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LAST CHANCE TO DANCE

COMMENTARY

South Bend takes on vital role of sixth man

A few weeks ago, a cookie cake at the Mishawaka Meijer caught my eye. It was situated on a shelf with the other generic decorated cakes that said “Happy Birthday,” or just contained a few flowers. This one, right in the middle of the display, was decorated with an orange-frosting basketball. In blue letters, it read:



Laura Myers

Sports Writer

“Go Irish women!”

It was a little surprising to see that the bakery had thought of that particular message to sell a gigantic cookie. But it probably went quickly in this town.

A few days ago, two stories in the South Bend Tribune caught my eye. Both were short staff reports containing news about the women’s team. The stories were labeled as “Notre Dame basketball.”

A little searching found a recent story about the men’s team; it was labeled “Notre Dame men’s basketball.”

That one might have just been an oversight, but certainly one indicative of the city-wide relationship with the women’s basketball team.

The Irish are South Bend’s hometown heroes; a team the city has supported all year long, through good times and, well, Connecticut.

It’s only fitting that Notre Dame begins its tournament road at home, as a reward to fans who packed the Purcell Pavilion for every game and sold it out six times.

Prior to this season, the women’s basketball team had six sellouts in its entire history. Now it has 12 and looks to add a 13th Sunday for its first-round game against Cleveland State.

“They’re our sixth man, they’re the fuel to our car to get us going,” said freshman guard Skylar Diggins, a South Bend native responsible in no small part for the city’s love of the team. Many fans have followed her career for years.

Senior guard Melissa Lechlitner, another area native, said the community support has always been strong but was even better this season.

“They are just excited and

enthusiastic about everything,” she said.

It’s fair to say that the Irish football team belongs to alumni, as well as to “subway alumni” and fans all across the country, who are as dedicated as they come.

It’s also fair to say that the men’s basketball team belongs to the students, who proudly wear their Leprechaun Legion t-shirts and pack the arena, chanting cheers specific to each opposing team.

But the women’s basketball team truly belongs to South Bend and the surrounding area. It belongs to grown men and women in neon-green t-shirts who dye their hair, wear funny hats and paint their faces green for game day. They stand up and dance when the band plays the fight song. And after the game, they take their children to Heritage Hall, where they get autographs on anything flat enough for the players to sign.

“Even the last game we played against UConn here [on March 1], we were down what, 15, 20 and they were screaming and cheering like it was a one-point game,” Lechlitner said.

In fact, there was just one moment at that Connecticut game when the crowd was silent: when the announcers were declaring the winner of the “Most Spirited Section” award for the section that had cheered hardest all season long.

The crowd was also quiet for a moment during the Feb. 14 Pink Zone game when the announcer declared that Notre Dame had raised more than \$70,000 for breast cancer research and awareness. The community didn’t stop there, though; the Irish have now toppled \$100,000.

With the exception of those two times, fans have made sure to keep the Purcell Pavilion loud and provided a great atmosphere, creating a home-court advantage that led to a 14-1 home record.

And if the Irish add two more wins to that total this week, South Bend will certainly celebrate — perhaps with some giant cookies — knowing that it helped its favorite team on the march toward the championships.

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

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Irish focused on Vikings

By JARED JEDICK
Senior Staff Writer

The postseason is about to begin for the No. 7 Irish, who earned a No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament and are set to take on No. 15 seed Cleveland State on their home turf in the Purcell Pavilion.

“We had a great season,” Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. “But the second season starts now, and we want to have a great second season.”

The invitation marks the 17th time in school history that Notre Dame (27-5, 12-4 Big East) has been included in the NCAA tournament and is the team’s 15th consecutive appearance.

The Irish were upset by Minnesota in the first round last year, putting an early end to their tournament hopes.

“I think after last year, we’re going to really concentrate on Cleveland State,” McGraw said. “I don’t think there’s any question that this team knows what can happen.”

“Hopefully we’ll play a little better than we did last year if we make it to that second round, because Cleveland State’s a pretty good team too. You know, everyone’s good. And at this time of year, you’ve got nothing to lose, you just go out and play.”

