DRIVING IT HOME

Senior guard Natalie Novosel’s aggressive style sustains the Irish as they make another run at the Final Four.
Irish ready to reach consecutive Final Fours

Six points. That is how close Notre Dame came to winning a national championship last season. Six points. The Irish did the seemingly impossible. They knocked off both Tennessee and Connecticut in consecutive games to advance to the national championship game. Forty minutes of basketball against Texas A&M was all Notre Dame had to show for itself. The Irish fell short. Six points. Undoubtedly, the loss haunts coach Muffet McGraw and the entire Notre Dame women’s basketball program. The Irish have become what are expected to win. The Irish were under-seeded, and it was never their day. On top of holding the No. 1 seed in the bracket, the Irish were given a favorable draw. It may be demanding too much. Should the Irish beat No. 5 St. Bonaventure in the regional semifinal, the possibility of a rematch with Texas A&M awaits. The No. 2 seed is Maryland, the ACC champion. Losing to any of those teams would be unacceptable with the degree of excellence McGraw demands. The future is certainly bright for Notre Dame, but the present is just as uncertain.

Every year, the challenge of winning a national championship will get harder. The parity that was once lacking in collegiate women’s basketball is developing. One game in particular points to that trend. In the Des Moines bracket, No. 11 Kansas knocked off No. 3 Delaware. Delaware is a parity to parity for two reasons: Delaware, a mid-major team, locked up a No. 3 seed in the bracket, and Kansas advanced to the Sweet 16 thanks to Natalie Novosel finishing with 28 points. Women’s basketball is becoming a more dynamic game. In that respect, there is no better time for Notre Dame to capitalize and take home another national title. It’s Denver or bust. The time is now.

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

Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins dribbles the ball during Notre Dame's 66-47 victory over Providence at Purcell Pavilion on February 14 in South Bend, Indiana. Diggins had 29 points and five assists in the game.

Bonnie stand in way of Elite Eight

Top-seeded Notre Dame knows the route to Sweet 16, a test to itself in this week’s regional semifinal in Raleigh, N.C. Its third appearance in three years this far in the tournament. But its next opponent, fifth-seeded St. Bonaventure, is a new challenge for the Irish.

“The Sweet 16 is where we expect to be every year, and now from here on out anything can happen,” Irish coach Muffet McGraw said.

Not only is this year the Bonnies’ first time to compete at the regional semifinal level, this is the first year they have qualified for the national tournament.

“We look at the opportunities that you look and you have not heard a lot about them, so it is easy to look past them,” Peters said. “I think that we are just going to concentrate on the next game.”

But this is a really good team. They’re number one in the country. They’re number two in the country. They don’t turn the ball over and they shoot it really well. They have the No. 1 three-point shooter in the country.”

The Irish and Bonnies share an identical 33-1 record heading into their third round match-up. The Irish finished the season at No. 4 with losses to top-ranked Baylor and Big East opponents Connecticut and West Virginia. St. Bonaventure fell to Delaware, Villanova and Dayton twice, once in the regular season and in the Atlantic-10 conference tournament final.

“We beat three No. 2 seeds in the tournament, and we beat a No. 1 seed twice, so for us, I think we are playing the level of competition that we are used to,” McGraw said. “But for them, they are very similar to us in that they are a veteran team. They have juniors and seniors on the starting line-up, they have been in this a few years, they really know each other well, they don’t turn the ball over, take care of the little things and pay attention to the details.”

The Irish will depend on the defensive aid of graduate student forward Devereaux Peters, who averaged 12.3 rebounds and 3.4 blocks per game in 2012.

“They are very good 3-point shooters. They’re a very well-coached team. If you let them move the ball really well and they do not cause a lot of turnovers on the court, they can make a good test for us really defensively,” Peters said.

Peters said that St. Bonaventure’s way of structuring an outside-offensive strategy looks like what she is used to seeing inside the Big East.

“I’m just going to play outside a little bit more, and definitely on offense we’re going to look in because they’re more of a guard-oriented team,” Peters said. “We’re going to look in a little more. I just have to play guard,” she said. “I’m just going to play whatever they give me because I am usually trying to usually play that in the Big East. Teams like us do a lot of outside offense with a lot of guards. It shouldn’t be that big of a difference for us.”

The Irish played their first two rounds of the NCAA tournament at the Purcell Pavilion, and the trip to Raleigh starts what really feel like a tournament, McGraw said.

“It has a tournament feel when you’re traveling and you get to have the team to yourself, watch a lot more film and do a lot more things with them,” McGraw said.

At home, Notre Dame beat Liberty 74-43 in the first round. In its second game of the tournament, eighth-seeded California was tied with the Irish at halftime, but Notre Dame took off on a 10-2 run at the beginning of the second half for a 72-63 victory. Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel finished with 28 points against the Golden Bears.

“A lot of us really liked that we had a really tough game going into it, I was really worried about that, thinking that they were under-seeded, and it was going to be tough,” Novosel said. “But now that we’ve had that experience, I think we really needed it.”

