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FEARLESS

Muffet McGraw and No. 1 seed Notre Dame won't let up in pursuit of their sixth straight Final Four

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Susan Zhu and Michael Yu

COMMENTARY

Season a success regardless of end



Daniel O'Boyle
Sports Writer

Four conference tournament championships, going back to 2013. Five conference regular season championships, going back to 2012. Five consecutive Final Fours, going back to 2011. Yet no national title since 2001.

Every year, as the tournament approaches, the same question is asked: What makes this Irish team different to all the others? Why is this team the one that will bring Notre Dame back to the very top?

This Irish team is definitely different to the team that lost to Connecticut last year. But does it look any more likely to overcome the final hurdle? Probably not.

Anyone looking for ways this team sets itself apart from last year has plenty of starting points. Brianna Turner continues to get better as the season goes on; Lindsay Allen has taken another step up in running the floor; there are seven players who could lead the team in scoring on any night; players have stepped up into bigger roles with confidence; and even more than ever, this looks like a team that fights for absolutely everything.

But Turner's improvement is because she's recovering from a shoulder injury, one that could have ended her season and one that kept her back from being even more dominant. Allen has been fantastic, but a pre-season injury to her backup, freshman Ali Patberg, has left the junior as the only real viable option at point guard and ended any hopes of trying Allen in some new looks. The way Notre Dame has replaced the points provided by Jewell Loyd has been nothing short of exceptional, but there is no team that wouldn't feel some sort of loss without a player of Loyd's caliber. The Irish didn't miss a beat when Taya Reimer left the team early on in the season, but it couldn't have been anything other than a challenge.

The team has drive, but it takes more than drive to win a championship. It takes talent, and the Irish right now just don't look more talented than they were a year ago. When Irish head coach Muffet McGraw described her 2015-16 squad as "probably not the most

talented team we've had in the past five years," it certainly wasn't meant as a slight against them, but when you consider all that this team has been through, it's impressive the Irish have already achieved so much between the regular season and the ACC tournament.

Think back to nearly four months ago and over 1,100 miles away from South Bend, when the Irish faced UCLA in the Bahamas. Brianna Turner had just injured her shoulder and faced the possibility of surgery that would rule her out for the remainder of the season. Without their star player, the Irish fought through an overtime contest with the Bruins, as Madison Cable guided Notre Dame to victory.

Things could have gone another way. One bad bounce and maybe the Irish lose. Next up would be a strong Ohio State team, which the Irish beat, 75-72, and the Connecticut team that was the only team to beat Notre Dame this season. DePaul and Oregon State would present further challenges to the Irish before they even faced their first ACC opponent, with Reimer announcing she would leave the team shortly after the Irish faced the Blue Demons.

It's easy to imagine a version of this year in which the Irish entering conference play without Turner and with four losses, including a defeat against UConn that was more comprehensive than the 91-81 game they played in reality.

Irish hopes of a second national title could have been put to a halt by an injury on Thanksgiving in the Caribbean. Instead, McGraw's team enters the tournament as the third overall seed. This Notre Dame team might not be the best equipped Irish squad to go all the way, but it's not out of the question.

If Notre Dame ends yet another great season without winning it all, you could reflect on this year as another disappointment. But with the hurdles the Irish have overcome, the 2015-16 season should be a success no matter what.

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

Cable, freshmen provide unexpected boosts for Irish

By **BEN PADANILAM**
Associate Sports Editor

Coming into the season, Notre Dame knew it would be without Jewell Loyd, who skipped her senior season to declare for the WNBA draft.

What it did not expect was to lose one of its top recruits, freshman guard Ali Patberg, to a torn ACL prior to the start of the season or to have junior forward Taya Reimer leave the team just nine games into the season. Depth was becoming an immediate concern for the Irish, especially as star sophomore forward Brianna Turner faced a potential season-ending shoulder surgery.

But before long, the offense was running like a well-oiled machine, and Turner was back manning the paint on both sides of the court for the Irish. It was as if the concerns had never existed — and perhaps they never had, at least for the players. Graduate student guard Madison Cable said she thinks the team's abundance of leadership kept them rolling despite the adversity they faced early on.

"I just try to set the best example I can for everyone else on the team," Cable said. "Luckily, there's a lot of other great leaders on the team. That's [one] reason why we're so good. It's not just a one-person thing, everyone plays a role and I think that's why we're good."

Cable has been one of the largest contributors to Notre Dame's success this season. After starting just six games last season and finishing as the team's seventh-leading scorer, Cable has stepped into the role of everyday starter this year and thrived. She currently leads the Irish in steals, 3-pointers made and 3-point shooting percentage, while also being second on the team in scoring average and rebounds.

Not one to take credit for her success, Cable said the team and staff have made the transition into this new role easy for her.

"I think it's a really easy transition when you look at who else is on the team," Cable said. "The coaches were really good about it, the players are amazing. It makes playing easy when everyone is very unselfish, and we just all have the same goal. We just want to win, so it was a good transition."

But Cable's teammates

believe she's more than deserving of the praise.

"It was huge for Madison to come back this season," junior guard Lindsay Allen said. "She's always been kind of that player that provided the clutch plays for us, and now she's the second leading scorer on the team. She provides that boost, and she stills does the little plays like rebounding, taking charges, getting on the floor, but she's just that steady player, and we can always count on her to provide whatever we need for the team."

The confidence Cable's teammates have in her has allowed the Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, native to develop that confidence in herself.

"I just focused on being confident and not being afraid to take more shots and do a little bit more for the team," Cable said. "I play a little bit more this year, so I couldn't be afraid to do anything."

While Cable has stepped into a leadership role for the team, she has not been the only player to step up for the Irish when they needed it most. Freshman guards Arike Ogunbowale and Marina Mabrey both have contributed in a way the Irish have only seen once in the last 10 seasons: providing the team with double-digit scoring off the bench.

