

# IRISH INSIDER

FRIDAY, MARCH 2, 2012

THE  
OBSERVER



## TAKING THE FIFTH

In their fifth year for the Irish, graduate students Devereaux Peters and Brittany Mallory let their game do the talking





## COMMENTARY

# Connecticut-Notre Dame rivalry one of sport's best

North Carolina-Duke has its moments every season, Kentucky-Louisville is back on track and even Kansas-Missouri generates additional hype on gameday. Each rivalry has its own special history, its own place in college basketball, thanks to a series of unforgettable matchups, exciting (devastating) upsets and healthy (painful) win streaks.

So, add Notre Dame-UConn to the list.

What makes a rivalry great? Legendary coaches — check.

Along with Tennessee's Pat Summitt, Huskies coach Geno Auriemma is the face of women's basketball and the driving force behind seven national championships. While Irish coach Muffet McGraw only has one title so far, she joined Auriemma as a member of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2011 and has more than 650 wins to her name.

Legendary players — check. The advantage certainly favors Connecticut here, as WNBA stars Diana Taurasi, Tina Charles and Maya Moore each made her mark in UConn jerseys. But Ruth Riley led Notre Dame to its

only national title, and South Bend native junior Skylar Diggins would be well on her way to Player of the Year honors in 2012 if not for Baylor's Brittney Griner.

Signature moments — check. Notre Dame's upset of the Huskies in the 2011 NCAA tournament semifinals stands out above the rest. Diggins and her 28 points stole the show, propelling the Irish into the title game, ending Moore's collegiate career and snapping a 12-game Connecticut win streak over Notre Dame.

But well before that, the two programs made history when ESPN College GameDay covered its first women's basketball game in January 2010, a matchup between Notre Dame and Connecticut. While the Huskies blew out the Irish, the two programs advanced the sport further into the national spotlight.

Balanced record — no check ... yet.

Since January 1996 the two programs have met 35 times, and Connecticut holds a commanding 28-7 series lead. In fact, the Huskies won the first 11 matchups until the 2000-01 Notre Dame team broke that streak en route to winning a national champi-

onship.

From 2001 to 2005 the rivalry played out much more evenly, as Notre Dame won four of its next 10 matchups against Connecticut before quickly reverting back in the Huskies' favor. From 2006 to 2011, UConn rattled off 12 straight wins in the Big East regular season and conference tournament.

Finally, momentum has shifted towards Notre Dame. Dating back to the 2011 Final Four victory, McGraw's squad has beaten Connecticut in three consecutive contests, the first team to accomplish the feat since North Carolina did from 2004-07. More importantly, Notre Dame's poise has carried it to two conference victories this season, an overtime victory at home and a road win in a notoriously hostile arena. For a team with only marginally better talent than the Huskies, these wins bode well for an almost certain rematch in the Big East championships title game and a potential rematch in the Final Four.

And what if Notre Dame extends its win streak to five, which would include two victories in the NCAA tournament, a victory that secured a Big East regular season title outright and a victory with the conference tournament title on the line? While Notre Dame would still trail Connecticut by a significant margin in the all-time series, quality victories with titles and championships on the line certainly mean more than regular season wins.

Earning a Big East regular season and conference tournament title over Connecticut in the same season would send a clear message: Notre Dame is committed to winning at the highest level. Consistently.

The Irish certainly lost their grip as contenders following the program's first national title in 2001, failing to return to the title game for a full decade. Some programs would be content with a return to the Final Four last season. But this year's squad has its sights set on a national title, the talent to beat opponents it should beat handily and the character to grind out the tough wins.

Like all good rivalries, win streaks alternate from team to team, and Connecticut will surely rebound sooner than later. But for the first time, the Huskies are looking up from the wrong end of a rivalry approaching parity.

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



Chris Masoud

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*Since January 1996 the two programs have met 35 times, and Connecticut holds a commanding 28-7 series lead. In fact, the Huskies won the first 11 matchups until the 2000-01 Notre Dame team broke that streak en route to winning a national championship.*

# McBride improves in year two

By MATTHEW ROBISON  
Sports Writer

As the lone non-veteran on the starting five this season, sophomore guard Kayla McBride has surprised everyone but her teammates and coaches with her breakthrough performance.

