

## NCAA TOURNAMENT



## TODAY'S GAME: WSU VS. NOTRE DAME

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# They're the guys who do dirty work

## Managers invaluable

## NOTEBOOK

BY VINCE GRIPPI  
Staff writer

DENVER – You can see them at every game, sitting at the end of the bench, ties on, clipboards and folding stools at the ready.

But any basketball team manager is more than just the person who sets up the seats for players to sit on during timeouts.

"My top job is equipment, handling the laundry, passing out all their gear, doing all that kind of stuff," said Mitch Reaves, who along with Marlon Stewart are Washington State's head student managers. "I also deal with one of our recruiting

databases, helping Marlin out with any video stuff he needs. ... And then, you know, normal practice stuff."

Stewart has been with the Cougars as long as Tony Bennett has been with the program – five years. Reaves has been with the team for four.

"Managers have a special place in my heart because they do all the dirty work," Bennett said, before speaking directly about Stewart and Reaves.

"They are students of the game. They want to be coaches. It's neat when you have guys who really want to learn the game.

"We have those (five) principles in our program, and you talk about a servant. They embody a servant and humility

more than anybody else."

Stewart, who earned his degree in sports management this winter, has morphed into the video expert for WSU during his five years managing, something that surprised him.

"The most I knew about electronics was video games," said Stewart, who played basketball until his junior year at Mercer Island High. "I knew nothing about computers or editing systems or anything like that. I just saw an opportunity to get more responsibility."

But video should only be part of his future, as Stewart wants to coach basketball in the future.

"The education, 'basketball-wise' from the coaches, I couldn't put a price on it," he said.

Coaching is also a goal of Reaves, who already has a

sports management degree and is working on an English degree.

"Maybe I'll end up coaching on the high school level," said Reaves, who was a basketball starter for three years at River Ridge High in Lacey, Wash. "But I would like to give the college level a shot. It doesn't really matter ... I just want to be able to impact people's lives."

The managers' hours are long and the recompense is low, but both feel it has been worth it.

"The first thing they told us when we showed up as managers five years ago is you get out of this what you put into it," Stewart said. "That's really come true."

## Bouncing back

Notre Dame's shooting guard Kyle McAlarney missed most of last season after being expelled

from the school following a drug arrest. Unable to play and unsure whether he wanted to return to the Irish, he watched them lose in the NCAA first round to Winthrop.

"It was very tough to watch this team get bounced out in the first round knowing that, if I was there, I could have helped them a lot," the junior said. "It was a tough time."

McAlarney admits he was about 99 percent sure he wasn't coming back to South Bend, Ind., but changed his mind when Notre Dame coach Mike Brey visited McAlarney's home in Paulsboro, N.J.

"If he can come and set his emotions aside and stick his neck out for one of his players ..." McAlarney said. "I just felt like if I set my emotions aside, (it was) the best decision for my future."

Not only has he shined on the court – converting 44.7 percent of his 237 3-pointers and averaging 15.2 points per game – but off it as well.

"Looking back now, I'm so much a better person and a better teammate," he said.

## Big matchup

There is one matchup everyone seems to be looking forward to: Notre Dame's 6-foot-8, 250-pound Luke Harangody against WSU's 6-10, 270-pound Aron Baynes down around the basket.

"It should be a big battle inside between him and me," Harangody said.

"There are definitely going to be a couple collisions. That's just the way post play is," Baynes said.

"You just have to set yourself physically down there."

## BLANCHETTE

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another, unprecedented back-to-back appearances.

Now it's time for the next step, just as precise.

And don't think the Cougars don't know it.

"This year, it would be a disappointment to everybody – our fans and even ourselves – if we didn't win this next game," said junior forward Caleb Forrest. "It's not something we need to be pressured by. We just need to come out and play. But it's a needed step for this program."

Today the Cougars meet Notre Dame, the noted basketball school with a lower seed but a higher national ranking than Wazzu, for the reward of going to the Sweet 16 – which has come to be seen as a different tournament altogether.

