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 on 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.

The community didn’t stop talking about the women’s basketball team, either. The women’s basketball team has been an oversight, but certainly one indicative of the city’s love of basketball. Late in the season, the team truly belongs to South Bend and the surrounding area. It belongs to the students, who proudly wear their Leprechaun Legion t-shirts and pack the arena, chanting cheers specific to each opposing team.

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They’re our sixth man, they said. “They’re our sixth man, and 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 their team. Many fans have followed her career for years.

Senior guard Melissa Donnet 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.

“If the Irish advance, they will see 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.”

Contact Jared Jedick at jjedick@nd.edu

This is the first time in team history that three Notre Dame teams have received this honor in the same season. The heroes 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 freshmen this year to earn the honor along with Delaware forward Elena Done and Baylor center Brittney Griner.

“It’s a big accomplishment for me,” Diggins said. “She has really had a fantastic year and wants to get better. I think after last year, we’re going to really concentrate on Cleveland State,” McGraw said. “We had a great season,” Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. “But the second season starts now, and we want to have a really 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 it’s going to take,” McGraw said. “I want to make sure we win the tournament, and we might have to win it just the way we won it last year, putting an early end to their tournament hopes.

The Irish have an overall record of 28-5 and the team is 15-4 in ACC games. The team is coming off a 86-57 win over the automatic bid.

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Three players named All-Region

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

By JARED JEDICK
Senior Staff Writer

I agree with Diggins. It’s always been lowed her career for years. Cleveland State’s first-round game against the Irish last Saturday was a one-point game,” McGraw said. “It was a one-point game when the crowd was quiet, and a one-point game when the crowd was not going to be on our side, and this crowd is so electric.”

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Contact Jared Jedick at jjedick@nd.edu
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 were no confetti pouring from the ceiling, no unruly fans rushing the home court — just a first-round defeat at the hands of the 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 2009-10 team, new 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 disappointed with the way we went out," Schrader said. "And good thing we didn't have those four 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 keep the home court — just a first-round victory over Notre Dame's 97-53 victory over Indianapolis in a preseason game. A 'sense of urgency' in terms of "This is our last game," senior guard Ashley Barlow said. "We've got 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 forceful competitors, two unselfish distributors, and a motivator that brings out the best in each of them.

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

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

Ashley Barlow senior guard

"Last year we lacked that sense of urgency in terms of 'This is our last game,' because we had no one graduating."

Erica Williamson senior forward

"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 gave the game-winning 3 after missing her previous four attempts. She was a great personality, and obviously everyone sees what she does on the court," senior guard Melissa Lechlitner said. "She brings such a positive energy, grabbing that huge rebound or making that clutch shot. Just the epitome of what a senior should do.

"She's really stepped up and is always doing everything she can for the team," Williamson said. "She's really stepped up and is always doing everything she can for the team, that's my bread and butter right now," Lindsay Schrader senior guard

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

Seth McConnell/The Observer

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

"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.""I think the steady hand that we offer for them allows them to play within themselves and excel from that point." 

Melissa Lechlitner senior guard

"I thought the steady hand that we offer for them allows them to play within themselves and excel from that point."

Lindsay Schrader senior guard

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

"She's the heart and soul 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 strict reduction in playing time this season due to the emergence of junior forwards Becca Bruszewski and Devereaux Peters into players of the post. Despite the obvious temptation to throw in the towel, Williamson has taken the high road.

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"I thought the steady hand that we offer for them allows them to play within themselves and excel from that point."
The Observer

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.