Irish coach Muffet McGraw certainly knew McBride's potential upside and is certainly glad to see it show through in her play this season.

"I'm absolutely thrilled with the way she's playing and what she's been contributing to our team," McGraw said. "She makes a huge impact for us."

Playing with four veterans in the starting lineup, including three other guards, McBride has quickly learned the system and her role within it. But more importantly, she has drawn one key lesson from it: mental toughness. Seniors Devereaux Peters, Natalie Novosel and Brittany Mallory and junior Skylar Diggins have inspired McBride to display the fortitude to embrace and overcome adversity.

"They've been through so much during their three, four, five years here," McBride said. "Just taking that and going with it, just playing with them and seeing their determination. It just kind of gives me the strength that I can go out there and do these things, and I can go far, and I can get better each and every day like they have."

McBride has averaged just over 11 points per game this season and has pulled in just under five rebounds. Last season, she played 19 games for the Irish before sitting out the remainder of the season to deal with an off-the-court issue.

Her return has sparked



SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Irish sophomore guard Kayla McBride dribbles the ball during Notre Dame's 66-47 home victory over Providence on Feb. 14.

Notre Dame both offensively and defensively and gives a great glimpse of the future for the Irish. She is motivated by both an internal fire and the push she receives from those around her.

"I think a lot of it is self-motivation just because of everything I went through last year," she said. "But I think a lot of it comes from my coaches and the confidence they have in me. They wanted me to step in and play my game and that gave me a lot of confidence."

McGraw expressed supreme confidence in McBride's ability right now, as well as her ability to continually improve during the remainder of her career.

"She plays well in the high post against the zone. She can score one-on-one, she can use the ball screen. She can score in a lot of different ways," McGraw said. "She's just beginning to tap that potential. She can continue to get better. She really has made great strides and continued to make them while she was out last year."

Certainly a contender for Most Improved Player in the conference when the postseason awards are announced, McBride has strived

to get better each and every day. That is her primary goal.

"One of my goals is just to get better on and off the court," McBride said.

"I think she's the most improved player in the league," McGraw said.

As a heavily recruited player coming out of high school, she saw Notre Dame's diversity of offerings appealing, the ultimate deciding factor to play for the Irish, she said.

"There was really nothing I could see wrong, academically, athletically," McBride said. "I was just drawn to it immediately."

She attributes part of her success to the culture of Notre Dame, a culture of hard work and the determination to succeed.

"I think the work ethic we have to put in as a student-athlete here at Notre Dame makes you succeed on so many different levels," McBride said. "I think that's just one of the best things about being here and being part of this program."

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# Fifth element

Graduate students Devereaux Peters and Brittany Mallory bring experience, leadership to Irish in final campaign

By MOLLY SAMMON  
Sports Writer

During the 2008-09 season, Irish graduate students Brittany Mallory and Devereaux Peters sat on the bench with matching torn ACLs in their left legs.

But without that time off the court, their careers could very well have ended with losses to Connecticut in the Big East title match and Texas Tech in the national championship game.

Now enjoying their fifth years in Irish uniforms, Mallory and Peters, two parts of the triumvirate of team captains, have another chance to grab both the conference tournament and national championship titles as integral members of No. 3 Notre Dame.

"I think everything happens for a reason. I'm a strong believer in that," Peters said. "I really believe that I hurt myself so I could play this year and take this team as far as we can. I get an extra year to play with these girls. Since we lost it last year, it's just another opportunity to get that back."

After their injuries Peters, a forward, and Mallory, a guard, spent months off the court and underwent multiple surgeries and rehabilitation sessions to build their health back up. Then, each had to recondition herself to the rigors of maintaining a spot on the starting roster in one of the nation's top programs.

"I have absolutely no regrets about taking a fifth year," Peters said. "I would do it again everyday. If I didn't hurt myself, I wouldn't be able to play with this team and I really think we have a shot at winning. That wouldn't

be an opportunity that I would have if I had left. I would do it again."