The 65-team bracket is the whole family – from stodgy patriarchs to crazy uncles to shirt-tail cousins. It's a party with loud music and dancing, and chip dip getting spilled on the rug.

The Sweet 16 is the sit-down dinner for the grown-ups, with the odd Cinderella at the end of the table.

"There's just a prestige around it," said WSU senior Robbie Cowgill. "There is with every step in the tournament, but the Sweet 16 is like a new tournament. It has its own name. It's set apart."

And the Cougars, in their evolution into a program that matters, need to be a part of it.

Look, it's not as if the program needs to be abandoned if the Cougars don't beat Notre Dame. It won't undo all the work that's been done or the successes already achieved. Coach Tony Bennett won't be more vulnerable to the enticements of other employers because the Cougars have bumped their heads on the ceiling.

Basketball will go on at Wazzu, regardless.

But the operative term here is "window of opportunity." The



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON The Spokesman-Review

A win today would bring additional joy for Cougs, from left, Aron Baynes, Robbie Cowgill, Derrick Low and Taylor Rochestie, here leaping off bench after 1st-round victory.

Cougars may well have the makings of more tournament teams, and possibly sooner instead of later, but there are three seniors in the program who give Wazzu its best chance of tournament advancement now. And tournament advancement puts the program in an even better light than the one already shining.

There are some parallels to other power-conference programs that have recently pulled themselves out of the mire. Pittsburgh didn't have an NCAA appearance between 1993 and 2001, then made consecutive Sweet 16s. Texas A&M was absent from the bracket for 19

years prior to 2006, then made the 16 a year ago and is now working on three straight appearances. Vanderbilt – which subdued the Cougars in double overtime last year to deny them a place in the second weekend – has made a similar jump, despite Friday's surprising loss to Siena.

The most striking example, however, is even more familiar – since its revival was also a Dick and Tony Bennett production.

Wisconsin had made exactly one tournament trip between 1947 and 1997, when the elder Bennett finally steered the Badgers back. In 2000, they reached the Sweet 16 – and beyond, all the way to the Final

Four. Two head coaches later, they haven't been out of the bracket since.

They've become a perennial. Established. Pencil them in every March.

The Cougars would love to follow that model. Yes, this is a program devoted to the value of humility and married to the role of the underdog. That does not have to be incompatible with ambition.

"This is something that could turn us into a team that is recognized," said Forrest. "Right now, we're not even recognized. Last year, when they were showing coach's award, they put UW's emblem on TV. This is

national TV – how do you not get that right? It's because nobody knows Washington State. I didn't know it before Coach Tony called me to recruit me."

For immediate motivation, of course, the Cougars have the memory of the Vanderbilt loss, a victory that got away – "unfinished business," as Bennett told his players. For Cowgill, there was an extra sting in that one "because I want us to be a team that overachieves."

"We've always been picked as underdogs and surprised people, but last year we were a 3 seed and lost to the 6, and so you can say we underachieved. I want us to be a group of guys that because

of our unity and the way we play together can achieve more."

The Cougars will play for their own instant gratification today: the chance to play another day. But they're also playing for the future.

"That's probably the most important thing besides actually winning the game," said senior Kyle Weaver. "Taking this thing as far as we can, not only for the seniors but for the new crew coming after us. Giving them some stars to shoot for. Realizing that the guys before them took it somewhere and they can, too. That's pretty important for the program."

And the time is now.

## WSU

Continued from C1

From 6-foot-8, 250-pound center Luke Harangody to 5-11, 193-pound point guard Tory Jackson, the fifth-seeded Irish (25-7) run at every opportunity. Their up-tempo style has led to an average of 61 shots and 80 points a game.

As a point of reference, the much-more methodical Cougars average 49 shots and 67 points every 40 minutes.

Most impressive, although the Irish like to push the ball, they have an assist-to-turnover ratio of 1.4, second best in the nation – mainly because they lead the nation with 18.8 assists per game. The patient Cougars (25-8), who led the Pac-10 this season, have a 1.3 ratio.

