

IRISH INSIDER

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RISING ABOVE EXPECTATIONS

Young Irish team overcomes early obstacles,
advances to fifth consecutive Final Four

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Jodi Lo and Erin Rice

FRESH IDENTITY,



JODI LO | The Observer

Notre Dame sophomore forward Taya Reimer looks for a pass down low in a 68-52 Irish victory over Louisville on Feb. 23 at Purcell Pavilion.



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish freshman forward Brianna Turner, guarded by Baylor junior guard Niya Johnson, decides her next move during Notre Dame's 77-68 win over the Lady Bears on Sunday.

By **MARY GREEN**
Assistant Managing Editor

At the beginning of the season, Irish head coach Muffet McGraw seemed to slip one particular phrase into every one of her press conferences.

"Take some lumps" — that's how she described her expectations for Notre Dame's upcoming season.

The Irish had advanced to four straight Final Fours, but McGraw wasn't about to book her team's tickets to Tampa, Florida, just yet. There were too many question marks and unsettled areas.

"We're going to take some lumps early, and we're going to have a lot of games that could go either way, and we'll see what happens," McGraw said Nov. 12. "We over-achieved last year. This year, I really mean it: We're gonna take some lumps early.

"I mean, we really are young. We're so different from last year. We just don't know what's gonna happen late in a game, when adversity hits, when we get down, when we get in foul trouble, when things start to spiral in the wrong direction."

For one, the starting lineup looked a little different than it had the year before, when the Irish finished the regular season undefeated and suffered their only loss of the year in the national championship game.

"When you lose two first-round draft picks, three starters and a ton of experience, I

don't think you go into the season thinking, "This is our national championship team," McGraw said in a teleconference Wednesday.

Those two first-round picks in last year's WNBA Draft, guard Kayla McBride and forward Natalie Achonwa, averaged a combined 32.5 points and 13.0 rebounds per game in their senior year.

Even more so, they and classmate Ariel Braker represented experience in the starting five — each played significant minutes for the Irish, with McBride (29.4 minutes per game) leading the way, followed by Achonwa (25.4) and Braker (17.0).

The other two starters, junior guard Jewell Loyd and sophomore guard Lindsay Allen, returned, but Loyd, a 2014 second-team AP All-American, was about the only surefire thing on the roster.

Allen's role at point guard during her freshman year centered primarily on handling the ball, dishing it out to teammates and keeping her turnovers down. This year, McGraw said she asked Allen to do more to fill in for the graduated players.

"Coming into the season, we talked to Lindsay and told her she's going to have to score a little bit more," McGraw said Wednesday. "This year, she's got to score more and be more vocal, and she's been able to do that."

Irish coaches then had to fill out the rest of the starting

five. They settled on one lineup for the season opener and have stuck to it in nearly every game since: Loyd, Allen, junior guard Michaela Mabrey, sophomore forward Taya Reimer and freshman forward Brianna Turner — with the latter three combining for seven career starts in a Notre Dame uniform.

With such a young and inexperienced group, McGraw questioned her team's toughness in early contests.

But after a sweep of the ACC regular season and tournament titles, the head coach said her expectations had been met.

"I think they've definitely reached that level and then some," McGraw said last Saturday. "I think we've seen that in a lot of games in the ACC. We saw that in our DePaul game up in Chicago, which was shortly after the first loss of the season. So I think they really showed a lot of resilience, but particularly in the posts.

"I think our guards are pretty tough. They've been tough all year long, but I think the post was where we were questioning it, and they definitely have come along and come a long way."

McGraw pointed to two games in particular that served as the season's turning points. The first came against DePaul on Dec. 10, just four days after the Irish had suffered their first defeat of the season at the hands of then-No. 3 Connecticut and

a week after they had topped then-No. 15 Maryland — both of which join Notre Dame in the Final Four this weekend,

along with South Carolina. Notre Dame trailed the Blue Demons for most of that matchup in Chicago before



WEI LIN | The Observer

Irish head coach Muffet McGraw observes her team's offense during Notre Dame's win over DePaul in the NCAA tournament March 22.

SAME GOAL



WEI LIN | The Observer

Notre Dame junior guard Michaela Mabrey pulls up just past midcourt in the 79-67 Irish win over DePaul in the second round of the NCAA tournament on March 22.



