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Saint Mary's men's basketball – more of the same only better



Logan Johnson

Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdon

It was Mark Twain that said, "Familiarity breeds contempt." It's certain that he was not referring to this year's Saint Mary's men's basketball team. Head coach Randy Bennett's Gaels are only one of two college teams returning every player that played every single minute last season.

Bennett appreciates how more efficient his practices are with all of the veterans on the team (and three freshmen): "It's refreshing. You know what they can do and what they bring to the team and that's where it's an advantage. You can teach things so much quicker in that the players already know the drills so you can move faster. Now in practice, we can put in three plays rather than one play and they'll pick it up like that."

Last year's team (14-10) dealt with many issues – the coronavirus (6 canceled games), youth (6 new players on the roster) and injuries with only three players appearing in every game. "I know our team better this year because of what everyone went through last season," Bennett said. "Our young players were thrown into the fire, and I feel they know it now. I feel their maturity, growth and toughness and it often gets down to that. I feel good here."

With five sophomores and two recruited freshmen, Bennett appreciates the leadership that the upperclassmen are providing. "We have a group of seven older players that have been through the good and bad for us," Bennett said. "It's not one individual. (Tommy) Kuhse, (Logan) Johnson, (Matthias) Tass, (Dan) Fotu, (Quinn) Clinton, (Kyle) Bowen and (Alex) Ducas have all been very good leaders as a core group. I feel that as much with this team as with any other team I've coached that this group of older guys has ownership of this program right now, in a good way."

Bennett is excited at the improvement he has seen from last year's freshman class. "It was a big adjustment for last year's freshmen, but they have all made a big jump into their sophomore year," Bennett said. "Last year with only 10 players that were healthy at times, they had to practice every day and play in the games. We had to overcome much and we were forced to play a lot of young guys, yet through all that they got tougher and better. They grew up a lot and I can see it now in practice."

There is great depth and size at the guard position for the Gaels. Returning starters, leading scorer Tommy Kuhse and 2nd team All-WCC Logan Johnson are backed up by junior Quinn Clinton, sophomores Jabe Mullins (6'6"), Leemet Bockler (6'7"), Luke Barrett (6'6") and freshmen Augustas Marciulionis (6'4") and Chris Howell (6'6"). This will allow Kuhse who led the team with 36 per game and Johnson with 32 minutes per game to play less and not be as worn down later in the season.

Bennett is particularly excited about his two freshmen recruits: "Marciulionis and Howell are both really good. It will take a little while for them to get comfortable and learn our offense and defense, but they are on track to be able to help us this year."

Marciulionis' father, Sarunis, played six years for the Warriors and is in the NBA Hall of Fame. "Sarunis is very familiar with the area and people really love him around here," Bennett said. "Augustas has got a lot to learn but having played against older and bigger players, he knows what to do offensively and it helps that we play a lot like the European teams."

The front court does not have the depth the team has at guard. Returning at the forward positions are senior Dan Fotu and juniors Alex Ducas and Kyle Bowen. Sophomore Judah Brown should also see time in the front court along with being able to play guard. "Those are the guys we have, and we want them to stay healthy," Bennett said.

Senior center Matthias Tass, a three-year starter who averaged 10.9 points and 5.3 rebounds a game, is backed up by sophomore Mitchell Saxen who appeared in all 24 games last season and was named to the All-WCC Freshmen team. "Last year, it was a new role for Tass to be one of the go-to guys in our offense but he needs to make another jump this year if we're going to be really good," Bennett said. "We have good depth with Saxen who played well for us and has shown a lot of improvement." Matt Van Komen is coming off a foot injury and may redshirt this season.

After averaging 75.3 points per game in 2019-20, the Gaels scoring average dropped to 64.3 this past season and it's an area that Bennett has been focusing on. "Last year was an aberration. When we lost our two best shooters (Bockler and Mullens), we didn't have much shooting to replace them. "Because of that, we focused on our defense and tried to score enough to win," Bennett said. "If we're going to be good, we're going to have to score points so we're working on our team chemistry. We must be better offensively, scoring in the low post, throwing it out of the low post, kicking it out on penetration and making better shot selection. I feel we've gotten better in just our first three weeks of practice. We have the personnel where we can get eight or nine guys scoring in double figures so it's not just a matter of someone putting up 20 points."

Still, it's not as easy as it sounds. "Our guards have to be willing to find the guys that are open," Bennett said. "We did not shoot with a high percentage and that's why we struggled in the league. Knock on wood, we have our injured players back and the team has been shooting the ball very well. The team has improved as much as any team that I can remember thus far."

Saint Mary's does have a favorable schedule with eight non-league games at home, two on the road and four on neutral sites. The Gaels will open with four home games before heading to Las Vegas to play Notre Dame and either Oregon or Chaminade.

Though things have improved with the virus, Saint Mary's is requiring proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID test for anyone to be allowed into the arena.

"I'm looking forward to having fans again," Bennett said. "It wasn't the same last season without them. It'll be fun playing in front of crowds again."

