



NOTRE DAME, Ind. – The calendar has rolled over to 2013, and the Notre Dame basketball team is rolling right along. The Fighting Irish extended their current winning streak to 12 games Monday night with their 66-60 win at Cincinnati. Just like last year the Irish played their first conference road game in the Queen City, but things were decidedly different than last year's game, which ended with a 71-55 loss.

The Irish trailed 20-11 with 7:13 to play in the first half Monday night. Their biggest deficit of the game prompted head coach Mike Brey to call a timeout.

"We talked about taking punches on the road," Brey said of his message to his group during the pause in action. "We took a couple of them. I was really pleased with how we came out of those. Of course, you saw a little bit of that in the second half against BYU (a 78-68 victory) where we called a timeout, down seven (but) didn't panic. I think our maturity and our experience helped us in that department."

Cincinnati's raucous environment has been one that Brey's group has trouble dealing with in the past, but that was not the case Monday. Notre Dame (14-1, 2-0 Big East) had played just three of its first 14 games outside Purcell Pavilion at the Joyce Center prior to the matchup and the game against the Bearcats was ND's first true road game since going to Georgetown on Feb. 27 last year.

Brey is extremely pleased with his team's 2-0 start to conference play. He says it is important for his team, which arrived back on campus on Tuesday, to get its energy up for a Saturday-Tuesday turnaround at home against UConn and at St. John's next week.

The Irish have a veteran squad this season that has a "been there, done that" mentality. "I just think it was a calmness, a poise and a maturity that has been part of the process with this nucleus," Brey concluded.

### **Did Someone Say "Process"?**

Brey's veteran group is going through its own learning and maturity process, but just hearing the words "the process" likely remind Notre Dame fans of Brian Kelly's catch phrase during the football season that concluded Monday night. Brey and the Irish watched the BCS Championship Game in their team hotel until the bitter end after their win over Cincinnati.

"You're just watching as a fan," Brey said of the experience. "You feel for coach, because we've all been there and done that, been in a seat like that. We watched until the end of the game and felt for him, but also knew what a great year as our staff sat there. They had a great year and they've created great momentum for their future."

Despite Notre Dame's lopsided 42-14 loss to Alabama, Irish players were still playing hard late in the game. As Brey alluded to, every coach has been on the wrong end of a score like that, but he says seeing players fight until the end is a good sign for any coach.

"I think that's very important," Brey commented. "Especially with the group that he has coming back, you want to try and set the tone. I'm sure some different guys got some experience playing and it does set them up for next year."

"As you get further away from Monday night you've gotta look at the big picture of the year they had, which was just fantastic," Brey continued. "It's a year that can lay groundwork for you in the future."

### The Best There Are?

Brey has made no secret of the fact that he believes his starting guards, Jerian Grant and Eric Atkins, comprise one of the best backcourts in college basketball. Grant is averaging 12.7 points with 17 steals and a 5.3 assist average, while Atkins is averaging 11.3 points and has team-highs of 7.3 assists and 25 steals.

“I don’t feel there’s any backcourt better than them,” Brey opined. “I think they’re as good as any of them out there the way they’ve been playing. I think they’ve been a little under the radar for a lot of reasons, but their efficiency right now with what they’re doing on the offensive end is flat out off the charts.”

The offensive end of the floor is always easier to tangibly gauge than the defensive end of the court where steals and blocked shots are the only real tangible stats for a basketball player. However, it is the defensive side that Brey believes has really elevated his backcourt duo.

“Their bodies are stronger,” he praised of Grant and Atkins. “They’ve gotten older and stronger. They were both leaner guys when they got here. Their ability to guard strong guards in our league, and we have a lot of strong ones (in the Big East).”

Brey said both of his starting guards have added between 15 and 17 pounds of muscle since they first arrived on campus.

“They’re proud to take their shirts off now a little bit,” Brey said of their physiques. “There’s nothing like having older guys. These guys are part of our older guys now as third year guys.”

### The Culture of Passing

## Mike Brey Notebook

Written by Sean Stires

Wednesday, 09 January 2013 13:38

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Brey credits ESPN analyst Jay Bilas for coining the phrase “The culture of passing” that exists in the Notre Dame basketball program. Bilas used it in a conversation the two old friends had during Monday’s shoot around prior to the Cincinnati game.

Brey has always stressed the importance of high assists and low turnovers in his time as a head coach. In fact, he keeps plaques on his coffee table from when his team has led the nation in those statistics as reminders to his team of their importance. He says his team takes pride in its ball movement on the court.

“There has to be great trust to do that,” Brey said. “That’s something that I have to develop. Now, I think there is great trust, because it’s not like 10 guys are playing (in the game rotation). The smaller of that number of the rotation, guys know they’re going to be out there. Their more comfortable to keep doing that, I’m going to be out here for a while-I’m not just in and out of the game.”

Notre Dame’s current player rotation during games averages about seven. Only five players have played in all 15 games this season. Brey commended both freshman Cameron Biedscheid and sophomore Pat Connaughton for their continually improving passing skills. Connaughton had just 30 assists in 34 games last year, but he already has 42 assists in 15 games this season.

“You can’t have top scorers unless you’ve got guys that can really find them and pass it to them and move it to them,” Brey continued. “Not just one guy, a point guard, (but) a bunch of guys that can find those guys that can put it in the hole.”

## Helping Hurricane Sandy Victims

The state of New Jersey is still working hard to recover from the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. A special on-line auction is currently underway and runs through Jan. 17 at [und.com](http://und.com) , with proceeds to benefit New Jersey victims.

New Jersey governor Chris Christie, a long time friend of Brey’s whose daughter is also

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interested in attending Notre Dame, is expected to be in attendance for ND's Jan. 19 home game against Rutgers – the state school of New Jersey.

“He loves our team and watches us all the time,” Brey said of Christie. “As it looks like now, I’m 99% sure he’s going to be out here.”

Auction items include game worn jerseys from Notre Dame’s Nov. 29 win over Kentucky, a chance to meet the Irish, attend a practice and tour the Purcell Pavilion basketball facilities, four courtside seats to ND’s Feb. 24 home game against Georgetown and more.