THE IRISH GUARDS

Notre Dame’s four-guard phenomenon paves way to Final Four
Fourth Final Four competition poses challenge for Irish

By JOSEPH MONARDO
Sports Writer

The Irish used a dominant defensive effort to get past five-seed St. Bonaventure, 79-75 in the Sweet 16, and crushed two-seed Maryland in the Elite Eight, 80-49. "Our last game against Maryland seemed one of the best we have played this whole tournament, maybe all year, and we just have to really use that as momentum going into this game," Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory said.

The Irish must face a familiar foe in their Final Four match-up with the Huskies, who fell to the Irish twice in the regular season before denying Notre Dame its first-ever Big East tournament championship.

"We know them pretty well, they know us pretty well, so I don’t think there is going to be a lot of mystery in the game," McGraw said. "I think it’s a matter of who is going to play well, who is going to be able to defend a little bit better. The adrenaline will be flowing. The more exciting thing can happen."

The Irish have plenty of prior experience and game tape to help guide them as they attempt to replicate the successes from their two wins.

"In our wins over Connecticut, we were just clicking, especially on defense we were getting a lot of stops," Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters said. "In [the Big East title] game, we were letting them do what they wanted to do … and we let them decide what we were running [on offense] and we weren’t as aggressive as we normally are, so that definitely has to change."

As they attempt to move past Connecticut and into the championship game, the Irish gain confidence from last year’s tournament, Mallory said.

"Since we have been there before, we aren’t as star-struck from the whole Final Four atmosphere," she said. "We are a little more relaxed in that, and just knowing what to expect."

The Irish will tip off with Connecticut at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at the Pepsi Center, as they try to advance to their first-ever national championship game.

Contact Joseph Monardo at jmonardo@nd.edu

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Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory dribbles the ball during Notre Dame’s 81-61 home victory over Akron on Nov. 11.

COMMENTARY

For the second consecutive year, the Irish and the Huskies will face off in the Final Four with a berth in the national championship game on the line. In last year’s semifinal, the two-seed Irish entered the game as the heavy underdogs, trying to prove they belonged among the game’s elite.

What a difference a year makes…

No. 4 Notre Dame (34-3, 15-4 Big East) and No. 3 Connecticut (33-4, 13-3) both enter this year’s Final Four matchup in Denver as top seeds. No. 1 Baylor and No. 2 Stanford also reached the Final Four as top seeds, making the first Final Four since 1989 populated entirely by number-one seeds.

For Irish, the arrival during Denver is a long-awaited achievement that brings relief.

"I feel like we have accomplished what we needed to," Irish coach Muffet McGraw said. "I think we would have been extremely disappointed if we had not gotten this far. I think the expectation from probably November was that these are the four teams that were going to advance, and that is a heavy burden to carry throughout the year."

Notre Dame faced the Irish managed to sustain success throughout the season, losing only to Baylor (38-0, 18-0 Big 12), Big East foe West Virginia and Connecticut. In the tournament’s opening rounds, the Irish made the most of their obvious height advantage, and blew out 16-seed Liberty 74-43 before clamping out a 73-62 victory over eighth-seed California.

These — potential — two games won’t disappoint, whether the Irish reach their goal of tournament champions or if they fall short. Notre Dame’s old conference tension to be able to defend a little bit better. The adrenaline will be flowing. The more exciting thing can happen.

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IRISH INSIDER

Fourth Final Four competition poses challenge for Irish

By MOLLY SAMMON
Sports Writer

These are teams that not only can beat the Irish, but have proven it as well. In the Final Four, there should not be any more blowout wins, no more games where a combination of their usual rebuffing techniques and good offensive management by each of their four guards on the court can run away with a lead as soon as the ball is tipped.

Against Maryland, they executed this perfectly with hardly a flaw in their play and structure, and a triple-double for Diggins. They made a victory over No. 2 seed Maryland, the ACC conference tournament champions who hold an obvious height advantage, look far easier than expected. They ran away with the game like it was the first of the tournament, not a regional final where teams have to not only work hard and show poise, but fight off a team that shares the court as their relative equal.

Connecticut will want to shake Notre Dame first, in their fourth and final time the Irish will play their Big East rival this season with the veteran team they have now seen twice in the Big East, Novosel and Frederica Miller and graduate student forward Devereaux Mallory and forward Devereaux Peters have one last chance to prove they were the once-invincible team before they graduate. It follows that it will be either the most important game of their last season or an Irish jersey on their backs.

In the Big East tournament final, Connecticut gave the Irish one of the rare chances to feel the real and raw panic associated with losing. Not just a shot-for-shot final few minutes where the Irish had a chance to win, but the feeling of being down by 10 points or more and knowing that losing was inevitable.

