Irish senior guard Natalie Novosel and junior guard Skylar Diggins celebrate Notre Dame’s 83-75 victory over Connecticut as Huskies coach Geno Auriemma looks on. Novosel had 20 points, Diggins added 19 of her own and graduate student guard Brittany Mallory scored seven points in overtime to send the Irish back to the title game.
By the numbers

Notre Dame pulled away from the Huskies in overtime on the strength of three 3-pointers, including a duo of shots from graduate student guard Brittany Mallory from beyond the arc.

Connecticut and the Irish have played eight games in the last 14 months. The Irish have won four of the last five games, with two of those wins coming in the Final Four.

After falling behind by three early in the overtime period, Notre Dame scored 16 points to put distance between itself and Connecticut. Mallory’s two 3-pointers put the Irish up for good.

With the victory, Notre Dame is now 7-0 on the year in games played at neutral sites. The Irish took a pair of games in the Bahamas during the regular season before the five postseason games.

Connecticut led by three at halftime on the strength of a 55 percent shooting performance in the opening frame. Huskies forward Stefanie Dolson controlled the paint in the early going.

Notre Dame, as the Irish notched 11 fast-break points. The Huskies slowed their transition.

Dolson’s size advantage over Irish graduate student forward Devereaux Peters manifested itself in the form of a 52-34 advantage in points in the paint. Dolson led UConn with 20 points.

Notre Dame is now a perfect 8-0 in its green trim on white background. The Irish wore green jerseys in last season’s Bahamas games, with two of those wins coming on the year in games played at neutral sites. The Irish took a pair of games in the Bahamas during the regular season before the five postseason games.

Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins jumps into Devereaux Peters’ arms, Muffet McGraw pumped her first and the other team cried. The script couldn’t have been more perfect if McGraw had written it herself.

Well, maybe she would have taken out the 8-0 Huskies run over the final three minutes of regulation to put the Huskies ahead by two. Or perhaps Notre Dame’s inability to put the game out of reach when Stephanie Dolson picked up her fourth foul and headed to the bench with over 17 minutes to go. But that’s why she’s a head coach and not a director, and judging by Notre Dame’s thrilling 83-75 victory over Connecticut in the national semifinals, she’s one of the nation’s best.

With the win, McGraw has now ousted Geno Auriemma in four of the team’s last five meetings and became the only coach to take down the Huskies in three national semifinals in all three tries.

This victory can be boiled down to a pair of coaching decisions made in the final minutes.

Beating UConn makes win even sweeter.

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Auriemma, concerned with his team’s ability to move on top of Notre Dame’s screen, subbed out 6-foot-3 center Kiah Stokes in favor of the quicker guard Caroline Doty. Helped by her coaching staff, McGraw avoided the temptation of ripping into her team in the game’s final timeout, opting instead to deliver a positive message and an offensive set.

When the Huskies pulled ahead by two with 11 seconds remaining on a pair of free throws, the Irish remained poised. With no timeouts remaining, Diggins ran the length of the court and missed a layup at close range.

But senior guard Natalie Novosel outrebounded the Connecticut frontcourt, laying it up to send the game to overtime with three seconds left on the clock.

Diggins and Brittany Mallory took care of the rest, lifting Notre Dame in overtime with a combined three 3-pointers and limiting UConn to just eight points.

These teams don’t like each other, and whether or not the referees realized it, eating their whistles only made things chipper. After the game, Peters said beating the Huskies in the Final Four made it that much sweeter.

Of course it did. After losing to Connecticut in eight straight contests during their first four seasons, Mallory and Peters are doing their best to exact some form of revenge. That’s a dish best served in the Final Four on the sport’s biggest stage.

It should come to no surprise then that the two played their best games of the tournament, with Peters battling Dolson in the post and Mallory hitting clutch 3-pointers in overtime. More importantly, their composure trickled down to the rest of the team, even to Diggins.

The sheer pressure of returning to the national championship is difficult to grasp.

After falling to Texas A&M last season, Notre Dame said all the right things about using that loss as motivation to work harder in the offseason.

But so does every national champion runner-up.

In recent memory, only Butler actually followed up on that promise.

Maybe that’s why Sunday’s win feels almost as satisfying as winning a national title. In taking down its biggest rival on the biggest stage, the Irish overcame the pressure of fulfilling the expectations placed upon them since day one by the rest of the world.

The only expectation left to fulfill in Tuesday’s national championship is the one they put on themselves.

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The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Observer.
Griner leads Baylor past Stanford

By CHRIS MASOUD
Senior Sports Writer

DENVER — Stanford forward senior Nnemkadi Ogwumike outscored Baylor center junior Brittney Griner 22 to 13, yet finished as the Cardinal's only scorer in double figures as the Lady Bears advanced to the NCAA title game with a 59-47 victory Sunday night.

Stanford forward and Nenmkadi's sister sophomore Chinny Ogwumike fouled out with 7:58 remaining in the second half, finishing with just four points and four rebounds.

"They have an excellent team. We worked very hard, we prepared really hard, but at the end of the day they outplayed us," Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer said. "They have some great players and an outstanding coach in Kim Mulkey.

"Sophomore guard Odyssey Sims directed the Baylor offense from the backcourt, tallying 11 points, four rebounds and three assists. After leading the Cardinal (34-2, 18-0 Pac-12) by just two at the break, the Lady Bears (39-0, 18-0 Big 12) erupted in the second half, outscoring the Cardinal 24-16 in the paint, while limiting Griner to just nine rebounds.

"I give credit to Stanford. They're a good team," Griner said. "They always had two people on me or a second defender coming to try to double me, and they stuck with their plan the whole game. You're frustrated when your shot doesn't go in. But you know I had all the confidence in my team. Like coach said, it's not the Brittney Griner show at all."

The Cardinal could not find the bottom of the net from behind the arc, finishing 2-for-17 on the night. Yet they did outscore Baylor 24-16 in the paint, while limiting Griner to just nine rebounds.

"I give credit to Stanford. They're a good team," said. "It's not that we were trying to run the clock down, it just kind of happened. Those aren't the shots we want, but I think we tried our best to really compose ourselves on defense."

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The Irish prevailed 83-75 in a back-and-forth contest in the first of two national semifinal games in Denver. Despite only scoring four points in regulation, Irish graduate student guard Brittany Mallory hit two 3-pointers in the overtime period to put Notre Dame ahead for good. Notre Dame will play Baylor in the national championship game on Tuesday at 8:30 p.m.

Clockwise from top: Irish junior guard Skylar Diggins inbounds the ball; graduate student forward Devereaux Peters contests a shot; senior guard Natalie Novosel leaves the court after the overtime win; Novosel loses her headband during a contested play; Diggins drives on Connecticut guard Caroline Doty.