itself and Connecticut. Mallory's two 3-pointers put the Irish up for good.
- 7
- With the victory, Notre Dame is now 7-0 on the year in games played at neutral sites. The Irish took a pair of games in the Bahamas during the regular season before the five postseason games.
- 55
- Connecticut led by three at halftime on the strength of a 55 percent shooting performance in the opening frame. Huskies forward Stefanie Dolson controlled the paint in the early going.
- 52
- Dolson's size advantage over Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters manifested itself in the form of a 52-34 advantage in points in the paint. Dolson led UConn with 20 points.
- 8
- Notre Dame is now a perfect 8-0 in its alternate home jerseys, featuring a green trim on white background. The Irish wore green jerseys in last season's national championship.
- 11
- Getting out in transition was kind to Notre Dame, as the Irish notched 11 fast-break points. The Huskies slowed down play, scoring only two points in transition.
- 4
- Mallory missed her first four attempts from three-point territory before connecting on back-to-back attempts in overtime.
- 6
- The Irish led the Huskies by six points with 2:52 left in regulation before squandering the advantage in a frantic final few minutes of play.



Check out the Observer Live Blog during Tuesday night's championship game starting at 8:30 p.m.
ndsmcobserver.com



Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins looks on as graduate student forward Devereaux Peters celebrates in the final moments of Notre Dame's 83-75 win over Connecticut. Notre Dame finished the year 3-1 against UConn.

Beating UConn makes win even sweeter

DENVER — Skylar Diggins jumped into Devereaux Peters' arms, Muffet McGraw pumped her first and the other team cried. The script couldn't have been more perfect if McGraw had written it herself.

Well, maybe she would have taken out the 8-0 Huskies run over the final three minutes of regulation to put the Huskies ahead by two. Or perhaps Notre Dame's inability to put the game out of reach when Stephanie Dolson picked up her fourth foul and headed to the bench with over 17 minutes to go. But that's why she's a head coach and not a director, and judging by Notre Dame's thrilling 83-75 victory over Connecticut in the national semifinals, she's one of the nation's best.

With the win, McGraw has now outdueled Geno Auriemma in four of the team's last five meetings and became the only coach to take down the Huskies in three national semifinals in all three tries.

This victory can be boiled down to a pair of coaching decisions made in the final minutes.



Chris Masoud
Senior Sports Writer

Auriemma, concerned with his team's ability to move on top of Notre Dame's screen, subbed out 6-foot-3 center Kiah Stokes in favor of the quicker guard Caroline Doty. Helped by her coaching staff, McGraw avoided the temptation of ripping into her team in the game's final timeout, opting instead to deliver a positive message and an offensive set.

When the Huskies pulled ahead by two with 11 seconds remaining on a pair of free throws, the Irish remained poised. With no timeouts remaining, Diggins ran the length of the court and missed a layup at close range. But senior guard Natalie Novosel outrebounded the Connecticut frontcourt, laying it up to send the game to overtime with three seconds left on the clock.

Diggins and Brittany Mallory took care of the rest, lifting Notre Dame in overtime with a combined three 3-pointers and limiting UConn to just eight points.

These teams don't like each other, and whether or not the referees realized it, eating their whistles only made things chipper. After the game, Peters said beating the Huskies in the Final Four made it that much sweeter.

Of course it did. After losing to Connecticut in eight straight contests during their first four seasons, Mallory and Peters are doing their best to exact some form of revenge. That's a dish best served in the Final Four on

the sport's biggest stage.

It should come to no surprise then that the two played their best games of the tournament, with Peters battling Dolson in the post and Mallory hitting clutch 3-pointers in overtime. More importantly, their composure trickled down to the rest of the team, even to Diggins.

The sheer pressure of returning to the national championship is difficult to grasp.

After falling to Texas A&M last season, Notre Dame said all the right things about using that loss as motivation to work harder in the offseason.

But so does every national champion runner-up.

In recent memory, only Butler actually followed up on that promise.

Maybe that's why Sunday's win feels almost as satisfying as winning a national title. In taking down its biggest rival on the biggest stage, the Irish overcame the pressure of fulfilling the expectations placed upon them since day one by the rest of the world.

The only expectation left to fulfill in Tuesday's national championship is the one they put on themselves.

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

FINAL FOUR PHOTO GALLERY ONLINE AT

NDSMCOBSERVER.COM

Griner leads Baylor past Stanford



Baylor sophomore guard Odyssey Sims and junior center Brittney Griner defend a Stanford drive during Baylor's 59-47 victory against Stanford. Baylor advances to face Notre Dame in Tuesday night's championship game.

By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Sports Writer

DENVER — Stanford forward senior Nnemkadi Ogwumike outscored Baylor center junior Brittney Griner 22 to 13, yet finished as the Cardinal's only scorer in double figures as the Lady Bears advanced to the NCAA title game with a 59-47 victory Sunday night.