They will see that same encompassing panic one more time, but now it will be magnified as the importance grows. If the Irish want to reach their goal of returning to South Bend and graduate this senior class with a national championship, they will need to show the utmost composure, even if they are down by 10.

One of the benefits of playing on a Final Four team is not having to play through many discouraging situations. But in this year’s finals, stacked with the teams who have been on top all year, Notre Dame will need to learn how and learn it quickly.

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The news expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.
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By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Staff Writer

Notre Dame isn’t running up the score for promotional McDonald’s vouchers anymore, but its 29-point average margin of victory in the 2012 NCAA tournament is reminiscent of its dominant performance during the regular season. The Irish start only one player over six feet tall, and yet, outscore opponents inside the paint on a regular basis, including a Maryland team that started three in the regional finals.

There are no secrets, no “hoosiers” halftime speeches — just Irish coach Muffet McGraw’s patented four-guard offense that has fooled height-advantaged opponents all season long.

“The four-guard lineup, it’s just so versatile,” senior guard Natalie Novosel said. “Everybody can score — it’s so balanced. You can just do whatever you want, but at the same time it’s a system, so there’s different options. One person goes backdoor, one person cuts out of bounds. There’s just so many different options and it’s so balanced.”

Averaging 15.3 points per game as Notre Dame’s second-leading scorer, Novosel has developed into one of the nation’s most efficient players and junior guard Skylar Diggins’ number-one option under McGraw’s signature offense. While winning basketball games has been the most obvious effect of McGraw’s implementation of the four-guard offense, her underlying motivation is much simpler.

“Because I love a high-scoring game as probably the other three coaches in this [Final Four would agree],” she said. “It’s so much more fun to watch. I think it makes the game so much more exciting for the fans when you see up-tempo scoring also with great defense.”

Notre Dame’s path to the 2012 NCAA tournament national title may have been a surprise for many, as its successful championship run in 2001, but the vehicle responsible couldn’t be more different. Take away the loss to Connecticut in the Big East tournament finals, the rematch in the Final Four, the consensus First Team All-American and the Hall-of-Fame coach, and you’re left with two very different offensive systems driving the Irish.

“I think the players are more complete players [now],” McGraw said. “You used to have the defensive specialists [like] the 3-point shooter who couldn’t guard. I think players now are so much better and so much more capable of playing the game at both ends, and it’s great for the women’s game.”

The point guard

Every team needs one, but the Irish happen to have the nation’s best. Averaging 16.7 points and 5.8 assists per game, Diggins lifted Notre Dame over the Terrapins with her first career triple-double to send the Irish to the tournament semifinals.

The point guard leads the Irish attack with her exceptional vision, quickness and versatility. “Sky’s the general of the court,” Novosel said. “She just knows where everybody is — that’s her job and she does it flawlessly. She’s just so versatile and does things really well.

Unlike a traditional Princeton offense that features four guards simultaneously directing the offense, Diggins’ ability to dictate the Notre Dame offense on the court makes McGraw’s system unique. The head coach said she has complete faith in Diggins to make the right pass, take the right shot and manage the game by herself.

“I give her complete control,” Diggins said. “I try to help her if I feel she needs it, but she generally makes great decisions,” McGraw said. “I really let her have a lot of flexibility to do what she can do because she’s so talented and hard to guard. In addition to letting Diggins facilitate her offense, McGraw added the coaching staff selects specific plays in particular to signal Diggins it’s her time to take over a game. Diggins said the degree of flexibility granted to her by McGraw has been a developmental process.

“I have the green light. I think it’s time-green now in my junior year,” she said.

The offensive threat

Named the Big East’s Most Improved Player in 2011, Novosel has elevated her game to another level in her final season in uniform. The talented guard led the Irish in scoring in victories over California in the regional quarterfinals and St. Bonaventure in the regional semifinals, including a 28-point performance against the Golden Bears.

A native of Kentucky, Novosel said the four-guard system rattles opponents by creating mismatches that are difficult to guard and even harder to prepare for.

“Guards are quicker, faster, sometimes craftier with the ball, so I think it definitely creates a lot of problems for different people, especially those who are used to playing against two posts inside,” she said. “Especially the point guard. Guards can coast down the court, and that’s really tough to match up against.”

McGratw said the luxury of having two prolific scorers in Diggins and Novosel prevents oppositions from successfully double-teaming on defense.

“They’re both just really tough matchups,” she said. “They can score in a lot of different ways. They can score off the dribble, they get to the foul line and they make great passes.”

