

Pat Connaughton And The Cultural Transformation Of Notre Dame Basketball

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Sitting on a bus, riding to minor league baseball games in the New York-Penn League last summer, Pat Connaughton had plenty of time to think about Notre Dame's dismal basketball season.

Even though he was pitching for the Aberdeen IronBirds he kept up with the group text messages his hoops teammates exchanged. Connaughton noticed Jerian Grant, his co-leader on the Fighting Irish, had called a time for pickup games. Then Connaughton read the excuses about how guys couldn't make it, things about having to eat at that time.

From more than 500 miles away, Connaughton stepped in. He texted the squad, reminding his teammates Grant was in charge. Be there. Find another time to do whatever else needs to get done. Eat later.

“Starting with that at the very beginning of the summer people understood: the team is first,”

Connaughton said.

Notre Dame needed the jolting interruption.



Pat Connaughton #24 of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish dunks the ball. (Photo by Andy Lyons/Getty Images)

Annoyed and frustrated by a losing 2013-14 season, Connaughton, along with his good friend Grant, no longer tolerated habits that eroded a winning culture.

Last season, after finishing 15-17, the Fighting Irish were relegated to spectator status for the postseason. A couple of months into that losing campaign, Grant, a rising star, was suspended from school because of an academic-related issue. As the losses mounted, symptoms of loseritis grew. **Players put their personal agendas first, caring more about playing time and shot attempts than winning.** Instead of building bonds in the locker room, they scattered after games.

“They’d be out of the locker room before you could even address the team as a whole. **That’s not something you**

can build a program around, or a team around, when people are just kind of leaving and doing their own thing,” Connaughton said.

This season, the program has had a remarkable turnaround. The Irish won the ACC tournament, the program’s first conference tournament championship — ever. They go into tomorrow’s NCAA tournament tilt against Northeastern as the No. 3 seed in the Midwest region, and the team’s 29-5 mark represents the most wins for the school in the last 106 years.

“It’s been unbelievable to see the transformation from last year to this year,” said Notre Dame assistant coach Martin Ingelsby. “Keeping it very simple, one of the main reasons is Pat Connaughton and Jerian Grant have taken complete ownership of this team.”

Connaughton and Grant are the only two seniors. Grant is tops on the team in points, steals and assists. Connaughton is the best three-point shooter. Both could have left Notre Dame after last season. Grant could have pursued a professional basketball career, though he is probably a more attractive prospect after an All-American season, and Connaughton could have continued his path toward Major League Baseball.

In last June’s draft, the Baltimore Orioles picked Connaughton in the fourth round. The right-hander’s fastball registered in the high 90s as he threw 14 2/3 innings, gave up four earned runs, walked three batters and struck out 10. He has a future in the sport if he wants it.

Since they were both on campus together Connaughton and Grant bonded through their desire to win. They came

back to fulfill on that and earn their degrees. Sure, with other opportunities available they made half-hearted jokes like, “if you leave, I’m leaving.” **But the truth was “we needed each other to be successful this season,”** Connaughton said.

While Connaughton rode those buses in the Class A short season league, he assessed what was lacking in his leadership. Meanwhile, Notre Dame head coach Mike Brey called on Dr. Joe Carr. The well-known sports psychologist has worked with many teams and athletes, most notably Lebron James and the University of Connecticut, who claimed last year’s national title. At Notre Dame, Carr had the Irish sit in a circle. Players told their personal stories. They said what they had to say about last season. Then they created a structure to communicate with one another this season. Something Connaughton, after going through individual sessions with Carr, refers to as **“call-outs.”**

With the context of the team being first and winning being the overarching commitment, the concept of call-outs becomes very basic. ***Players call each other out when they are not doing what they’re supposed to do, and the player being called out has to listen. The one caveat is the call-out has to happen within 24 hours of the misstep.***

This goes for behavior on or off the court. If a player finds out a teammate has missed class, the teammate can’t go to practice until the absence is handled.

“The biggest thing was everyone bought in at the beginning of the year. They knew that nothing was to be taken personal, no matter how brutally honest it may have been,” Connaughton said.

Last year, if a player didn't hustle back on defense and somebody mentioned the poor effort, the conversation might have devolved into something that had nothing to do with basketball. **This year, the response is, "You're absolutely right,"** Connaughton said.



Connaughton, head coach Mike Brey and Jerian Grant after the seniors' final home game at Notre Dame, an 81-67 win versus Clemson. (AP Photo/Joe Raymond)

The end result has been success in the form of an unorthodox, resilient Notre Dame team. Brey starts four guards and a 6-10 forward. Playing as an undersized 6-5 power forward at times, Connaughton leads the team in rebounds, grabbing 7.4 per game, and blocks with 28 on the year.

Six times this season the Irish have come from behind to win games in which they trailed by 10 or more points. Defeats haven't splintered them

either. They sit around and talk about them and move on, winning the next game after each of their five of losses.

As with any good leadership structure, it has taken root and grown throughout the roster. ESPN analyst Jay Williams saw it during the ACC tournament championship.

Notre Dame trailed North Carolina in the second half and Williams noticed Notre Dame players calling each other out on their bench. Connaughton was grabbing a teammate's jersey. Grant was jawing at somebody and sophomore guard Demetrius Jackson was doing the same.

“It was ok to challenge people and that's the way it should be,” Williams said on TV after the Notre Dame win.

The next challenge is defeating Northeastern and then ending Notre Dame's 12-year absence from the Sweet 16.

Jerry Barca is the author of Unbeatable. You can find him on Twitter @JBarca.