

Published November 15th, 2017

Saint Mary's Basketball opens season play

By Jon Kingdon



Jordan Hunter Photos Tod Fierner

When a team is coming off a 29 and 5 season and returns their top three scorers, one would think that optimism would be flowing.

Saint Mary's College basketball coach Randy Bennett feels good about his team but still has his reservations, having lost to graduation West Coast Conference Defensive Player of the year Joe Rahon and forward Dane Pineau. According to Bennett: "They were the grit and toughness of last season's team."

The statistics from last year's team reveal the strength of Bennett's system - on average the team scored more points, shot a better percentage, outrebounded, had more assists and blocks than their opponents. Though the Gaels had 10.7 turnovers to their opponents 9.4 per game, Bennett saw no concern in this area: "If we can keep our turnovers to 10 or fewer per game, we're doing fine there."

With nine players on the roster that have had a redshirt season, this is a naturally mature team that is very familiar with the system that Bennett has installed since coming to Saint Mary's in 2001. In fact, Bennett anticipates playing no true freshmen this season. Kristers Zoriks, a freshman from Latvia, might have played but will, in all likelihood, take an injury redshirt season.

Senior Jock Landale, the team's 6'11" center, was the Gaels' leading scorer last season, averaging 16.9 points per game along with 9.5 rebounds and 4 blocks. Bennett believes that Landale has the ability to play in the NBA: "Jock can take it to the next level. He has the size and ability. He just needs to keep improving in each area."

Junior Jordan Hunter and 7'0" redshirt freshman, Jock Perry, will be the backups at center.

Starting at one forward spot will be 6'6" senior Calvin Hermanson who has increased his points per game average each of the past three seasons and was the team's second leading scorer last season and led the team in 3 point field goals. Evan Fitzner, a 6'10" junior who can be a force inside and an effective outside shooter as well, will be the other starting forward for the third year in a row.

Bennett will be relying on senior Emmett Naar, who was honorable mention all WCC last season, to run the team's offense. Naar averaged 9.4 points per game last season along with 5.6 assists.

Sophomore Jordan Ford, a backup in all 29 games last season is going to be asked to fulfill the difficult task of replacing Rahon at the other guard spot.

Cullen Neal, a 40 percent shooter from 3 point range playing for the University of Mississippi last season, is going to be counted on to provide the offensive threat off the bench.

Bennett feels that the depth of the team is going to be a real strength if "we can avoid injuries. We are going to know pretty soon how good we are as a team."

Following in the footsteps of Australians Patty Mills and Matthew Delavedova, both of whom went from Saint Mary's to the NBA, there are seven Australians on Saint Mary's team this season along with Zoriks who will be redshirting this season. With players from California, Arizona, Oregon and New Mexico, somehow it all comes together for Bennett: "I don't do anything special to bring them together. It just works." It also helps, according to Bennett, that "these are high character, intelligent young men."

Bennett signs new 10-year contract

Over his 16 seasons at Saint Mary's, Bennett has led the Gaels to the post season 11 times, six times in the

NCAA tournament and five times to the National Invitational Tournament with an overall career record of 365-158 (.698).

Bennett's success during his tenure has not been overlooked by the Saint Mary's administration. The school announced Nov. 10 that Bennett has been given a new 10-year contract.

SMC President James Donahue showed his high regard for Bennett in announcing the contract extension. "Randy represents what Saint Mary's College is all about. He exemplifies the college's ongoing commitment to the development of our student-athletes," Donahue said in a school statement. "He is not only a remarkable coach, but he is a valued and respected leader on our campus. We are excited to have him committed to this long-term agreement and look forward to him leading Saint Mary's basketball for the next decade."

Bennett looks forward to being at Saint Mary's for a long time: "I'm appreciative and thankful to President Donahue, Athletic Director Mike Matoso and the Saint Mary's administration for their support. It's an honor to have this opportunity to work at such a great institution. We've had great student-athletes and assistant coaches who have put a lot of hard work and effort into building the program to this level. My family and I truly enjoy being in such a supportive community and raising our family around this environment. We are excited to continue what we have started here 17 years ago," Bennett said in the school statement.



Jock Landale

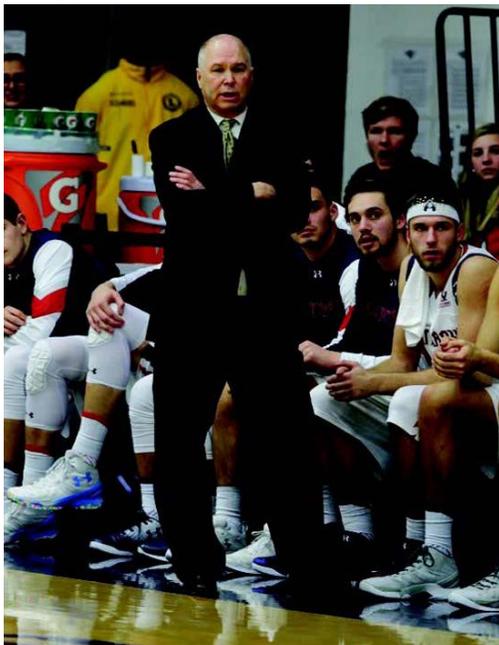


Photo Tod Fierner

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