

ND Primed For UK Challenge

Written by Sean Stires

Thursday, 29 November 2012 07:26



NOTRE DAME, Ind. – Mike Brey knows it. Despite the fact that his team has seven games under its belt, including five home games, Thursday night’s marquee matchup against the defending national champion Kentucky Wildcats might as well be the first game of the season. The two teams are squaring-off in the Big East/SEC Challenge.

“For a lot of people it’s our season-opener,” Brey said of his team’s game against one of the biggest brand names in college basketball. “(That is the way) our fans and everything have kind of looked at it. With what football has been doing it’s very fitting now that the season-opener comes with a six-week pause before the national championship football game.”

Home games against the likes of Evansville, Monmouth, George Washington, St. Francis, and Chicago State just don’t have the same chops as Kentucky. Those games have largely lacked the drama and the atmosphere that Thursday’s main event will have.

“I think it’s gonna be a fun night,” Brey continued. “It’ll be a great atmosphere in our building. I think two very good teams going at it early in the season, but I think for our players it’s one they’ve talked about all summer.”

Notre Dame’s home atmosphere has been tepid as best so far in 2012. Two of the last three dates at Purcell Pavilion at the Joyce Center were during Thanksgiving break, so the student section was largely empty, the band was gone and the cheerleading unit was not even at full

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strength.

The band, the cheerleaders and more green t-shirt clad students were back in the arena for Monday's game against Chicago State – but it was *Chicago State*. Brey expects the buzz inside the building for Kentucky to be much more like last year's clash with No. 1 Syracuse, which resulted in an Irish upset.

"We haven't played in that at home (this season)," Brey said during his Tuesday teleconference this week. "So I have to talk to our guys about us not getting out of character with a crazy atmosphere at home, because we've yet to have that."

"I think when we've had a crazy atmosphere sometimes we've played too fast on offense and we've gotten a little too excited. I think that's something I really have to address over the next two days to handle that maturely. These guys have played in a great home atmosphere before, so hopefully they can digest that."

The game brings not only a game between two of the top brands in college athletics, but also an encounter between two programs built on starkly contrasting foundations. Now in his fourth season at Kentucky, John Calipari's program has become the poster child for the "one and done" basketball player. Brey's players, most of which play all four years if not five, are the grey beards of the college basketball world.

"We're not gonna get as many of the one and done guys," Brey said of the facts of life recruiting in a more academically rigid environment that Calipari does in the Blue Grass state. "It's just a different world. Not that we won't try and recruit some of them."

"If I could get my hands on three one and done guys I'd be the first one to do that," Brey continued. "Certainly if a freshman's good enough he's playing. The way we're set up and our university and the kind of kids we're getting here it's gonna be more four and five year guys and I kind of like the rhythm of how we do it."

Brey's current roster includes four seniors, a junior (Jerian Grant) who did not play as a

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freshman and sixth-year graduate student Scott Martin, who transferred from Purdue. It's more than a bit different than Kentucky's roster that sends a bevy of freshmen to the floor on a regular basis and has seen nine freshman players drafted in the first round of the NBA Draft over the last three years.

"I hope it comes into play," Brey said of his advantage in experience. "That's been a thing that's helped us consistently over the years is we've stayed 'old'. We have not had to rely on playing a lot of young guys."

"Certainly if we're gonna be successful on Thursday night our experience and our poise are gonna have to play out and we're gonna have to be good in that department for close to 40 minutes to beat the talent they put on the floor."

Kentucky's young talent consists of three freshmen, Archie Goodwin (19.0), Alex Poythress (18.4) and Nerlens Noel (12.4), who are among the team's top four scorers this season. Their fourth freshman, Willie Cauley-Stein, is a 7-footer from Olathe, Kan. whom Brey's son, Kyle, spotted at a University of Kansas football camp last year.

The Wildcats actually have a graduate student of their own and he is from Indiana as well. Marion (the town not the Catholic high school close to Notre Dame) native Julius Mays started his collegiate career at North Carolina State before transferring to Wright State in Dayton. He was named the Horizon League's Newcomer of the Year there last season and is averaging 9.0 points and 4.2 rebounds for UK this season.

The biggest challenge Brey expects the Irish to have offensively is contending with Kentucky's size. The 6'10 Noel is seventh in the nation with 18 blocked shots. Cauley-Stein's length is a presence and sophomore Kyle Wiltjer goes 6'10.

"I think you're gonna have to get some buckets outside the paint because of their shot blocking," Brey said of ND's need at the offensive end of the floor. "We're gonna have to make some shots, whether it's threes or midrange stuff, we're gonna have to stop and make some shots. I would hope we can get some stuff maybe in transition so you're not having to play against those shot blockers back there in the paint."

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The closest thing Notre Dame has seen this season to what Kentucky has on the front line is St. Joseph's. As has been the case in recent years with similar teams, the Irish struggled with the Hawks' physical athleticism in the 79-70 overtime loss in Brooklyn nearly two weeks ago. Brey knows UK's front line will pose an even bigger test on Thursday night.

"I think it's really a challenge the way Noel and (Cauley)-Stein play with their elbows at the rim," Brey remarked. "That's a level where we're gonna have to have bodies on people and we're gonna have to understand they're gonna have some highlight dunks. Thankfully they only count (for) two (points)."

"Their shooting percentages in the paint are off the charts. Keeping a body on people, not letting them get too deep and keeping them to one and done will be the ultimate challenge."

The Wildcats get the ball inside with Calipari's trademark dribble-drive offense and they dish to the big men with regularity. Mays and Goodwin are averaging 4.4 assists, Noel is averaging 3.0 and Wiltjer averages 2.6.

"We respect their perimeter," Brey commented. "How do we get them from turning the corner and getting into our paint, because then you get put in help and recover and then they throw it at the rim. Their post feeds are lobs to the rim with rolling athletes. That's how they feed the post."

Notre Dame's big men, Jack Cooley and Garrick Sherman, will be put to the test against the athletic Wildcats. Cooley has been through the paces over the last couple seasons in Big East play, but Sherman, who struggled with just seven points in 21 minutes against St. Joe's, is yet to experience that "Big East style".

"It's a similar preparation," Brey compared Kentucky to what his team sees in conference play. "An athletic front line is what we see in the Big East a lot of nights. We have to neutralize these bouncy athletic long front lines. The nights we do it we're able to get out with a win. The nights that it gets to us we usually lose the game in the Big East."

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Strap-in and get ready, because Notre Dame's "season-opener" is here.