The wild card

Sophomore guard Kayla McBride sat out the second half of the 2010-2011 season to attend an off-the-court issue, watching Notre Dame’s run to the national title game from the bench.

In her first NCAA tournament game, she paced the Irish with a team-high 15 points in Notre Dame’s victory over Liberty in the first round.

Afterwards, Liberty coach Carrie Green called her the “wild card” of Notre Dame’s offense.

“I think the four-guard look really makes it tough for that fourth defender for the other team. Kayla McBride’s a tough matchup because she can go on the perimeter and hit threes, she can drive the ball and she can do so many things,” McGraw said.

“So if you try to put a post on her, she can take advantage of that.”

Two seasons ago, 2010 graduate Lindsay Schrader served as a similar role as a guard who could score in the frontcourt while remaining a shooting threat on the perimeter. However, McBride’s defensive skill and 3-point shooting ability makes her even more versatile.

“K-Mac shoots a lot of threes and Lindsay really didn’t, but she can still harass guards,” Novosel said. “Lindsay did, Diggins said. “It’s different components.”

The specialist

Ranked sixth all-time in program history with 130 career 3-point field goals, graduate student Devereaux Peters serves as Notre Dame’s most potent threat behind the arc. Despite her reputation by McGraw for her exceptional 3-point shooting, Mallory’s experience in the four-guard system and all-ball movement has made her invaluable on the court.

“Brittany’s the stabilizing force. She’s the smart one,” McGraw said. “She’s going to go back-door, she’s going to make a great cut. She’s going to tell everybody to be in the right spot and make sure everybody’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing.”

Mallory said the offense can’t function properly if Notre Dame relies too heavily on the three-point shot. Rather, McGraw’s system flourishes when the guards spread the floor and allow Diggins to find the open shooter or cutting player.

“When we spread the floor, that creates opportunities for driving, and when Sky drives everyone’s going to look at her,” she said. “We just have to look to get open and allow her to get the ball.”

The forward

Graduate student forward Devereaux Peters serves an important role as Notre Dame’s lone conventional post player, attracting defenders to free up perimeter shooters while finding the backdoor cutters. An athletic forward like Peters who can run the floor and rebound makes McGraw’s offense that much more effective.

“The guards really play well through me,” Peters said. “We can start from outside and before we know each other and we play well together. I move a bit quicker than a lot of the posts, so it works to our advantage in our case.”

Regardless of position, McGraw said her players’ laser-like focus and motivation to return to the national championship game, coupled with their ability to coach themselves on the floor, set this year’s team apart.

“This is a team that has taken ownership. They’re accountable for each other; they help each other,” she said. “They feel like they’re coaches on the floor. When they see things they’ll talk about, ‘Hey, why don’t we try this? This looks great. I see this. This is going to work.’ I think it’s a real team effort.”

Contact Chris Masoud at cmasoud@nd.edu

The fantastic four

Unique offensive system relies on guards’ speed and versatility, produces strong results for Irish

Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters shoots a layup during Notre Dame’s 80-49 defeat of Maryland in the Elite Eight.

Irish sophomore guard Kayla McBride drives to the basket during Notre Dame’s 80-49 victory over Maryland in the Elite Eight in Raleigh, N.C. McBride had 16 points in the game.

MATT SANDUSKY/Observer
One of the best teams in the country this year, the Irish have played some of their best basketball the last two times out. Also promising, the Irish seem to have the upper hand in the matchup with Connecticut, having won two of three meetings this season and currently on a mission to avenge their Big East championship game loss to the Huskies. Diggins and Peters will lead the Irish on both ends as they overcome UConn and move on to the finals against Baylor. The Irish will have their hands full with the Bears, but their penetrating style will put Griner on the bench with foul trouble early while McBride jumps out to a hot start. Ultimately, Griner and the rest of Baylor will be too much for Notre Dame to contain as the Irish finish as runner-ups for the second straight year.

BOTTOM LINE: Baylor 76, Notre Dame 68

The Irish have had Connecticut’s number this season, beating the Huskies in two of three matchups. The only Connecticut victory came in a virtual second home game in the Big East championship. Diggins, Peters and the Irish will send Auriemma, Hayes and the Huskies packing after the national semifinal. But, as much as I would like to see Muffet McGraw and Notre Dame win another national title, I really don’t see anyone getting past Baylor this year. Brittney Griner and the Bears dominated the Irish in the first matchup this year. While I don’t see it being another dominant performance, I think Baylor is just too big and strong for Notre Dame’s post players. I hope the Irish prove me wrong, but Baylor will edge Notre Dame in a close one.

