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Saint Mary's basketball continues its dominance over California under Randy Bennett

By Jon Kingdon



Malik Fitts Photos Gint Federas

The Saint Mary's men's basketball team made the 10-mile trek to Berkeley and Haas Pavilion Dec. 14, defeating the University of California, in a game the Gaels' sports information department dubbed the Caldecott Classic, by a score of 89-77. This was the fourth time in five games that head coach Randy Bennett has defeated the Bears during his tenure at Saint Mary's.

After falling behind 10-2, the Gaels offense got into gear and went into halftime leading 45-29. Saint Mary's two leading scorers, Malik Fitts and Jordan Ford, each dominated one half of the game. Fitts had 21 points in the first half, going 5 for 6 from the 3-point line and finished the game with 28 points. Ford only had seven points in the first half and scored 25 points in the second half to lead all scorers with 32 points.

Ford was happy to defer to Fitts in the first half because he was playing so well: "I just had to keep getting into the flow of the game. When Malik is shooting open shots for us, it opens up the floor for all of us. It's take your poison between Malik and myself."

In the second half, Saint Mary's led by as many as 19 points but Cal battled back to close the gap to eight with two minutes to go in the game; a Tanner Krebs field goal, a Ford layup and two foul shots, and two more foul shots by Tommy Kuhse closed out the game for the Gaels.

Saint Mary's leads the nation in three-point shooting percentage (44.4%) and this game further solidified their hold on that statistic, connecting on 10 of 15 shots from beyond the arc. The ability of the team to shoot so well is simple, according to Ford: "We have a lot of really good shooters that put in the time in the offseason and we have a lot of confident guys with people picking each other up. Everybody trusts each other to make the open or contested three."

When the play of his centers was less than stellar, Bennett was forced to call upon sophomore forward Dan Fotu to play inside: "Dan was probably the unsung hero for us. He went in there at center and he had to battle. He was very effective, the offense and the rebounding was better and he really gave us a big lift. He had a big impact on the game." Fotu scored seven points and grabbed a career-high nine rebounds.

Dating back to last season, Cal had an eight-game winning streak at home and Bennett took great satisfaction in the victory, but was disappointed in seeing the rivalry go on hiatus, since the Gaels have defeated the Bears the last three seasons: "It's big to beat Cal being 10 miles apart. They're a better team this year and it's a good win for us."

California head coach Mark Fox responded with a terse "no" when asked if he would like to continue to schedule their closest opponent, explaining how the Bears will have two additional conference games next season which would not allow them to continue to play the local schools. Besides Saint Mary's, Cal has lost to San Francisco and Santa Clara this season.

"If they're good and we're good it makes sense," said Bennett. "We've done our part. They have to do what's best for his program as we do with our program, but I'm not going to campaign in front of the media, 'Hey, let's make this happen.' I probably have before." Prior to Bennett's arrival at Saint Mary's, going back to 1910, California had dominated the series, winning 64 of their prior 80 games.



Jordan Ford

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