Ogunbowale and Mabrey currently rank third and fourth, respectively, on the team in scoring average. In fact, Ogunbowale has led the Irish in scoring in seven games this season, while Mabrey has led the way in six, including a career-high 23 against Connecticut. Both players have shown tenacity and confidence on the court since day one, offering the Irish crucial offensive sparks off the bench, Allen said.

"Coming in as freshman, they're just fearless," Allen

said. "They're relentless. They come in the game and they're looking for their shot. They're always just being really aggressive on offense off the bench, and that's been really key for us."

While both have been effective as scorers, their styles have contrasted quite a bit. Ogunbowale is aggressive and creates her own shot, as she leads the team in shots and free throws made. Mabrey, meanwhile, is a patient scorer who finds opportunities within the offense, as she ranks second on the team in 3-point shooting percentage and is fourth in field goal percentage. Their contrasting styles complement each other well and pose problems for defense as it gives the Irish offense variety when they are in the game, Cable said.

"Arike and Marina have both been huge for us this year," Cable said. "They come in and they both play a little bit different, but they've both been huge in many games this year. They're gonna be huge for us in the next tournament games, too, so I'm really looking forward to seeing what they can do."

As the season has progressed, each player has settled into her role on the team and enabled the team to thrive, Cable said. As the Irish look forward to the tournament, their goal to win remains the same, and they expect to continue to do what they've done all year long.

"Everyone knows their role, and everyone plays their role really well," Cable said. "We faced a lot of adversity this year, but like I said before, we all had the same goal and we all just want to win, so that's kind of what we've done all year."

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Nothing but the best

McGraw adds to legendary résumé by demanding the most from players, coaches and herself

By **MARY GREEN**
Senior Sports Writer

The procession starts the same way before each and every game at Purcell Pavilion.

Before introductions and starting lineups, while the players are still wearing their warmups and taking last-minute shots and fans are getting settled in their seats, the video is cued.

Images and sounds from Notre Dame's biggest moments flash across the screen, proud moments for the Irish faithful and admonitions to visiting teams, reminders of the five Final Four trips in the last five years, of legends of years past — Riley, Ivey, Diggins, et al. — and, of course, of the 2001 championship.

Like clockwork, the legions of fans inside Purcell hear the background anthem — technically called “Heroes of War,” but more aptly understood as the Entrance Song — and look to the screen, waiting for the time when they rise to their feet in a standing ovation as she steps out from the tunnel and walks around the perimeter of the court, with her assistants following her, step by step, to the home bench.

No matter how many All-Americans are in her lineup, she's the one to always receive the loudest, most thunderous applause right before tipoff, the type of applause 29 years of fruitful leadership will bring.

Make no mistake about it: Muffet McGraw is the face, heart and soul of this Notre Dame program, and this is where she rules.

♦♦♦♦

If nothing else, Muffet McGraw demands respect.

Her careers stats alone are enough to tell you that: She's one of five coaches in the history of college basketball, women's and men's, to have at least seven trips to the Final Four, five championship game appearances and 800 wins under her belt.

The others? Tennessee's Pat Summitt, Connecticut's Geno Auriemma, Duke's Mike Krzyzewski and North Carolina's Dean Smith — legends, all five of them, to say the least.

McGraw joined that club Jan. 3 of this year, when she collected win No. 800 against Pittsburgh, and she enters the NCAA tournament with that tally now up to 818 and counting.

She's a member of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 2011 and the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 2014 and was named a first-time finalist for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in February.

McGraw has 12 major national coach of the year awards on her shelf, having swept all four majors in two of the past three seasons, and was most recently announced as a finalist for the Naismith College Coach of the Year Award on Wednesday.

Her head coaching position was the first in Notre Dame athletics history to be endowed — yes, even before football — when Karen and Kevin Keyes, one of McGraw's former point guards and her husband, gifted the University with \$5 million last year.

But numbers and accolades alone don't speak to who McGraw is.

Fearless. Demanding. Intense. It's how her players, past and present, describe the Philadelphian.

Count them on the long and growing list of her many admirers.

“She's so detail-oriented,” Irish associate coach Niele Ivey said. “She works so hard, and she's such a perfectionist, so I think that's probably the most challenging and the most rewarding part. It's the same thing because you have to make sure, scouting-wise, you know everything, and you're preparing her. I learned right from the beginning.

“I've learned so much from her, just being a perfectionist. So I guess

that's the best of both worlds, to be so detail-oriented like she is. That's been the most challenging part, but I think that's the part I've learned so much of from her about it. She works so hard, it makes you want to work hard.”

Ivey and associate coach Beth Cunningham both played under McGraw — Ivey from 1996 to 2001 and Cunningham, the former Beth Morgan, from 1993 to 1997 — before returning to South Bend to coach alongside her.

The two former players are part of a strong coaching tree McGraw has cultivated in her time at Notre Dame, a group that includes current head coaches Kevin McGuff of Ohio State, George Washington's Jonathan Tsipis, Bill Fennelly of Iowa State and Penn State's Coquese Washington, another former player at Notre Dame. Added to that is current Irish associate head coach Carol Owens, who has been at McGraw's side for 16 total seasons.

Ivey said she was flattered when McGraw called her to ask about returning to South Bend.

“It was an honor, and my kind of livelihood just shifted to being a coach, and I thought that the best opportunity I could ever have would be to work under her back at my alma mater for my first job,” she said.

Ivey added she gained even more respect for her former coach when she joined McGraw's staff in 2007.

“I just saw a whole different side because as a player, you don't really realize how much goes into coaching: the behind-the-scenes, the scouting, the recruiting, so much time. I had so much respect,” she said. “I called and thanked all my coaches because I know how much goes into that.

“She's basically the same. She's so intense. I think she does a fantastic job of basically kind of changing the way she coaches with the generation of kids because the generation back when I was playing is

totally different from this generation, so I think she does an amazing job of adapting to the different types of kids she recruits.”

A big part of getting those players to go to Notre Dame rests on Ivey's shoulders as recruiting coordinator, but she said at the end of the day, it's a pitch that really sells itself.