BOTTOM LINE: Baylor 81, Notre Dame 76
The Irish have come up against the Huskies eight times in the post-season, six in the Big East tournament, and twice in the Final Four. And the Irish have lost every one of those contests — aside from the two Final Four matchups. Notre Dame will make that count 3-0 on Sunday led by continued strong postseason play from Diggins. But in the championship, the Irish will not be able to derail Baylor from the first 40-0 season in NCAA basketball history. The last time Notre Dame matched up with the Bears, Griner dropped 32 points, 14 rebounds and six blocked shots. While the Irish have certainly improved defensively since then and will not allow Griner that kind of statline again, Baylor will simply prove too tough and too big for ND and its four-guard system.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Baylor 84, Notre Dame 78

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**NOTRE DAME**

**34-3, 15-1**

**SKYLAR Diggins**

16.7 ppg, 5.8 apg, 3.3 rpg, 2.6 spg

**NATALIE NOVOSEL**

15.3 ppg, 4.1 rpg, 47 steals, 1.9 apg

**BRITTANY MALLORY**

5.8 ppg, 2.6 rpg, 2.0 spg, 2.2 apg

**KAYLA MCBRIDE**

11.7 ppg, 4.6 rpg, 1.6 spg, 1.8 apg

**DEVEREAUX PETERS**

11.8 ppg, 9.4 rpg, 1.9 blocks per game, 2.1 apg

**TEAM** — 79.2 ppg, 18.1 apg, 41.1 rpg, 13.0 spg, +27.7 margin

**THREE-POINT .346**

**OPPONENTS** 51.5 ppg

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**UCONN**

**33-4, 13-3**

**MOSQUEDA-LEWIS**

15.0 ppg, 5.4 rpg, 1.7 apg, 46 steals

** TIFFANY HAYES**

14.8 ppg, 5.8 rpg, 3.4 apg, 82 steals

**BRIA HARTLEY**

13.9 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 3.7 apg, 69 steals

**STEPHANIE DOLSON**

10.2 ppg, 5.9 rpg, 1.8 apg, 53 blocks

**KELLY FARIS**

6.6 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 4.3 apg, 77 steals

**TEAM** — 76.4 ppg, 18.8 apg, 41.6 rpg, 11.38 steals, +30.4 margin

**THREE-POINT .352**

**OPPONENTS** 46.1 ppg

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**Kelsey Manning**

Sports Writer

The Irish have come up against the Huskies eight times in the post-season, six in the Big East tournament, and twice in the Final Four. And the Irish have lost every one of those contests — aside from the two Final Four matchups. Notre Dame will make that count 3-0 on Sunday led by continued strong postseason play from Diggins. But in the championship, the Irish will not be able to derail Baylor from the first 40-0 season in NCAA basketball history. The last time Notre Dame matched up with the Bears, Griner dropped 32 points, 14 rebounds and six blocked shots. While the Irish have certainly improved defensively since then and will not allow Griner that kind of statline again, Baylor will simply prove too tough and too big for ND and its four-guard system.

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**Chris Masoud**

Senior Sports Writer

Conventional wisdom suggests the team that has not lost a game all season, Baylor, led by a national champion coach, Kim Mulkey, and powered by the sport’s best player, 6-foot-8 Brittany Griner, will not lose in Denver. But Stanford’s senior forward Nnemkadi Ogwumike is quietly putting together the best performance in the NCAA tournament thus far, averaging 28 points per game after leading the Cardinal to 28 regular season wins against just one loss. But Notre Dame and Connecticut are peaking at the right time. Losing to UConn in the Big East tournament finals was the best thing that happened to Notre Dame, who will start a new winning streak against the Huskies instead of trying to extend an old one to five.

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**BOTTOM LINE:** Baylor 84, Notre Dame 78

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**BOTTOM LINE:** Stanford 76, Notre Dame 68
Notre Dame-Connecticut rivalry gains added significance

By MATTHEW ROBISON  
Sports Writer

Notre Dame and Connecticut renew their Big East rivalry Sunday night in what will determine the premier team in the conference.

For the last two decades, Connecticut has dominated the Big East. However, recently — and especially this season — Notre Dame has made its claim as the new face of the conference.

In the regular season, the Irish knocked off the Huskies twice, once at Purcell Pavilion and once at the XL Center in Storrs, Conn.

“We’ve played them before,” graduate student guard Brittany Mallory said. “We know what to expect. They know what to expect. So it’s just going to be a good challenge.”

Connecticut got revenge for its two defeats this season when it beat Notre Dame, the Big East regular-season champion, in the conference championship game in Hartford, Conn.