SARAH OLSON | The Observer

Irish junior guard Jewell Loyd sidesteps a Duke defender during Notre Dame's 63-50 victory against the Blue Devils on Feb. 16 at Purcell Pavilion.

forcing overtime and escaping with the 94-93 victory, solidified by two free throws from Loyd with 5.3 seconds

left for the tie and the win. The junior scorched the DePaul defense for a career-high 41 points to ensure the

Irish didn't fall in a second straight game.

However, Notre Dame did end up falling a second time

on the season in the other matchup McGraw called a tipping point. In a 78-63 loss to unranked Miami (Fla.) on Jan. 8, the Irish scrapped together a lackluster performance on both sides of the floor and never seemed to get in a rhythm against the Hurricanes.

"We played about as poorly as we could possibly play," McGraw said Wednesday of the Miami loss. "Worst game of the year — shot about 25 percent from the field and didn't defend, and so many things went wrong in that game. So I think to come back from that debacle and win out the rest of the year, I think that shows that we did get a lot tougher."

Since that point, there has been no looking back for the Irish squad, which is currently riding a 21-game win streak.

Notre Dame cruised through the ACC tournament, with an average margin of victory of nearly 12 points, and has looked just as dominant in the NCAA tournament, in which it has bested No. 16 seed Montana, No. 9 seed DePaul, No. 4 seed Stanford and No. 2 seed Baylor.

After the win over Baylor on Sunday to advance to a fifth-straight Final Four, McGraw said she had never experienced a run quite like this one.

"We had to work the hardest to get to this one," she said Sunday. "I thought we

lost so much from last year, and we've lost really good players throughout the years, but last year's experience and not having any senior starters, you know, you just didn't know how the season was going to unfold.

"We had so many tough games. I think we played the toughest schedule in the country, so we learned a lot throughout it. I thought they came into practice every day ready to learn, but I still felt we were going to take some lumps at some point, so when we kept on winning, it just really built our confidence."

Now that her team has exceeded its early-season expectations, McGraw said it will keep trying to reach its goals for one final weekend.

"I think we go into the Final Four with an attitude of, we're going to do what we do," she said Wednesday. "We're going to work hard. We have an attitude that we think we can win. At the end, we have four of the best teams in the country. We've had some really close games. We've lost some heartbreakers. We've had some success in the semifinals.

"But I don't think we go in thinking we've got to win this one. We're just going in and playing our game."

So far, playing their game has worked out for the Irish — whether that success was expected or not.

Contact Mary Green at mgreen8@nd.edu

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Multiplayer attack fuels Irish offense



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish junior guard Jewell Loyd drives past Baylor redshirt sophomore guard Alexis Prince in Notre Dame's 77-68 win in the Elite Eight.

By SAMANTHA ZUBA
Senior Sports Writer

The No. 1 seed Irish have made the Final Four for the fifth straight year. But Notre Dame looks a little different this season.

This team is younger. It has improved perhaps more than any of the most recent five Notre Dame teams to make the Final Four, Irish head coach Muffet McGraw said Wednesday during the Final Four coaches teleconference. And it is more balanced.

"We've had so many different people," McGraw said. "I think that's also another difference from years past. We relied on our All-Americans in years past, and I feel like this year, everybody that's in the game can contribute."

Junior guard Jewell Loyd topped many box scores this season on her way to averaging 19.9 points per game and

first-team All-America honors from the Associated Press (AP), United States Basketball Writers Association and John R. Wooden Award. But the Irish (35-2, 15-1 ACC) proved their depth over the course of the season — four players average in double-figure points per game.

The NCAA tournament has been no exception.

Loyd scored a team-high 18 points in Notre Dame's 77-43 first-round win over Montana. But then junior guard Michaela Mabrey led the way with sharp 3-point shooting in the second round against DePaul. Sophomore guard Lindsay Allen posted the most points for the Irish in their two most recent wins, over No. 4 seed Stanford in the Sweet 16 and No. 2 seed Baylor in the Elite Eight.

Last season, Notre Dame wanted Allen to focus on having "a

2-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio" as a first-year point guard, McGraw said. Her role has expanded this season as she was recognized Tuesday with honorable mention All-America honors from the AP.

"She's looking to score more and doing more in transition, and she's been really successful," McGraw said. "I think it's helped our offense tremendously."