St. Bonaventure rides the excitement of its first time at the Sweet 16 on the two nail-bitting games that helped them reach this point. First, the Bonnies toppled Florida Gulf Coast in overtime 72-65 followed by a 66-63 win over Marist after the Red Foxes led 63-58 with 1:11 left.

The competition on the court is not the only matchup between Notre Dame and St. Bonaventure. Bonnies’ coach Jim Crawley and McGraw are both finalists for the Naismith Women’s Coach of the Year.

McGraw said junior guard Skylar Diggins wears many hats while on the court and is critical to Notre Dame’s success on both ends of the floor. “Skylar is doing whatever we need her to do. She had nine rebounds in the first game, sometimes more. She is very similar to us in that sense, so she really ready,” McGraw said. “She wants to score, she wants to help us out, but she means she needs to score, she’ll do it. She’s comfortable getting the ball, getting good, getting good, getting good, but she’ll do a little bit more.”

“The big stage is the big place for her. She really plays well as the competition steps up.”

A win against the Bonnies would advance the Irish to face the winner of second-seeded Maryland and third-seeded Texas A&M in the elite eight, each an underdog to Notre Dame’s success atop the regional.

This time we’re the No. 1 seed, and I think that puts a little different look on it,” McGraw said. “I think that there is maybe a little more pressure on us, but we’re trying really not to think about that. We’re trying really just to focus on St. Bonaventure. That’s the big game.”

The Irish will play the Bonnies in the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA tournament at PNC Arena in Raleigh, N.C. at 2:30 p.m. Sunday. A win qualifies them for the Elite Eight portion of the national tournament, where they will play the winner of second-seeded Maryland and third-seeded Texas A&M on Tuesday at the same location.

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Irish senior guard’s tough demeanor, scoring prowess power Notre Dame into Sweet Sixteen

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

Whatever it takes, Natalie Novosel is willing to do it.

The senior guard can drain jumpers, make the right pass, slash to the basket and finish at the rim. And she does it all with regularity.

After pedestrian freshman and sophomore seasons, Novosel emerged as one of the nation’s best players as a junior. In the 2010-2011 season, Novosel started all 39 games for the Irish, improving her previous season’s average of five points per game to a team-leading 15.1. Novosel reached double-digit scoring totals in 33 games as a junior after reaching the mark only 19 times total her first two seasons and posted seven 20-point performances and made a school-record 183 free throws.

Following her stellar third year, Novosel received an invitation to compete in the World University Games alongside Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins and graduate student forward Devereaux Peters.

“Just gave me a lot of confidence, to know that I was one of the players in the nation and to have Dev and Sky on the same team,” Novosel said. “That’s really fun.”

In her final season, Novosel has averaged 15.3 points, four rebounds and two assists per game.

“Nate’s been amazing,” Peters said. “She has been a huge offensive threat for us. It has been great for us because whenever we really need a basket and we have been going through a drought or things haven’t been falling, we can always count on Nat to get to the basket and get a layup and get to the line, so she has been great for us and she has grown a lot in the past two years.

“Having grown into a leader on the score sheet, Novosel eased into a position of leadership on the team naturally, she said. “I think I am a leader by example, the way I play. They always tell me that I work the hardest and make the hustle plays — I think everybody [on this team] does that. But I think just being an example on the court and always giving 100 percent [makes me a leader].”

Novosel exhibited her leadership ability multiple times this season, most notably by netting a game-winning buzzer-beater against No. 7 Duke to capture the Buckaroo Jam title in the Bahamas on Nov. 26. Novosel shot just 6-of-20 from the field for the game, including 1-of-10 shooting in the first half, but finished with 15 points and 10 rebounds to propel the Irish to victory with her jump shot as time expired.

However, for the native of Lexington, Ky., another game provided the top memory from this season.

“I would say, definitely, the Kentucky game — averting last year’s loss was the high-light,” she said. “And then, my buzzer-beater in the Bahamas, that was really fun.”

Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel attempts a layup during Notre Dame’s 74-43 win over Liberty during the first round of the NCAA Tournament at Purcell Pavilion on Mar. 18.

In Notre Dame’s 92-83 victory over then-No. 7 Kentucky on Dec. 18 at Purcell Pavilion, Novosel scored 22 points and grabbed seven rebounds to help the Irish avenge a loss to the Wildcats during the 2010 season.

“It was a great win for me,” Novosel said after that contest. “I thanked every one of [my teammates].”

“I just really, really felt good to get that win and a little re-taliation,” Peters said.

Much of Novosel’s success is a product of her versatility. Peters said. Able to score from inside and out, the senior guard presents a significant opposing defenses.

“I don’t really think anybody can guard her — she is very deceptive with her game and her moves and the way she slashes to the baskets and gets around people,” Peters said.

“You can’t really cover her, Peters said. “I mean, I have never seen a player, not a player of any kind, that is able to go one on one with her.”

Devereaux Peters Irish graduate student forward

“I think I am a leader by example ... They always tell me that I work the hardest and make the hustle plays — I think everybody [on this team] does that. But I think just being an example on the court and always giving 100 percent ... make me a leader.”

Natalie Novosel
Irish senior guard

Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel controls the ball during an 80-68 win on senior day over South Florida at Purcell Pavilion on Feb. 25.