At the time of her injury, Peters was unsure if she would ever be able to play again, let alone become an integral part of Notre Dame's success.

"It was tough at first when I injured myself," she said. "I wasn't sure if I could even play at all. It's hard going through an ACL once, let alone a second time, right back to back, but I knew it was a decision I had to make right away because of the work that goes into rehab and everything. I took about a week and talked to my family and coaches."

Mallory's decision to take a fifth year came after serious contemplation as well.

"I was a little on the fence about continuing on," she said. "I had been through two ACL [injuries]. I wasn't sure if coming back for another year was exactly what I wanted. I talked with my family and coaches, and everyone seemed to want me back. I sat down mostly with my brother, who said to stick it out."

"It took a lot of hard work when I came back. Having the team behind me was a lot of help, and once the season started and I started to get my wind back, everything started to fall into place. It seemed like I made the right decision, and I really felt like I made the right one."

After contributing an extra year to the program, both Peters and Mallory have an advantage in understanding team makeup, team strategy and a general approach to winning.

"When you have players that have been around for five years

that have gone through the injury, they really mature," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "They learn a lot from that year out. They look at the game from a different perspective. They watch the coaches a little bit more; they're students of the game a little bit more; they appreciate what they have a little bit more. For that reason, I think they have that maturity and that wisdom that comes with age."

Mallory said the extra year was especially helpful to not only familiarize herself with what McGraw looks for in various game situations, but why she employs certain strategies.

"When I sat out for that year, you get the see the whole coaching aspect and side of things, and you see where coach is coming from which gives you a whole new look at things. Being a captain and having everyone come to you and trust you with an issue you have, you know Coach [McGraw] trusted me with the ball and being the glue that puts everything together."

Being thrust into a team leadership role can sometimes result in added pressure, Peters said, especially during high-intensity parts of the season like the Big East championships.

"I think at first [being more experienced] did [add pressure] a little bit," she said. "It's hard. If you're not performing [the coaches are] going to get on you because they know you better and you've been here the longest. I've been here forever. They might be on your back about it; [Mallory and I] accepted that and have been able to handle that for this year."

Now well-situated into their roles on the court, Mallory and Peters fill different needs for the Irish, but both will be vital to Notre Dame's postseason success.

Leading the Irish in rebounds, Peters recognizes her job on the court of bringing defensive tenacity to the frontcourt. McGraw said she has raised the team's



GRANT TOBIN/The Observer

Irish graduate student Devereaux Peters plays defense during Notre Dame's 76-43 win over Villanova on Jan. 21 in Purcell Pavilion.

intensity "up to a different level" this year.

The tallest player on the team at 6'2", Peters has averaged 9.5 rebounds per game in her final season with the Irish and recently broke her career-high mark with 18 boards against South Florida on Feb. 25, perfect timing for Senior Night at Purcell Pavilion.

"It's about rebounding for me," Peters said. "My job is to get in there, be crashing the board, making a lot of things happen, make extra opportunities on offense and keep their offense from getting any second chances. I don't consider myself a scorer, and I think we have plenty of those, but if necessary, if they're taking the girls away, I know I have to be an option. I think most of them handle that pretty well."

Peters said she leads most effectively by bringing an experience calm to her captainship rather than being verbally abusive of her younger teammates.

"I think I'm more of a leader by example; I'm not very talkative on the court unless I'm mad, in which [case] they take it pretty well because they know how I am," Peters said. "I think I'm more about being out there as showing them what to do instead of saying that. Since I don't talk too much, I think I've established that role. When I do say something they listen, they know I've been here forever. So I do [talk] a little bit, and I think it's easier for them to take criticism

or advice from me knowing that I've been here and been through a lot."

Mallory boasts the nickname "Mom," granted to her by the underclassmen on the team and perfectly suggestive of her interpretation of her role on the team.

"I just like making sure that everybody is okay; I hate leaving people without [that]," Mallory said. "It's just my tendency. I just have to make sure that everything is okay."