The Irish have the advantage of playing in their home gym for the first two games of the tournament, an advantage not lost on freshman guard Skylar Diggins.

“It is always good to have the crowd on your side, and this crowd is so electric,” Diggins said. “They know that the crowd is not going to be on their side, so they are going to come in and we expect them to come out with a chip on their shoulders.”

The Vikings (19-13, 11-7 Horizon) finished the regular



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Freshman guard Skylar Diggins sends a behind-the-back pass to junior forward Devereaux Peters March 1 against Connecticut.

season fourth in the Horizon League, but managed to put together a run in the conference tournament, defeating favored Butler 66-57 to earn the automatic bid. McGraw said that the Cleveland State might come in with a lot of momentum.

“They are coming off of a win,” McGraw said. “They are coming in with a lot of confidence.”

Cleveland State is led by senior guard Kailey Klein, who paces the team in scoring with 18.6 points and 7.3 rebounds per game.

“Klein is their best player; she is a really good player,” McGraw said. “I think she shot about 168 3s on the season.”

Pairing with Klein is junior guard Shawnita Garland, who posts impressive numbers across the board with 13 points, five rebounds, 3.3 assists and three steals per game.

“They are a much faster-paced team, with those kinds of

screens and cuts that are going to be really hard to guard,” McGraw said.

McGraw said that the team has really been focusing on defense this week, finding ways to cover the Vikings’ fast-paced motion offense.

Beyond working on defense, Notre Dame plans to mix things up in the tournament, developing both its offense and defense to give teams something they have never seen before.

“We’re putting a lot of new wrinkles in, a lot of nuances to the offense, a couple of different looks on defense,” McGraw said. “You can’t do the same thing.”

If the Irish advance, they will play the winner of the match between No. 7-seed Wisconsin (21-10, 10-8 Big East) and No. 10-seed Vermont (26-6, 13-3 America East). That matchup would be Tuesday at the Purcell Pavilion.

Wisconsin and Vermont will tip off at noon Sunday at the Purcell Pavilion, with Notre Dame and Cleveland State slated to follow a half an hour after the conclusion of that game.

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Muffet McGraw
Irish coach

Three players named All-Region

By JARED JEDICK
Senior Staff Writer

Freshman guard Skylar Diggins and senior guards Ashley Barlow and Lindsay Schrader each garnered all-region honors, which were announced Tuesday by the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association. Forty players will be chosen from the 52 all-region nominees to become members of the 2010 State Farm Coaches’ All-America Team.

This is the first time in team history that three Notre Dame players have received this honor in the same season. The Irish have only fielded multiple selections three times in their history, and only ten different players have earned the honor.

Diggins is one of just three freshman this year to earn the honor, along with Delaware forward Elena

Donne and Baylor center Brittney Griner.

“[Diggins] is doing it all every single night, she has been incredibly consistent for a freshman,” McGraw said. “She has really had a fantastic year and wants to get better.”

Barlow said she is pleased that all the time she has put into the team working hard has finally paid off.

“I feel like people are noticing what I am doing. It is a big accomplishment for me,” Barlow said. “I have been working really hard, so I feel like I got rewarded this year. It is a really big honor.”

Schrader has been McGraw’s go-to player all year when she has needed a big shot, but Schrader is

focused on just doing the little things every game that give her team a better shot at winning the game.

“I was pretty shocked [about earning all-region honors],” Schrader said. “I always consider myself a really blue-collar kind of player. I am not going to score twenty points for you, but I will do all the little things for you: rebound, set a good screen, and all the little things for you.”

Notre Dame is among just three teams in the country with three all-region selections. The other two are top-seeded squads Connecticut and Tennessee.

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Ashley Barlow
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A 'sense of urgency'

Leading Notre Dame's attack, five seniors get their final crack at the NCAA Tournament

By CHRIS MASOUD
Sports Writer

Despite the buzz traditionally associated with March Madness, Notre Dame's NCAA Tournament run last year could not have been more anticlimactic. There was no confetti pouring from the ceiling, no unruly fans rushing the home court — just a first-round defeat at the hands of No. 10-seed Minnesota in front of a stunned home crowd.