"I think it's important for us to run on makes and misses as much as we can, not necessarily ... to force transition, but to make them change ends," Notre Dame coach Mike Brey said. "I think one of the advantages we had (in the Irish's 68-50 win over George Mason) was our opponent was fatigued."

"I thought we really looked fresh running last night. That could be an advantage for us."

With a roster that only goes eight deep and usually features less, Washington State's goal is simple: Make the Irish play a half-court game.

"If we let them get out, get easy baskets in transition, get running, it will be very difficult," Bennett said. "I think that bat-



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON The Spokesman-Review

Six-foot-8, 250-pound center Luke Harangody will be a load for Cougars, especially if they force Irish into half-court game.

tle, who can kind of settle into their game, will have an advantage."

Bennett's players get the message.

"Transition defense is crucial," reserve guard Nik Koprivica said. "If we do pretty good and don't let them get easy buckets, like layups, I think we

have a pretty good chance to beat them, because I don't think they are really good in set offense."

"They aren't a team that likes to play defense for 35 seconds. They like to get turnovers, gamble to get the ball, so I think with our patience, they aren't going to like that."

It's the last piece WSU wants to exploit.

"You always look at your team and ask what gives you the best chance to play against the best and be successful," Bennett said. "You try to be as sound as possible (on both ends of the court)."

"On the defensive end, if we can be set and (make) people take quick shots or get impatient, that definitely plays into our hands. The same thing offensively, if we can be sound."

"We've been in games in (the Big East Conference) where we've had to grind it (for) 40 minutes," Brey said. "I thought we've concentrated and not gotten frustrated and been focused."

If the game becomes a half-court affair, the Cougars know they will have to concentrate on Harangody, the Big East's player of the year.

"Looking at Harangody on film, he's another animal," Daven Harmeling said of Notre Dame's leading scorer (20.7) and rebounder (10.3).

"He's a brut (and) just relentless. Tremendous size and skill. ... It's going to be a tough matchup."

## 4 Washington State

## Guards

If you believe the Cougars will go only as far as their perimeter players will carry them, you wouldn't be all that far off. When **Derrick Low** and **Taylor Rochestie** struggled in the first half against Winthrop, so did WSU. When Low got his shot untracked and Rochestie began to get to the hoop after halftime, the Cougars' offense took off. While they struggled, **Kyle Weaver** filled the breach, scoring 12 first-half points.

## Forwards and centers

Winthrop's overmatched frontline was one thing. Notre Dame's offers much larger challenges, figuratively and literally. The Cougars have struggled against teams that could throw more than one big man at them, which the Irish can. **Aron Baynes** and **Robbie Cowgill** will match up with two of Notre Dame's three bigs, but the 6-foot-6 Weaver will have to help down low, using athletic skills to offset a size differential.

## Bench

If the Cougars big men get in foul trouble, **Caleb Forrest** and **Daven Harmeling** will have to play some big minutes and come up big on the defensive end. **Nik Koprivica** needs to be efficient in relief of the guards.

## 5 Notre Dame

## Guards

The Irish have a near-perfect backcourt pairing in point guard **Tory Jackson**, who averages 6.0 assists per game, and shooting guard **Kyle McAlarney**, who shoots 44.7 percent from beyond the arc and averages 15.2 points. The Irish shoot better than 41 percent from behind the arc.

## Forwards and centers

**Luke Harangody** went from being an overweight, afterthought freshman to the Big East player of the year as a sophomore. The 6-8 post slimmed down to 250 and bulked up his scoring average from 11.2 points and 6.2 rebounds a game to 20.7 and 10.3. **Rob Kurz** and **Zach Hillesland** both stand 6-9 and attack the glass.

## Bench

The Irish have a strong eight-man rotation, with **Ryan Ayers**, **Luke Zeller** and **Jonathan Peoples** combining for 16 points and 7.1 rebounds a game. Ayers, a 6-7 guard, and Zeller have converted 87 3-pointers combined.

## Summary

The Irish average 80.2 points per game, 15th in the nation. WSU yields 56.5, the third-best defense. The Cougars' number has been built on controlling tempo. If they can't today, moving on to the Sweet 16 will be tough.