

IRISH INSIDER

Women's Basketball

Baylor 80, Notre Dame 61

THE OBSERVER

Wednesday, April 4, 2012
Vol. 45, Issue 117
ndsmcobserver.com



Unbearable

Baylor center Griner scores 26, grabs 13 rebounds as Lady Bears down Notre Dame in national championship



PAT COVENEY/The Observer

Irish sophomore forward Ariel Braker and junior guards Skylar Diggins and Kaila Turner walk off the court following Baylor's 80-61 defeat of Notre Dame in Tuesday night's national championship game. The Irish have now lost consecutive national championship games after dropping a 76-70 decision to Texas A&M in last year's final.

By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Sports Writer

DENVER — The scene was all too familiar. The buzzer sounded, the confetti fell and Notre Dame was denied in the national championship for a second consecutive season.

Baylor looked every bit like the national favorite that had not lost a game all season, blowing past the Irish 80-61 to claim the program's second national title. Naismith Player of the Year Brittney Griner led the Lady Bears with 26 points, 13 rebounds and five assists, as Baylor became the first team in Division I basketball history to finish a season 40-0.

"I think it hurts no matter how much you lose by," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "I think the feeling last year was a little different, more of 'We kind of let it slip away,' but this game got out of hand. I think there was some frustration that everybody didn't play as well as they wanted to, but it's still pretty much the same [feeling]."

No. 4 Notre Dame (35-4) kept the contest close in the first half, heading into the break down by just six points. But

like their victory over No. 2 Stanford in the national semifinals, the No. 1 Lady Bears (40-0) broke the game open in the second half, outscoring the Irish 46-33.

Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins paced Notre Dame with 20 points and sophomore guard Kayla McBride added 11, but the rest of the Irish were plagued by cold shooting.

"We just kept digging ourselves into a hole by not taking our shots," Diggins said. "I don't think we were taking the shots that we had and when we were, we weren't shooting them confidently ... We spent a lot of energy chasing."

McGraw's game plan was simple and effective in the opening minutes: double-team Griner on defense and engage the center on offense before finding the backdoor cut. Diggins and Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters scored a quick five points on two field goals and a foul shot in Notre Dame's first three pos-

sessions.

But momentum turned when Peters was sent to the bench just two minutes and 38 sec-

ket."

Griner and the Lady Bears took advantage of Peters' absence on both ends of the floor,

outscoring Notre Dame 40 to 22 in the paint and outrebounding the Irish 46 to 27. Baylor sophomore guard Odyssey Sims contributed 19 points and seven rebounds, capturing the Lady Bears' front-court.

"It's frustrating," Peters said. "But you can't knock what the team has done

this year in being able to get to back-to-back Final Fours and back-to-back national championships. We've just done so much and my teammates have stepped up when they needed to."

Peters, senior guards Natalie Novosel and Fraderica Miller and graduate student guard Brittany Mallory leave behind quite a legacy. During their combined five-year tenure, they helped Notre Dame

"I think there was some frustration that everybody didn't play as well as they wanted to, but it's still pretty much the same [feeling]"

Muffet McGraw
Irish coach

onds into the game after picking up two quick fouls.

"When we got into foul trouble, it just destroyed our game plan," McGraw said. "We really needed Devereaux — she was a big part of the plan and we didn't have her ... But in the second half we were afraid to foul, and every time Brittney got the ball, even when we brought the double team, we didn't really lean on her and she got really close to the bas-

achieve 142 wins and reach four Sweet Sixteens, two Final Fours and two national championship games.

"It's just a great senior class. I know me watching their whole careers on the sidelines — just amazing what they've been able to do, [bringing] this program back to an elite program and being able to lead this team to back-to-back national championship games," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "I hate that it ends on a game like this because you fail to see everything they did to get to this point."

Notre Dame returns just two starters, Diggins and McBride, but McGraw said several bench players are ready to step into larger roles next season.

Diggins added that her role as a leader will also expand as Notre Dame's lone returning senior starter and its top scorer.

"I've got to be a better job being a leader," she said. "I thought I didn't have very good leadership there tonight as far as keeping our fire, but I'll be better. I promise."

