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## St. Mary's Golf: WCC Champs Prepare for NCAA Championship Bid

*By Dean Boerner*

On the Saint Mary's College campus, amid high-profile programs like basketball and baseball, exists a bunch that lack in fanfare but brim with success. That group would be head coach Scott Hardy's golf team, now winners of three out of the last five WCC Championships.

That accomplishment came in Danville last month, when the Gaels obliterated the field at Blackhawk Country Club. They finished the contest 25-under par, leaving their closest competitor, Pepperdine, 23 strokes behind in the dust.

"When you play golf as a team sport, so much of it is about momentum," Hardy said. "We got off to a good start and started to build that confidence."

Like many great teams, the Gaels have a great player leading the way. Jonathan De Los Reyes, the WCC co-Player of the Year, shot a 64 the first day and never looked back. The senior shot 19-under par, 11 strokes better than the second-place finisher.

"Johnny is the first player I've had who really doesn't have any weaknesses," said Hardy, who's in his sixteenth year at Saint Mary's. "He can play well on any type of course, and I think that's what makes him such a good player."

But even the talent of De Los Reyes doesn't come close to solely explaining the Gaels' success on the course this season. From top to bottom, the Gaels can flat-out play.

"We're all just as capable as one another to shoot a good number," said sophomore Connor Blick. Blick, a native of Danville, finished in eight place overall at 2-under for the tournament.

Fellow sophomore Perry Cohen also shined in the championships, going 4-under and ending up tied for fifth. Out of the eight golfers who shot below par in the tournament, three of them were Gaels. Junior Hunter Rappleye and sophomore Pavan Sagoo failed to crack the top ten, but they both had impressive showings throughout the season.

Rappleye finished tied for fifth in the tournament preceding the conference championships, while Sagoo set the lowest 54-hole score in program history during the fall, shooting a 197 in the Nick Watney Invitational.

"Our key is that we don't have a guy in our starting lineup ranked outside the top 400," explained Hardy. "There are 3000 Division I golfers, so to have all of ours in the top 400 is really solid. They're all capable."

The numbers support Hardy's claim. Although they're ranked a modest 51st in the nation, the Gaels sport the fifth-best scoring average in the nation at 72.00, and they've tallied a nation-best 584 birdies. Now, after a program-high four tournament wins this season, the next step for Hardy's group will be the NCAA Regional Championships beginning on May 16.

While the Gaels are assured an automatic bid thanks to their conference victory, they don't learn until May 5 where they'll play. All they know for sure is that they'll playing for spot in NCAA Championships, something they don't take lightly.

"I'm looking forward for a chance to play in Nationals," said De Los Reyes. "All I can look forward to is the chance to play in Nationals again, because that's really why we're playing."

De Los Reyes stands as the last player remaining from the 2013 team that reached that pinnacle. Younger players like Sagoo, who last year as a freshman performed well in Regionals, will also join in this year's quest.

"Obviously there's some really good teams there, and it's going to be a really good experience," said Sagoo.

Last season, the Gaels ended day one in fourth place, positioned nicely for a chance to be one of five teams that advanced to Nationals. They ended up finishing eighth, but the Gaels are eager to improve on that number.

"The ultimate goal of Nationals is so close," said Blick. "It's just a few good rounds away."

Hardy believes that as long as the Gaels play to their potential, they'll end up where they're supposed to be.

"We just need to get out of our own way," he stressed. "They're going to be nervous, but if they can just play golf and rely on the fact that we have five good players, I think we'll do fine."

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