

Irish, Cooley Trump Aces

Written by Kevin O'Neill

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It wasn't an easy season opener, but Notre Dame prevailed over the feisty Evansville Purple Aces 58-49 at Purcell Pavillion Saturday afternoon. Jack Cooley led the Irish with 19 points, 11 rebounds, and 6 blocked shots. Scott Martin led the Irish to a 10-rebound advantage on the boards with 17. Colt Ryan, Evansville's leading scorer last season, led the Aces with 15 points.

Largely due to aggressive perimeter defense, neither team shot well from outside the lane. Cooley was the trump card making 5-7 from the field, going to the free throw line 14 times, and stifling Evansville's inside scoring on the defensive end of the court.

The offenses started slowly thanks to both teams' aggressive perimeter defense, but Evansville had no answer for Jack Cooley inside... and outside. Cooley scored the first nine Irish points, the first six from within three feet and the final three from beyond the arc when the Aces left him alone for a five count. "I'm a college basketball player," Cooley said sarcastically after the game. "I can hit the shot."

The shot gave the Irish a 9-4 lead at the first media timeout.

Garrick Sherman entered the game after the timeout, so someone else had to score for the Irish. That someone was Eric Atkins cutting to the basket, taking a nice feed from Sherman, and making a layup for an 11-4 ND lead. Jerian Grant followed with a three before Evansville's Jaylon Moore broke the 10-point run.

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Evansville came out of the break with consecutive jump shots to cut the lead to three points, but Cameron Biedscheid, who entered the game at the timeout, scored on consecutive ND possessions. The first basket was a pretty baseline drive, and the second was an alley-oop layup courtesy of an Atkins pass.

As it would throughout the game, the Aces' aggressive defense kept the Irish from pulling away. The lead was just six points with Cooley going to the free throw line after 7:40 media timeout.

Neither team was able to gain an advantage in the next segment as the defenses continued to thwart opponents' rhythm. The lead bounced between six and eight points until The Aces' Lewis Jones turned a nice drive into a three point play. Once again, the lead was down to five points, 26-21, with 3:01 to play.

There was only one more score in the last three minutes of the half, a Cooley layup thanks to a nice pass from Pat Connaughton. He finished the half with 13 points and five rebounds. Center Ryan Sawvell led Evansville with six points.

Notre Dame shot 45% for the half, 4-4 by Cooley and 6-18 by everyone else, as Evansville contested the perimeter well and the Irish missed most of the open shots they earned.

Scott Martin's eight boards led Notre Dame to a 19-14 rebounding advantage at the half, and he finished with 17 to assure a 44-34 Irish advantage for the game. "It was a grind-out game," said Martin, "and you had to come ready to play defense and rebound."

Notre Dame tried to push the tempo to start the second half but had little to show for it as its cold outside shooting continued. It took half-court offense to extend the lead. Martin drove to the basket, drew two defenders, and dished to Connaughton for a layup; and Grant followed Ryan's answering drive with a short baseline jumper to send ND into the timeout with a 34-26 lead.

The Irish spent the next five minutes trying to pull away from Evansville, and the Purple Aces

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spent the next five minutes staying in the game. Cameron Biedscheid got more involved in the offense, and once again it looked like the Irish would pull away from Evansville. First he made a three point basket against an expiring shot clock with 10:40 to play, and he followed it on the next possession with a nice pass to Grant cutting down the lane for a layup.

However, Notre Dame didn't handle the prosperity well, committing turnovers on the next two possessions that Evansville converted into baskets. A Ryan jumper followed a missed Cooley layup, and the lead was down to six points again, 43-36 with 7:05 to play.

The game held form, bouncing between six and eight point Irish leads, until the Irish finally took command, mostly via made free throws, in the final two and a half minutes. Martin's breakaway dunk put an exclamation mark on the victory with 0:36 to play. A pair of DJ Balentine three pointers and four missed free throws by the Irish in the final 30 seconds made the score more respectable; but when the horn sounded, the Irish had a 58-49 victory.

After the game, Notre Dame Head Coach Mike Brey said, "I'm pleased with our win because I think we beat a really good team and I think that's a win that can be part of our resume.

"One of the things we talked about in practice was our defensive identity," Brey continued, "and that's the only way we won the game tonight."

Indeed, the Irish held Evansville to 31% shooting from the field; and Ryan, a 21 point scorer last season, had just 15 on 6-14 shooting. Connaughton had primary responsibility for Ryan. "He's a great player," Connaughton said. "He's really crafty coming off screens. I was excited to take on the challenge."

"Those guys that start, they've been through a lot together," said Brey. "It was great to see their body language... 'We can't get away from this team, so we've got to keep guarding and keep figuring it out down the stretch.' That starting unit never panics and is always poised."

Irish Notes

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Though the Irish offense struggled throughout the game, 14 of the 18 baskets they scored were assisted. Atkins had four. Martin and Connaughton had three apiece.

Notre Dame played seven with Biedscheid logging 14 minutes and Sherman 15. "I'm really pleased with Garrick Sherman and Cameron Biedscheid at this point, understanding and fitting in with us and not detracting when we substitute. They've come a long way. I'm very impressed with Cam. He really wasn't involved defensively ever in his life, and he has become more reliable defensively." Biedscheid finished with 7 points and two rebounds in his college debut. Sherman had 3 points, all from the free throw line (3-4).

Sherman and Cooley did not play at the same time. "That has more to do with the other team. Their tallest guy was 6'6", and their second tallest guy was Ryan (a guard), their best player. From what I've seen in exhibitions and practice, it will happen because it's really good for the team."

Picking up where they left off last season, the Irish held Evansville to 24% shooting from three point range. They led the Big East in that category by a wide margin last season. The starting guards, Atkins and Grant, had relatively quiet scoring games - 7 and 11 points; but they defended Evansville's three guard/wing starters other than Ryan into a combined 2-17 from the field.

As the first round draw in the Coaches vs. Cancer Classic, Evansville was a better than usual season opener. The tournament will continue Monday with Monmouth visiting Purcell Pavillion Monday evening at 7:00. The Hawks defeated Hofstra 91-62 on Friday.