The Irish have seen their post players grow this season and contribute to the team's depth as well. Freshman forwards Brianna Turner and Kathryn Westbeld have been productive, Turner as a starter and Westbeld as one of Notre Dame's primary bench players.

Turner received recognition Tuesday as an honorable mention All-American along with Allen.

"She always wants to know what she can do differently and how she can attack things

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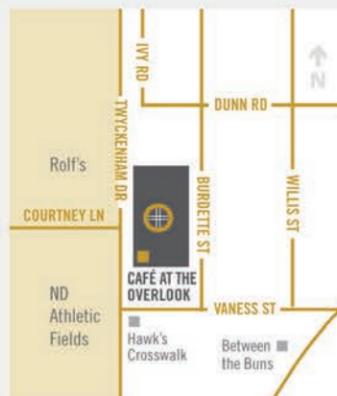
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differently,” McGraw said of Turner. “She watches a lot of film. I’m so pleased with her progress. She’s really overachieved for us this year, and we’re excited about her future.”

Sophomore forward Taya Reimer has helped the freshmen forwards develop in addition to improving her own game, McGraw said.

“I think that consistency is one of the strengths that she’s had,” McGraw said. “I think she also brings a lot of physical play around the basket in terms of both offensively and defensively. I think she’s really smart. She’s kind of stepped up as a leader in the post as a sophomore, helping Kathryn and Brianna. So she’s taken on a little bit of a leadership and mentoring role.”

Senior guard Madison Cable has provided the Irish with scrappy minutes off the bench as part of an involved Notre Dame reserve corps. Four players other than the five regular starters have

averaged double-figure minutes this year.

So far, it all has added up to a Final Four berth. Playing as a team has helped the Irish come back from some tough spots over the course of the season, McGraw said.

Notre Dame played from behind in the NCAA tournament against both DePaul and Baylor but came out as winners. The Irish also rebounded from their two regular-season losses to Connecticut and Miami.

“It’s been a great group to work with,” McGraw said. “They are just relentless, and they never quit. We’ve been down in a lot of games, and they just keep stepping up.”

Notre Dame tips off its Final Four matchup against No. 1 seed South Carolina at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida.

Contact Samantha Zuba at szuba@nd.edu



EMILY MCCONVILLE | The Observer

Notre Dame freshman forward Brianna Turner leaps to fire a contested shot over Wake Forest senior forward Dearica Hamby during a 92-63 Irish home victory over the Demon Deacons on Feb. 1.

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ERIN RICE | The Observer

CONNECTICUT

No. 1 overall seed Connecticut arrives in Tampa, Florida, seeking its third straight NCAA title and head coach Geno Auriemma's 10th career championship, and the Huskies are heavy favorites to do just that.

The team leads the NCAA in both scoring offense and defense, with a scoring margin (41.9) not far off from the points it allows per game (48.2). In addition, the Huskies top the country in five other major statistical categories.

Powered by defending AP Player of the Year and Naismith Trophy winner junior forward Breanna Stewart, the Connecticut lineup features two other All-Americans in senior forward Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis and junior guard Moriah Jefferson and an honorable mention in sophomore forward Morgan Tuck.

In the Sweet 16, the Huskies topped fifth-seeded Texas, 105-54. It was the largest margin of victory in any NCAA regional semifinal game ever. However, just two days later, they struggled to separate themselves from seventh-seeded Dayton, which entered halftime up by one before falling back in the second half.

Connecticut's lone loss this year came against Stanford back in November. The 88-86 defeat came in overtime and on the road. Since then, the Huskies have reeled off 35 straight wins.



Greg Hadley
Editor-in-Chief

Four top seeds won all four games each to make it to the Final Four. So far, so predictable.

But now is when things get interesting. Maryland is the only team left Connecticut hasn't beaten. Notre Dame and South Carolina were both thrashed by the Huskies, but Connecticut also looked surprisingly vulnerable in the Elite Eight against lowly Dayton. Then again, the Huskies also won by epic proportions in the Sweet 16 against Texas.

Connecticut's three-peat is not as secure as some, including myself, first thought. Look at what the Flyers did offensively, pushing the pace to breakneck speeds and making every possible shot. If any other team can do that and sustain it for two halves, it's the nation's fifth-best offense: Notre Dame.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame defeats Connecticut in the title game.

