

Niagara Falls... to Notre Dame

Written by Kevin O'Neill

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Despite a lackluster first half, Notre Dame defeated Niagara 89-67 thanks to 24 points from Jack Cooley and 15 from Cameron Biedscheid. Jerian Grant added 13 points and eight assists for the Irish while Cooley's 15 rebounds keyed ND's 41-29 advantage on the boards. Antoine Mason led Niagara with 17 points.

"I liked how we played tonight", Notre Dame Head Coach Mike Brey said after the game. I thought offensively for the whole game we were extremely efficient, and I thought our defense in the second half was better than the first half. How we move and share the ball, it's a fun way to play and a productive way to play.

"I like where we are offensively," Brey continued. "Since that Chicago State – Kentucky week we have really gotten confident and found our weapons"

Indeed the Irish were efficient, shooting 62% from the field for the game, 75% in the second half. They had a remarkable 25 assists on their 31 baskets. "That team is selfless," said Niagara Head Coach Joe Mihalich. "They all share the ball and don't care who scores."

The game opened with (take your pick) excellent halfcourt offense or poor halfcourt defense as both teams executed give-and-go for layups on their first possessions and continued to get the ball inside for easy points. Cooley scored Notre Dame's first six points and had eight at the 16:00 media timeout. Eric Atkins and Jerian Grant had the other four points from the foul line as

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the Irish took a 12-9 lead. Center Devon White and Guard Antoine Mason had Niagara's points.

The next four minutes were jab and parry, not very intense despite four lead changes. Then both teams started taking and making threes – two by Cameron Biedscheid and one by Atkins for Notre Dame and one apiece by the Purple Eagles' T.J. Cline and Juan'ya Green. When Mason drove and made a twisting layup with 7:47 left in the half, the Notre Dame lead was just one point – 25-24.

Then Jack Cooley began to assert himself - first with a layup, assisted by Jerian Grant, then with an offensive rebound and a put-back basket, next with a blocked shot, and finally with a pair of free throws. With Niagara's defense collapsing on Cooley, Pat Connaughton made a three point basket to give the Irish a 34-24 lead with 5:00 left in the half.

Cooley continued to be the major presence on the court with another put-back, another block, and four more made free throws after the final first half media timeout, but he was Notre Dame's only offense. Scott Martin had to force shots with the clock expiring twice in the closing minutes causing a frustrated Brey to call timeout; and after Atkins scored on a driving layup with 0:07 to play, ND's defense allowed an aggressive Green to take the ball the length of the floor for an answering layup. The score at halftime was 42-34, and Brey did not look happy on the way to the locker room.

"I was disappointed in that," said Brey. We did a great job getting a good shot, and we kind of fell asleep.

But it was more than Green's layup that concerned the coach. "Their ball screen stuff really distorted us," said Brey. "When a ball screener like a Scott Martin can step out and shoot, it really puts us in a tough position. You had four shooters on the floor. The guards are crafty. They've got guys who can make tough shots around the bucket. Finally we went zone just to change and not deal with the ball screens which are like we see in Big East games. That really gave us the push to get the lead around 10 points."

Cooley had an outstanding first half - 20 points and 10 rebounds while making 7-9 from the field. The rest of the team was only 6-15. The Irish held a 21-15 rebounding advantage. "They weren't really doubling," he said. "Coach was running great sets for us to get me the ball, and I

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was just getting good position on the low block and it was allowing me to score."

Niagara's scoring was evenly distributed – Mason and Green with seven apiece, White and Cline with six points each.

The Irish executed their halfcourt offense crisply in the second half. Slowly the game turned from a contest to a blowout with ND getting the ball to the post players in good scoring position. Garrick Sherman, Biedscheid, Grant, Cooley, and Connaughton all scored from the lane while the Irish built the lead, step by step, inch by inch. When Biedscheid nailed a three with 7:00 left to give Notre Dame a 75-52 lead. There was no doubt who would win the game.

Irish Notes

- Cameron Biedscheid was Notre Dame's #2 scorer with 15 points. He made all four of his shots from the field, all from three point distance; and he made three of four field goals. "I knew the veteran guys would find me if I was open," Biedscheid said after the game. "I was just making open shots.

- The Irish mad made 8-16 from three point range, 4-4 by Biedscheid and 4-12 by everyone else. Only Biedscheid made more than one basket from beyond the arc.

- The team has a long layoff until the Big East opener against Seton Hall on January 5th.

There will be a break until the 27

th

and a Christmas Break Clinic on the 28

th

. Then the Irish will bus to Chicago for "Big East Training Camp" at the Attack facility where the NBA holds its pre-draft camp.

- Grant's status was in doubt after an ugly fall when a Kennesaw State defender undercut him on a drive Wednesday night, but he logged 30 minutes against Niagara. "I'll tell you what, he's one tough guy to play after that fall," said Brey.