The clock is starting to wind down on Scott Martin's career. The sixth-year Notre Dame basketball player has missed his team's last eight games with a knee injury and just four regular season games remain this season. ESPN's Jay Bilas said during Monday's Notre Dame - Pittsburgh broadcast that Martin was shooting for a return to action this Sunday against Cincinnati.

"I think Scott Martin's talking more to Jay Bilas than he is to me," Irish head coach Mike Brey joked on Wednesday when asked if Bilas' account of Martin's return was accurate.

"I think he's really trying to make some progress toward a full practice or going live, five-on-five, on Friday," Brey explained of Martin's next steps to return to game action. "(That) would be a really big step. I don't know if he would be really ready with all the time he's missed in just two days of practice. I think we've gotta see a couple full days of practice, but we are making progress. I'm encouraged."

The Irish have gone 6-2 in the eight games Martin has missed. The wins have gone down to the wire and the two losses to Syracuse and Providence, both on the road, have been by 16 and 17 points, respectively. What is most disconcerting to many Irish fans has been the lack of flow the offense has displayed in Martin's eight-game absence.

"Our system offensively has been built on great spacing," Brey said when asked about the

impact of the loss of Martin. "We are able to spread you and space the floor. We've been able to do that, because we have always had a four man who can stretch the floor."

Brey mentioned past players like Troy Murphy, Rob Kurz and Carlton Scott who have filled that role in his offense in the past. That roll has been unfilled over the last eight games, and to an extent the four games prior to that when Martin was playing through the pain of his injury.

"Scott Martin has been the ultimate stretch four man," Brey commented. "(He) can make a shot, you've gotta guard him out there. What it does is it makes our guards more effective, because the floor is more open, so when we do ball screen - you can't jam in off that other big guy."

Tom Knight has started each of Martin's missed eight games. While Knight has 15-16 foot range on his shots, he is yet to attempt a three-point shot. Martin is 31-of-67 from three-point range this season. The Irish offense ranks 8th in the Big East in terms of the percentage of overall team field goals that are three-pointers (31%), but Brey believes they would rank at least third if Martin was still playing.

"As I've always said about Scott, he's a great 'stir the drink guy'," Brey said of Martin. "He's a great guy that kind of makes everything work. I think his injection back in would be extremely smooth."

"Our young guys watch him play and when they play with him they learn how to play," Brey continued. "Austin Burgett learned our system from playing against him and watching him play all summer."

Martin's loss at the other end of the floor has been critical as well. Notre Dame is 10th in the Big East in field goal percentage defense (.414). It doesn't show up in stat sheets, but Martin has always been one of ND's best at drawing charges on opposing players - as he did on Jan. 19 at the end of a 69-66 win over Rutgers.

"Scott Martin was the ultimate team defender," Brey praised. "There was no stat sheet for the stuff he clogged-up. It was a loss for us."

Brey does believe his team is getting better at doing those little things they became accustomed to seeing Martin do, but it is still a work in progress to some extent. The blessing for both Martin and the rest of the team is the five days in between games the Irish have this week before Sunday's home game against Cincinnati. Another five-day gap sits between that game and their March 2 game at Marquette. The extra time will help some tired legs rest and possibly give Martin the chance for one last go in an Irish uniform.

"He just wants to be able to help the team in some way, shape or form," Brey said of Martin's attitude. "Whether it's ever back to the minutes and the role that he had before - who knows. Maybe he can't do that and that's not us, but he does want to help and I would love to have that body available as we head down the stretch."

Brey discounted the idea that Martin might only be available for a one-game return. Senior night is Tuesday, March 5 when the Irish host St. John's. The regular season finale is March 9 at Louisville and then the Big East Tournament begins on Tuesday, March 12 in New York.

The Irish are still in the running to receive a double bye if they finish in the top four in the regular season standings. They are currently in fifth place.