

SPLINTERS FROM THE PRESSBOX - Paul Fullmer '55

Irish Blindside #22 Pitt, 72-59; Extend Home winning Streak To 28

ND coach Mike Brey should get down on his knees and kiss the Purcell Pavilion court before and after every home game. Somehow, there is magic in that hardwood for the Fighting Irish, who have won 28 straight at home.

To the great surprise of the basketball world, the much-maligned ND team (9-5) opened Big East play by stunning #22 Pitt (11-3) in the conference opener, 72-59.

After stumbling to five pre-season losses (three to ranked teams by an average of 20 points), the inexperienced Irish played David again, knocking off mighty Pitt for the fourth straight time.

Unheralded sophomore Alex Dragicevich nailed four three-pointers and scored a career-high 22 points to lead the second half offensive explosion. The Irish, not used to being in first place in the Big East (they're picked to finish 9th), found the confidence to take it to the Panthers.

"I have been part of a lot of fun games here," Brey said. "But this one ranks right up there with the best. To see us play with that swagger in the second half, I guess I just wasn't sure this group was ready for that."

Solid Team Effort All Night

Newcomer Jerian Grant added 15 points and nine assists, as did point guard Eric Atkins, who played all 40 minutes and was outstanding in distributing the ball. Big Jack Cooley pulled in 14 rebounds and contributed eight points. Tom Knight finally showed that he is an adequate backup in the middle when Cooley needs a breather.

ND hung around in the first half, trailing 26-25 at the intermission. They weren't rushing shots or making costly turnovers for the first time, an important step forward for a young team playing without its senior captain and leader, Tim Abromatis, who is out for the year after knee surgery.

ND remained patient in the second half, moving the ball until someone had a makeable shot. The Irish shot an amazing 18 of 25 (72%) from the field after the break, including five of eight (62%) from three-point range. Sophomores Dragicevich, Grant and Atkins each had just five points in the first half, but the trio caught fire in the last 20 minutes with seven critical three-pointers.

With his outstanding performance against the Panthers, Dragicevich served notice that he could be the scorer to replace Abromatis. Although he only scored six points all year in Big East play last season, the rangy youngster seems to have found the necessary confidence. "I'll come off a screen and have a guy on my hip and I'll pass it up and coach will be like, 'why didn't you shoot that?,' Dragicevich said. "Then I'm like, 'alright. Those are the kind of shots he wants me taking.' Cool. With that type of green light, when you can shoot anytime you're comfortable, it's a shooter's dream."

Brey , Staff Deserve Credit

No doubt Brey and his staff deserve kudos for turning around a team that looked so unsure of itself in pre-season play. Even crusty Bob Knight, who was doing TV commentary, lauded the coaches.

It should be noted that the Panthers only got 20 minutes from their outstanding guard, Tray Woodall. And, somewhere along the line the defending Big East champs have lost their Superman cape. One of their three losses was to unknown Wagner, so the Irish knew Goliath could be taken down again. But, the important thing is they did it and didn't panic at the end.

The former Indiana coaching legend also wondered why the more athletic Panthers didn't try to disrupt the Irish by pressing. In earlier games, ND has unraveled under pressure.

Brey admitted that he was surprised by Notre Dame's performance, but now, like all coaches, wants more from his team.

"Now I need to ask them in practice if they can do that for 40 minutes," he said. "Tonight we did it for 20 and now we need more."

Let's hope Coach Brian Kelly's football team continues the positive momentum when they play Florida State Thursday (**5:30 p.m., e.s.t, ESPN**) in the Champs Sports Bowl. **Let the Big Mo roll!**

Go Irish!

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