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Saint Mary's Basketball - a tale of two seasons

By Jon Kingdon



Head Coach Randy Bennett Photo Tod Fierner

When the preseason prognosticators in the press declared that Saint Mary's was the favorite to win the WCC, it was something that head coach Randy Bennett did not trumpet himself.

After starting the season with a 4-5 record, Saint Mary's has won 10 of their last 11 games, opening up league play with four straight wins over San Diego (81-70), Loyola Marymount (68-64), Portland (95-52) and Santa Clara (73-49), who had defeated nationally ranked Gonzaga two days earlier, making the press look more prescient. "We had a lot of growth that needed to happen and there were some expectations on us that we just weren't ready for as a team yet," Bennett said.

Though there are a number of experienced players that returned this season, four of the five starters had hurdles they had to overcome, which was not perceptible to the general public. The starting five of center Mitchell Saxen, forwards of Alex Ducas and Joshua Jefferson and guards Augustas Marciulionis and Aidan Mahaney all had adjustments to make from the start of the season.

"We had a lot of growth that needed to happen. Joshua and Augustus have come to grow into their roles as starters," Bennett said. "Alex spent the entire off-season trying to get healthy. He was out for four months, and it has taken him four months to get back and he's close to 100% now. Aidan's role this year is different with the

graduation of Logan Johnson who shouldered a lot of the load for him, and he is now going against the best perimeter defender every night and we've asked Saxen to increase his scoring and rebounding and he's been trying to do that. It's not a completed process at this point."

As the season was developing, the offense was not what Bennett had been anticipating: "That's what surprised me a little bit in that I thought we would have been further along offensively but we haven't put it all together yet. We turned the ball over way too much, but our field goal percentage numbers have gotten better (48.7) in nine of our last 10 games. As Ducas, Marciulionis and Jefferson have gotten better, we've gotten better offensively. I was careful not to get down on them because we've been playing tough games against high ranked teams. Aidan had a bad shooting streak early in the season, but he has been coming out of it and shooting better. Confidence can be a fickle thing even for the best of them and he's fighting through it and he's going to be all right."

Starting league play, Bennett understood what the team needed to do to be successful. "We could not lose our identity of being a really good defensive and rebounding team and that's what we are right now. We had to be a better offensive team and the number one thing was taking care of the ball. That's why we've been good the last two years. We needed to keep getting better offensively without losing the other two factors."

After the slow start, the team's performance has made a big turnaround with everything coming together in the win over Portland last Thursday, with as balanced a performance as a team could have, both offensively and defensively. The Saint Mary's guards scored 39 points, the forwards 40 points and the centers 16 points led by Mahaney with 25 points, Ducas with 17 and Saxen with 8. With only five turnovers, 25 assists, 40 rebounds and 10 steals, Bennett appreciated those numbers. "We played really unselfishly and defended well," Bennett said. "We try and hit those numbers and I was pleased with how our guys kept playing unselfishly."

Mahaney, who had been going through an uncharacteristic shooting slump, has come out of it with a vengeance in the last four games, connecting on 28 of 53 shots, averaging 18 points in those games.

Historically, the strength of a Randy Bennett team has been in areas other than offense as is the case this season. "We're really a good defensive and rebounding team. (Saint Mary's is fourth in the nation - 59.1 ppg and 24th in the nation - 41.1 rebounds per game)," Bennett said. "We're 12-0 when we hold teams to 40% shooting or less. We're 1 and 6 when we don't. That's who we are. . We're still gritty, not pretty."

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