

The Luck of the Irish

IT WAS A SCENE OUT OF A MOVIE, PART *HOOSIERS*, PART FOOTBALL CLASSIC *UNNECESSARY Roughness*. It was Wednesday night, October 17, and the Notre Dame basketball team was holding open tryouts for walk-ons for the upcoming season. The tryouts were being run by the three assistant coaches, associate head coach Sean Kearney, and assistants Anthony Solomon and Lewis Preston. Head coach Mike Brey was there but not really involved, preferring to stay off to the side, scanning the crowd. Dressed in a sweater, blue jeans, and a pair of brown hiking boots, the coach looked more like an archeology professor than a basketball coach.

At first the assistants had the players go through drills—layups and dribbling and shooting—and then they split them up into squads to scrimmage. It was the cast of characters that you might expect at an open tryout for a Division I basketball team. There were some decent players, guys who were high school standouts, but not good enough to play at the Division I level. There were some students whose concept of basketball was much different from the version being played on ESPN. Guys with socks hiked up to their crotch and headbands holding back flowing curly hair did their best to impress the coaches. (There was one player not required to tryout, senior Chuck Thomas, who had been a walk-on the past three seasons and who Brey would probably add again this year.)

The staff did not expect to find anyone at the open tryout, but it was fun anyway, and hey, you never know. What they could have used was a big body for practices, to take the punishing blows from center Ryan Humphrey, but no one fit the bill. At the end of the session, Brey gathered the auditioners at one end of the court and thanked them all for coming out. Telling them “we will be in touch if you fit any of our needs.” It’s the same speech he gives every year, one that he hates to give but knows that he has to. As the players get up to leave, one fellow comes over, with a backpack full of books and shakes Brey’s hand. “Thanks, coach, for giving me the shot,” the tired-looking graduate student says.

For many of the guys on the floor this night, they had no illusions about their abilities, or about making the squad, but they cherished the chance to live out a dream. And Mike Brey knows all about getting and giving chances.

Like so many other college coaches, Brey is the son of coaches and educators. His mother was an AAU swimmer, Olympian, and educator in Rockville, Maryland; his father was a well-known physical education teacher and athletic director in the same town. His mother’s brother, Jack, played on Duke’s 1960 ACC basketball championship team. From a young age, Brey watched his family teach, coach, and play the game of basketball, and as early as the age of two, he was adorned in a Duke sweatshirt—an omen of what was to come.

Brey had a relatively uneventful childhood in Maryland, but knew by ninth grade that he wanted to play basketball. He had attended clinics and camps run by legendary coach Morgan Wootten, the coach of a Catholic school, DeMatha, in Hyattsville, Maryland, about 20 miles from Brey's home. The self-proclaimed "gym rat" was so enamored of the coach and of the success of DeMatha that he made the difficult decision to transfer out of the public school district that his parents both worked in to commute to DeMatha. He played on the junior varsity as a freshman and sophomore and played two seasons on the varsity under Wootten, helping the team to a 55-9 record. The coach nicknamed Brey the "Prudential Playmaker," because he always "gave everyone a piece of the rock."

He played his first three seasons of college ball at Northwestern Louisiana State, leading the team in assists and steals. He still ranks fifth all-time on the school's career assist list. After his coach was fired, Brey transferred to George Washington in D.C., to complete his degree at the school where his mother was the swim coach. With no real intention of playing, he got the bug again, and after sitting out the required year, the 1980–1981 season (a year in which he started dating his future wife, Tish), Brey averaged 5.0 points and 4.8 rebounds a game as a senior at GW and was named team MVP and captain in his only season at the school. He graduated in 1982 with a degree in physical education and looked to follow in his parents' footsteps as an educator and coach. He got a job as an assistant varsity and head junior varsity coach at his alma mater, DeMatha, the preeminent high school basketball program in the nation. More legendary than the high school was Morgan Wootten. He was the John Wooden of high school basketball and joining his staff at any level would be a great opportunity.

