

# LAMORINDA SPORTS

## Saint Mary's Rides Hot-Streak to Fourth Straight Win

By Michael Sakoda



James Walker (35) with a drive to the basket. Brad Waldow (00) is ready for a rebound. Photos Tod Fierner

Nearly midway through WCC league play, the Saint Mary's men's basketball team has had a season of hot and cold streaks.

The Gaels (16-5, 6-2 WCC) got off to a hot start, winning their first nine games in convincing fashion, but then dropped three straight at the Diamond Head Classic in Hawaii. SMC has again found their rhythm taking four straight games in WCC play, including an 89-61 win over Loyola Marymount University on Jan. 25.

"I don't like to count games played outside the continental U.S.," joked head coach Randy Bennett. "But seriously...we were in those games, but it's tough when you're not playing 40 minutes of defense. We've got to improve defensively."

The Gaels lost those non-continental games by a combined 11 points, 71-78 to South Carolina, 74-76 to Hawaii, and 63-65 to George Mason.

But stateside, St. Mary's is back on track, winning seven of their last nine, including their 4th straight win in conference play with the win over LMU in the final game of a six game home-stand.

With just under 15 minutes to go in the first half, St. Mary's led the Lions 12-7, but a 14-0 run, sparked by three 3-pointers from Jordan Giusti (career high 15 points, 4/5 3-pt) had the Gaels up 26-7 with 10:50 left to

play in the half. "I (was) tired of it," said Giusti about the shooting slump he'd been in much of the season. "I've been hitting the gym...getting up shots...because if I'm able to knock down the three, it opens things up for my team." The long ball was falling for a few of the Gaels on Saturday who were 8-of-18 from long. In addition to Giusti, Kerry Carter (2/3) and James Walker (2/4) hit multiple shots from distance.

Yet, it was the interior game that was constant throughout. Brad Waldow was scoring at will in the paint, putting up a game-high 27 points to go with his 10 rebounds (4 offensive), and Dane Pineau was protecting the rim at the other end, with a game-high five blocks.

"Brad played really well," said Bennett of his center. "The bigs really helped...I think Dane was the unsung hero defensively...he really made some nice plays. It's not just guarding his man, it's the help he gives."

And the help was needed. Both Pineau and Steve Holt, who was held without a field goal in the contest, were instrumental in a first half shut down of Loyola's leading scorer Anthony Ireland. Ireland, who averages better than 18 a game was held to just 2 points in the first half.

"(Ireland) is one of the best players in the league," Bennett said. "We talked a lot about preparing for him, and Holt did a great job on him...and our bigs really helped defending him."

The Lions went on a 9-0 run early in the second half, cutting the St. Mary's lead to 44-33, but St. Mary's countered with a 15-1 stretch of their own. Ireland finished with 17 points, but he shot 6/16 from the field, and most of his scoring came late when the game was well out of reach.

"I think we played one of our best games of the year," Bennett said of Saturday's matchup. "Probably the best we've played defensively all year...as close to 40 minutes of defense we've had."

With a 6-2 WCC record, the Gaels sit in the second spot in the conference behind No. 21 Gonzaga. The Gaels head out on the road on Thursday to take on San Diego.



Jordan Giusti had a career-high 15 points in the win over LMU.

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