Contact Chris Masoud at
cmasoud@nd.edu

By the numbers

- 1
- Baylor becomes the first team in NCAA basketball history to win 40 games in one season while going undefeated on the year.
- 17
- Points scored by Brittney Griner in the second half. Griner finished with 26 points, 13 rebounds and five blocks and earned MVP honors for the national championship.
- 46
- Rebounds by Baylor, compared to Notre Dame's 27. The Lady Bears also recorded 16 offensive rebounds, compared to Notre Dame's nine.
- 0
- Shots made by senior guard Natalie Novosel in the game. The guard went 0-for-11 against the solid Baylor defense in 30 minutes of play.
- 3
- The Baylor lead with 15:09 left in the second half before graduate student forward Devereaux Peters picked up her fourth foul and went to the bench.
- 63
- Percent shooting for Baylor in the second half. The Lady Bears ended the game shooting 50 percent on 29-of-58 shooting.
- 6
- The number of wins Baylor had this season over teams ranked in the top-10 in the polls.
- 2
- Consecutive years the Irish have lost to a Texas team in the national championship game while wearing green.
- 1,038
- The attendance at the Purcell Pavilion for the national championship game watch.
- 117
- Wins by the senior class of Natalie Novosel, Brittany Mallory, Devereaux Peters and Fraderica Miller.



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Baylor deserved win, but ND will be back

DENVER — Last year Notre Dame ran into a buzzsaw. Texas A&M had beaten Baylor and Stanford on its way to the championship game. This year, Notre Dame hit a brick wall in the form of 6-foot-8 Brittney Griner and Baylor.

Matthew Robison
Sports Writer

When it boils down, Baylor was the better team Tuesday. There is absolutely no doubt about that. The Lady Bears solidified their year-long assertion they are the best team in the country. While the pressure should have been entirely on Baylor, Notre Dame was the team who came out tight. Devereaux Peters picked up two quick fouls, Natalie Novosel could not hit a shot and no one beside Skylar Diggins or Kayla McBride looked willing to step up and make a play. One bright spot was the play of Natalie Achonwa and Markisha Wright, who did everything they could to slow down Griner. But, like Dan Patrick used to

say, you can't stop her, you can only hope to contain her. Griner got hers, as expected — but the Baylor supporting cast stepped up as well. Odyssey Sims effectively controlled the pace and Destiny Williams pounded the offensive glass. There was a question as to whether Griner's physical presence and the Lady Bears' undefeated record created a psychological component to beating Baylor. Looking at the way the Irish played, I don't really think that is a question anymore. The Lady Bears were physically, mentally and psychologically dominant throughout the game. When it all boils down, Baylor simply outperformed Notre Dame. The Lady Bears came ready to play, they executed on their game plan and they made shots. They deserved the title. It is yet to be seen how Notre Dame will recover from a second consecutive loss in the national title game. As heartbroken as the team was last year, this one has to sting even more. The worst part about the loss might be that this was probably Notre Dame's best chance to win a title since 2001.

Before the game against Connecticut, Huskies coach Geno Auriemma said Notre Dame lacked a weakness. The Irish had great guards, a strong corps of seniors

and solid post players. Unfortunately, the pieces just did not fall into place when it mattered most. Diggins has made an incredible impact on the program, but one has to wonder if her legacy will be shadowed if she fails to take home a championship during her career. Undoubtedly, Mallory, Peters and Novosel all had tremendous careers. But none of them have quite the reputation Diggins carries. This generation's great players — Diana Taurasi, Candace Parker, Maya Moore, even Brittney Griner — all have titles. Right or wrong, people will hesitate to put Diggins in that category if she does not win a championship for Notre Dame. There is a bright side to all the heartbreak. Among all the questions, all the uncertainty, one thing is for sure. McGraw has turned the Irish into an elite program. If the play of freshman Wright, sophomore Achonwa and sophomore McBride on Tuesday is any indication, the future of the Irish is blindingly bright. Notre Dame will be back.

Contact Matthew Robison at mrobison@nd.edu
The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP PHOTO GALLERY



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Peters’ foul trouble plagues Irish



Baylor junior center Brittney Griner shoots over Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters during Notre Dame’s 80-61 loss to Baylor on Tuesday. Peters finished with seven points and three rebounds.

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

Trying to beat Baylor in the national championship is tough enough. Trying to beat Baylor with 6-foot-2 graduate student forward Devereaux Peters on the bench for more than half of the game is even tougher.

Early foul trouble for Peters inhibited Notre Dame’s ability to keep up with the Bears’ defense, especially junior center Brittney Griner, for the entirety of the 80-61 Irish loss for the national title at the Pepsi Center in Denver. Peters went to the bench early in the first half, but came back in and helped the Irish climb to a six-point deficit before the break. She sat out again in the second half and the Bears ran away with the lead.

“It was really disappointing that [Peters] got the third foul in the first half,” Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. “That was really disappointing. Because she was why we made that run, having her back in.”

With Notre Dame’s top rebounder off the court for most of the game, Griner flirted with the possibility of a triple-double, put up 26 points for the Bears, had 13 rebounds and made

five steals to wrap up the Bears’ perfect 40-0 season and national championship win.

“When [Griner] got the ball we didn’t lean on her and she shot over us,” McGraw said. “She made great shots, she’s a great player. She was unstoppable.”