Wootten had won over 1,200 games, 31 conference titles, and five national titles in his 45 years as a high school coach. Brey stayed at DeMatha for five seasons, teaching history and helping coach the basketball team to numerous conference and state titles and a No. 1 national ranking in 1984. Then Mike Brey got the chance of a lifetime: Duke. As Wootten's assistant at DeMatha, Brey was in charge of handling the recruiting process for the DeMatha players, and there were many who coaches came to watch. Coaches would come to scout players, meet with the coaches, and otherwise make themselves known. Along the way, Brey formed solid professional and personal relationships with many of the top level Division I coaches. One DeMatha player who ended up at Duke was All-American Danny Ferry, who joined the Blue Devils in 1983. Brey was the assistant varsity coach at DeMatha when Ferry signed with Duke. Three years later when an assistant position at Duke opened up, Brey was hired—not because Ferry played there, but because he'd already impressed Krzyzewski, who believed that Brey would stay at Duke for a long time, and Brey came with Wootten's and Ferry's strong recommendations. Brey's hiring was not without controversy, though. There was another DeMatha player, Jerrod Mustaf, who also attracted a great deal of college interest. Skeptics said that Krzyzewski hired Brey to sign Mustaf. As it

turned out, Mustaf signed with ACC rival Maryland, and when he wanted to transfer later on, Duke again missed the boat.

When Brey joined Mike Krzyzewski's staff in 1986, Duke was about to enter into one of the greatest runs in college basketball history, and Brey was there for the ride. During Brey's eight seasons as an assistant at Duke, the team won two National Championships, went to six Final Fours, and the coach helped recruit and coach superstars like Ferry, Grant Hill, Bobby Hurley, and Christian Laettner. Most importantly for Brey, though, was the ongoing opportunities to watch a Hall of Fame coach do what he did best: coach. "Both Morgan [Wootten] and Mike [Krzyzewski] have influenced me. I've probably stolen from both of those guys and then put a system together and tweaked it to fit my personality and style. I really feel that with Morgan and Mike I've had like the Harvard Medical School of coaching."

As Duke became synonymous with success, Krzyzewski's phone began to ring with athletic directors looking for bright assistants to hire. At the time, current Michigan coach Tommy Amaker was an assistant with Brey. The calls would come from mid-majors and the biggies, looking for a big name assistant to take a program to "the next level." But Brey did not jump at the first, second, or even third opportunity, and as his career would prove, patience pays off. In the spring of 1994, Paul Houlihan, the Vanderbilt athletic director, called Krzyzewski and inquired about Brey. With a sound recommendation, Houlihan began to pursue Brey, along with five other candidates. Brey had passed on other opportunities, but he was intrigued by the Vandy job. Big conference, good salary, solid academics, it seemed like a good fit. It came down to Brey and Jan van Breda Kolff, and Brey was not the lucky one. (As fate would have it, van Breda Kolff would leave Vanderbilt in 1999 for Pepperdine, and Todd Turner, the new AD at Vanderbilt, would pursue Brey, who by then was at Delaware. But Brey was not interested anymore and declined to meet with Turner at the Final Four in Tampa to discuss the opening again. Brey had called Krzyzewski and Kentucky legend C. M. Newton and asked, "Am I stupid for turning this down?" Both men responded no.)

In the spring of 1995, Brey sat in his room at the Queensville Marriott in Greensboro, during the ACC Tournament. The phone rang. It was C. M. "I have a good friend at the University of Delaware, David Roselle. He is a good man. Worked with him at Kentucky [where Roselle was the former president]. Would you be interested in coaching at Delaware?" Brey was shocked and excited. He was from Delaware's neighbor, Maryland, and knew the area well. He could recruit those kids and knew that Delaware had a chance to be a great mid-major. He had also received some advice in previous years from older coaching colleagues who had told him to make sure he had the support of the guys hiring him and that he liked them. Brey trusted Newton who trusted Roselle. He told Newton that he was interested. Ensuing phone calls and meetings between Roselle, Delaware athletic director Edgar Johnson, and Brey took place in late April and in May 1995, Brey became the Delaware coach.

At Delaware, Brey's success was unparalleled. His overall record of 99-52, accumulated in five consecutive winning seasons, included two trips to the NCAA Tournament and a postseason NIT trip. He was the America East Coach of the Year for 1997–1998. His fourth season, 1998–1999, the team finished 25-6 and won the America East title. The Blue Hens lost a thriller to Tennessee in the first round of the NCAAs, 62-52. In his last season at Delaware, the Hens went 24-8 and advanced to the NIT. Perhaps even more important to Brey's coaching resume, every player who completed their eligibility at Delaware had graduated. The former history teacher and high school coach had become one of the most sought after coaches in the country. Edgar Johnson knew it was a matter of time before Brey left. But the story of where Mike Brey *didn't* go is as compelling as the story of where he did.