*"I just like making sure that everybody is okay; I hate leaving people without [that]... It's just my tendency. I just have to make sure that everything is okay."*

**Brittany Mallory**  
graduate student guard

"You get your emotions running wild before these games, especially the big ones," Mallory said. "Last year before the national championship, I couldn't sleep

I was so excited. But I just need to remember what I'm here to do, what my purposes are, why my goals are [what they are]."

Peters, Mallory and the rest of the Irish have earned two byes before they take the court in the quarterfinals of the Big East championships. After rolling past Connecticut 72-59 on Feb. 27, both remain confident in accomplishing a program first during the final season in Irish uniforms: winning a tournament title.

"I'm very excited right now by this year and by this team. [Our win over Connecticut] showed us a lot about the team, about how we play and what we're capable of," Peters said. "I'm very excited for what's to come."

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SARAH O'CONNOR/The Observer

Irish graduate student Brittany Mallory passes around a Providence defender on Feb. 14. The Irish captured a 66-47 victory over the Friars in Purcell Pavilion.



# Road to the Big East championships

## UConn

**Record:** 26–4, 13–3 Big East  
**Regular Season:** The Huskies beat every team in the Big East other than Notre Dame and St. John's. Their only non-conference loss came to No. 1 Baylor on the road. The perennial powerhouse showed the country it is once again a serious contender for the national championship, as UConn is every season.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Irish 74, Huskies 67 OT (at Notre Dame, Jan. 7); Irish 72, Huskies 59 (at Connecticut, Feb. 27)

## St. John's

**Record:** 21–8, 13–3 Big East  
**Regular Season:** The Red Storm struggled during the non-conference stretch, suffering losses to Harvard, Iowa and Baylor. But St. John's rebounded in the Big East, finishing the season on the an eight-game winning streak, including a win over Connecticut to snap the Huskies' 99-game home winning streak at Gampel Pavilion.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Irish 76, Red Storm 51 (at St. John's)

## WVU

**Record:** 21–8, 11–5 Big East  
**Regular Season:** The Mountaineers' season was filled with ups and downs. In addition to handing Notre Dame its lone conference loss of the season, they had some impressive victories over teams like Louisville and Rutgers, but fell to unlikely opponents like Cal State Northridge and St. Bonaventure. West Virginia is capable of running with the best, but it also has a tendency to not show up.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Mountaineers 65, Irish 63 (at Notre Dame)

## Rutgers

**Record:** 21–8, 10–6 Big East  
**Regular Season:** Despite a record that shows eight losses, the Scarlet Knights only suffered losses to high quality opponents. Out of conference, Rutgers only lost to No. 13 Tennessee and No. 7 Miami on the road, both strong teams in their respective conferences. All of the Scarlet Knights' Big East losses came against teams who finished in the top five of the standings.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Irish 71, Scarlet Knights 41 (at Rutgers)

## DePaul

**Record:** 21–9, 9–7 Big East  
**Regular Season:** The Blue Demons can compete with anyone at the middle level of the conference. They beat St. John's and Georgetown, but also suffered some tough losses to San Diego State and South Florida. DePaul also only had to play conference leaders Notre Dame and Connecticut once each.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Irish 90, Blue Demons 70 (at Notre Dame)

## G'town

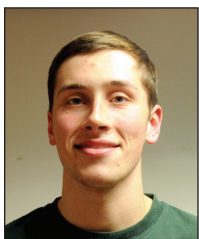
**Record:** 22–7, 11–5 Big East  
**Regular Season:** The Hoyas started the season strong with an 11-game win streak during their non-conference stretch. With losses to Louisville and DePaul, the Hoyas have certainly shown their weaknesses on the court, but they did do a good job of beating up on the meddling teams in the conference. But it still does not have a signature win on the season.  
**Against Notre Dame:** Irish 80, Hoyas 60 (at Georgetown)