While that scene never made the Irish postseason highlight film, the defeat has become ingrained in the memory of those on the court.

"I don't think it's ever been fully behind us," senior guard Lindsay Schrader said. "It's always been in the back of our minds because that's where our motivation came from, that's why we worked so hard this summer because of that and how we felt. We never want to feel like that again."

Yet with no seniors on the 2009 team, no tears of disappointment were shed. Watching the Sweet 16 bid be decided on their home court could have been a demoralizing experience, but the desire to make a return was fueled that day.

"If I was a senior last year I would have been very, very disappointed with the way we went out," Schrader said. "And good thing we didn't have any seniors because I would have felt bad for them. This year, I just want to end my career on a win."

To do that the Irish will have to make it to San Antonio, the site of this year's

Final Four, as the No. 2 seed in the Kansas City Region. But unlike the team from a year ago, this year's squad features five seniors not willing to finish their collegiate careers just yet.

"Last year we lacked that sense of urgency in terms of 'This is our last game,' because we had no one graduating," senior forward Erica Williamson said. "With five people who are saying 'This is my last chance to wear a Notre Dame uniform,' we're going to go out and play to the best of our ability."

They are a unit of five seniors. Or maybe three guards, a forward, and a hybrid that can play any position on the floor. Or maybe two fierce competitors, two unselfish distributors, and a motivator that brings out the team's best. Whatever classifications are thrown on

this year's graduating class, one unifying thread can be used to describe them all.

"First and foremost, I think all of us bring leadership," senior guard Ashley Barlow said. "We've been here four years, some of us even

five. We just get along with each other, we know how to work well with each other."

Barlow's leadership was put to the test in one of the toughest stretches of the season, a two-game road trip beginning with a matchup against Syracuse in the hostile Carrier Dome. Down by two

with less than a minute to play, Barlow hit the game-winning 3 after missing her previous four attempts.

"She's got such a great personality, and obviously everyone sees what she does on the court," senior guard Melissa Lechlitner said. "She brings so much to us offensively, grabbing that huge rebound or making that clutch shot. Just the epitome of what a senior should do."

Each brings a unique set of skills to the floor that gives Irish coach Muffet McGraw an arsenal of plays and styles to keep the opposition on its heels. Perhaps just as important, practicing and playing in the Big East together for four years has given them the opportunity to feed off each other's talent.

But their greatest asset to the team may be the seniors' ability to develop the freshmen and sophomores into legitimate competitors on both ends of the court.

Guard Skylar Diggins has turned one of the best freshman campaigns in program history, and it's not over. McGraw credits Diggins' rapid development into an All-Big East Second Team honoree to the experience and maturity of her veterans.

"I think that's so important because she's learning shots from the upperclassmen," McGraw said. "They're helping her, they let her be creative and play her game, and still they communicate well with her. She just fits in so well with everything and everyone."

Lechlitner believes the ability of the seniors to maintain their composure and poise in the midst of a difficult situation has been especially helpful to their teammates, who look to follow in their example.

"We're just a steady force," Lechlitner said. "When adversity's thrown or a game might be getting tight or we're down a little bit, I think the steady hand that we offer for them allows them to play within themselves and excel from that point."

Every season has its ups and down and every team must deal with the possibility of injury. When Schrader sprained her ankle in the first half of a victory over DePaul, that possibility became a reality.

Notre Dame became a noticeably different team on both ends of the floor without the fifth-year senior at the helm. The Irish dropped consecutive road games to No. 18 St. John's and No. 13 Georgetown, averaging 10 points fewer on offense while giving up 14 more points than

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senior guard

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"I just want to make it to San Antonio, that's my bread and butter right now."

Lindsay Schrader
senior guard



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Irish senior Lindsay Schrader lines up her shot during Notre Dame's 97-53 victory over Indianapolis in a preseason game.

the season average.

"I felt so helpless," Schrader said. "I'm not the sitting on the sidelines kind of person, I have to be doing something. When I saw my teammates out there needing help and I couldn't do anything, I felt so bad, sick to my stomach because I felt so helpless."

