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Saint Mary's Basketball Teams off to Promising Start

By Dean Boerner



Joe Rahon Photos Tod Fierner

Both Saint Mary's basketball teams are projected to be top-four finishers in the WCC, but they couldn't be more different. The men are young and have a perimeter-oriented offense, while the women are replete with veterans looking to score in the paint.

Through their first three contests, the men are scoring at a torrid pace, putting up 82 points per game at a .542 field goal percentage. The composition of head coach Randy Bennet's team is almost completely different from last year, as the Gaels lost their entire starting lineup to graduation.

Consequently, younger players, like sophomore Emmett Naar have had to step up. "My role has increased leadership-wise and I've had to take on a bigger role scoring," Naar said. The sophomore guard is scoring a team-high 19 points per game.

Naar has shared the great majority of ball-handling duties early on with Joe Rahon, a junior transfer from Boston College. Naar and Rahon have been the Gaels' offensive sparkplugs, yielding 18 and 21 assists respectively, while no other player on the team has more than three.

With the entirety of Saint Mary's starting lineup last season graduated, other players are taking on more responsibility. This has led to the emergence of a young core of post players consisting of Evan Fitzner, Jock Landale, and Jordan Hunter.

"Guys who didn't have as big of a role last year have stepped up," Naar explained. "It's definitely very different going from one of the oldest starting lineups in college basketball to now one of the youngest ones."

Evan Fitzner, one of the upstart Gaels, credits past players like Brad Waldow and Desmond Simmons for his transition into the starting lineup as a redshirt freshman. "I think it really helped just learning from those guys last year, says Fitzner, who's averaging 10.7 points per game thus far.

With three wins already under their belt, including a convincing 78-61 victory over Stanford Nov. 22, in Moraga, the Gaels will look to push perennial WCC frontrunner Gonzaga later in the season.

Those around Saint Mary's women's basketball are excited about the mix of young and veteran talent on this season's roster. "I'm very happy with the collection of individuals we have that make up this team," said head coach Paul Thomas.

The Gaels have played well on the road so far, earning road victories against University of Wyoming and Northern Colorado. It's apparent early on that Saint Mary's has an inside-out approach at the offensive end. Forwards Sydney Raggio (17 points per game) and Devin Brookshire (14.8 points per game) lead the way in scoring for a team that's only attempted 49 three-pointers compared to 121 by their opposition.

"We do like getting it into our post players and letting them work, says senior guard Lauren Nicholson. Nicholson, who just returned from injury and was the leading scorer of last year's squad, highlights coach Thomas's strategy of high-percentage shots. Whether it's a jump-hook from a forward like Devin Brookshire or a layup from senior guard Shannon Mauldin, the Gaels look to take advantage of their ability to finish at the rim.

Thomas believes much of the team's success hinges on capitalizing on their rebounding

pro prowess and limiting their turnovers. "Our demon is our turnovers," explains the coach. "Until we can control that demon, put it in a box, and pack it away, that's going to be something that's going to hurt us." If the Gaels can do that, they have a good chance of finishing at the top of the WCC come March.



Evan Fitzner

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