“We beat them twice this year and they have beaten us once so it is an equal matchup,” senior guard Natalie Novosel said. “Going in, it is just going to be all about heart.”

When asked how the loss to the Huskies in the Big East title game will carry over into Sunday, the Irish said they will use it as a means of motivation.

“We’ve had a lot of different games with them,” coach Muffet McGraw said. “Stefanie Dolson has really beat us. Bria Hartley’s beat us. I think different people have stepped up in different games and played really well. When you’re playing a team like Connecticut, they’ve had such an equal opportunity team that any one person can step up on a given night and play excellently well.”

Facing such a versatile lineup, the Irish cannot be complacent with their two victories over the Huskies this year. A national championship is the goal.

“The Notre Dame-Connecticut rivalry has reached new heights. The two teams are not only competing for Big East dominance but national renown. When the ball is tipped Sunday night, it will no longer be about a conference, a rivalry or a history. It will be about two teams’ relentless pursuit of a national championship.”

Contact Matthew Robison at mrobison@nd.edu
Diggins leads Irish in title hunt

By KELSEY MANNING
Sports Writer

Junior guard Skylar Diggins plays defense during Notre Dame’s 81-61 victory over Akron on Nov. 11 in the Purcell Pavilion. Diggins had 23 points, seven assists and four steals in the season opener.

In the midst of racking up nominations for every major national player-of-the-year award, earning spots on three different All-America teams, recording her first career triple-double and claiming the title of Most Outstanding Player of the Raleigh Regional, Irish junior point guard Skylar Diggins remains focused on one thing — winning it all.

“We are not just here to participate,” she said. “We are not just happy to be here. We want to win it.”

This attitude has been evident in Diggins’ postseason performance, as she posted her first career triple-double in No. 4 Notre Dame’s 80-49 rout of No. 5 Maryland in the Raleigh regional final March 27.

Diggins finished the game with 22 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds along with five steals — she was the game’s top performer in all four categories. The feat marked the 13th triple-double in NCAA tournament history, and only the second in a regional final. Diggins also achieved the third triple-double in Notre Dame history, and the first ever in postseason play.

In the wake of the win over Maryland to advance the Irish to the Final Four for the second straight year, Irish coach Muffet McGraw recognized the profound mark Diggins has had on the Notre Dame program.

“This puts us in more elite company,” she said. “This is something that [Diggins] has brought to our program. I think we now have a place with all the elite programs in the country, and I couldn’t be prouder of that.”

Diggins has been showered with national honors, most recently earning a spot on the John Wooden All-American Team and the 10-player United States Basketball Writers Association All-American Team. These selections indicate the finalists for player-of-the-year awards from both organizations.

But despite all the individual attention, Diggins said her focus is on winning a championship, where it has remained since last year’s loss in the final.

“The loss against Texas A&M has been in our mind for a year now. [We were thinking] ‘When is a championship going to come?’ When is the tournament getting started?’” she said. “I think we tried to win a championship against Arkansas Pine-Bluff right on the tip [in the first game of the season]. It’s good for us to finally be back here, and get into the last hurrah with the team. And with this team, it is kind of bittersweet because we are at the end of the season with this team. But that gives us more reason to play for.”

With that in mind, Diggins currently has her gaze set firmly on No. 3 Connecticut, who the Irish will face in the tournament semifinals in what will be the teams’ fourth matchup of the year. Brushing off any notion of the difficulty of beating a team three times in one year, Diggins said she and the team are using the same approach they have all year — one game at a time.

“I don’t think the difficulty of beating a team three times in one year matters. I think it is hard beating them once, especially a team like that,” she said. “It’s the game to get to the championship, so I don’t think it matters who we are playing. The fact that it is UConn, I think we both have some familiarity with each other.”

In a Wednesday teleconference, Huskies coach Geno Auriemma was asked what concerns him the most about playing Notre Dame.

“The most, everything,” he responded. “This is the eighth time we’re playing them in 12 months, and it’s crazy, isn’t it? I mean, it’s just ridiculous. Everything. Everything. I think if you stripped them apart as a team and all the components, you would find they don’t have any weaknesses, and you can’t say that about a lot of teams.”

Some of that praise can definitely be attributed to Diggins, he said.

“Certainly Skylar Diggins is playing unbelievable basketball right now,” Auriemma said. “Diggins will try to continue this trend, as Notre Dame looks to advance to the national championship game for its second-straight year. And as the Irish take on Connecticut to earn that right, they will look to their junior point guard, who will — as always — have her eye on the prize.

“We know what it is like to get there, but we don’t know what it is like to win it,” Diggins said. “So it’ll be great for us.”

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