MARYLAND

If anything is certain about this year's Final Four, it's that the Maryland squad Notre Dame met in December isn't the same Terrapins team that had advanced to the tournament's final weekend.

The Irish earned a dominating 92-72 victory over Maryland on Dec. 3, which came on the heels of a Terrapins loss to Washington State four days before.

Since then, however, Maryland has won 28 straight games en route to capturing a Big Ten title and Spokane, Washington, regional crown in the NCAA tournament with a 58-48 win over Tennessee last Monday. It earned a 27-2 record in the regular season, including a perfect 18-0 mark in conference play.

Maryland had relied on three-time ACC Player of the Year Alyssa Thomas to carry the load on offense and defense for the past four seasons.

After Thomas' graduation, the Terrapins are led this year by sophomore guards Lexie Brown, a third-team AP All-American, and Shatori Walker-Kimbrough, an honorable mention AP All-American, along with red-shirt senior guard Laurin Mincy.

Mincy's 13.8 points per game are tops on the team, while Walker-Kimbrough (13.5) and Brown (13.4) are close behind to make up Maryland's balanced offensive attack. Sophomore center Brionna Jones also averages 12.3 per game.

Jones leads the Terrapins on the boards with 9.0 rebounds per game and has recorded 14 double-doubles this season, three of those coming in the NCAA tournament.



Mary Green
Assistant Managing Editor

Muffet McGraw said she wanted Lindsay Allen to be more than a facilitator this year, and Allen's done just that lately, flashing her shooting touch to lead the Irish past Stanford and Baylor.

While Jewell Loyd had a strong second-half against the Cardinal, she still has not performed to her full potential this tournament, and that should set off alarms in the South Carolina, Connecticut and Maryland locker rooms.

An Irish backcourt with Allen in the zone and Loyd playing at her best is, well, scary.

Those two guards always show up to play when the stakes are highest, and that should be enough for Notre Dame to overcome any size disadvantages down low.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame defeats Connecticut in the title game.

SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina is on the rise, having made its first Final Four in program history.

The signs from the 2013-14 season already pointed up.

Last season, the Gamecocks advanced to the Sweet 16 and finished with a 29-5 overall record and a 14-2 mark in the SEC.

They lost to North Carolina, 65-58, in the regional semifinal, but despite the tournament loss, South Carolina had reason to stay positive.

A freshman led the Gamecocks in the game against the Tar Heels, as forward Alaina Coates posted a double-double of 22 points and 11 rebounds. Coates was the third-leading scorer last season for South Carolina. None of its top five scorers or top five rebounders were seniors, so all returned for this season.

The Gamecocks averaged 72.9 points per game as a team last season and surrendered 55.8 points per game.

This season, they have improved on both ends. South Carolina has averaged 76.2 points per game in 2014-15 and held opponents to 53.8 points per game. Their only losses this season came against No. 1 Connecticut and No. 11 Kentucky.

Freshman guard/forward A'ja Wilson joined the group of established players and has emerged as the team's second leading scorer with 12.9 points per game off the bench.

Now, with a 34-2 overall record and a 15-1 SEC record, they head to the Final Four.



Samantha Zuba
Senior Sports Writer

The No. 2 Irish have come a long way since losing to No. 1 Connecticut, 76-58, on Dec. 6.

They didn't have freshman forward and rebounding leader Brianna Turner, out with a shoulder injury for that game. They didn't have the cohesion they have now. Their freshman didn't have the experience they have now.

The Irish have gotten hot at the right time. They've been rolling since the ACC tournament, which they won with a 71-58 statement victory over No. 7 Florida State.

They had to play from behind against DePaul and Baylor in the NCAA tournament, but they've demonstrated their ability to stay cool under pressure, all the way to the Final Four.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame defeats Connecticut in the title game.

NOTRE DAME

Going into its fifth Final Four in as many years, No. 2 Notre Dame is hoping for a different NCAA tournament outcome than last year's 79-58 defeat to Connecticut in the title game, despite the graduation of standout players Natalie Achonwa and Kayla McBride.

Notre Dame (35-2, 15-1 ACC) hasn't lost since Jan. 8 in what head coach Muffet McGraw called a "debacle" at Miami (Fla.).

