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## New coach, new optimism for Saint Mary's women's basketball team

By Jon Kingdon



Saint Mary's women's basketball team Photo Tod Fierner

It's been six months since Jeff Cammon was named the Saint Mary's women's basketball coach, so on Oct. 15, he held an open practice for the team's fans to show "the energy in the gym and the connectivity between the young ladies."

Cammon's initial aim was to make a clean break from last season's team. "It was getting to know the players and trying to move on from the past and go forward," Cammon said. "If there's an emotion from it, it can linger, which can prevent you from growing and moving forward. The main thing was "Hey, clean slate. Let's get to know each other genuinely and let's all be on the same page with moving forward." We did a lot of team bonding and had a lot of dialogue, trying to connect and get on the same page, mentally, physically and emotionally, and making sure that the players are all in a healthy place."

As if to show where his coaching priorities lie, Cammon had the players come out and work for a large section of the practice on defensive drills. In comparing Cammon's Long Beach State defensive numbers with Saint Mary's from last year, the differences are fairly significant. Long Beach State gave up 57.4 points per game to 68.0 for Saint Mary's. Long Beach State forced 656 turnovers to 433 for Saint Mary's (223 more possessions), and Long Beach State had 184 more steals than Saint Mary's.

"I believe in defense so much because no matter how great you are offensively, some nights your offense isn't going to be there, but if we can defend and rebound, along with our ability to create more possessions, we don't have to be great all the time," Cammon said.

There were few breaks in the practice with the players going all out in each drill. "That's a reflection and a product of our mentality," Cammon said. "It's desire, design, talent, philosophy, vision, and leadership. All of that are our core and standards, meaning how you respond to adversity and having an optimistic mindset. Our players are going to be energy givers, not takers."

Senior Ellie Croco, who unfortunately will be missing the season due to a recent knee injury, saw a big difference in Cammon's coaching from last year's team. "There is just a big emphasis on effort and competitiveness," Croco said. "Our defense is going to be so much better because the coaches have been really focused on the details, effort, and competitiveness."

Cammon was aware of Saint Mary's offensive skills and looked to change the team's mental approach to the game. "We spend a lot of time with culture, building a foundation and finding out where our talents are," Cammon said. "It's a matter of trying to improve the skill sets on the floor, getting our players more comfortable and acclimated as to how we want to play on a defensive side of the ball. Our identity now is how we're going to defend, and we do that by changing habits and mindsets. I don't care how well you shoot; you have to be able to defend. It's a matter of not getting into a bad position, which comes from discipline, and not putting yourself into a position where you have to take yourself out of the game."

Croco saw the change immediately: "I would say there was an instant connection. We went straight into working hard and went through some adversity, having really tough practices. We did something called the program, which was Navy SEAL training, and it was a really good team bonding experience for us."

Offensively, again the numbers speak for themselves. Long Beach State shot 42.7% from the field and 76.8 from the foul line to 40.6 and 70.9 for Saint Mary's. Turnovers which have long been an Achilles heel for Saint Mary's should be reduced as evidenced by Cammon's team having only 13.9 per game compared with Saint Mary's 17.3 per game.

"Taking care of the ball is a huge focus for us," Croco said. "We've been doing passing drills with heavy balls, making sure that both our left and right hands are as good as the other. Ball security is huge and getting the loose balls and making the effort plays are really important, which is going to get us more steals."

Pace is the operative word in Cammon's offensive philosophy. "We like to get up and down the floor but that doesn't mean we're going to necessarily be a fast break fast-paced team, but we want to be able to play

with pace," Cammon said. "We want to be able to sustain and outlast our opponents. We're not going to be outworked and we did a lot of training in the offseason, putting in a lot of time and energy, establishing our fitness and making sure that we're in great shape."

Cammon is also bringing an aggressive attitude to the team's offense: "We're going to attack the basket, emphasizing paint touches, throwing it in or getting in off the dribble, we have to get a paint touch whether it's our guards or posts and that in turn will allow us to get to the free throw line. That's something we do differently from other teams in that we post our guards, and we have the big guards to do it. Our players have to know who they are and who their teammates are."

Cammon has installed the basic principles for the Gaels' offense and defense but it's the fine points that still need to be installed. "Foundationally, we're in 100% but in the weeds of the intricacies, we're about 60%," Cammon said. "We're going to be a multi-defensive team, showing a lot of different looks and we've just started putting in our presses. We're teaching concepts and trying to get the players to feel great within our continuity offense before we start to put in set plays."

The team is returning four starters: 6'3" redshirt senior forward Ali Bamberger (14.2 ppg, 8.4 rebs), senior guards 5'11" Tayla Dalton (7.4 ppg, 56 assts), Leia Hanafin (3.5 ppg, 78 assts) and junior guard Hannah Rapp (7.0 ppg, 5.4 rebs).

"Ali and Tayla's leadership has been outstanding," Cammon said. "For Ali to come back and want to finish this thing off has been great. She, Tayla, Hannah, and Leia set the tone. Hannah is someone that can manufacture points because she's tough and is able to get out in transition."

There are five new freshmen on the team: 6'4" freshman forward Nadia Bernard (Santa Clarita, Ca.), 6'3" forward Ruby Vlahov (Perth, Australia), whose father played at Stanford, 5'10" redshirt freshman guard Maia Jones (Tasman, New Zealand), 6'1" freshman guard Emily Foy (New Castle, Australia), and 5'10" freshman guard, Zeryhia-Lee Aokuso (Amarillo, Texas).

"I have no problem playing freshmen," Cammon said. "I've had the Freshman of the Year twice at Long Beach State so if they earn it, I have no problem playing them. Maia, and Z (Zeryhia-Lee) and Ruby are talented but we need to see if they can put it together in a Division I game so we may have to do it collectively so you should see a number of scorers in the box score."

Redshirt sophomore Addison Wedin and junior Makena Mastora will also see a lot of playing time and have already taken on leadership roles. "They've been great teammates for our young kids, setting the example with their actions and verbally which has been great," Cammon said. "It's not easy playing Division I basketball and keeping up with your studies and I couldn't ask for a better group of young ladies. When you have young ladies who are willing to take coaching and want to be great, it makes it easier. Time isn't on our side, but we've been efficient with it and it's a credit to the players. When we can't work with them, they're always in the gym working out on their own and that's what it takes because you're not going to get better just doing the things in practice. They've committed themselves to putting in extra work and it's made a difference."

As Cammon begins his first season at Saint Mary's, he's also been able to take advantage of what Randy Bennett, the men's basketball coach who is beginning his 23rd season at Saint Mary's, has to offer. "Coach Bennett has been great," Cammon said. "He's poured into me already. He's been amazing and along with his staff, have put together what a program should be."

The Gaels opened the season at Grand Canyon University on Nov. 6 for the first-ever meeting between the two programs.

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[back](#)

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