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Celebration of Saint Mary's men's basketball history at Gaels All-Star Classic

By Jon Kingdon



Gaels All-Stars with Coach Randy Bennett (far left) Photo Jon Kingdon

One-hundred twenty days after the Saint Mary's men's basketball team finished a 26-8 season highlighted by a victory in the NCAA tournament and approximately 127 days before the 2022-23 season begins, the school hosted the third Gaels All-Star Classic at the University Credit Union Pavilion. There was an alumni game made up of former Saint Mary's players that finished their careers in college followed by an "All-Star" game comprised of Gaels that went on to play professional basketball, mostly overseas.

At various times during the games, players from the following years were brought out for special recognition and to be photographed: 1958-1959, 1988-1989, 1996-1997, 2004-2005, 2007-2008, 2009-2010, 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 - next year's team.

The players in the All-Star game were very prominently listed in the Saint Mary's record book. The career leading scorers in attendance and their ranking: 2

Jordan Ford (2016-20) 1,929; 3 Daniel Kickert (2002-06) 1,874; 4 Omar Samhan (2006-10) 1,848; 7 Jock Landale (2014-18) 1,658 (not here but was in the form of a garden gnome which was given out to all in attendance); 8 Diamon Simpson (2005-09) 1,603; 13 Stephen Holt (2010-14) 1,370; 16 Calvin Hermanson (2014-2018) 1,300; 19 Mickey McConnell (2007-2011) 1,234; 23 Bill Sanchez (1953-56) 1,170; 26 Tommy Kuhse (2017-22) 1,138; 30 Malik Fitts (2018-20) 1,079; 31 A.J. Rowland (1992-97) 1,063; along with Kamran Sufi (1993-1997) who was third in assists and steals.

In what was an evenly matched game, the white team outscored the blue team by a score of 103-100. Joe Rahon led all the scorers with 25 points and won the All-Star Classic MVP Award. There was a 3-point shooting contest at halftime which was won by Jordan Ford, followed by Daniel Kickert and Mickey McConnell.

With players from teams that Coach Randy Bennett coached from 2003 to 2022, it brought a lot back for him: "There is a lot of flashback," Bennett said. "This is why we do it. We started building relationships with the program over the years and it's gotten better and better. When I first came here, it wasn't like that because there was no continuity. From that point, we began to build it and our teams that were really good have helped by coming to these events. It's made our program closer and tighter and that's what we get out of this."

Diamon Simpson, who has been playing on various teams from all over the world since 2010 just returned from playing in Israel, took great pleasure in returning for this event. "It's like a brotherhood where we get to see each other," Simpson said. "Everyone has got their family and it's good that Coach Bennett is still here."

Simpson still falls back on his experience playing at Saint Mary's wherever he plays. "It helps tremendously," Simpson said. "A lot of us will come back and work out together so it's like iron sharpening iron. I constantly learn new methods and am always listening to Coach Bennett who is so wise. In fact, Coach overprepared me because a lot of pros don't work out the way Coach Bennett pushes us."

After graduating from Saint Mary's, E.J. Rowland has played on various teams over four continents and had just returned from playing in Israel. Rowland was also able to play for a team in Iran because he had a Bulgarian passport. "Actually, everyone in Iran was really nice and treated me well," Rowland said. "It's not a democracy and everybody there has to live by the rules, but I never had any issues or ever felt uncomfortable."

Having played for Coach Bennett and in so many different countries gave Rowland his own perspective on basketball and life. "It's just how Coach Bennett affects people, treating them the right way and in how it equates to life after your time here and in life after basketball," Rowland said. "Basketball translates to life in dealing with adversity, setting goals and driving towards them along with sacrificing things in accomplishing those goals."

Along with playing professionally, several Gaels have moved on to working as coaches. "That's why we've been good," Bennett said with a laugh. "We've had good players that became coaches."

What was the most important thing that Bennett passed on to these coaches? "I would say caring about your players."

Former Gael players on the current Saint Mary's staff are Joe Rahon, Mickey McConnell, and Dan Sheets. Rob Jones just moved on from the Saint Mary's staff to UC Riverside.

Bennett has maintained contact with just about all of these coaches. "I've talked with most of them," Bennett said. "Not necessarily about X's and O's but more in how to deal with certain situations, whether it's administration, recruiting or dealing with a player that's doing this and that and how they should handle it."

Cullen Neal who is on the Rice coaching staff avails himself of whatever Bennett has to offer. "It's a

family atmosphere that Coach Bennett has built; a brand where everyone truly gets along and when you come to Saint Mary's, you come to understand what that means," Neal said. "All colleges in the country could learn that from this program. I call Coach Bennett frequently and I will stay in contact with the whole coaching staff to get as much advice from them as I can."

Todd Golden who just left the University of San Francisco to become the head coach at the University of Florida has brought Saint Mary's along with him in his other coaches stops at Columbia and Auburn. "I spent five years here in the developmental stages of my life and I feel that being here with Coach Bennett and the program at Saint Mary's, I just grew up a lot, going from being a boy to a man," Golden said. "I learned about being tough and gritty and putting the team in front of myself. It truly is a brotherhood, and we have a lot of pride having played in this program and graduating from here. With the continued success that the team has had, we're still very prideful for the time that we spent here. When I got the job at San Francisco, Randy was a great role model and mentor for me, and I was able to run things by him when I found myself in some spots where I needed a little help. Now, being at Florida, it's a lot better because we're not competing against each other multiple times a year and I'm grateful for that. He remains someone that I look up to and I hold in incredibly high regard."

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