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Women's Gaels Show Great Promise

By Mikaela Cowles



Jontelle Smith in last year's Fresno play Photo Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's women's basketball team looks forward to a promising season. With a team stacked in experienced returnees and talented newcomers, head coach Paul Thomas has high expectations.

Despite going from a 14-14 season in 2007 to a 15-17 record in 2008, Thomas said the Gaels had a more successful season than the previous one, finishing with an RPI of 127. Saint Mary's raised their Rating Percentage Index by 67 points, making their improvement the second highest increase in the West Coast Conference and one of the highest in Division I women's basketball.

The Gaels also broke an important streak during the 2007-2008 season, as they beat Loyola Marymount 71-67 in the conference tournament. This win advanced the Gaels to the second round of the WCC Tournament for the first time in seven years.

Despite the loss of seniors Serena Benavente, Lauren Shaughnessy and Mikaela Cowles, the Gaels return with experienced leading scorer Jontelle Smith, freshman sensation Louella Tomlinson and crafty fifth year Maija Lahde.

Smith broke SMC's all time record for three-pointers scored in a career last year, totaling 189, as well as the record for three-pointers made in a season, finishing with 84. Thomas said he has seen incredible maturity and growth not only in Smith's game, but also her leadership, and he is confident that she will bring big things to the team.

As a freshman, Tomlinson broke the NCAA Division I record for blocks in a season with 156. Averaging 12.8 points, 6.3 rebounds and 4.8 blocks per game, Tomlinson returns stronger and with the experience of a season under her belt.

Saint Mary's also looks to incorporate the freshman class right away. Thomas is pleased with their competitive spirit and love for the game. He says they bring "important tangibles, such as versatility."

Keep an eye out for point guard Alex Carbonel of American High School who comes in with an average of 27 points and 6.5 assists per game. Also on the court this year will be local favorite Katie Batlin from Miramonte High School.

With a lengthier lineup and another year to learn Thomas's Freak Defense, he is confident that his weapon of choice will be ready for the upcoming season. The fast paced, full court defense is not only hard to understand and learn, but is also extremely hard to beat when implemented correctly.

Thomas says the success of Freak will depend upon two main factors. First, he says, "it doesn't matter what offense or defense, coaches need to adjust to the personnel's skills." Second is "trust." He believes Freak will work well with his roster and that the trust will be there this year to bring success.

Check out the Gaels in action at their season opener Sunday, Nov. 9, at 4 pm in McKeon Pavilion when they face off against San Francisco State.

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