“I don’t really think anybody can guard her — she is very deceptive with her game and her moves and the way she slashes to the baskets and gets around people.”

However, when her jumpers are not falling or she is unable to find an open shot, Novosel turns to the aspect of her game that most closely corresponds to her nickname “Nasty.” The 5-foot-11 guard has the speed to attack the basket and the strength to finish layups while absorbing contact, often drawing a foul in the process.

“I think [having an inside game] is huge for me, because when I make an open shot, Novosel turns to the aspect of her game that most closely corresponds to her nickname “Nasty.” The 5-foot-11 guard has the speed to attack the basket and the strength to finish layups while absorbing contact, often drawing a foul in the process. Novosel said. “I mean, I have never seen a player, not a player of any kind, that is able to go one on one with her.”

“I think that is what is most important,” she said. “Also, getting the other players in foul trouble so we can open up other people. I think that is key.”

While Novosel may not get credit for her defensive efforts, the senior guard is more than willing to do anything to accomplish her goal.

“Win. I don’t even care how we do it,” she said.

With at most four games remaining in the season, Novosel approaches the end of her college basketball career. In a 99-34 victory over Indiana State during the Pre-season WNIT at Purcell Pavilion, Novosel became just the 29th Irish player to reach 1,000 points in a career (Peters became the 30th on Dec. 2).

“I am very proud of her,” Peters said. “I have one of the strongest, biggest personalities on the court and she never tries to glory on anything. I mean, she is 100 percent [makes me a leader].”

Natalie Novosel Irish senior guard

“Win. I don’t even care how we do it,” she said.
Clockwise from top left: Irish graduate-student forward Devereaux Peters goes for a layup during a 73-62 win over California on March 20; the Irish huddle before their win over California; sophomore forward Natalie Achonwa battles in the paint against Cal; senior guard Natalie Novosel drives during Notre Dame’s victory over the Bears.

Round One: No. 1 Notre Dame 74, No. 16 Liberty 43
The Irish began the game on an 11-0 run and cruised to victory in their tournament-opener against Liberty. McBride led the Irish with 15 points, 13 in the first half, in her first-ever NCAA tournament game. Novosel and Peters each scored in double figures, and Diggins filled the score sheet with seven points, nine rebounds and six assists.

Round Two: No. 1 Notre Dame 73, No. 8 California 62
Irish coach Muffet McGraw said she was worried the Bears were underseeded, and her fears were warranted. California challenged the Irish throughout the game, led by junior guard Layshia Clarendon’s 17 points. The teams entered halftime locked at 31, but the Irish began the second half on a 10-2 run. 10 second-half steals helped the Irish get out in transition and stifle the California offense. Novosel scored 28 points on the night, Diggins added 21 and Peters had a career-high seven blocks to go with her 11 points and 17 rebounds.

No. 5 Saint Bonaventure (31-3, 14-0 Atlantic-10)
Sweet 16 matchup
Not only is this the fifth-seeded Bonnies’ first time in the Sweet 16, it is their first-ever appearance in the national tournament. Though they far surpassed their season goal of qualifying for the tournament, it was not easy for them to get there. In the first round, St. Bonaventure outperformed Florida Gulf Coast in overtime for a 72-65 victory in which they erased an 11-point hole with six minutes to play. Next, St. Bonaventure barely snuck by Marist to qualify for the Sweet 16 when a long 3-point attempt by the Foxes fell flat and the Bonnies won 66-63. In the regular season, the Bonnies’ went 31-3, highlighted by an 18-game win streak and climbed to a No. 19 ranking.

No. 3 Texas A&M (24-10, 11-7 Big 12)
Possible Elite 8 matchup
Second-seeded Maryland passed through the first round of the tournament with ease, topping Navy by a score of 59-44. They struggled in the second round, as seventh-seeded Louisville held a five-point lead, before a Terrapin 13-4 run earned them a 72-68 win. Maryland opened the season with a 16-game win streak and finished 25-4 overall, with an ACC championship and No. 6 ranking. They lost to Duke, Virginia Tech and twice to Miami during the regular season.

No. 2 Maryland (30-4, 12-4 ACC)
Possible Elite 8 matchup
Second-seeded Maryland passed through the first round of the tournament with ease, topping Navy by a score of 59-44. They struggled in the second round, as seventh-seeded Louisville held a five-point lead, before a Terrapin 13-4 run earned them a 72-68 win. Maryland opened the season with a 16-game win streak and finished 25-4 overall, with an ACC championship and No. 6 ranking. They lost to Duke, Virginia Tech and twice to Miami during the regular season.

Possible Elite 8 matchup
The Irish have a chance to meet the defending national champions in the Elite Eight, the same Aggies they fell to in last season’s championship. Third-seeded Texas A&M pushed Albany out in the first round by 22 points, then almost fell to sixth-seeded Arkansas. The Aggies were saved by a pair of free throws, giving them a two-point win. In the regular season, Texas A&M topped out at No. 6 at the beginning of the season, slowly dropping to No. 14 at the end with a 24-10 record.