“Sometimes, I'm like, this is so easy!” Ivey said. “Sometimes I listen to her speeches, and I'm like, I want to come play for her again. What she's done is so amazing, and the University of Notre Dame just offers student-athletes so much, that, for me, it's so hard to pass up.”

But once those players get to Notre Dame, it's up to them to live up to McGraw's expectations.

“She's extremely demanding of everybody,” senior guard Michaela Mabrey said. “She tries to get the most out of every single one of her players, and she's gonna do whatever she has to to get that.”

Those expectations in how players conduct themselves in practice and games have yielded talk that might frighten an occasional freshman.

“I heard a few stories — I don't know if we'll call them horror stories — about Coach McGraw,” junior guard Lindsay Allen said with a laugh. “But you really have to experience it yourself because she knows our personalities, so she's different to different people, and she really knows how to get the best out of you and what motivates you, so I think she does a really good job in doing that.”

Allen said McGraw's ability to cater her approach to individual players is one of her strongest features as a coach.

“She's just a brilliant basketball mind, honestly,” she said. “She's a hall-of-fame coach, but she's also really good with handling our personalities and just managing us as young women and making sure we're striving for any goal that we want to reach, whether it's on the basketball court or off the basketball court. So I think she has a really good balance of both.”

With those expectations on their backs, McGraw's teams have earned a berth in the NCAA tournament in each of the past 21 years. For them, the winning culture has become the status quo.

“I think it's probably a good thing,” McGraw said March 8. “I think it's a compliment to us and what we've done, but I hope people appreciate how hard it is. Winning's hard; losing is very easy. Winning takes a lot out of you mentally. ... We're supposed to win every game. Every game we go into we're picked to win, and so we've got to be ready because every single team is giving it their best shot every single game.

“It's the Super Bowl for them, and for us, we've just got to take care of business.”

♦♦♦♦

But there's another side to the intense, businesslike McGraw that not everyone gets to see.

It comes through when a laugh slips out at a joke in practice, when

she congratulates someone after making a big play and even in the signature heels and outfits she sports on the sidelines.

“The best part of playing with her — I really love her outfits. She's very stylish,” sophomore forward Brianna Turner said. Then she added, almost as a side note: “And she's just such a great coach, of course, a hall-of-fame coach. She's just accomplished so much.”

Allen said one of her favorite parts of playing under McGraw has when she's been able to crack her typically serious demeanor.

“I think anytime you can make her laugh, it's probably a really funny joke because she's really serious in practice because it's business and we're trying to get things done, so any time you can make Coach McGraw laugh, that's probably the highlight of your whole year,” she said.

Even when McGraw maintains that demeanor, there's something to be found in those moments.

“She does a lot of funny things on the bench, just watching her when you're sitting on the bench, just her reactions and her heel stomps and crouch is funny,” sophomore forward Kathryn Westbeld said.

McGraw might appear to rarely be fully satisfied with her team's performance — after all, it's a mindset that's gotten her to seven Final Fours and four straight conference championships — but that's not always the case for her players.

“Last year, we were playing Georgia Tech here, and I played terrible the first half, and she was getting on me at halftime, and then the second half, we came out and we came on a big run and I hit a bunch of 3s in a row, and she came to half-court and met me at halfcourt and hugged me,” Mabrey recalled. “I'll just never forget that moment.”

Ivey said McGraw has possessed that ability to switch gears since her own playing days.

“Some of my favorite moments are, honestly, when we would be in practice, and her son, Murphy, would come in from grade school,” Ivey said. “He'd come on the court, and she would totally change from being so intense to just being a loving mother, and I used to always love to see her be able to switch and be able to wear both hats, so that's my favorite moments.”

But from now until the beginning of April, when just one team is left to cut down the nets in Indianapolis, you can count on McGraw wearing one hat — the relentless competitor, never refusing to give up until she and her team reach the top once again.

“It's a whole new season,” McGraw said. “We're 0-0, so we've got to start over, and we've gotta be focused on the first game because once you start looking ahead, I mean, your season could end. You've got to be prepared for every single round.”

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Irish head coach Muffet McGraw high-fives Director of Athletics Jack Swarbrick after Notre Dame's last-second, 66-65 win over South Carolina in the national semifinal April 5 at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Fla.

ND opens tournament atop Lexington region

By **GREG HADLEY**
Senior Sports Writer

For the third straight season, No. 1 seed Notre Dame will have a home-court advantage as it seeks yet another Final Four berth.

As the top seed in the NCAA tournament's Lexington, Kentucky, region, the Irish will host the first and second rounds of the tourney this weekend at Purcell Pavilion, seeking its seventh straight Sweet 16 berth, and for the third straight year, they will face a No. 16 seed to kick things off.

This year's bottom seed is North Carolina A&T, who made the field of 64 after capturing the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) title. The Aggies (19-11, 12-4 MEAC) have won of nine of their last 10 games, but their one mutual opponent with Notre Dame, Ohio State, crushed them earlier in the year, 89-56.

"We've got to be all business when we come on out, and

I'm sure our seniors will take care of that, but we're gonna focus on North Carolina and see what's gonna happen in that game before we even look forward," McGraw said on Selection Monday.

Beyond the first round, the road becomes significantly more difficult for the Irish. They will meet either No. 8 seed Georgia or No. 9 seed Indiana in the second round, both of whom have posted 20-win seasons.

The Bulldogs (21-9, 9-7 SEC) are three seasons removed from an Elite Eight run but missed the tourney last season. Meanwhile, the Hoosiers (20-11, 12-6 Big Ten) are back in the tournament for the first time in 14 years and have become a winning program under head coach Teri Moren, who was named Big Ten Coach of the Year this season.

After the second round, the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight might provide Notre Dame with the most daunting challenges of any No. 1 seed, but McGraw

insisted her team will not allow itself to think too far ahead.

