

## Irish Set For 'Reinvention'

Written by Sean Stires  
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Look for a “reinvented” Notre Dame basketball team to take the floor when the Fighting Irish travel to Tampa, Fla to play the South Florida Bulls on Saturday. The need for reinvention is not what either head coach Mike Brey or anyone else might have expected from a squad that had all five starters back from last year’s NCAA Tournament squad, but that is exactly how Brey phrased it this week.

The Irish were on a roll just two weeks ago when they were still riding a 12-game winning streak that dated back to Nov. 17. All that has changed though – Brey’s bunch has lost three of its last four games, with even the win over Rutgers in that stretch coming in excruciating fashion.

“I think anything can happen when you get into league play,” Brey said this week when asked if he could have ever envisioned the need for reinvention this late heading into the season. “You get into a comfort zone and maybe your fans do when you win 12 in a row through your non-league. I am never going into league play thinking you’re not going to be put up against the wall.”

The roster and lineup are chalked with experience – from senior Jack Cooley and grad student Scott Martin and right on down to sophomore Pat Connaughton, who has been a fixture in the starting lineup since this time a year ago. The Irish (15-4, 3-3 Big East) are trying to find a way right now to make that experience mean something.

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"We always have experience and we've always been put up against the wall for the most part at some point," Brey said of the yearly trials that Big East play brings with it. "You manage it day-to-day (and) week-to-week in our league and try and rebound from stuff. Could we be a 1-and-1 team each week the rest of the year? Yeah, so how do you manage that? We may not rip-off five in a row or nine in a row."

If the Irish go 1-and-1 the rest of the season they would go into the Big East Tournament with a 21-10 record and a .500 record in league play. The Irish are already 6-4 against teams with top-100 RPIs and 3-2 against RPI top-50 teams with six games against top-100 teams. That should be a good enough resume to qualify for the NCAA Tournament, but Brey says thinking about big picture stuff is off limits right now.

"Let's just play and compete," Brey emphasized of his team's desired thought process. "Let's not over analyze this thing. You've got a chance to get enough to get in this dang tournament. That's the kind of frame of mind (we need to have)."

The biggest spot that must be "reinvented" is Scott Martin's spot in the starting lineup. Martin has started 83 of Notre Dame's last 84 games dating back to 2010, but he will miss at least the next three weeks due to reoccurring issues with a left knee that has had multiple procedures performed on it.

With Martin out indefinitely Brey says "everybody's back on the board" to fill his spot – even little used freshmen Zach Auguste and Austin Burgett. It could be a challenge for either of those two to get going now in the thick of Big East play.

"I wouldn't want to dwell on it, and if they have to play their way into it a little bit, the young guys, we can do that," Brey said of the duo's lack of playing time so far. "There are a lot of games left and if we have to learn on the fly for a while to have what we need to have in February then that's what we've gotta do."

Auguste and Burgett have each played in 10 games this season. Auguste is averaging 3.2 points in 6.2 minutes, while Burgett has just a 0.6 scoring average in a mere 2.9 minutes on the floor. Brey believes that while they have not seen extensive game action, they have gained experience by facing their own players in practice since October.

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Garrick Sherman is another player who is back in the mix. The transfer from Michigan State, who has one season of eligibility remaining after this year, was a key reserve early this season, but his playing time has dwindled recently. Sherman sat the last two games after going 0-for-4 from the field in five minutes on the floor in the Jan. 15 loss to St. John's. Brey says Sherman was frustrated and disappointed when his playing time decreased, but added "business is business as far as production".

Regardless of who gets more minutes, the key is scoring more points.

"In our three (recent) losses we're averaging I think 57 points," Brey said of his team's offensive woes in the last two weeks. "We've gotta score more. One of the things we really talked about (is) ball reversal in the last week, but I think we need to emphasize screening for each other more – not just ball screening."

The Irish have averaged 76 points in their other 16 games this season – that includes their 70 points in an overtime loss to St. Joseph's. Cooley continues to lead the Irish with 14.8 points a game. Those double-digits nights have remained consistent through the losses, but Brey says Cooley has forced things at times when shots have been off for the team across the board

"There's a fine line with our offense between establishing Jack in the post and him coming out and ball screening," Brey commented. "Is it a night he can score over the guys guarding him (or) is it a night he needs to ball screen and roll into getting stuff?"

"I think that's something we're always evaluating and analyzing. In our league there's a lot of length and bouncy guys (but) Jack's not an above the rim guy (and) that can both him in there."

The first glimpse of Notre Dame's reinvention process will be on display in a noon tip-off on Saturday against USF. The Bulls (10-8, 1-5) are a smaller team, playing in the newly renovated Sun Dome.

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"They're playing well there," Brey said of the Bulls. "They're a tough group – they defend you (and) they're athletic. Bouncing up on our backboard – that worries me with how we've given-up some volleyball stuff lately."

USF is 8-4 on its home floor, with its only conference win coming against Georgetown two days before the Hoyas beat the Irish 63-47 at Purcell Pavilion.

Victor Rudd leads the Bulls with 10.9 points and 7.3 rebounds per game. Guard Jawanza Poland is next at 10.8 a game, while Rudd's frontcourt mate, Toarlyn Fitzpatrick, averages 10.6 points.