

Huskies Halt Irish Streak

Written by Sean Stires

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NOTRE DAME, Ind. – It was a tale of two halves. Notre Dame held Connecticut to eight points in the paint, while scoring off drives seemingly at will in the first half, but saw the Huskies turn the tables with a 24-6 advantage in the lane in the second half as UConn walked away with a 65-58 victory Saturday afternoon at Purcell Pavilion at the Joyce Center.

Notre Dame's game plan was apparent early on – attack the basket. The Irish (14-2, 2-1 Big East) scored 12 of their first 13 points in the paint, (plus a free throw on an “and one” foul) with seven of them coming on drives by Scott Martin, Pat Connaughton and Jerian Grant. The drives opened up the outside, allowing Eric Atkins to hit the game's first three-pointer to make it 16-10 Irish with 13:33 on the clock in the first half.

“(It is) disappointing for us,” Irish head coach Mike Brey began after his team's first home loss of the season after winning their first 11 of the season on their home floor. “Because you're playing pretty well in the first half and you're driving it and scoring pretty good, but their defense really changed and made it hard for us and then they were really difficult to guard.”

The early emphasis on the drive led to more three-point opportunities. Jack Cooley scored the game's first four points, but didn't score again until 6:10 left in the half. Cam Biedscheid and Grant each hit treys as the Irish offense slowed down with just 10 points over the next nine-plus minutes.

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The second half turned to classic, physical Big East play with bodies flying to the floor and crashing off each other. Notre Dame never trailed in the first 20 minutes, but gave-up the lead twice in the first five minutes of the second half.

Shabazz Napier had 13 points for UConn 12-3, 2-1), including nine on 3-of-3 three-point shooting in the first half. He finished with a game-high 19 points, while Tyler Olander ended with a career-best 16 points. His previous career high was 12 points against Arkansas in Dec., 2011.

“We were gonna give him open jump shots,” Cooley began of Notre Dame’s planned strategy for the 6’9” Olander. “He just started hitting them and he was playing really well inside and we went small and they recognized that right away and they went to him like three possessions in a row and that hurt us a little bit. We’ve just gotta play better interior defense.”

Cooley finished with 14 points and nine rebounds while battling with the unheralded Olander, who came in averaging just 4.6 points, all day. Cooley was a respectable 7-of-12 from the floor, but he missed several easy shots right around the rim. He fouled out with 14.1 seconds remaining. The only other time the big man has fouled out this season was Notre Dame’s only other loss – a 79-70 setback to St. Joseph’s back on Nov. 18.

“We could never get Jack into anything around the bucket,” Brey said. “He was battling the whole night and fighting. I felt because their guards were defending our guards very well they couldn’t really ever take over. There just wasn’t a great rhythm to things and if we did get it it was gonna be a really ugly one.”

The Irish trailed by six two different times with under 6:00 to play. A three from Atkins had them down just 58-56 with 3:02 remaining. He tied at 58-58 nearly two minutes later with a layup, but the Huskies closed the game with a 7-0 run, the biggest run of the game for either team, to close out the 65-58 victory.

“It never felt good in there though,” Brey said of his team’s mojo even after tying the score. “The vibe was different than other nights. It was gonna have to be a flat out theft...we played with a little bit of the weight of the world on our shoulders.”

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Atkins led the Irish with 18 points. He was just 6-for-12 from the field, but 3-of-5 from three-point range. He reflected afterward about missed opportunities in the six-point loss.

“We missed a lot of easy ones,” Atkins commented. “I feel like we couldn’t rebound off of that. We never just recovered from that. At the end of the game I don’t think we ever got a good look and they knocked down their free throws at the end.”

The loss snaps Notre Dame’s overall 12-game winning streak. It matched the longest streak for the Irish under Mike Brey and was the longest since the 2006-2007 season. One more win would have marked the program’s longest winning streak since the 1953-’54 squad won 18 in a row.

The Fighting Irish also had their 17-game home court winning streak snapped. It is the third time a UConn team has ended a Notre Dame double-digit home court winning streak.

The Irish have a quick turnaround coming, with a trip to St. John’s Tuesday night.