**Notre Dame Women's Basketball: 'McGraw' green is quite lucky for ND**

By CURT RALLO South Bend Tribune

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It's not Kelly green. That would be football.

It was a sea of “McGraw” green that greeted the Notre Dame women’s basketball players as they walked down the tunnel to the Purcell Pavilion court before Saturday’s game against No. 2 Connecticut.

A sellout crowd of 9,149 rocked the Pavilion and inspired the Irish in their 74-67 overtime victory against the Huskies. Notre Dame, which beat Connecticut, 72-63, in last season’s Final Four, claimed back-to-back victories against the seven-time national champs for the first time in program history.

Coach Muffet McGraw marveled at the impact of the home crowd to the Irish victory.

“We wouldn’t have won that game if it wasn’t for the crowd,” McGraw said. “The crowd was amazing. They really, really helped us, and they know exactly when we need them. They came on strong for us. It was electric, and that was huge for us. I want to thank them.”

McGraw said that the deafening Purcell partisans created an electrifying atmosphere that helped jolt the Huskies.

“I think it can rattle a team a little bit, especially a young team,” McGraw said. “It can change the momentum of the game in our favor. It can make it so loud, you can’t hear the coaches.

There can be confusion. “On their last play in regulation, UConn was in the wrong spot. With the noise in the building, maybe they couldn’t hear somebody tell them where to go. It makes everybody a little more frustrated, during a timeout, trying to hear over the band, trying to shout out instructions, and you can’t hear.

“Our crowd gave us a huge lift, it was almost overwhelming. When you first come out, you almost want to take a minute to look around and appreciate it.

And it’s such an amazing affect, to hear the crowd. It’s almost like a calming voice, ‘we know you can do it.’ It gives us incentive and momentum.”

**Big benefits**

Notre Dame’s classic victory, rallying from an eight-point deficit in the second half against Connecticut, showcased the Irish program to a nationwide audience that included plenty of potential recruits.

“[Winning](http://www.southbendtribune.com/news/sbt-notre-dame-womens-basketball-mcgraw-green-is-quite-lucky-for-nd-20120108,0,442292.story?page=2) a game like that definitely helps in lot of ways,” McGraw said. “It helps recruiting of course, No. 1, because so many people were watching, but it also was great for our alums.

When we travel, hopefully we’ll get more and more people following us on the road.”

Notre Dame’s victory was also beneficial in helping the Irish position themselves early for a No. 1 seed.

“It’s a long season,” McGraw said in downplaying an early look ahead to the NCAA Tournament. “We don’t even want to consider looking ahead to anything like that.”

But the Irish are 15-1 and have knocked off the No. 2 (Connecticut), No. 6 (Duke), No. 7 (Kentucky) and No. 10 (Purdue) teams in the country, losing only to No. 1 Baylor on the road.

“We’re building a resume and doing a really good job, and we want to keep adding to it,” McGraw said. “We don’t want to get complacent. We don’t want to look ahead.”

**Wright on target**

When posts Devereaux Peters and Natalie Achonwa hit the bench against Connecticut midway through the first half with foul trouble, McGraw turned to freshman Markisha Wright, who didn’t get any minutes in Notre Dame’s previous battle against a ranked opponent, No. 7 Kentucky.

“It’s time to come of age,” McGraw said of what she was thinking when she sent Wright into the game. “I kept thinking, ‘This would be a great moment for you to step up and really contribute and just do it.’ We talked briefly as a staff, do we want to go back with Ace or Dev at some point (in the first half)?

“We were down eight. I said, ‘If it gets to 10, we might have to go back with one of them.’

Then, we cut it to six, and we got going a little bit more.”

Wright didn’t take a shot, but she wasn’t needed offensively. What she did was hold Connecticut’s 6-foot-5 force Stephanie Dolson in check. Dolson was only 1-of-3 shooting and was pushed into two turnovers by Wright in the final nine minutes of the first half. During that stretch, Wright grabbed three rebounds, and the Irish rallied from an eight-point deficit to a halftime tie at 31.

“ I thought Markisha was fantastic,” McGraw said. “She did exactly what we wanted her do to.

We did it at practice. She kept Dolson off the block, she was physical with her, she got some rebounds. I was really proud of her.”

**Stepping up**

Notre Dame missed its first four free throws and only shot 6-of-10 in the first half. The Irish stepped up, hitting 17-of-19 free throws in the second half and overtime. Natalie Novosel hit 9-of-9 free throws in the second half and overtime, including 6-of-6 in the final five minutes.

“We missed a lot of free throws early,” Novosel said. “Shots were not going down for us. We didn’t shoot very well at all. We stepped up and made them in the second half. That was really big, especially for me, to get my game going a little bit in the second half.”