Other than that, its only loss was to Connecticut in December, when freshman forward and ACC Freshman of the Year Brianna Turner was unable to play due to injury. Turner leads the team in rebounds and blocks while also boasting the best field-goal percentage in the NCAA at 65.6 percent.

So far in the tourney, Notre Dame has found success by distributing the ball and keeping the offense balanced. When defenses key on national player of the year candidate and junior guard Jewell Loyd, another player steps up her scoring, whether it's Turner, junior guard Michaela Mabrey or sophomore guard Lindsay Allen, as was the case in the regional round.

Loyd was a unanimous selection for the AP All-America team, while Allen and Turner both received honorable mentions.

With a backcourt powered by Loyd and Allen and an inside game controlled by Turner and sophomore forward Taya Reimer, Notre Dame has the No. 5 offense in the NCAA, scoring 80.9 points per game.

Renee Griffin
Sports Writer

With only No. 1 seeds in the Final Four, there's no Cinderella story. However, there are also no guarantees for the remaining teams.

Connecticut, Notre Dame, South Carolina and Maryland have all played well through the regular season and tournament, but no team is unbeatable. The Huskies and Gamecocks both had to come back from halftime deficits in the Elite Eight, while the Irish trailed for nearly 19 minutes of their game. The Terrapins had their lowest-scoring first half of the year.

Connecticut and Notre Dame have been here the most, and their consistency will carry them into the championship. There, an Irish attack at full strength and Notre Dame players hungry for their first title since 2001 will finally dethrone the Huskies.

PREDICTION: Notre Dame defeats Connecticut in the title game.



PROJECTED STARTING LINEUPS

NOTRE DAME

Lindsay Allen

– Sophomore Guard
Scored 51 combined points in Sweet 16 and Elite Eight, AP All-American Honorable Mention.

Jewell Loyd

– Junior Guard
espnW National Player of the Year, ACC Player of the Year, unanimous All-American.

Michaela Mabrey

– Junior Guard
Shoots better from 3-point range (39.2 percent) than the field (38.2).

Taya Reimer

– Sophomore Forward
ACC all-tournament second team.

Brianna Turner

– Freshman Forward
ACC Freshman of the Year, WBCA and AP All-American.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Khadijah Sessions

– Junior Guard
Leads the Gamecocks in steals, second in assists.

Tiffany Mitchell

– Junior Guard
SEC Player of the Year, AP All-American, Finalist for Wooden Award, Naismith Trophy.

Asia Dozier

– Junior Guard
2.1 assist-to-turnover ratio.

Aleighsa Welch

– Senior Forward
First team all-SEC.

A'ja Wilson

– Freshman Forward
Third team All-American, first team all-SEC, SEC Freshman of the Year.

CONNECTICUT

Moriah Jefferson

– Junior Guard
One of five finalists for Nancy Lieberman Award, given to nation's top point guard, second team All-American.

Kia Nurse

– Freshman Guard
AAC Freshman of the Year, fifth in the conference in 3-point percentage.

Breanna Stewart

– Junior Forward
Defending AP National Player of the Year, unanimous All-American.

Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis

– Senior Forward
One of five finalists for Wooden Award, second team All-American.

Morgan Tuck

– Redshirt Sophomore Forward
Led all scorers with 25 points against Notre Dame on Dec. 6, second in AAC in field-goal percentage.

MARYLAND

Laurin Mincy

– Redshirt Senior Guard
Second team all-conference in Big Ten.

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough

– Sophomore Guard
Shoots 52 percent from the field, 80 percent from the free throw line.

Lexie Brown

– Sophomore Guard
All-conference, all-defensive teams in Big Ten, third team All-American.

Malina Howard

– Junior Center
6-foot-4 junior averages 5.9 points, 4.6 rebounds per game.

Brianna Jones

– Sophomore Center
First team all-Big Ten, third in the conference in field-goal percentage.

COMMENTARY



Greg Hadley
Editor-in-Chief

The last two Final Fours, Notre Dame had a clear mission: win one for the seniors. Win one for Skylar or Kayla and Natalie. Top Connecticut for a fourth time or finish off that undefeated season. Don't go home disappointed and defeated. Finish the job.

No such pressure will exist in Tampa, Florida, this year. The Irish are playing with house money, at least as much as any team reaching its fifth straight Final Four can. Connecticut is such an overwhelming favorite, and Notre Dame is young and relatively unexperienced.