ELISA DE CASTRO | Observer Graphic

## Predictions

### Joseph Monardo

Sports Writer



In the quarterfinals, the top-seeded Irish will handle a South Florida team that challenged the Irish less a week ago. The Bulls will not put up as strong of a fight this time, and the Irish will roll into the semifinals where they will capture a double-digit win over Georgetown. Notre Dame and Connecticut will face off in the championship game in a rematch of Monday's game, but the Irish will keep the Huskies out of the paint early, denying Connecticut center Stefanie Golson another hot start. Mosqueda-Lewis and Tiffany Hayes will lead the Huskies, but Novosel and McBride will provide the scoring for the Irish. Diggins will lead Notre Dame down the stretch of a close game and the Irish will capture their third win over Connecticut this season and capture the first Big East championship in school history.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Notre Dame 84, Connecticut 76

### Molly Sammon

Sports Writer



Even though the Irish are the proud owners of the coveted No. 1 seed in the tournament, it will not be a particularly easy road for them to get to the championship game. They will meet up with South Florida in the quarterfinals. A win over South Florida puts them on the court with West Virginia for the semifinal game, the same Mountaineer team that robbed the zero in loss column in Notre Dame's conference record on Feb. 12. This time, the Irish will play like they usually do, get revenge against West Virginia, and bump into a St. John's team feeling bulletproof after a close win over Connecticut. The final game will take a large effort from Devereaux Peters, as her 15 rebounds were imperative in Notre Dame's regular season win over the Red Storm. If the Irish force turnovers and play defense like they did in the regular season, the title will go to Notre Dame.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Notre Dame 76, St. John's 68