John MacLeod resigned from Notre Dame after eight seasons and the Irish were looking for a new head coach as the 1999 NCAA Tournament got underway. With Delaware and Duke on his resume, and a solid reputation as a coach and educator, Brey became a front-runner for the Notre Dame job. But a crazy ten days in March 1999 ended up with Brey right back where he started.

Sunday, March 28. Brey took the Amtrak train from Wilmington, Delaware, to Penn Station in New York City, to meet with Notre Dame athletic director Mike Wadsworth and associate athletic director Bubba Cunningham. They met in the plush Waldorf Astoria hotel to discuss the job. After meeting for close to an hour, Brey headed back to Penn Station to catch the train. He was not as excited on the trip home as he had been going up. As he stepped off the train in Wilmington, he wasn't sure of his interest, but knew he was still one of five candidates. In the meantime, Brey had also been talking with Georgia athletic director Vince Dooley, who was searching for a new coach. Dooley's assistant Dick Bestwick had gotten a call from his friend, Wyoming AD Lee Moon, who had offered Brey the Marshall job when Moon was the AD at Marshall. (Brey declined and the job went to a Rick Pitino assistant, Billy Donovan.) Moon recommended Brey to Bestwick who then told Dooley, and soon both Brey and Georgia were interested.

Monday, March 29. The day after Brey had taken the train to New York to meet with Notre Dame, he took a Delta flight from Philadelphia to Atlanta to talk with Georgia. He met with Dooley and Georgia President Dr. Michael Adams at the Delta Crown room in Atlanta. Brey was impressed with Dooley and certainly liked the large contract, but Georgia was balking at a six- or seven-year deal. Dooley and Brey agreed to meet in Tampa on Friday or Saturday during the Final Four weekend. Dooley was nervous because he knew Brey was in the running for Notre Dame and could be a candidate for other jobs. Brey got back on a flight to Philadelphia. Later that night, he heard from Bestwick, who told Brey that "he was their man."

Saturday, April 3. Brey convinced his wife, Tish, to go with him to the Final Four in Tampa, though she had been to so many already, because “these three days could change our lives.” They met with Adams and others in Tampa on Saturday morning at a hotel far from the coaches’ headquarters. Still in the running for the Georgia job was Tulsa’s Buzz Peterson and Rhode Island former UCLA coach Jim Harrick. As Brey and his wife got back to the coaches’ hotel, Brey sent Tish out to the lobby to scope the scene for coaches because Brey knew all too well how it worked—he would be swamped with coaches looking for assistant jobs now that his name was out there for Notre Dame and Georgia. At the second Final Four game Saturday night, Dooley sat two rows behind Brey, and in between games he told Brey that “you’re our guy.” They agreed to meet Sunday morning.

Sunday, April 4. Dooley and Adams met with the Breys on Sunday morning and offered the Georgia job to them. But something didn’t sit well with Brey and, after letting Dooley and Adams know that he still wanted to meet with Notre Dame Sunday afternoon, it seemed that Adams cooled to Brey. He knew Dooley would be retiring soon, and without Adams’ support, Brey wouldn’t have “his guy” in there (remembering the advice from years past). Brey met with Notre Dame officials Sunday afternoon for what he described as a “general interest” meeting.

Monday, April 5. By the championship game, Brey had taken himself out of the running for Georgia, and he also was out with Notre Dame after he received a phone call from Bubba Cunningham. Brey didn’t know who was getting the Irish job, but he knew it wasn’t him. After the final game, he went to the Hyatt bar and sat with other Notre Dame candidates Dan Monson from Gonzaga and Skip Prosser from Xavier. They were teasing each other about losing out on Notre Dame. None of them knew who the next Irish coach would be and certainly had no idea Matt Doherty was in the picture. Brey called his boss, Edgar Johnson, who was also in town for the Final Four, and who probably was sweating out the weekend, to inform him that he would be staying at Delaware. He and Brey agreed that the coach would make it official the next night on his weekly radio show back home in Delaware.