“It would have been great to see Devereaux play 39 minutes, but I don’t think it would have changed a lot. [Griner] is one-of-a-kind.”

Throughout the season, Peters averaged 24.5 minutes of play per game, but plagued by fouls in the title game, Peters spent just 15 minutes on the court. During the season she averaged 9.4 rebounds a game overall and 10.9 in the Big East, but grabbed only 3 against the Bears.

“We just couldn’t get key stops when we needed to,” Peters said. “Down three, we give up an offensive rebound, they get a put back. Or we might have a call not go our way and get a foul and then we’re not as aggressive as we normally were. We just were struggling today and it showed.”

Peters went 3-for-5 from the field for a total seven points.

“I thought we did a great job getting [Peters] in foul trouble because

she helped Notre Dame out with rebounds and blocking shots,” Baylor redshirt junior forward Destiny Williams said. “We had to rebound. We couldn’t allow them to get second-chance points. If so, it would have kept them in the game, and we had to limit them to one shot. A couple times they did and they’d score off it. And it’s something that we had to do in order to win.”

Sophomore forward Natalie Achonwa and freshman forward Markisha Wright got a chance to play the position in a national championship situation that does not usually lend itself to much dependence on the bench. But with Peters on the bench, they got prime preparation for their future seasons with the Irish in that role.

Achonwa tied graduate student guard Brittany Mallory in rebounds for the Irish with six.

“I think [foul trouble is] something we’ve had to deal with before,” Peters said. “It wasn’t that difficult. It’s a position we’ve been in. We’re fighters. We never quit. We’ve never been that type of team.”

Contact Molly Sammon at
msammon@nd.edu

NOTES

Quartet caps historic tenure at ND

By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Sports Writer

DENVER — Graduate students Devereaux Peters and Brittany Mallory and seniors Natalie Novosel and Fraderica Miller leave Notre Dame as one of its most accomplished classes. The foursome compiled 142 wins and one Big East regular season title, while reaching four Sweet Sixteens, two Final Fours and two National Championships in their combined five seasons.

“I’m just completely just so proud of them and what we’ve done this year and how we fought back,” Peters said. “Even this game we didn’t quit throughout the game. I’m just happy for them and for what we’ve accomplished in our careers. Not many people can say what we’ve done.”

Back-to-back national runner-up

Notre Dame has now lost back-to-back national championship games, falling to Baylor 80-61 after losing to Texas A&M 76-70 in 2011. Notre Dame became the third team to do so, join-

ing Tennessee in 2003 and 2004 and Auburn in 1988, 1989 and 1990.

“I feel a little numb right now,” Novosel said. “To get all the way back to this point, it hurts the most because we came up short once again. To come all this way, especially as a senior, and wanting and willing a sense of urgency to come back this whole way and to not be able to come out on top against is what hurts the most.”

Senior-itis

Devereaux Peters was on the floor for just 15 minutes and played in foul trouble all night, finishing with four fouls. Her regular-season average was 24.5 minutes per game.

Natalie Novosel failed to record a field goal Tuesday, finishing 0-for-11 from the floor and five-for-eight on free throws. Novosel led Notre Dame in scoring with 28 points in its Nov. 20 loss to Baylor.

“I was trying to get confidence baskets, trying to get a layup or get to the line, and even my free throws weren’t going in,” Novosel said. “I thought they

did a really good job on me defensively, not helping off me at all so I could get a clean look at the basket. They always had a hand in my face.”

Big time on the big stage

Baylor junior center Brittney Griner registered 26 points, 13 rebounds and five blocks in the win, earning herself the title of Final Four Most Outstanding Player. Prior to the contest, Griner was named the Associated Press Player of the Year, the Naismith Player of the Year and the Wade Trophy winner.

“Brittany Griner comes to work every day,” Baylor coach Kim Mulkey said. “A lot of great players think they’re all that and they half go through drills and they come to practice and they dog it. That child comes to work and brings her work pail every day.”

Sports writer Kelsey Manning also contributed to this report.

Contact Chris Masoud at
cmasoud@nd.edu



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Title game heartbreak

A dominant performance from Baylor junior center Brittney Griner handed Notre Dame a loss in the national championship game for the second straight season. Lady Bears sophomore forward Odyssey Sims added 19 points of her own and Notre Dame All-American Skylar Diggins scored 20 points as Baylor built a second-half lead and cruised to an 80-61 victory.



PAT COVENEY/The Observer



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Clockwise from top: Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel rises for a shot attempt; Baylor guard Odyssey Sims shoots from the corner; Baylor center Brittney Griner blocks an Irish shot attempt; Notre Dame junior guard Skylar Diggins attempts a shot over Griner; Irish coach Muffet McGraw cries during the postgame press conference.