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Saint Mary's Drops Two on the Road

By Justine Sgalio



Omar Samhan (#50) Photo Tod Fierner

at home) were all considered to be "good" losses-if there is such a thing-meaning RPI points for the Gaels, something that could potentially work in their favor come post-season play.

Though any combination of wins or losses last week would still leave the Gaels' post-season fate to be determined, at least one road win would have secured them a number two conference standing the remainder of regular season play, pending wins over San Diego (February 18 in San Diego), Pepperdine (February 25 at home) and Loyola Marymount (February 27 at home), all games in which Saint Mary's is favored to win.

But the Gaels aren't planning on throwing in the towel anytime soon, and aren't even thinking about post-season play at this point. "When it comes right down to it, all we can do is try to keep winning," said Saint Mary's Head Coach Randy Bennett. "As a team, we just have to focus on winning the rest of our games and just see what happens."

But if the Gaels post-season hopes include an NCAA tournament bid, they are going to have to step up their game the next few weeks, especially during the WCC Tournament in Las Vegas on March 5-7, assuming Gonzaga continues their reign in the current WCC standings.

Earning the title of WCC tournament champions would mean an automatic NCAA bid for the Gaels, something they have to accomplish in order to ensure NCAA tournament play. An at-large bid could still be in the cards for the Gaels even if they don't walk away WCC tournament champions, but head coach Bennett is not counting on that. "You have to go into it thinking you aren't getting one [at-large bid]," Bennett said. "At this point, we're just assuming worst case scenario and not counting on one and focusing on winning all our games the next three weeks."

The Gaels took an early first half lead against the Pilots Saturday, and after a 3-pointer by sophomore forward Clint Steindl with 10:48 to go in the half, Saint Mary's was up by 11. But an 11 point run by the Pilots that started with 2:22 to go in the half left the Gaels trailing 44-35 at halftime.

The Pilots extended their lead to 13 early in the second half, but the Gaels, led by junior guard Mickey McConnell, fought hard to break the margin to five with 11:32 to go in the game. A lay-up by senior center Omar Samhan put the Gaels ahead 72-70 with 40 seconds left, but Portland guard T.J. Campbell answered back with a lay-up, followed by a Saint Mary's foul and a turnover forced the game into overtime.

In overtime, a three pointer by McConnell put the Gaels up by one with 2:56 to go, but the Gaels fell behind shortly after two turnovers and two missed shots. Foul shots by Campbell with nine seconds to go sealed the deal for the Pilots, giving them the 80-75 win over the Gaels.

Saint Mary's travels to San Diego this week to take on the Toreros on Thursday, February 18 at 8 p.m. The game will be televised on ESPN2.

The Saint Mary's Gaels (21-5, 8-3 WCC) fell hard last week on the road. On Thursday, they took on the Gonzaga Bulldogs (21-4, 8-1 WCC) in Spokane and were steam rolled 80-61. The team traveled to Portland (16-8, 7-3 WCC) on Saturday looking for a bounce-back win. The Gaels were not able to overcome the Pilots and lost in overtime 80-75.

Though the game against Gonzaga started off in the Gaels' favor, it wasn't long before Gonzaga's offense took charge. Despite a solid first half outing by the Gaels, who went into halftime down 36-33 after a 3-point buzzer beater by Gonzaga's senior guard Matt Bouldin, the Gaels were not able to maintain their pace in the second half. With 14:34 to go in the second half, the Bulldogs were up by nine and their lead quickly shot to 15 with just over 10 minutes to go in the game, eventually giving the Bulldogs the 80-61 win over the Gaels.

Going into last week, the Gaels had not lost a conference road game all season and were looking to extend their six game win streak that started January 16 at McKeon Pavilion against Portland. Their three losses, against Vanderbilt (November 20 at home), USC (December 23, in Hawaii at the Diamond Head Classic) and Gonzaga (January 14

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