Stanford forward and Nnemkadi's sister sophomore Chiney Ogwumike fouled out with 7:58 remaining in the second half, finishing with just four points and four rebounds.

"They have an excellent team. We worked very hard, we prepared really hard, but at the end of the day they outplayed us," Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer said. "They have some great players and an outstanding coach in Kim Mulkey."

Sophomore guard Odyssey Sims directed the Baylor offense from the backcourt, tallying 11 points, four rebounds and three assists. After leading the Cardinal (34-2, 18-0 Pac-12) by just two at the break, the Lady Bears (39-0, 18-0 Big 12) erupted in the second half to outscore Stanford 34-24.

But it was the Baylor defense that stifled the Cardinal into bad shots as the clock wound down,

allowing the Lady Bears to pull away in the second half.

"Having Brittney in the paint completely changes everyone's game, not just the inside players' game. Attacking the basket is a little bit more difficult," Nnemkadi said. "It's not that we were trying to run the clock down, it just kind of happened. Those aren't the shots we want, but I think we tried our best to really compose ourselves on offense."

The Cardinal could not find the bottom of the net from behind the arc, finishing 2-for-17 on the night. Yet they did outscore Baylor 24-16 in the paint, while limiting Griner to just nine rebounds.

"I give credit to Stanford. They're a good team," Griner said. "They always had two people on me or a second defender coming to try to double me, and they stuck with their plan the whole game. You're frustrated when your shot doesn't go in. But you know I had all the confidence in my team. Like coach said, it's not the Brittney Griner show at all."

Senior guard Terran Condrey chipped in 13 points for Baylor, who finished with one less field goal than the Cardinal at 19. What the Lady Bears lacked from the field they made up from the free throw line, knocking down 19 of 26 attempts.

"We'd make one pass and play right into Stanford's hands and shoot the first shot that was open. All you've got to do is reverse the ball, be patient, let Griner still get touches," Mulkey said. "But you know, Griner does what she does. She draws a lot of attention, and we're not a one-dimensional team. Brittney Griner is the face of women's basketball right now."

Baylor's victory sets up a national championship matchup with Notre Dame, 83-75 winners in the other national semifinal contest against Connecticut. Baylor defeated the Irish 94-81 on Nov. 20 in Waco, Texas.

Nnemkadi, who played with several Notre Dame starters on Team USA in the Women's World University Games last summer, said the rematch could be a tightly-played affair.

"[Notre Dame] may not have the size, but I think Devereaux is one of the best post players I've played with [on Team USA], and Kayla McBride is a brute," she said. "You have Natalie Novosel, Brittany Mallory and obviously Natalie Achonwa and everyone that comes off the bench. I think it's going to be a great matchup on Tuesday."

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NOTES

Irish improve to 11-0 as top seed

By MATTHEW ROBISON
Sports Writer

DENVER — Notre Dame is now 11-0 in the NCAA Tournament as a No. 1 seed.

"I am just so proud of our team right now," McGraw said. "At the end of regulation we had the game won with about 1:13 to go, and we simply gave it back to them."

Back with a vengeance

The Irish advance to the national championship game for the second straight year. Last season, Notre Dame lost to Texas A&M in the title game.

"I don't think we've ever had a group like this," McGraw said. "They take such ownership. We play for each other. I want them to experience a na-

tional championship."

Conquering the Huskies

Notre Dame went 3-1 against Connecticut this year. The Irish beat the Huskies twice during the regular season but lost in the Big East championship game.

"It's great getting to the championship game and it's the exact thing that happened last year," Mallory said. "But we've had a battle with them all year. We played them three times before this game. And they won the last game that we had, that we faced each other."

Semifinal success

Notre Dame is now 3-0 all-time against Connecticut in national semifinals. The Irish beat the Huskies in

2011 as well as in 2001 en route to a national championship.

"I don't really look at it that way because it's over such a long span of time and they're a program that's here so often," McGraw said. "It's nice to be able to be a team that can actually beat them here."

Stealing a victory

The Irish recorded 14 steals Sunday. Notre Dame has recorded a double-digit steals total 29 times this season.

"At the end I think our defense kind of led to our offense," Peters said. "We got a couple steals, got out in transition, got some points. And it was good for us to get our momentum going."

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Back to the big game

The Irish prevailed 83-75 in a back-and-forth contest in the first of two national semifinal games in Denver. Despite only scoring four points in regulation, Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory hit two 3-pointers in the overtime period to put Notre Dame ahead for good. Notre Dame will play Baylor in the national championship game on Tuesday at 8:30 p.m.



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Clockwise from top: Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins inboundes the ball; graduate student forward Devereaux Peters contests a shot; senior guard Natalie Novosel leaves the court after the overtime win; Novosel loses her headband during a contested play; Diggins drives on Connecticut guard Caroline Doty.