The Huskies have already dominated the Irish this season. In fact, they've just about dominated everyone in sight. South Carolina had no chance. The entire American Athletic Conference (AAC) was swept away. Their first three NCAA tournament opponents lost by an average of more than 47 points.

Rest assured, Geno Auriemma and UConn can handle the pressure that comes with being a front runner. They've been there and done it, over and over and over, ad nauseam.

But for an Irish squad still struggling to get over the hump and win its first title in more than a decade, the lack of pressure is a wonderful thing. It's a weight off Muffet McGraw's shoulders, a freedom from urgency that could make a significant difference.

When a team succeeds yet falls short as many times as Notre Dame has the past four years, there is no questioning both its talent and its motivation. But with each passing year, as the Irish watch the championship go to someone else, it is not unreasonable to ask when the pressure to capture that elusive title might finally get to them.

But the Irish don't feel any pressure. Not this year.

With three new starters to begin the season, McGraw hit the reset button on her expectations. Without a definitive senior leader on the court, she said the Irish were bound to experience more difficulty than they had in a long time. For the first season since 2010-2011, it was not, "Championship or bust."

Of course, when Brianna Turner and Taya Reimer came

to Notre Dame, they certainly expected to compete for championships every year. But the fact that McGraw was willing to ease her demanding standards, even by the smallest of margins, meant her team could play relaxed and comfortable basketball, not paralyzed with fear of ever making a mistake.

That is where the Irish stand this weekend. They are experienced enough not to be overwhelmed by the big stage but young enough to know this is not their final shot. But does that mean they can finally win a national championship?

Any argument for the Irish winning based on the fact that they are the overwhelming underdogs with nothing to lose can be countered by the simple fact that Connecticut is the favorite for a reason, just as there is a reason youthful teams like Notre Dame are not expected to succeed: They typically don't. Connecticut has earned the respect of every fan, coach and player in the game.

But respect does not equate to fear. And Notre Dame can enter this Final Four without fear. McGraw's squad does not need to win to have had a successful season. And, ironically enough, that may be the reason the Irish could win. If they can ignore the weight of recent history and push past the media accounts of their epic rivalry with the Huskies, if they can play freely, they have a chance.

But if they allow themselves to get swept up in the heady excitement of the Final Four, if they start thinking about the historic implications an NCAA title would have, the Irish could just as easily find themselves on the losing end of a national semifinal against a very dangerous South Carolina team.

What Notre Dame is playing for this year is not as clear as seasons past. It's a fine balance between using history as motivation and simply playing for oneself. It's a mind game that gets more difficult the longer you think about it.

Contact Greg Hadley at ghadley@nd.edu

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

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South Carolina awaits Notre Dame in semifinal

By **RENEE GRIFFIN**
Sports Writer

No. 2 Notre Dame faces No. 3 South Carolina on Sunday at 6:30 p.m. in Tampa, Florida, with the Irish making their fifth consecutive appearance in the Final Four while the matchup marks the first semifinal appearance for the Gamecocks.

Both teams are top seeds, as are the other two teams in the Final Four, No. 1 Connecticut and No. 4 Maryland. However, their victories to make it this far did not come easily.

Notre Dame (35-2, 15-1 ACC) was trailing second-seeded Baylor for a considerable amount of time in Sunday's 77-68 Elite Eight win, while South Carolina (34-2, 15-1 SEC) had to come from behind to defeat No. 2 seed Florida State, 80-74.

"This is one of the best tournaments we've had in terms of parity," Irish head coach Muffet McGraw said. "I feel like there were so many great games throughout the tournament, there were great games. The one seeds advanced, but we all had games, maybe three of us had games, where we were in a really good game, in a really good battle."

South Carolina could cause the Irish trouble, McGraw said, due to its size in the post combined with the presence of All-American junior guard Tiffany Mitchell.

"They are so strong in the post and their depth – you can't even think about getting them into foul trouble because they just have so many people they can bring in off the bench," McGraw said. "And then they've got Tiffany Mitchell, obviously first-team All-American and one of the best guards in the country. They've got good shooters and great team speed. They play really hard defensively, they pressure so well, and again they don't have to worry about foul trouble."

McGraw said adjusting and adapting the defense to limit the strengths of the Gamecocks' attack would be key to the Irish strategy.