"I think everybody's probably gonna be looking at their bracket and going, 'We're in the toughest region,'" McGraw said. "We're excited to be going to Lexington, but right now, we've got to focus on our first two games. We've got great teams coming in here, and we've got to do the job on them."

Indiana and Georgia have found success this season with wildly different strategies. The Hoosiers boast a top-50 offense and shooting percentage centered around sophomores Tyra Buss (guard) and Amanda Cahill (forward), while the Bulldogs feature a top-20 defense that has limited their opponents to 53.8 points per game this season. In particular, the Bulldogs shut down their opponents from 3-point territory; they rank second in the nation in 3-point percentage defense at 24.2, while the Irish rank second in the NCAA in 3-point percentage.

Starting the tourney within the friendly confines of Purcell Pavilion is an advantage that cannot be overstated, McGraw said.

"I think that the best thing is having our fans at home — more comfort here," McGraw said. "We know this arena. Our fans are gonna make it special for these seniors going out. They want it to be a really great first round."

But even assuming the Irish do advance to the Sweet 16, they will have their hands full.

No. 2 seed Maryland has made the past two Final Fours and won the Big Ten this season. No. 3 Kentucky features three all-SEC players and would be playing on its home court in Lexington. No. 4 Stanford is the last team to beat Connecticut and ranks second in the nation in field goal percentage defense. No. 5 Miami (Fla.) is the only ACC team to beat Notre Dame in the past two years. Even No. 6 Oklahoma has played another No. 1 seed, Baylor, to within 10

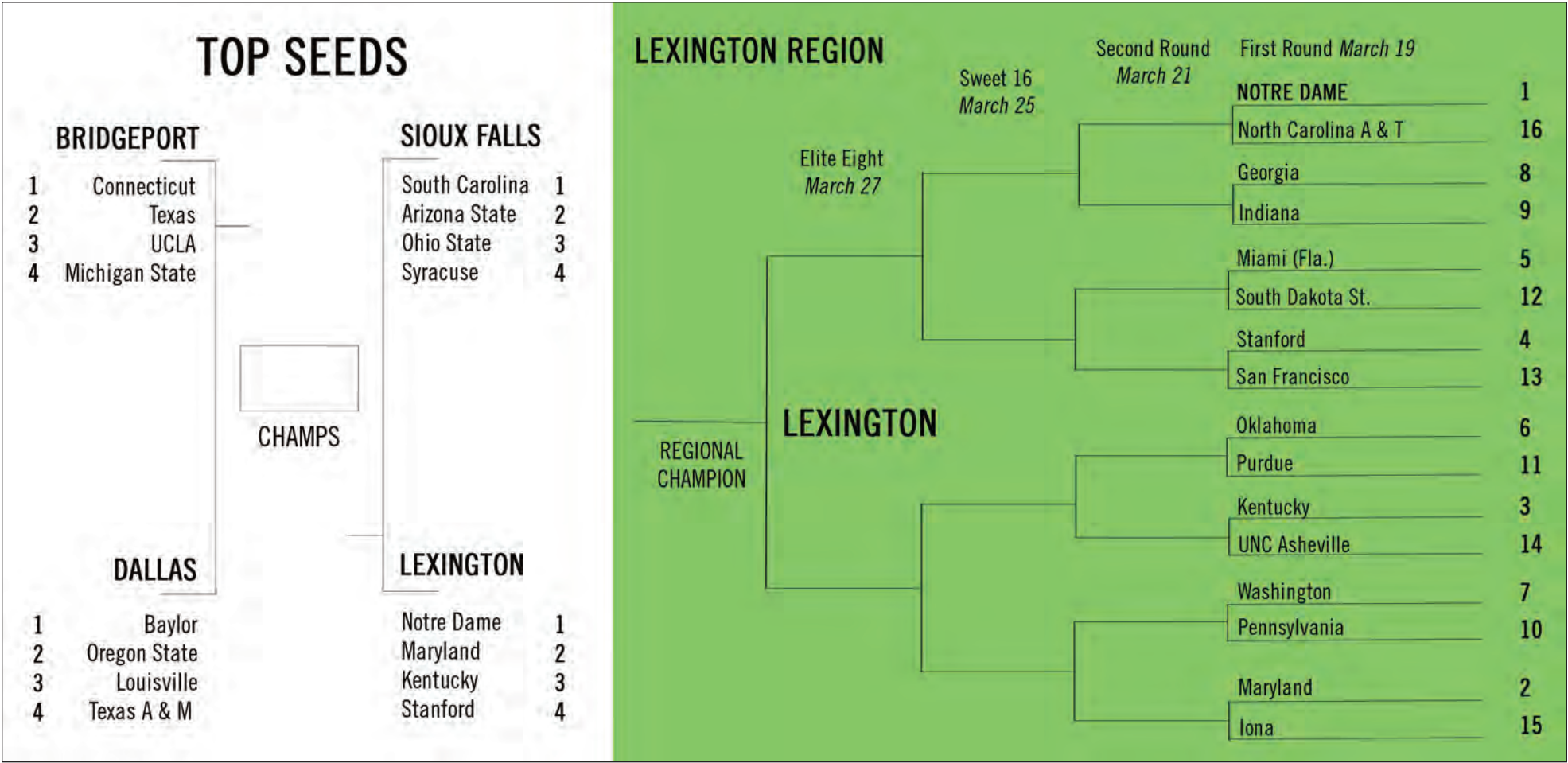
points twice this season.

And of course, even if Notre Dame makes it back to the Final Four, the big question on everyone's minds will be if McGraw's team can finally take down UConn. It's a question she received as soon as the bracket was announced this past Monday.

"I think what we try to do is just play well enough every game to beat the best team on our schedule. And certainly everybody knows who the best team on our schedule is," McGraw responded. "So I think we're trying to do this every single day to prepare for that game."

Before the Irish can play the Huskies, however, they must first get through the Aggies of North Carolina A&T. Tipoff is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Saturday at Purcell Pavilion. Should they win, the Irish would play in the second round Monday.