Although tempted to blame herself for the only loss of the season, Schrader said she had to remind herself to take a positive approach to the setback, the same approach she took when she tore her ACL her sophomore season. Grateful for the opportunity to play in the tournament, Schrader now looks forward to a second chance at defending the home floor.

"It wasn't my fault that I got hurt," Schrader said. "I just had to keep telling myself that any given night anybody can go down. You just have to put the best of your abilities to the time that you have it and take nothing for granted."

But Schrader is just one link in McGraw's four-guard offense. A natural point guard and the unanimous leader on offense, Lechlitner's ball-handling skills are a complement to her drive and outstanding work ethic.

"She's the leader of this team," Williamson said. "She's the heart and soul. When she's on the court you can tell that everything else has calmed down. When she's playing you can tell that we play so much better because

she's there."

A starter for the majority of her career, Williamson has seen a steady reduction in playing time this season due to the emergence of junior forwards Becca Bruszewski and Devereaux Peters into playmakers in the post. Despite the obvious temptation to throw in the towel, Williamson has taken the high road.

"She's really stepped up and is always doing everything she can for the team," Lechlitner said. "She's probably one of the most unselfish players on this team and will put her body on the line and do absolutely everything she needs to do to help us be successful."

Walk-ons seldom get playing time at the collegiate level. Senior guard Alena Christiansen is no exception, yet she has managed to positively impact her team in a rarely appreciated position.

"She's found a great role for herself," McGraw said. "She's the first one off the bench cheering, giving everyone a pat on the back and encouragement if they're not playing well."

The seniors will leave quite a legacy on the women's basketball program, one that includes four tournament appearances and a trip to the Sweet 16 in 2008. However, they still have some unfinished business.

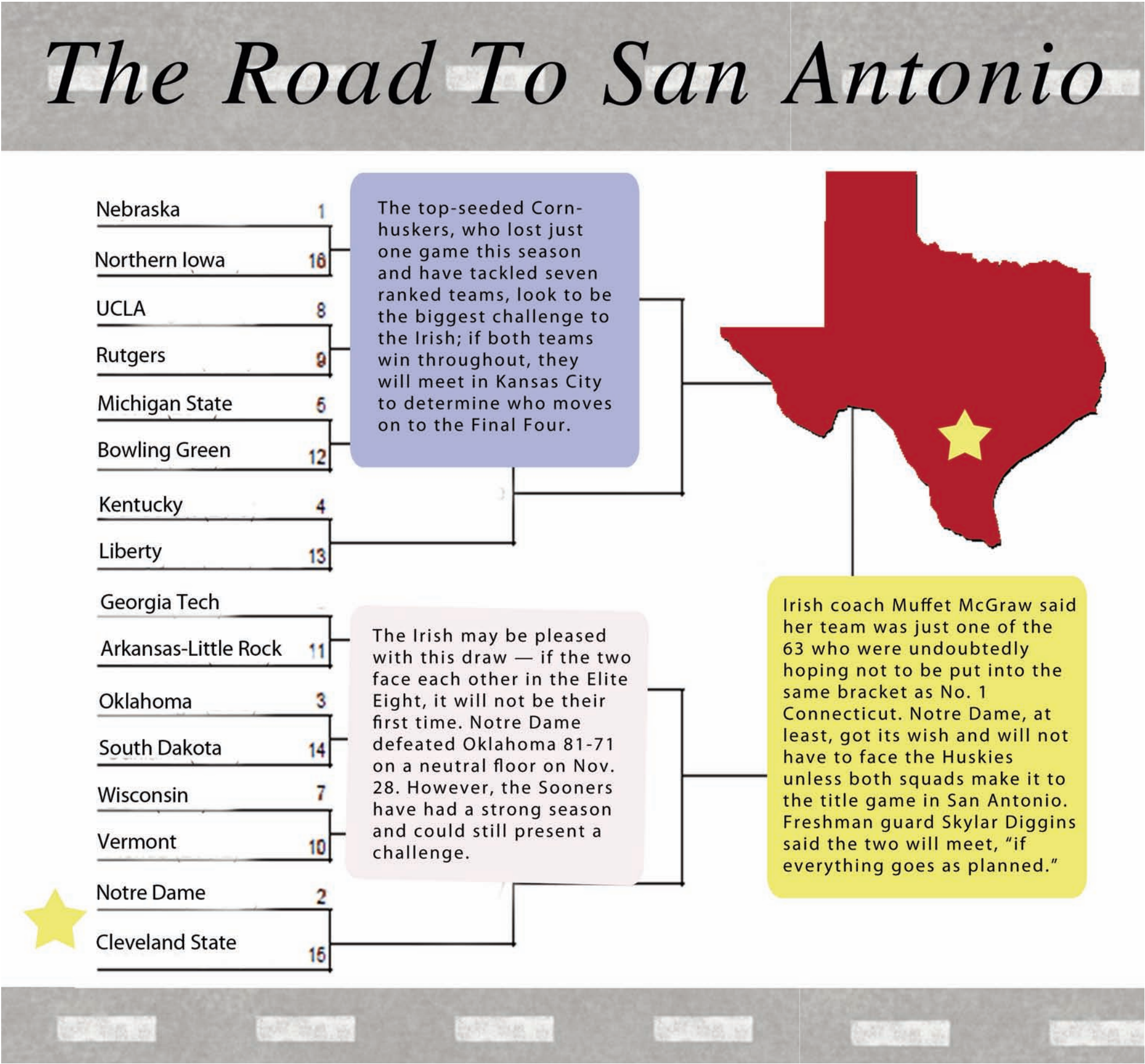
"I just want to make it to San Antonio, that's my bread and butter right now," Schrader said. "If I can do that, I would say I had a very successful year hands down. Actually that's all the girls. Everybody wants to go to San Antonio."

