IRISH INSIDER

Friday, March 19, 2010

THE OBSERVER

Photo Illustration by Pat Conway and Jaclyn Espinoza

LAST CHANCE TO DANCE
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DOMINIC CALABRO/The Observer

Senior guard Ashley Barlow dribbles the ball during Notre Dame's 97-53 victory over Indianapolis in a preseason game.

**A 'sense of urgency'
Leading Notre Dame's attack, five seniors get their final crack at the NCAA Tournament**

By CHRIS MASoud
Sports Writer

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

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

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

Yet with no seniors on the 2009-10 team, no tears of disappointment were shed. Watching the Sweet 16 bid be decided on their home court could have been a demoralizing experience, but the desire to make a return was fueled that day.

“Last year we lacked that sense of urgency in terms of ‘This is our last game because we had no one graduating,’” senior guard Ashley Barlow said. “We’re going to go out and play to the best of our ability.

They are a unit of five seniors. Or maybe three guards, a forward, and a hybrid that can play any position on the floor. Or maybe two fierce competitors, two unselfish distributors, and a motivator that brings out the best in everyone, Barlow said.

No. 10-seed Minnesota in the Sweet 16 in 2008. However, that includes four tournament appearances and a trip to the Sweet 16 in 2008. However, they still have some unfinished business.

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“I just want to make it to San Antonio, that’s my bread and butter right now,” Lindsay Schrader, the game-winning 3 after missing her previous four attempts, said. “I brought in a lot of great personality, and obviously everyone sees what she does on that court,” senior guard Melissa Lechlitner said. “She brings so much. She’s just grabbing that huge rebound or making that difficult block, just the epitome of what a senior should do.”

Barlow brings a unique set of skills to the floor that gives Irish coach Muffet McGraw an arsenal of plays and styles to keep the opposition on its heels. Perhaps just as important, practicing and playing in the Big East together for four years has given the seniors a familiarity that will help them put on a show.

But Schrader is the key to the team's success. She is the seniors’ ability to develop the freshmen and sophomores into legitimate competitors on both ends of the court.

Gardener, who has turned one of the best freshman campaigns in program history, and it’s not over. McGraw credits Diggins’ rapid development as a major reason Notre Dame ended the season as the No. 2 seed in the East Second Team honor. It’s the experience and maturity that every coach craves in a senior.

Schrader said that any given player on this team can step up and hit a big shot. Despite the obvious temptation to throw in the towel, Williams has taken the high road.

“They’re really stepped up and is always doing everything she can for the team,” Muffet McGraw said. “She’s proba- bly one of the most selfless players on this team and will put her body on the line and do whatever she needs to do to help us be suc- cessful.”

Walk-ons seldom get playing time at the collegiate level. Senior guard Morgan Christiansen is no exception, yet she has managed to posi- tion herself in a rarely appreciated position.

“They’re on the outside looking in and they’re working on something or an opportunity to play in the tournament. Schrader now looks forward to a second chance at defending the home floor.

“I was very disappointed,” Lechlitner said. “I just wish I could have done more to help.”

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“She’s ‘the heart and soul’ of this team,” Williamson said. “She’s the heart and soul. She’s got that ‘swagger’ that Notre Dame has. That’s our style. We’re going to go to San Antonio.”

A starter for the majority of her career, Williamson has been a steady presence in playing time this season due to the emergence of junior forwards Becca Bruszewski and Bevereaux Peters into players on this team and will still have her body on the line and do whatever she needs to do to help us be suc- cessful.”

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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.

**Predicting the NCAA run**

Laura Myers

**Prediction:** Notre Dame loses to Stanford in semifinals

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.

Chris Masoud

**Prediction:** Notre Dame loses to Stanford in semifinals

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.

Jared Jedick

**Prediction:** Notre Dame loses to Connecticut in championship game

The Irish may be pleased with this draw — if the two face each other in the Elite Eight, it will not be their first time. Notre Dame defeated Oklahoma 81-71 on a neutral floor on Nov. 28. However, the Sooners have had a strong season and could still present a challenge.

Irish coach Muffet McGraw said her team was just one of the 63 who were undoubtedly hoping not to be put into the same bracket as No. 1 Connecticut. Notre Dame, at least, got its wish and will not have to face the Huskies unless both squads make it to the title game in San Antonio. Freshman guard Skylar Diggins said the two will meet, “If everything goes as planned.”