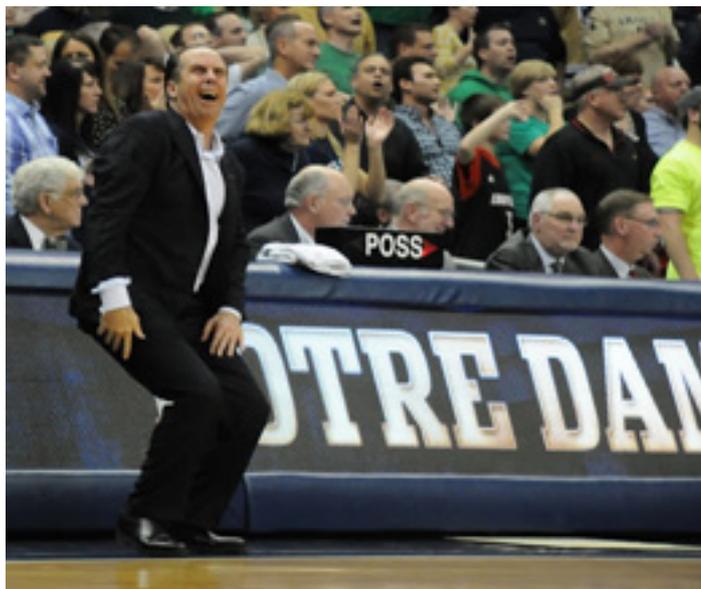


Brey Keeps Sights Set High

Written by Sean Stires
Friday, 22 February 2013 09:35



The Notre Dame basketball team found itself in nearly uncharted territory this week. After a stretch that began in January when the Irish were lucky to grab three days in between games the Irish are nearing the end of an extended respite that will give them a whopping five days in between contests.

The extended break could not have come at a better time for the weary Irish, whose tank appeared on empty Monday night when they trailed 19-3 in the first half, before coming back for a vital win at Pittsburgh. The comeback followed last Saturday's lopsided loss at Providence - a game that came after two wins that saw a total of five overtime periods.

Irish head coach Mike Brey says the unusual days of extra rest are "much needed" by his weary team. The Irish took Tuesday off after Monday night's road win. They had a light practice on Wednesday and then took Thursday off as well.

"I love the fact that we don't play until Saturday (March 2) after the Cincy game," Brey said. "This is really needed for us, probably just as much mentally as physically."

The extra down time allowed the Fighting Irish (21-6, 9-5 Big East) to get in the film room to both scout their Sunday opponent, Cincinnati, as well as look at tape of themselves. Brey also got to spend a little extra time at home watching other teams around the country.

Brey Keeps Sights Set High

Written by Sean Stires

Friday, 22 February 2013 09:35

"I can be a fan and root a little bit," Brey said. "We're always rooting standings down the stretch. Certainly when you have a win like we did Monday it's nice to put that in the bank for a while and see what the rest of the league does."

The Irish have now played eight games since Scott Martin left the lineup due to a knee injury. With any luck he could be back when the Irish head to Milwaukee to play Marquette next weekend. In the meantime, Tom Knight, Zach Auguste and Garrick Sherman have all seen extended playing time during the team's 'reinvention' stretch that has seen them go 6-2. Brey says the goals have changed for his team a bit over the last several weeks, but the mindset has not.

"We're going to play with a free mind no matter what's on the line," Brey said. "That's how I'm gonna prepare them and that's gonna be my frame of mind with it."

The Fighting Irish began the season with the goal of winning the Big East regular season championship. It was a realistic goal for a team that entered the 2012-2013 campaign with the same starting five that finished last season with a 22-12 record that included a 13-5 Big East mark. Goals changed after losing Scott Martin to injury and the team's 'reinvention' that followed.

"I think for us, for me, I've more thought of double-bye (at the Big East Tournament)," Brey assessed this week. "Could we get into that? You know what, if we don't get that that doesn't mean a darn thing either, because right now our NCAA Tournament resume is extremely strong."

The resume includes a No. 43 RPI and wins over four top-50 RPI teams (per Realtimerpi.com): Louisville (6), Pittsburgh (39), Cincinnati (42), and Kentucky (46) as well as No. 96 Rutgers. All six of Notre Dame's losses are to top-100 RPI teams as well: Syracuse (11), Georgetown (16), UConn (34), St. John's (60), St. Joseph's (84), and Providence (85). The Irish also still play a Marquette team that currently has a 14 RPI.

Those big picture numbers look good, but the Irish have had on court numbers that have been

Brey Keeps Sights Set High

Written by Sean Stires

Friday, 22 February 2013 09:35

flat out miserable at times this season. The rough numbers were never more evident than in the first nine-plus minutes of Monday's win at Pitt when Notre Dame missed their first 12 shots from the floor and trailed 11-1 and 19-3, yet they still emerged with a 51-42 victory.

"What I think we've come to grips with (is) we're going to have our lulls (and) we're going to be unsmooth," Brey said this week. "Can we just go back and guard and rebound like that."

Brey was referring to the 40-25 rebounding dominance Notre Dame had against a physical Pittsburgh team by game's end. It was not one of those games where Jack Cooley had 15 boards. The big man just missed a double-double with 13 points and nine rebounds, but teammates Tom Knight (8), Pat Connaughton (6), Jerian Grant (5), and Eric Atkins (4) all contributed to crashing the boards as well.

The Fighting Irish shot 12-of-20 (60%) in the second half after a 6-of-27 (22%) first half of shooting. They were an amazing 17-of-28 (nearly 61%) after missing 18 of their first 19 shots. While Brey would love to have those kinds of numbers all the time, he has learned to set more realistic expectations for his team.

"I think it's me trying to get them to realize if we have our spurts (or) if we have our lulls we have our lulls," Brey continued. "Let's just rely on defending and rebounding the ball and be mentally tough enough to know if it's a close game we've been pretty good in close games."

Sunday's home game against Cincinnati is the first of four to close the regular season against a tough slate of teams (Marquette, St. John's and Louisville as well) that are all in the RPI's top-60. Each of those games is likely to be hard fought as the Irish fight for that double bye at the Big East Tournament, which begins March 12.

"This nucleus has had a great will," Brey said emphatically of his veteran team. "This nucleus has delivered and they've delivered on the road before."

I'm proud of them, but I'm not surprised," he continued. "I'm glad that trait is showing up, because I've seen that before and we're certainly going to need it in every regular season game

Brey Keeps Sights Set High

Written by Sean Stires

Friday, 22 February 2013 09:35

left."