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Irish, Wolverines renew rivalry in first round

By ALEX CARSON
Assistant Managing Editor

While Irish head coach Mike Brey will embark Friday on his 11th NCAA tournament appearance at Notre Dame, this journey started out differently than the others — because it wasn't until late Wednesday night that the Irish learned precisely who they'd be playing in the first round.

"It is a little unusual that you don't really know your opponent yet," Brey said Sunday following the bracket announcement. "Usually we've turned around, I've left [the media], and we start breaking down one team."

But instead of breaking one team down and preparing for it, Brey got the opportunity to spend three days working on the East Region's No. 6-seeded team: Notre Dame (21-11, 11-7 ACC).

"I told [the team] I think the most important thing about this week is that we have three days of practice on our floor ... to really kind of work on us and get some

reps on us," Brey said.

Of course, after Wednesday's result, Notre Dame now knows its first opponent: No. 11-seeded Michigan in Brooklyn, New York, on Friday at approximately 9:40 p.m.

Unlike the Irish, who finished the season 3-4 in their last seven games, the Wolverines (23-12, 10-8 Big Ten) had to play their way into the tournament. Without a win in the Big Ten tournament over top-seeded Indiana, they would have likely found themselves playing in the NIT this week, and without the 67-62 win over Tulsa on Wednesday in Dayton, Ohio, they would have crashed out before reaching the final 64.

Prior to his season-ending injury, senior guard Caris LeVert led the Wolverines in scoring with 16.5 points per game. Without LeVert, however, junior guard/forward Zak Irvin leads a trio of active Michigan players in double figures.

Notre Dame and Michigan have met 22 times on the

hardwood, with the Wolverines ahead 15-7 in the all-time series. The last meeting between the rivals was an 87-84, double-overtime Michigan victory in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on March 20, 2006.

Playing the winner of a First Four game meant Notre Dame had the opportunity to see its opponent play one last time before Friday's opener, something sophomore forward Bonzie Colson said he saw as a positive.

"We get to watch a game and see what their tendencies are, how they play offense and defense, so we're excited about that," Colson said Sunday.

Though expectations aren't as high for this year's Irish squad as they were last season, Notre Dame lost just two rotation players from that team. And while Pat Connaughton and Jerian Grant were significant departures, it means the core of this year's team has been there and done that.

"I feel like our nucleus knows what it takes to advance, and we're excited about that," Colson

said.

If the Irish move past the first round, they will get a date with either No. 3 seed West Virginia or No. 14 seed Stephen F. Austin on Sunday, with a spot in the Sweet 16 on the line.

The style employed by West Virginia head coach Bob Huggins is best described by his squad's nickname, "Press Virginia." The Mountaineers (26-8, 15-7 Big XII) heavily utilize the press on defense, forcing a turnover on 25.5 percent of possessions, good for second in the nation.

The only team in the country that forces turnovers more frequently? Stephen F. Austin (27-5, 18-0 Southland). The Lumberjacks once more enter the tournament on a tear — they've won 20 straight games — reminiscent of their 2014 team that upset No. 5 seed Virginia Commonwealth in its opening game.

A pair of wins at Brooklyn's Barclays Center would advance Notre Dame to the Sweet 16 in Philadelphia, where No. 2-seeded

Xavier would be the most likely opponent. The other side of the East Region's bracket is littered with squads the Irish have recent history against: Notre Dame split a season series with No. 1-seeded North Carolina, lost in December to No. 5-seeded Indiana and ended its season last year with a 68-66 defeat to No. 4-seeded Kentucky in the Elite Eight.

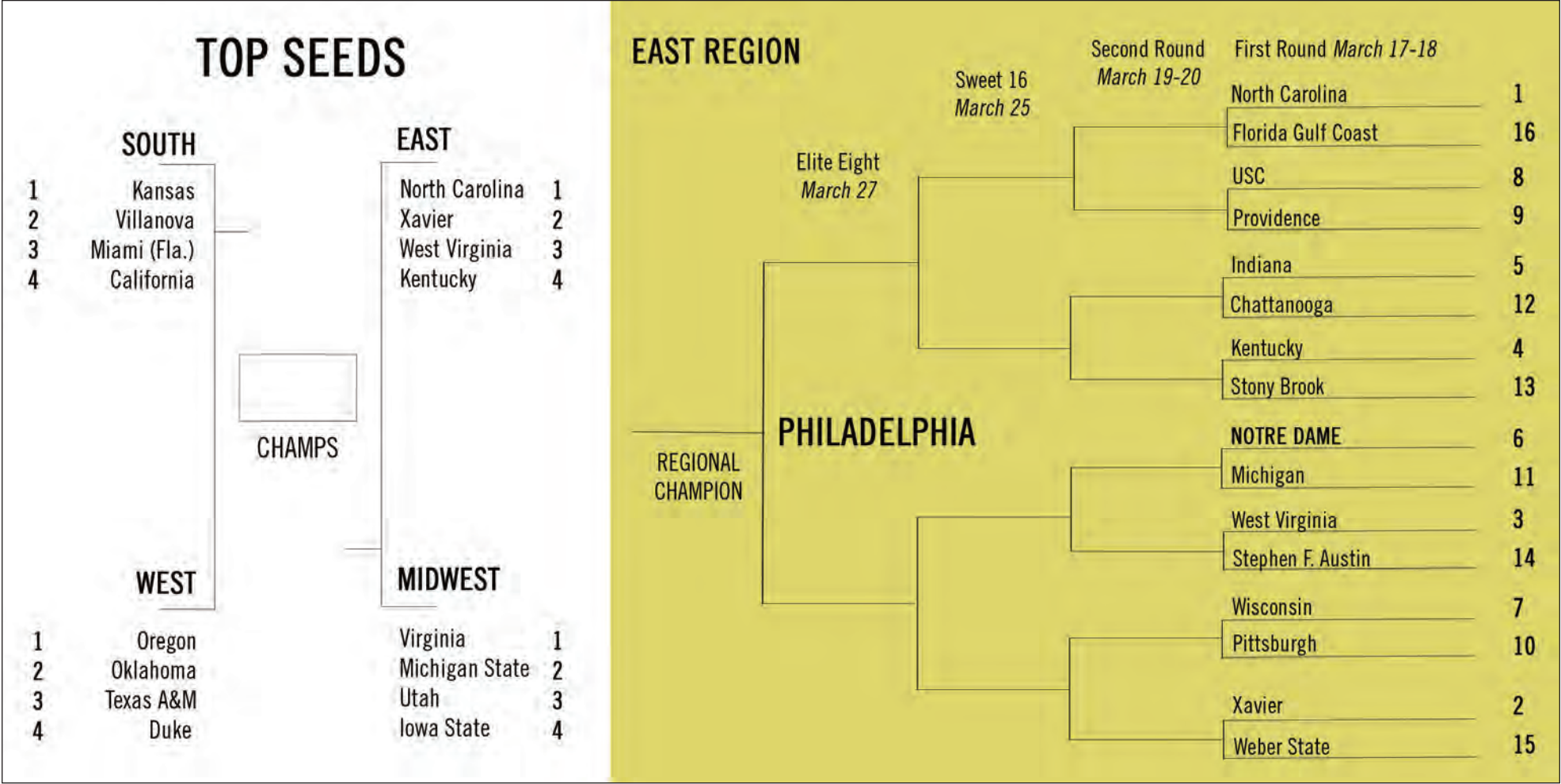
But Brey said he isn't looking that far ahead yet.