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SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Senior guard Ashley Barlow dribbles the ball during Notre Dame's 90-66 victory over DePaul on Feb. 14.



Predicting the NCAA run

Laura Myers

Prediction: Notre Dame loses to Stanford in semifinals

Chris Masoud

Prediction: Notre Dame loses to Stanford in semifinals

Jared Jedick

Prediction: Notre Dame loses to Connecticut in championship game

When asked if she could have drawn a better bracket for her team, Irish coach Muffet McGraw said: "I would've put us in a bracket with all 15- and 16-seeds."

That means no.

While the team will not look past its opening-round opponents, the two home games should be a breeze.

This year's Irish have two things they didn't have when they were shocked in the 2009 first round: an increased focus drawn from that early exit, and Skylar Diggins.

Combine those with a bracket whose other top teams are No.3-seed Oklahoma, which the Irish have beat, and No. 1-seed Nebraska, the best possible draw for the Irish, and the road to San Antonio looks pretty clear.

Notre Dame's fast-paced offense and aggressive style on defense will be too much to handle for its early-round opponents. Beginning with the statement win over Cleveland State, the Irish break in Purcell Pavilion's post-season debut in style. Freshman phenom Skylar Diggins will give the home fans what they want to see, as she should have no trouble tearing up opposing defenses. Don't be surprised if she averages over 20 points a game.

The highlight of the NCAA tournament comes in the Sweet 16, when the Irish beat Nebraska in a matchup of the top two seeds in the region. Nothing the Cornhuskers have seen in the Big 12 will prepare them for McGraw's four-guard offense.

The Irish run ends in the Final Four. Notre Dame lacks depth in the post. An almost certain meeting with Stanford should exploit that weakness.

Notre Dame's depth will help them easily roll past their early opponents, Cleveland State and likely Wisconsin, but once they meet a team that can match their bench, things will get a lot more difficult. It all comes down to how well freshman Skylar Diggins can play in her first ever NCAA tournament. If she turns it on and consistently produces 20 points a game the Irish could challenge to reach the championship game, where juggernaut Connecticut will await for a fourth time. If she cannot, it will be an early exit for Notre Dame.

I see a Skylar Diggins ready to take that next step and begin to build her legend. Expect Notre Dame to gain early momentum at home and carry that all the way to the championship game, topping Big 12 sweetheart Nebraska and powerful Stanford along the way. The championship game is another story.