### Matthew Robison

Sports Writer

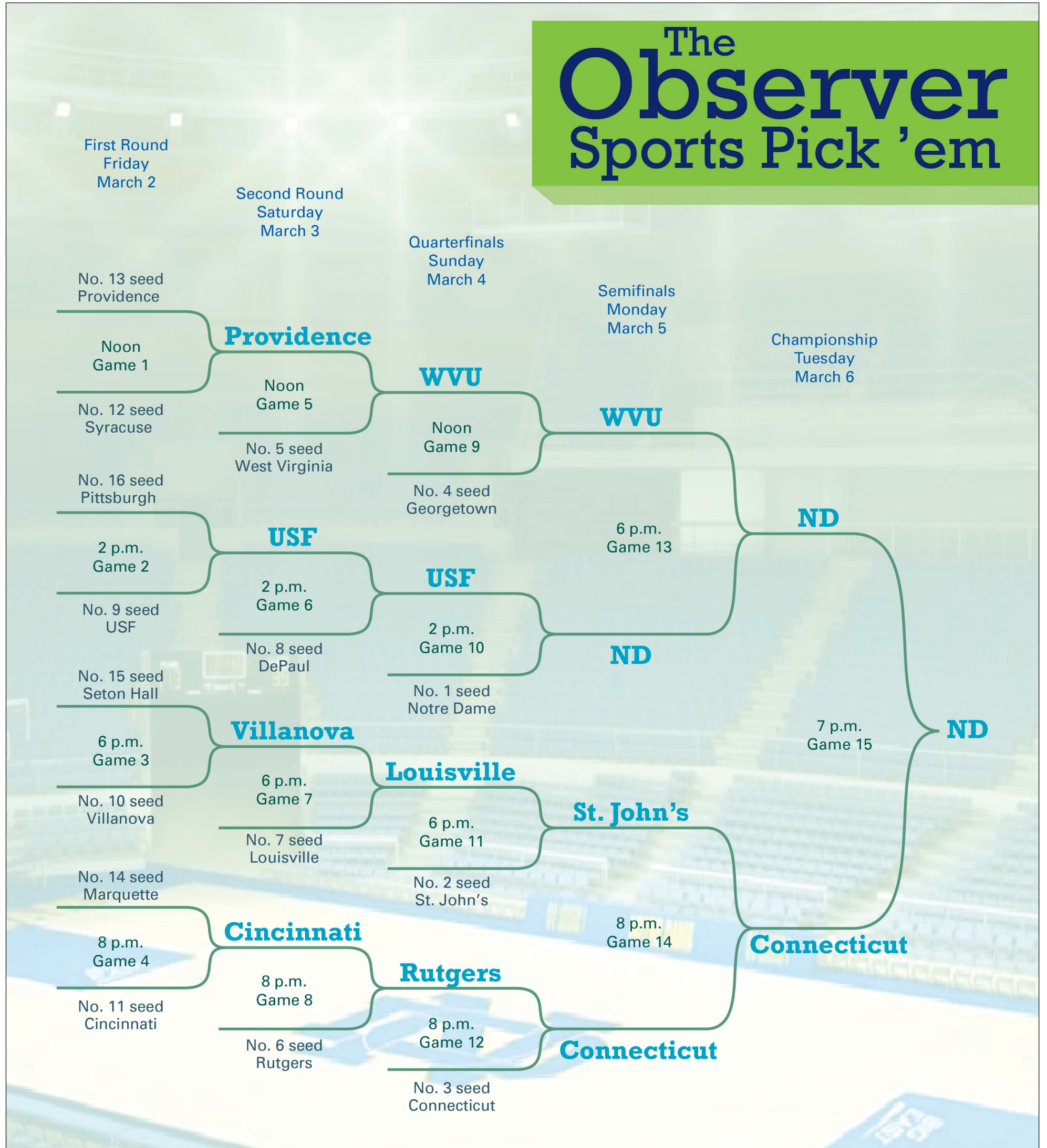


The Irish will have no problems with DePaul in the quarterfinals. Georgetown gives Notre Dame a run for its money, but the Irish advance into the championship game against Connecticut. Diggins and Novosel will lead the charge as the Irish will get out in transition early and often, applying defensive pressure throughout. Devereaux Peters will keep Connecticut's 6'5" center Stefanie Golson off the offensive glass and will limit the Huskies to one shot on offense. The constant pressure will finally break the Huskies and the Irish will pull away at the end of a close game. Kayla McBride and Brittany Mallory each also score in double figures for the Irish from behind the three-point line and finishing in transition. Tiffany Hayes will score her fair share of points, but Mallory will keep her from dominating the game.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Notre Dame 82, Connecticut 71



# The Observer Sports Pick 'em



ELISA DE CASTRO | Observer Graphic

**Kelsey Manning**

Sports Writer



This Irish squad simply will not lose in this Big East tournament. Despite beating opponents by an average of 29.1 points this season, this team has never gotten complacent. After they beat DePaul, the No. 8 seed in the Big East tournament and their probable quarterfinal opponent, both coach and players said they were disappointed in their defensive performance. After beating Georgetown, their likely semifinal opponent, McGraw said they were "lucky." This team has not taken anything for granted this season, and has found areas for improvement even when there appeared to be none. Notre Dame will handle DePaul and record a double-digit victory over Georgetown in the semifinals, only to face St. John's, who will stick around to the end, but ultimately fall to the Irish.

**BOTTOM LINE: Notre Dame 78, St. John's 70**

**Chris Masoud**

Assistant Managing Editor



Simply put, the Big East is stacked this season. With the exception of bottom-feeders Pittsburgh and Seton Hall, no team making it to the semifinals would surprise me. Notre Dame, Connecticut and St. John's all appear to be locks for the semifinals. The Red Storm handed UConn its only conference loss besides two to the Irish, but I like betting on coaches in the postseason. Geno Auriemma and the Huskies have a long memory and play well in the XL Center. Coupled with Auriemma's curious benching of his starters down 13 points with over 3 minutes remaining against Notre Dame on Monday, I expect an unforgiving Huskies squad to surge to a finals appearance against the Irish. This season has marked a number of firsts for Muffet McGraw and Notre Dame, and that continues with the program's first Big East championships title.

**BOTTOM LINE: Notre Dame 74, Connecticut 70**

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# Achonwa and Wright contribute off the bench for the Irish

By JOSEPH MONARDO  
Sports Writer

As one nears the end of her freshman season and the other continues to make strides in her game as a sophomore, “Keesh” and “Ace” provide much needed depth to the Irish post game.

Freshman forward Markisha Wright and sophomore forward Natalie Achonwa have combined to provide meaningful minutes off the bench and have taken on the important role of backing up graduate student forward Devereaux Peters.