"You look at a weekend thing," Brey said. "I haven't really looked past [Brooklyn]; I just glanced to see who else was in New York with us."

A return to New York, especially being in the same pod as West Virginia, brings back memories for Brey and Irish fans of trips for Big East tournaments.

"We're thrilled to be in New York," Brey said. "It's a great Notre Dame town; we have great memories of our Big East days, playing and hanging out in the city."

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SUSAN ZHU | The Observer



Alex Carson
Assistant Managing Editor

Throughout the year, we've seen both sides of this Notre Dame team. On one hand, when the Irish are firing on all cylinders, they're capable of beating anyone in the country — that was evident in impressive wins over North Carolina and Louisville.

But I just can't shake the image of the Irish team that, quite frankly, didn't have much success against teams of Michigan's caliber. The early-season losses against Monmouth and Alabama raised concerns, ones that returned when Notre Dame dropped games to Georgia Tech and Florida State last month.

There's no reason the Irish can't make a run to the second weekend. But the inconsistency against lesser teams doesn't bode well.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame loses to Michigan in the first round.



Marek Mazurek
Sports Editor

After a walloping at the hands of North Carolina last Friday, Notre Dame has precious little time to get its act together before a rivalry game against Michigan.

But Mike Brey will have his team ready for the Wolverines. The Irish will find a way to fix their turnover issues and Zach Auguste should dominate Michigan's frontcourt. Michigan shot 6-of-25 from deep against Tulsa on Wednesday night and if the Wolverines' cold streak continues, the Irish will advance.

However, the Irish will not make it much farther. They will likely get West Virginia in the second round and the Mountaineers will send the Irish packing.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame loses to West Virginia in the second round.



Brian Plamondon
Sports Writer

While Notre Dame should handle a Michigan team that was a questionable tournament team at best, don't be so certain.

The Irish haven't been playing their best basketball as of late, and every year since the First Four began, the late night Wednesday game winner has won its next game.

But in the end, the Irish should slide by in that contest. The next round Notre Dame should face a veteran West Virginia squad with its signature press that ranks second in defensive turnover percentage.

That will be enough to doom the turnover-prone Irish. If Notre Dame somehow sneaks by the Mountaineers, it could manage to make another run due to an overseeded Xavier in its region.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame loses to West Virginia in the second round.



Manny De Jesus
Sports Writer

Notre Dame's success in the tournament rests in the hands of the backcourt.

When Demetrius Jackson and Steve Vasturia play well, the Irish have one of the most potent offenses in the country. When they both struggle, Notre Dame looks just like it did two years ago, when it went 15-17, and can lose to anyone in the field.

The Irish were given a favorable first-round matchup against Michigan, which gives them one final chance to piece the puzzle together before playing much more formidable opponents.

However, I don't see Notre Dame putting it all together in time for West Virginia's pesky press defense.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame loses to West Virginia in the second round.

Finding a rhythm

Notre Dame's backcourt knows it must solve the squad's recent turnover issues as tournament play commences

By **BRIAN PLAMONDON**
Sports Writer

When the Irish gathered in the locker room after the NCAA tournament selection show Sunday night, they answered the usual questions about how excited they were and what they knew about their potential opponents.

But they also answered much harder questions related to performance: What has been the cause of the team's recent turnover struggles? Why have they gotten off to such slow starts? What clicked during the 10-game stretch where the Irish went 8-2 during the heart of their ACC slate that isn't now?

All things considered, this Notre Dame team is not like last season's 32-6 squad that was one basket away from the Final Four. At 21-11, this team has its own identity; one riddled with immense talent, strong leadership and a host of inconsistencies along the way.

And Irish head coach Mike Brey is okay with that, ready to forget about the ups and downs of the season and focus only on what his team can control: what's ahead of it.

"I think for us, you probably tear up the stats sheet of the regular season — obviously, there are some good stats in there and there are some not so good stats — and say, 'Complete clean slate,'" Brey said Sunday.

A good portion of Brey's disposing of statistics might have to do with his team's performance in Washington last week at the ACC tournament, where the Irish won a thrilling overtime game over perennial power Duke before falling flat a night later against North Carolina, a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament.

"We got beat good by a heck of a team, but we won a great one down there too," Brey said. "We won a thrilling one down there and showed some real March grit. I thought we ran into a buzzsaw against maybe the best team in the tournament, so we're not going to really dwell on that. Just because we didn't have a trophy at the selection show up there like last year doesn't mean we don't feel like we can get going a little bit."