Saint Mary's women's basketball – a picture of size and strength



Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdon

After eight consecutive 20-win seasons, the Saint Mary's women's basketball team had two consecutive losing seasons for the first time in 13 years. Head coach Paul Thomas learned that size and injury avoidance matters. "We're a lot bigger and stronger than we've been the last couple of years," Thomas said. "We're healthier today than we've been over that period as well. When you have injuries, you quickly discover that your best players are the ones that are available."

Balance is the key for Thomas, starting with the front court. "I believe that the game starts from the inside out," Thomas said. "If you're strong inside, it will make your perimeter better. We were a top 10 rebounding team in the country for years and that has been my challenge to get this team back up there. That takes work and commitment and toughness and the intangibles that we love our kids to have. With our length, we can put a lineup on the floor with everyone over six feet. Our team has a much better mix and flow to them. Our balance and rhythm between the perimeter and the paint has also improved. We can throw the ball inside and create a lot of things. We don't have to pound inside for every basket, but it will initiate what we can do."

With Ali Bamberger, Amy West, Mia Griszelj, Aspen Garrison, and Ellie Croco, it's a solid base of youth and experience in the front court. Bamberger, a sophomore, who transferred from the University of Washington, redshirted last season, recovering from a knee injury. She has made a complete recovery and is being counted on to be a key force for Thomas: "Ali should be a double figure scorer for us. She is one of those bigs that feels very comfortable stepping out and shooting the ball and we feel very comfortable with her out there. She will make a big difference in our ability to finish."

West, a junior, only played nine games last year due to an injury but the Gaels are expecting big things from her this season. "Amy is healthy right now and at 6'4" can really run the floor. We're looking forward to seeing her fulfill her potential," Thomas said. "She gives us a whole different dynamic and should be a big part of our success."

The back court starters are seniors Tayce Wedin (12.5 PPG) and Maddie Holland (11.3 PPG). Wedin is second on the team in career 3-point field goals and was Honorable Mention All WCC last season. "Maddie is definitely the quarterback on the court though she won't always be the point guard," Thomas said. "Tayce is currently out with an injury but should be fine in a couple of weeks." Freshman Addison Wedin, currently rehabbing a knee injury, is a strong shooter like her sister and should be available to play soon.

So far, the team has been shooting much better in the team scrimmages. The staff has been working very hard with the players in understanding and improving shot selection.

Thomas does not want the guards to be strictly shooters, encouraging them to be aggressive to the hoop. "Jade (Kirisome) is more comfortable in driving to the basket as are Leia (Hanifan) and Tayla (Dalton). We've challenged Briana (Simonich) to be more aggressive and she has also looked good in practice. I expect her to be able to average in dou-

ble figures. Our offense will play with 4 out and 1 in, spreading the court while still having two bigs in there because rebounding is going to be so vital to our success. If we're efficient with our shot selection and can get on the offensive glass, we can really have something."

Ironically, the pandemic has contributed to the depth of the team. "The pandemic affected all of us, but it allowed our seniors to come back for another year," Thomas said. "Maddie and Briana, who both have shown how much they love Saint Mary's, were able to get another year and they want to go out with some good juice, and they have been our hardest workers."

Thomas is also counting on a strong freshman class to contribute through the season. Aspen Garrison will provide size and depth in the front court and Makena Mastora and Addison Wedin, Tayce's sister should all find playing time. "Addison should be back for our league games. Makena is a left hander who brings a lot of smoothness to the game. She has different gears, can shoot the ball, loves to drive, and has a great pull up jumper. Our new people are going to be able to help right away and several of them should be able to get some high quality minutes."

With the additional size, the Saint Mary's defense will also have a different look from the last two seasons. "This year we're going to play more zone defense because of our length," Thomas said. "We gave up a lot of points these past two seasons. Those numbers are part of our legacy. We just didn't have the bodies because we suffered too many injuries. In the past, we set all kinds of records for 3-point shots attempted and made. We're not that team anymore and we've adjusted to our personnel."

Once again, Thomas is looking to address the turnover issues by the offense. Last year, the opponents scored 21.3 points off Saint Mary's turnovers. If the offense can reduce their "live" turnovers (bad passes, bad catches), the defensive numbers should improve. "With live ball turnovers, we're losing. This allows the other team to get down the court before we can set up our defense. We're constantly working on our ball handling skills. When we can defend a team in the half court, we're very good."

The team is going to be traveling back East to play North Carolina State who came to Saint Mary's three years ago and Coastal Carolina whose coach, Jaida Williams, played for Thomas when they were both at Cal Poly Pomona. Coming to Moraga are TCU, Fresno State, Western Michigan, San Jose State and UC Santa Barbara and the team is also playing at UC Berkeley.

"It's always good to take the team on the road, seeing a different part of the country and being able to play against two really good teams," Thomas said. "We don't shy away from competition. We can tell our recruits that we are playing against top ranked teams, knowing competitors want to play in those games."

The key to being successful this year, according to Thomas: "Staying healthy is always at the top of the list," Thomas said. "If our rebounding numbers are high and steady, you are going to see our win totals high and steady because the rebounding will solve a lot of things. This team has a good understanding of shot selection so add that to rebounding and we're good."