Averaging 10.4 minutes per game, Wright nears the end of what has been an educational freshman season under the tutelage of Peters and Achonwa.

“The season has been really exciting,” the Des Moines, Iowa, product said. “I have learned a lot from all the players, I would say especially from somebody I look up to — Ace, Natalie Achonwa. It has just been a great learning experience for me.”

Wright has racked up averages of 3.7 points and 2.4 rebounds per game during her rookie campaign, the highlight of which came in a 128-42 away win over Mercer on Dec. 30. In the game, Wright shot 10-12 from the field, scored 24 points and collected four rebounds in only 20 minutes of action.

While Wright has benefited from Achonwa’s guid-

ance, the sophomore said she struggled at times last year to adapt to the college game before impressing in the postseason. During last season’s 73-64 loss to Connecticut in the Big East championships title game, Achonwa recorded her first career double-double, scoring 12 points and grabbing 10 rebounds.

“I think I found my role by the end of the year,” Achonwa said. “I think it might have taken me a little [time], but I had great players to challenge me in practice and great opponents to challenge me in games. I think just the experience of getting to know the college game really contributed to the postseason.”

This season, Achonwa has continued her upward trend in securing averages of 7.7 points and 4.4 rebounds in 16.6 minutes of action per game as the first player off the bench.

“I think she’s the best sixth man in the Big East,” Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. “She has had a really solid season. I think I trust her. I’m comfortable with her in any situation of the game.”

On Dec. 4, 2011, Achonwa scored a career-high 20 points in only 18 minutes in No. 3 Notre Dame’s 76-48 win at Creighton. The second year player has been efficient all season with her team-leading field goal percentage of .566.

“I think something I have

learned is to value the time I get,” Achonwa said. “The efficiency just comes with having the mentality [that] when I come in, it is to give the starters a breather, so we don’t want to have a lapse from the bench.”

Although both Achonwa and Wright have shown the ability to score in bunches, the players understand their primary task is to help Notre Dame’s rebounding effort.

“[The team] had a little trouble at the beginning of the season ... Coming in with four guards and one post, we had a different look [from last year] and we had to get used to it,” Achonwa said. “At practice coach said, ‘Get back to the basics, remember how to box out, push them back and get the rebound.’”

Despite their early season struggles on the boards, Notre Dame’s 10.4 rebounding margin per game is good enough for second-best in the Big East, only slightly behind league-leading Connecticut’s average margin of 10.4.

“It is a big deal for us because we play a lot of teams that are really good at rebounding, so we emphasize boxing out first and then crashing the boards,” Wright said.

As Wright prepares to see her first postseason action, the Irish expect her to put into effect everything she has learned thus far.

“She is a really good listener, knows what we’re try-

ing to do, works hard and is continuing to get better,” McGraw said. “I expect big things from her in the future. She’s played in big games, won a state tournament, was the MVP of a state tournament in Iowa; so she’s had the opportunity to play big-time games.”

For now, though, Wright prefers to keep it simple.

“I just go my hardest and I do my role,” she said. “I go out there and I do what I am supposed to do, what I am expected to do.”

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# Regular season champion Irish head into tournament



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Junior guard Skylar Diggins locks in on defense during Notre Dame's home tilt with West Virginia on Feb. 12. The Mountaineers handed the Irish a 65-63 defeat, their only home loss of the season.

By KELSEY MANNING  
Sports Writer

After topping Connecticut 72-59 and crowning themselves sole regular-season conference champions on Monday, the No. 3 Irish now prepare to return to the XL Center to begin Big East tournament play in the quarterfinals Sunday.

The victory marks the first time the Irish (27-2, 14-1 Big East) have won the regular season conference championship outright. Notre Dame shared the title with Connecticut in 2001, before going on to win the national championship that year. According to Irish coach Muffet McGraw, achieving that

goal has only made her team more anxious for the next one.

"I think winning the regular season was a great accomplishment for us. Never having done it before, I think made it more special," McGraw said. "If we could follow it up with a win in the Big East championship, to get the automatic bid, that would be another first for our program."

