

We're March-in' NCAA Style

By Kevin D. Shallat



SMC players talk to fans, media at the College following the NCAA Division I selection announcement

Photo Tod Fierner

It's been six days since the Gaels dropped their semi-final game against the University of San Diego, but to the Saint Mary's basketball players it has felt like a lifetime. After dropping their one and only West Coast Conference tournament game to the Toreros, the Gaels have had to play the waiting game to see if they would be selected as one of 65 NCAA Division I teams to make the tournament. On Sunday, March 16, Saint Mary's invited fans to a party at the Soda Center on campus to view the live coverage of the NCAA selection process on the big screen. While the players waited anxiously in one room, the fans waited with pins and needles in their own conference room.

The mood in the player's room was upbeat, but decidedly serious. Omar Samhan was admittedly nervous, however, he wasn't alone. When Head Coach Randy Bennett was asked if he had a preference for a certain seeding or location, his response was sim-

ple, yet to the point. "As long as they call our name," he said.

Ten minutes later, they did.

When Greg Gumbel uttered the word "Gaels," the room erupted. The close-knit group of players stood up in unison, and hugged one another, followed by a few hard fist pumps to even out the mood. The Galloping Gaels of Moraga would return to the hallowed hardwoods of the NCAA tournament, a place they hadn't seen for three years.

While it may seem to some that the Gaels would make the NCAA tournament easily, given their incredible year, there were some lofty hurdles that could have kept Saint Mary's out of the big dance. The loss to San Diego may have passed without much fanfare had Gonzaga won the tournament, but the Toreros had other plans. San Diego pulled the upset win over the Bulldogs in the WCC tournament and received a guaranteed ticket to the NCAA tournament. As Gonzaga is a ranked

team, they too received an invite, albeit an at-large birth. Saint Mary's was the odd team out, or so it would seem. Perhaps the biggest hurdle was that the West Coast Conference had never, in its 56 years in existence, had three teams make the NCAA tournament.

As it turned out, the Gaels didn't have to win the WCC tournament, or even win one game in the tournament. It appears that the selection committee thought enough of the Saint Mary's resume to warrant a 10 seed to the Gaels, the same seed they received three years ago. The Gaels (25-6) will play the seventh seeded University of Miami (22-10) in a South Regional first round game on Friday, Mar. 21 at Alltel Arena in Little Rock, Ark.

"They (Miami) like to get up and down, and we love to get up and down. I think it's a great match-up, and I'm just excited about it," said Gael forward Ian O'Leary.