Wednesday, April 7. While in his office on Wednesday morning, Brey received a call from his wife. Dick Bestwick from Georgia had called their home looking for him. “Uh-oh,” Brey thought to himself. “They’re calling to make sure I keep quiet about the Georgia search process and keep low on the PR radar.” Jim Harrick was to be announced as their new coach and they didn’t want other candidates’ names out there. But when Brey returned the call, he discovered Bestwick’s call had not been to keep him quiet. “Mike, how would you like to be the next coach at the University of Georgia?” Brey realized that Harrick must have changed his mind; now it was an emergency. Dooley was on a hunting trip and couldn’t be reached and President Adams needed a coach. “I’ll give you an hour to think about it. Call me in the president’s office then.” Brey didn’t need an hour to think about it. He was already committed to Delaware and didn’t want the Georgia job anyway. He did call the president’s office, but threatened to

hang up if the secretary put him through. “Just tell him thank you, but I am not interested.” It was a day later when Jim Harrick changed his mind, again, and became the Bulldog coach. Brey thought to himself, what if I had taken the job in the meantime?

A year later, in the spring of 2000, Brey’s name was again mentioned for every coaching vacancy. He told Tish that his window of opportunity was getting smaller. Had he made the right choices by staying at Delaware? When is it best to jump ship from a mid-major?

He did come to realize that he and his family had a good life in Delaware. He made more money than he ever imagined and lived in a great community close to his parents. He loved his job, had great support from the administration, and had met with Delaware officials about the future. Life was pretty darn good. But was there another challenge?

In March 2000, Brey met with Georgia Tech officials in Philadelphia, at his home in Newark, Delaware, and again at the Final Four to discuss their coaching vacancy. However, in a week’s time, new candidates had come to the forefront and Georgia Tech was off of his list. Miami coach Leonard Hamilton had decided to leave to take the Washington Wizards job and had called Brey asking him to at least talk to the Miami administrators, even though Brey knew from the outset that Miami was not a good fit for him. He met with the Miami officials in D.C., along with Hamilton. After the meeting, it was clear that Brey and Miami would not be happening. A few months later, though, things would be happening for Brey.

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, is a vacation spot with which many on the eastern seaboard are familiar. A family beach, the sun, sand, and surf bring millions into the Delaware economy each year. Families from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware rent homes each summer on streets, “avenues,” called Philadelphia, Atlantic, Chesapeake and, of course, First Street. In the middle of Philadelphia Avenue, about a block and a half from the sand, the Brey family has owned a home since 1998, which they visit for a few weeks every summer. It is a typical beach house, with three bedrooms upstairs, a den, a kitchen and bathrooms downstairs, and the obligatory front porch with chairs that have seen their prime.

The Breys would usually come to Rehoboth for the first few weeks of July, and Brey would come and go as he traveled the summer evaluation circuit to places like High Point, Indianapolis, Teaneck, and Las Vegas. Tish and the Brey children, Kyle and Callie, would stay behind, enjoying the warm weather and the many fine restaurants at the beach. Rehoboth was only an hour and a half drive south from Newark, the home of the University of Delaware and of Mike Brey’s America East champions, but it was a getaway from the mayhem.

July 7, 2000, was a typical beach day, just like the ones he enjoyed when he was in town. The Breys would sit on the front porch in the morning, eat bagels, and read the papers: *The News Journal* for

the Delaware tidbits, *USA Today* for the big time news. As he read through the sports section of *USA Today*, he came across an article regarding Kansas' coach Roy Williams' decision to decline North Carolina's offer to become their head coach. A light went on in Mike's head. "Tish," he said across the table from his seated position on the porch. "We may have to get ready for South Bend." Like a great basketball mind, Brey always thinks two steps ahead. On this particular morning, he could see the pieces falling into place. Now that Williams had turned down the job, and after George Karl and Larry Brown had already said they were not interested in coaching the Tar Heels, Brey knew that UNC would go after Carolina alum Matt Doherty, who had taken the Notre Dame job just a year earlier, beating out Brey for the job. And as in 1999, when Brey did not get the Notre Dame job, he was anxiously looking forward to a potential move to South Bend.