In order to get going, however, Notre Dame will have to stop turning the ball over. While they still rank fifth best in the country, averaging only 9.72 turnovers per game, the Irish turned it over 18 times against Duke and 17 times against North Carolina.

"There's no secret formula, it's just about handling the ball," junior guard Demetrius Jackson, who turned it over seven times in the two games in Washington, said.

While pundits have consistently referenced Notre Dame's defensive woes all season, the turnover problem is troublesome because it not only has happened so recently — as part of a stretch where

the Irish have gone a mere 3-4 — but because it also has affected Jackson and junior guard Steve Vasturia, a duo that many consider to be one of the best backcourts in all of college basketball.

"That's a conversation that Steve and I have had, just being better," Jackson said. "It just comes down to really taking care of [the ball], being sharp, paying attention to detail, so it's really going to start with us, the two lead guards handling the ball most of the time. So we have to set the tone, set the example for the rest of the group."

"I think our backcourt needs to play better, there's no question," Brey said. "We're so reliant on those guys and we're not a six seed without what we got out of our guards' body of work this year and I don't have to bring up anything with them. Those two guys are really hard on themselves. For us to advance, our guards are going to have to find that rhythm that they had really most of this season."

That rhythm and backcourt combination contributed to Notre Dame having a few key stretches earlier this season.

In January, the Irish won four conference games in a row, including an impressive road win at Duke's Cameron Indoor Stadium. Just a few weeks later, Notre Dame downed North Carolina, Clemson and Louisville in succession, prompting a discussion about the Irish chasing the ACC regular-season title. Jackson and Vasturia were key in those big games, with the former scoring 24 and 27 against Duke and Louisville, respectively, and the latter adding 22 and 20.

Since then?

The Irish have struggled, losing to Georgia Tech and getting blown out by a middling Florida State team before their recent up-and-down run in the ACC tournament.

Part of the problem may stem from long cold stretches, particularly in the final few minutes before the half. That hurt the Irish against Florida State and Miami late in the season, and was exacerbated in the ACC tournament against Duke and North Carolina.

"The game situation we will do [in practice] is four minutes left, end of half," Brey said Sunday. "Because we did not handle end of halves well. We were fortunate enough to come back and win the Duke game, but we could not recover in the North Carolina game — and it was a rash of turnovers that were, I thought, very out of character."

Another issue may stem from Notre Dame just not scoring like it used to. After spending a good portion of the season ranked first in Ken Pomeroy's Adjusted Offensive Efficiency metric (an estimate of the points scored per 100 possessions a team would have against the average D-1 defense), the Irish have slipped to 10th in recent weeks. While Jackson and Vasturia know a lot of the offense rides on them, Brey said he doesn't want to

over-coach and wants them to be as loose as possible.

"The thing with [Jackson] all year — it's no different now — is just trying to take the weight of the world off him and have him smile a little bit," Brey said.

Vasturia, who is shooting just 11-of-43 from the field and 1-for-16 from 3-point range over his last five games, admits he has been struggling.

"For me, I just want to help this team win games," Vasturia said. "Just knocking down shots and staying aggressive."

If the Irish do want to win games in the NCAA tournament, they will have to clean up their act. If Notre Dame takes care of Michigan, it will have to face one of the top two teams in the country in defensive turnover percentage: No. 14-seeded Stephen F. Austin and No. 3-seeded West Virginia are first and second respectively in that category.

No matter the opponents along the road, the Irish will look to follow Brey's advice and tear up the stat sheet, sport a short memory and just play their game.

"Mistakes do happen, it's not a perfect game," Jackson said. "How quick can you bounce back from that?"

The Irish will soon find out.

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KATHLEEN DONAHUE | The Observer

Irish junior guard Demetrius Jackson brings the ball up the court during Notre Dame's 68-50 loss to Miami (Fla.) on March 2.

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Auguste drives Irish into postseason play



KATHLEEN DONAHUE | The Observer

Irish senior forward Zach Auguste looks to score a basket during Notre Dame's 68-50 loss to Miami (Fla.) on March 2 at Purcell Pavilion. Auguste is among the national leaders in double-doubles with 19.

By MANNY DE JESUS

Sports Writer

It's easy to overlook Zach Auguste. Surrounded by NBA talent throughout his four years at Notre Dame, it can be easy to forget how essential the Marlborough, Massachusetts, native is to the Irish.

Jerian Grant. Pat Connaughton. Demetrius Jackson.

Those are some of the names that quickly come to mind when thinking about the recent history of Notre Dame basketball. But over these last four years, Auguste has quietly made a name for himself. From sitting behind Garrick Sherman and Tom Knight his freshman year, Auguste has grown into one of the ACC's best big men.

In the ACC quarterfinal matchup against Duke, it was almost impossible to look past Auguste's performance.

Down by 16 points in the second half, it looked as if the defending ACC champions were on their way out of the conference tournament. A sudden 14-0 run flipped the script for the Irish, which put them right back into the contest and eventually forced it to go to overtime. And it took a total team effort to walk away from the quarterfinals with a win: Junior forward V.J. Beachem scored 19 points, which included four critical 3-pointers, sophomore forward Bonzie Colson hauled in 12 boards and added another 12 points and even freshman forward Matt Ryan sparked some offense early in the game with three 3-pointers.

But without Auguste, the Irish don't win that game.

He out-rebounded Blue Devils centers Marshall Plumlee and Chase Jeter 22 rebounds to 10 and scored a team-high 19 points. Let's not leave out the fact that of those 22 boards, the 6-foot-10 forward brought down

eight offensive boards, which was four more than any Blue Devil.

Auguste's tremendous performance against Duke wasn't an anomaly. In Notre Dame's pivotal win against North Carolina, the No. 1 seed in the South Region, Auguste recorded 15 points and 10 rebounds. Against then-No. 13 Louisville, he recorded another double-double with 11 points and 12 rebounds. Against Miami, the No. 3 seed in the South Region, he tallied 18 points and 11 rebounds. In his final game at Purcell Pavilion, the senior put up 24 points and hauled in 11 rebounds.