"We've got a lot of different ideas of things we want to try

to do. We have to try absolutely everything," McGraw said. "If you saw the beginning of the Baylor game, I think we played six different defenses before halftime. So we're going to throw everything we can at them and see how the matchups look."

"We are a man-to-man team so that is our primary defense. Offensively, we're just going to run our stuff same as we do every other game. Defensively is where I think we'll really be challenged."

Freshman forward Brianna Turner has played a crucial role in keeping Notre Dame's inside game competitive, leading the team in blocks and rebounds. She and sophomore forward Taya Reimer, who McGraw called "maybe



KAT ROBINSON | The Observer

Irish senior guard Madison Cable tries to cut by Pittsburgh guard Fred Potvin during Notre Dame's 87-59 win over the Panthers on Feb. 26 at Purcell Pavilion.

see S CAROLINA **PAGE 9**

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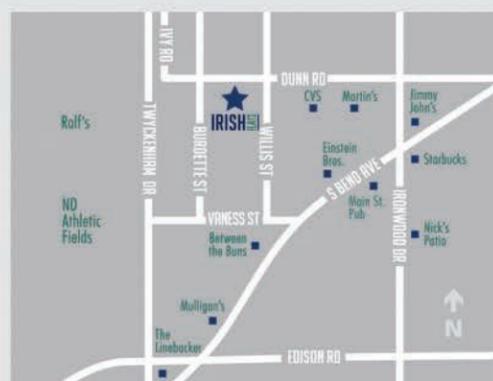
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JODI LO | The Observer

Irish sophomore forward Taya Reimer starts her dribble after collecting a rebound during Notre Dame's 77-68 win over Baylor in the Elite Eight on Sunday in Oklahoma City.

S Carolina

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

our most consistent player," will combat the Gamecocks' frontcourt.

"Brianna ... does a lot defensively just with her presence inside because of what she's able to do," McGraw said. "But to match up with South Carolina, they've got a lot more bulk than I think she does. They're a little bit bigger. I think it's going to be interesting. They have a little more experience."

To reach this point in the tournament, South Carolina had to go through North Carolina and Florida State in the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight, respectively. Notre Dame previously defeated both of those ACC teams this year, with an 89-79 victory over the Tar Heels on Jan. 15 and a 71-58 win over Florida State for the ACC title.

"[South Carolina is] a really difficult matchup for us. Obviously we played North Carolina and Florida State, two teams that they played, so we got a little bit of a look at how they match up with teams we're familiar with, but I don't know how much

that helps with the scouting report," McGraw said. "We've done a lot of homework on South Carolina, and I think then it comes time to step back and look at ourselves."

McGraw said this Final Four feels far different from her first, or even the one five years ago. The experience Notre Dame has at this level could factor into the outcome of the game against newcomer South Carolina, she said.

"I think it helps to know what to expect, especially with all of the things that you have to do outside of your own practice and playing the games," McGraw said. "It's very time consuming and it's a little draining mentally, I think sometimes too. But when it's your first one, you're so excited to be there and do all of it that it's actually sometimes probably easier for the first-timers because everything's different, everything's fun, everything's new."

The Final Four showdown between the Irish and Gamecocks takes place at Amalie Arena in Tampa, at 6:30 p.m. Sunday.

Contact Renee Griffin at rgriffi6@nd.edu



JODI LO | The Observer

ESPN's LaChina Robinson interviews Irish head coach Muffet McGraw during Notre Dame's Elite Eight win over Baylor.

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JODI LO | The Observer

Irish head coach Muffet McGraw, far left, and Notre Dame's bench cheer on their teammates during Sunday's Elite Eight win over Baylor in Oklahoma City.



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish freshman forward Brianna Turner battles for a loose ball with Baylor sophomore forward Nina Davis in the Elite Eight.



JODI LO | The Observer

The Irish pose with the regional championship trophy after topping Baylor in the Elite Eight, 77-68, on Sunday. Notre Dame now plays South Carolina in the Final Four this weekend.



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish junior guard Jewell Loyd cuts down the net following Notre Dame's 77-68 win over Baylor in the Elite Eight.



JODI LO | The Observer

Irish senior guard Madison Cable stays in front of Baylor junior guard Niya Johnson during Notre Dame's 77-68 win over the Lady Bears in the Elite Eight on Sunday in Oklahoma City.

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