July means evaluation and recruiting time for coaches, and they head out like cattle to scout the next crop of players. It was Saturday, July 8, and Brey was in Indianapolis watching players at the Nike camp at the morning session. He was approached by Perry Clark, a friend of new Notre Dame athletic director Kevin White, who had coached under White at Tulane. Clark asked Brey if he would be interested in the Irish job. Again. He told Brey what a great guy White was (remember the advice) and that Brey would be hearing from White. In between the morning and night sessions at Nike, Brey went to lunch at Palomino's in downtown Indianapolis. Who did he see upon entering the restaurant?

Coach K. His mentor thought that Notre Dame was a perfect fit for Brey and it was time that he (Brey) got out of a comfort zone at Delaware. After the late lunch, Brey decided not to return to the evening session of Nike, for he knew he would be inundated with job requests as word spread. And he didn't even have the Notre Dame job yet. Brey returned to Newark on Sunday and waited for a call from Kevin White. On Monday, he received a call from Notre Dame associate athletic director Missy Conboy, who had called Edgar Johnson seeking permission to talk with Brey. Conboy asked Brey if he was interested in the job and would he take it if offered. Brey again stated his interest and was told that White would be calling. He did call, the next day from Chicago's O'Hare Airport, running to catch a flight to Rome to talk with P. J. Carlesimo about the Notre Dame job. White figured that Carlesimo was not interested, but he had to explore it. White told Brey that he would talk to him Thursday night in Washington, D.C., a meeting previously arranged by Conboy. It was during that initial phone conversation that Brey told White that he wouldn't get into a horse race for the Notre Dame job. "Delaware has been good to me and I won't have a public jockeying again." White assured Brey that he was one of "two and a half guys" up for the job. Brey, Carlesimo, and Oregon coach Ernie Kent—though White still refuses to acknowledge the candidates on the record.

On Thursday, July 13, Mike Brey had one of those days. The days that change your life. Most of the Notre Dame family (administrators, president, Board of Trustees) would be in D.C. for a ceremony

honoring Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., the past president of Notre Dame who served 35 years in that role in addition to sitting on presidential committees and numerous boards. After the ceremony, Brey met with White, current President Rev. Edward A. Malloy, C.S.C., the vice-president, and members of the Board for close to two hours. Kent was to be interviewed after Brey. While walking out of the meeting, White asked Brey where he could reach him that night. Brey was headed back to Newark and told White, “You know where you can reach me.” As Brey got into his car for the hour and a half drive home, he had a good vibe about the Notre Dame job.

He called Tish and told her, “I think we will get this. If I don’t and I am wrong, then I can’t read people.” He wasn’t wrong. White called him at midnight and asked Brey if he was offered the job, would he take it? Without hesitation, Brey said yes. They hung up. A few minutes later, White called back and Brey was the new coach at the University of Notre Dame. He didn’t even have a contract, but knew the numbers and terms would be in his ballpark. A Notre Dame private plane would pick him and Tish up at 9:00 A.M. Friday morning, the next day, just hours away, at the New Castle County Airport in Delaware. Brey wanted more time to tell his Delaware players, Johnson, and Roselle. White said OK—the plane would be there at 10:00 A.M.

Early Friday morning, Brey called some of his Delaware players to tell them the news. The older ones had expected it, the younger ones were disappointed. Brey called Johnson and told him, and tried to see Roselle, but he was out of town. Notre Dame had called a press conference for 5:00 P.M. in South Bend. Brey and his wife headed for the airport to meet the plane at 10:00 A.M. On the tarmac, they were greeted by Mike Harkins, a major player in Delaware’s political scene and, at the time, the head of the Delaware River & Bay Authority. Harkins was also a big-time contributor to the University of Delaware. “You sure you are going?” Harkins asked Brey. There were only two pilots on the plane, no Notre Dame officials. Harkins ducked his head inside the plane and told the pilots, “If there is no one there to meet him, you bring his ass right back here.” Brey smiled, the pilots closed the door to the plane, and Mike Brey had finally said good-bye to Delaware.

Of course, upon landing in South Bend, Brey was whisked to his news conference and then had to face his new team. In a moment that tells you everything about Brey, he asked White for a few minutes to change before he met with his new team. He put on a short sleeve shirt, shorts, and sneakers and then went into the players’ lounge to speak to his new players. “I knew from the first day he came in, he was going to be great,” says junior Matt Carroll. It had been a long journey for Brey and his family, but they were finally where they were supposed to be.