

#19

Notre Dame Irish

13-9 (4-7) 12th in Big East

Previous 5 Games

Marquette L 71-64
@ Pitt L 93-80
@ Cincy L 93-83
@ UCLA L 89-63
Louisville W 90-57

Next 5 Games

USF
@ WVU
@ Providence
Rutgers
@ UConn

On paper few teams in the nation are better than Notre Dame. The Irish finished last year with a 14-4 conference record and that is quite impressive in the grueling Big East. A second round NCAA Tournament exit ended Notre Dame's year a little earlier than they had hoped, but with just about everybody back, a year older and a year wiser, the expectations for the 2008-2009 Notre Dame team are through the roof. And those expectations are in large part due to junior forward Luke Harangody. As a sophomore last year the 6-8 reigning Big East Player of the Year averaged 20.4 points and



Luke Harangody drains one against Washington State.

10.6 rebounds. Performing that well as an upperclassman may be difficult now that the opposition will not overlook Harangody.

Notre Dame hasn't lost at the Joyce Center in nearly three years, building the nation's longest home winning streak while establishing itself as a Big East heavyweight. What the No. 19 Irish haven't had to do much of in that time is host the nation's top teams. Two months ago, Notre Dame was considered a shoo-in for the NCAA tournament. Now the Irish are just trying to make sure the selection committee takes a long look at them. "Our theme has been to finish strong to make it interesting," coach Mike Brey said Monday. "How we finish can really determine a lot of things." Such as where they finish in the Big East, whether they play in the first day of the league tournament or get a bye, and whether they make their third straight NCAA tournament appearance or are in the National Invitation Tournament.

The Irish (15-11, 6-8) are in 10th place in the Big East with four games remaining, including a game at No. 2 Connecticut on Saturday and at home against No. 10 Villanova on March 2. While the media and fans try to crunch the numbers to determine what the Irish must do to earn an NCAA tournament berth, Irish players say they aren't focused on it. Several said Monday they don't even know where the Irish are in the conference standings.

"One night it can change so drastically, it's not even worth looking at," guard Kyle McAlarney said.

What We Said:

The frontcourt has a problem with their depth. Zach Hillesland is an experienced senior who is expected to replace Kurz and Luke Zeller is a solid option off the bench, but that is pretty much all Coach Mike Brey has to work with. If he can replace Kurz's numbers, few teams in the nation will have a starting five as talented as Notre Dame's group. However, with Hillesland stepping into the starting lineup, there is little room for injury and foul trouble. Zeller, a 6-10 senior, will be the first big man off the bench, but the Fighting Irish need a player like Tim Abromaitis to step up. Abromaitis only played in 12 games last year and it remains to be seen if he can play some quality minutes off the bench. If he, or anybody else, cannot provide Notre Dame with some depth, it could lead to another early exit in the NCAA Tournament.