He's 14th in the nation in rebounding, averaging 10.8 rebounds per game, and tied for 12th in double-doubles with 19. There's little debate about whether or not Auguste has truly made a name for himself during his four years at Notre Dame. Despite that, the third-team All ACC forward is still determined to have his name remembered across the country during the upcoming NCAA tournament.

"Individually, I just want to go out there and play the best I can to play and make a name for myself so that I can compete with the best of them," Auguste said. "As a team, we've just gotta continue to play our basketball, take what we learned from last year and use it as a learning experience to try and boost our confidence to really just play deep into March."

In last season's Elite Eight run, Notre Dame was a much different team. Its backcourt was substantially deeper with the leadership of Grant and Connaughton, which spread the court out for Auguste. He scored 25 against Northeastern, 15 against Wichita State and 20 in the two-point loss to a then-undefeated Kentucky squad.

This season, the roster is thinner. Jackson and Vasturia, two of the team's main contributors

in last season's run have struggled lately, and turnovers have made it difficult for the offense to get into the rhythm it did late against Duke in the ACC quarterfinals.

Even with those struggles, Auguste has still managed to play well and has continued to rack up the double-doubles. But he knows just as well as most that it's going to take a team effort if Notre Dame wants to replicate last year's tournament run.

"It really has to start off with the leaders," Auguste said. "Me, Steve and Demetrius. We have to set the tone. Especially me as a senior. I've got to come out there and be consistent. I've got to be that rock for the team, and that's not about just scoring, but being there on the defensive or offensive glass ... and being strong enough to hold out our opponent."

He's been as consistent as he's ever been at Notre Dame. But if the Irish want to make it out of their region, which includes power teams like North Carolina, Xavier, West Virginia and Kentucky, Auguste is likely going to have to play some of the best basketball of his career.

But Irish fans shouldn't put it past a guy who's averaging a double-double this season. It's gone unnoticed by many across the nation, but the senior is a major threat for this Notre Dame team.

"Early on, it was just me trying hard to establish that consistency and now that I've put it together, it's come second nature to me," Auguste said. "Just something that you go out there and do and something - I can't do it every night, but I strive for that. If we just stick to what we do, we come out hungry, have that edge and have a great start, I think we'll be hard to play."

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COMMENTARY

Which ND team will show up?



Marek Mazurek

Sports Editor

All season long, Notre Dame has been one of the toughest teams to figure out.

The team lost its two best players from last year, Pat Connaughton and Jerian Grant, and looked to enter the 2016 campaign as an average ACC team.

However, led by junior guard Demetrius Jackson, this year's squad refused to fade into obscurity. On Jan. 16, the Irish upset then-No. 9 Duke, a win that was part of a four-game winning streak. Three weeks later, the Irish knocked off then-No. 2 North Carolina and then-No. 13 Louisville before stumbling in losses to Georgia Tech and Florida State.

This stretch of games paints a glaringly clear picture of Notre Dame's NCAA tournament chances: the wins over North Carolina and Louisville prove the Irish have the talent to hang with anyone in the country, but the losses to Florida State and Georgia Tech prove the Irish have problems avoiding playing down to the level of their competition.

And if Notre Dame plays to the level of their competition come Friday, they'll be on the first plane back to South Bend.

The No. 6 seed in the East Region, the Irish will play No. 11-seeded Michigan and this is problematic. When the Irish play teams ranked between 51 and 100 in the Ratings Percentage Index, they're 3-6: Michigan is ranked 57th.

For a team ranked 31st itself, success against average teams should be Notre Dame's bread and butter. Yet that has not been the case this year. Against teams in the top 25, the Irish are a respectable 4-5 and against teams ranked outside the top 100, they are a perfect 13-0. But against run-of-the-mill teams, the Irish lost twice as many games as they won and with a first round matchup against one such team fast approaching, the Irish will have to turn this trend on its head.

Thus, Notre Dame's tournament fate depends on whether

the team comes ready to play.

Just the fact that it is March Madness will not accomplish this. Notre Dame has a bad habit of making early exits in the Big Dance — see 2011, 2012 and 2013. In fact, last year was the first season since 2003 in which the Irish advanced to the Sweet 16.

Furthermore, the team had a chance to chase the regular-season title in the ACC, but faltered against Georgia Tech and Florida State. If making a run at the conference title doesn't get this team to play up to their potential, it's not a given a contest against an old rival will.

Hand in hand with readiness to play is the plague of slow starts the Irish have suffered as of late. Against Miami two weeks ago, the Hurricanes scored the first 12 points and led 21-3 eight minutes into the first half. Against the Tar Heels last Friday, the Irish trailed 41-22 at halftime.

Slow starts kill a team's chances, especially in the NCAA tournament and especially against underdogs. Michigan will come out of the gates hungry and physical and if the Irish don't put them away early, an upset is likely without a Grant to make game-winning plays.

Being prepared is crucial for this squad because when the Irish do decide to play well, they are hard to stop. In the second half of the North Carolina game, Notre Dame put up 50 points on one of the best defensive teams in the country. Should the Irish advance, the combination of senior forward Zach Auguste's presence on the glass and Jackson's ability to drive the ball make this a dangerous team to face.

In the end, this year's NCAA tournament will not come down to strategy or field goal percentage or points in the paint or even mustard uniforms. This March is all about whether or not Mike Brey's team arrives in Brooklyn wanting to win.

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



KATHLEEN DONAHUE | The Observer

Irish junior guard Steve Vasturia drives the lane during Notre Dame's 68-50 loss to Miami (Fla.) at Purcell Pavilion on March 2.

IRISH INSIDER

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SEEKING STABILITY

Demetrius Jackson and the Irish must find their stride to make another tournament run

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Susan Zhu and Kathleen Donahue