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Women's Basketball Counts

By Robin Schoettler Fox



Interest in women's collegiate basketball is up, but attendance remains a challenge nationwide. Here, the Lady Gaels prepare to play the Cal Bears on December 29th in the Haas Pavilion, which that night had fan-seats to spare. Photo Jordan Fong

Make your ticket count for Saint Mary's College on January 24.

Watch the Lady Gaels battle defending West Coast Conference (WCC) champions, San Diego, and help SMC win this season's National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Pack the House attendance challenge. Tip off for what SMC calls Pack the Pavilion is 2pm.

Pack the House is the NCAA's second-year national effort to grow attendance for women's basketball.

Last year, almost two-thirds of Division I NCAA membership - 198 institutions - participated, attracting more than 592,000 fans across the Pack the House games, with 96 institutions breaking single-attendance records and five programs recording their first-ever sell-out game.

While you're at McKeon Pavilion, look around. See all those young girls? Those may be the faces of the future of women's basketball.

At least, says John Brewster, who took his 6th grade CYO team to Sunday's game against the University of the Pacific, "They can dream."

Brewster has coached twenty five basketball teams, everything from CYO to high school, about half of which have been girls' teams.

Just going to women's collegiate games helps make big things seem possible for girls, says Brewster: "Girls learn not to give up, not to think that it's just a game for boys."

Believing in the dream is easier for girls who know SMC scholarship freshman Katie Batlin was the star of last year's North Coast Section Division III champs, Miramonte High School.

Or that Assistant Coach Tracy Morris Johnston is the Campolindo graduate who became a star Saint Mary's player and remains the school's all-time leading scorer with 1,807 points.

At its best, women's collegiate basketball is exciting and fun to watch. But it's different than the men's game. Don't come expecting dunks, says Brewster. The women's game is more pure, more focused on fundamentals, team play.

Competition though is tough. Sunday's game against Pacific was a nail-biter, coming down to a foul shot with 3 seconds left in the game, SMC taking the win, 71-70.

According to the NCAA, women's collegiate basketball trends are good: "In terms of interest, participation, skill level and excitement, all the indicators are pointing up."

But attendance remains a challenge nationwide. At Saint Mary's, thanks in

part to Patrick Mills' near celebrity status, men's basketball games often sell-out the Gaels' 3500-seat McKeon Pavilion.

For women's games, the school typically closes the upstairs, leaving 1500 court-level seats for fans, most of which go unused.

Coach Paul Thomas works off-court to build interest. There are bi-weekly fan breakfasts, community presentations, and now a once-a-month local radio broadcast.

Meanwhile, Staci Hamaguchi, Director of Athletic Promotions for SMC since 2007, brainstorms ways to draw in more students, alumni and community fans.

Half-time scrimmages attract families; so do youth team days. There's Kids Work McKeon, a new program aimed at giving boys and girls a peek at game-day operations.

Now eyes are on that January 24th afternoon game.

Last year, Saint Mary's Pack the Pavilion game registered season-high attendance figures, but Portland won the contest for the WCC.

"This year we want to break (attendance) records of the last five or six years," says Hamaguchi. "We're piling everything on, making it big."

And that starts with the level of play - San Diego is tough competition. Go for it, the coaches told Hamaguchi.

"If we bring our 'A' game, it's going to be a great game," Hamaguchi recalls the coaches saying.

"If we come out with a victory, it's going to be exciting. If we don't, they'll see that we played hard the whole time."



Coach John Brewster huddles with his 6th grade St. P CYO team just prior to their half-time scrimmage in the Gaels' McKeon Pavilion during the January 4th game against the Pacific Tigers. "I want you to score, to not be afraid to shoot," he said. Photo Robin Schoettler Fox



St Mary's Sierra Chambers (10) blocks Devanei Hampton (20) of Cal from driving to the basket
Photo Jordan Fong

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