According to senior guard Natalie Novosel, who had 21 points Monday, it was easy to look ahead to a potential matchup in the tournament final when playing Connecticut at the XL Center Monday. She said that prospect does not at all frighten this Irish squad.

"It's easy to look ahead — a lot of people talk about it," Novosel said. "It can possibly be a déjà vu moment. It's a week later, in the championship. But I think absolutely [we were thinking about it]."

"Like we've said again and again, we're not afraid of them anymore, and it's nice to kind of be out of their shadow, and to find our own identity — I think that's one thing we were able to accomplish the other night."

At the same time, the Irish are approaching the tournament in the same way they approached their regular season — one game at a time. McGraw said the competition in the Big East is so tight that it is tough

to predict which squad might leave Hartford with the championship.

"I think all of the top eight teams, actually the top nine seeds [are capable of winning]," she said. "If you look at the game that South Florida just gave us, they're the nine seed, and we struggled to beat them here. They've had a lot of close games with a lot of teams. So I think really anybody is the top nine is capable of winning."

Novosel said even with the team's success, nothing will change with the team's mindset.

"Coach McGraw does a really good job of (making) us [have] the mentality of taking it one game at a time," the senior said. "In practice, it's really competitive, and we're just working on the next teams in drills and stuff, so I think she does a really good job of keeping us humble. And also we've got a lot of veterans on the team, a lot of experience, and that helps just keep the team grounded and not looking ahead to things."

With No. 16 Pittsburgh facing No. 9 South Florida in the first round, the winner of that game facing No. 8 DePaul in the second round and the winner of that matchup advancing to play Notre Dame in the quarterfinals, the Irish could face a couple foes that gave them trouble in the regular season.

Though the Irish defeated DePaul 90-70 in their regular-season contest Feb. 5, McGraw and her players expressed disappointment in allowing 70 points on defense. DePaul (21-9, 9-7) was paced by forwards sophomore Jasmine Penny's 24 points and junior Katherine Harry's

20. Novosel said the Irish would relish the opportunity to take on the Blue Demons once more this season.

"We looked at the people we could possibly play and I think DePaul we definitely want to play again," she said. "They challenged us on our home court and our defense took a hit. I think that's something we'd definitely enjoy — to have another rematch with them and get that game back."

South Florida (16-14, 8-8) notched 68 points Saturday against the Irish. Though Novosel recorded a career-high 32 points in the victory, she said the team's defense would have to step up in another matchup with the Bulls.

"[South Florida] definitely challenged us at home — they've got some really quick guards and some great shooters, so we're just going to have to hone in on defense on them," she said. "Again, it comes down to defense. We've just got to lock down and just keep our defensive assignments."

Regardless of whom the Irish play in the tournament, Novosel said the team knows not to take anything for granted in the Big East tournament.

"I think whomever we play in the Big East tournament right now, everyone's level of play raises because this is for NCAA tournament seeds," she said. "Everyone's going to be raising the level of play."

The Irish will take on the winner of DePaul and South Florida/Pittsburgh in the Big East tournament quarterfinals Sunday.

Contact Kelsey Manning at kmanning3@nd.edu

## Starting Five's

## Striking Stats



**Brittany Mallory**  
Grad student guard #22  
Points per game: 6.7  
Rebounds per game: 2.5  
Field goal %: 0.330



**Skylar Diggins**  
Junior guard #4  
Points per game: 14.4  
Rebounds per game: 4.0  
Field goal %: 0.435



**Natalie Novosel**  
Senior guard #21  
Points per game: 9.3  
Rebounds per game: 3.1  
Field goal %: 0.456



**Kayla McBride**  
Sophomore guard #23  
Points per game: 8.7  
Rebounds per game: 3.3  
Field goal %: 0.557



**Devereaux Peters**  
Grad student forward #14  
Points per game: 9.6  
Rebounds per game: 6.4  
Field goal %: 0.554



**I'M GOING TO BE...**



**IF WE CAN'T FILL THE STUDENT  
SECTION ONE MORE TIME!**

**ND VS. PROVIDENCE  
FRIDAY NIGHT @ 7PM**