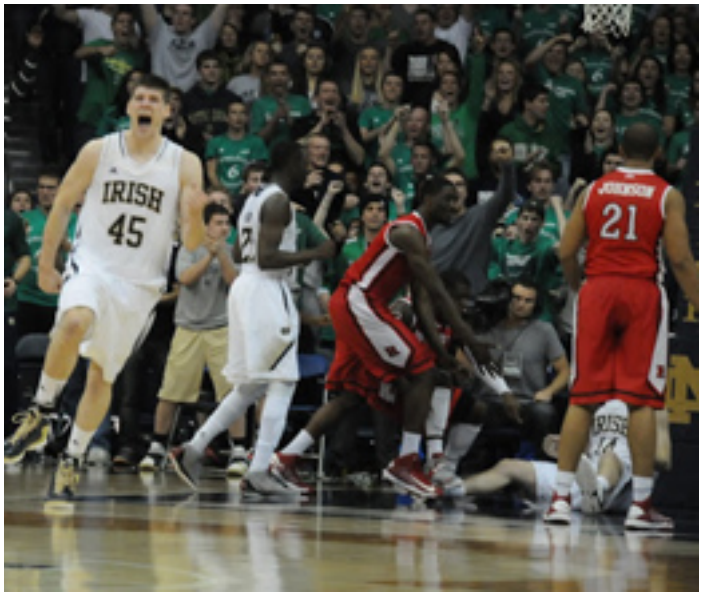

NOTRE DAME, Ind. – After losing its last two games in lackluster fashion, the Notre Dame basketball team could have easily folded its tent when it nearly blew a 13-point lead late in Saturday's game against Rutgers. Instead, the Irish found a will to win, despite seeing Rutgers trail by just a point in the waning seconds, and held on for a 69-66 win at Purcell Pavilion at the Joyce Center.

"It was a huge win for us. I'm thrilled," Irish head coach Mike Brey exclaimed afterward. "When you're in this league and you lose a couple you figure out a way to get one. A one-game win streak is huge in this league."

The Irish (15-3, 3-2 Big East) saw their lead swell to 13 points two different times in the second half, but Rutgers scrapped its way back and found itself trailing 67-66 with 5.7 seconds left after a driving layup by Eli Carter. The sophomore from Paterson, NJ finished with a game-high 20 points. The Scarlet Knights (12-5, 3-3) forced a tie-up and got the ball back after a tie-up on the inbound pass.

They had the chance to lead for the first time since the opening moments of the game when they led 4-2, but Carter was whistled for a charge when Scott Martin stood his ground in the lane.

"That was one I felt like I was there waiting for him," Martin explained. "He put his knee in my

chest and I just went down."

Martin had as many fouls as points (5 each) over his last two games before hitting a pair of free throws with 6:12 remaining to give ND a little breathing room at 62-55. He ended his night with four points on 1-of-4 shooting from the floor. He still has just seven points over ND's last three games.

"That would be the guy to make a play like that at the end," Brey said of Martin's crucial charge.

The late push that saw Rutgers go from an eight-point deficit to down by just one in the course of two and a half minutes was a microcosm of the game. The Irish had leads of seven points four times, an eight point lead and a nine point lead during the first half, but they could not push it farther than that. Rutgers would jab enough to keep things close throughout the first half by both driving to the basket and hitting from outside.

"We couldn't get away from them and I didn't expect to get away from them," Brey said of Rutgers' effort. "We almost needed to win one like that tonight. I thought we really defended well and we defended at key times."

Pat Connaughton started 3-for-3 from the field – all on shots from behind the three-point line. The trio of treys, which came in the game's first 13 minutes, equaled his game-high long range shooting for the season. Connaughton settled for a layup after a Cooley miss to finish the first half 4-for-4 from the floor, while putting the Irish up 38-31 at halftime.

"It did feel good," Connaughton said of his sharp shooting night from the outside. "I think it was just a matter of being lower before I catch the ball. I've talked to the coaches about it and watched some film and I think it's just something you can't over think too much."

Connaughton ended with 17 points on 4-of-6 shooting from behind the arc and 6-for-8 overall from the field. He was one off his season high 18 points against IPFW back on Dec. 17.

Jack Cooley gave the Irish double digit leads twice, the first by 11 and the second by 10, on layups early in the second half. Connaughton stayed perfect from three-point range and the field as well by nailing a trey with 16:48 remaining to send the lead to 13 points. His first miss from the field came on an errant three from the top of the key with 14:26 on the clock. He had a team-high 19 points and collected his 11th double-double of the season when he pulled down his tenth rebound with 1:21 remaining. He came into the week ranked fourth in the nation with 10 double-doubles.

Rutgers went on an 11-2 run in the second half after Connaugton's last three to pull within six of the Irish, but Tom Knight hit a pair of free throws at the 9:58 mark and then added an 18-footer moments later to put the Irish back up by eight. The lead was quickly down to three before Knight hit another jumper for a five point cushion. Knight's two free throws matched his previous total for the season.

"Gotta keep building on it," Brey said of Knight's six points in nine minutes of work. "I was really down on him in the first half. I was on him, because I thought he didn't grab some rebounds. He wasn't active. I tell you, he gave us energy in New York the other night, and him coming in and scoring the ball a little bit…gotta get him rebounding a little bit."

Jerian Grant tied his season and career-highs with 10 assists to go along with 9 points.

Rutgers has now lost nine straight at Purcell Pavilion since its last road win against the Irish in 1999. Notre Dame leads the series 19-13, including a 12-2 mark at home. ND has not lost consecutive home games since falling to UConn and Marquette in succession during the 2008-2009 campaign. Those losses were part of an overall seven-game losing streak. The Irish have won 47 of their last 49 home games. Both losses came to UConn.

New Jersey governor Chris Christie was on hand for the game that featured the state school of his home state. Christie was presented a check for $10,033, with the money coming from ND basketball's recent charity auction to go toward Hurricane Sandy recovery.