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Lady Gaels Give Pack the Pavilion Fans Double Overtime Show

By Mikaela Cowle



Lahde goes for the shot in Gaels' win against San Diego Photo Tod Fierner

On January 24, in the game Saint Mary's entered in this season's NCAA Pack the House attendance contest, fans got a peak at women's collegiate basketball at its best as the Lady Gaels upset defending WCC champions, San Diego, in double overtime. The final score was 76-74.

Saint Mary's built its game around underclassmen success and upperclassman perseverance. Local favorite, starting freshman guard Katie Batlin, set new career-highs in both scoring and rebounds, posting 27 points, 11 rebounds, four assists and three steals.

"I love to build off the fans," said Batlin, talking about the unusually large crowd of 713 fans, a season high.

Sophomore Louella Tomlinson added to Batlin's performance with 18 points, nine rebounds and six blocks. Together, Saint Mary's underclassmen scored 65 of the team's 76 points. While the younger ones put points on the board, senior Maija Lahde pulled down a game high of 13 rebounds.

The Gaels ended the first half shooting 36.1 percent and forcing the Toreros into 11 turnovers. San Diego, however, came out strong in the second half and scored four straight points to bring them back within seven.

The hard fought game continued as both teams traded run for run. San Diego's Kiva Herman tied the score 60-60 with 25 seconds remaining. The Gaels had possession, but didn't score.

The first overtime opened with Batlin and Herman trading basket for basket. With 10 seconds left on the clock and the score tied, 68-68, Lahde's attempt at a jumper did not fall. The Toreros broke away for a fast break, but Batlin came up with a huge defensive stop, leaving the game tied. Again.

Head coach Paul Thomas, known for his well-conditioned, up-tempo teams, had the Gaels more than prepared physically to battle through a second overtime.

Later, Batlin talked about the intensity of Thomas's running and lifting schedule: "I hate to say that it paid off, but it paid off."

Opening the second overtime with senior leadership, Lahde drove to the rim for two points. The Toreros did not go down easily, continuing to match Saint Mary's, bucket for bucket. With the game tied 64-64, and five seconds left on the clock, Lahde scored a jumper from the middle of the key.

"I guess third time's the charm," Lahde laughed, speaking afterwards about the victory.

The Lady Gaels won the game against San Diego but it remains to be seen how Saint Mary's will fare in the WCC division of the Pack the House attendance contest. Qualifying games can be played until March 8.

Pack the House is the NCAA's second-year national effort to grow attendance for women's basketball. Saint Mary's markets Pack the House as Pack the "Pavilion," a nod to its gym, the McKeon Pavilion

Last year, almost two-thirds of Division I NCAA membership - 198 institutions - participated in the contest, attracting more than 592,000 fans across the Pack the House games, with 96 institutions breaking single-attendance records and five programs recording their first-ever sell-out game. SMC competed last year but Portland won for the WCC.

Staci Hamaguchi, Saint Mary's Director of Athletic Promotions, said they worked hard to find ways to draw in fans, including having local youth teams sell tickets and holding a raffle for two courtside tickets when the Saint Mary's men's team faces Gonzaga on February 12.

"We had a packed GA (General Admission) side, could have fit some more people in there, but it was great we got the attendance that we did," said Hamaguchi.

The San Diego game's official attendance figure of 713 is below last year's Pack the Pavilion game against Santa Clara, which officially recorded 877 in attendance. But 713 is the current season high and boosted the season-to-date average attendance to 512.

More than anything, Hamaguchi said, those that came got to see a great game, experiencing first hand how exciting women's collegiate basketball can be.

"Hopefully the fans that came through the door had a great time and come back to future Gael games," said Hamaguchi.

Exactly the point of the NCAA Pack the House challenge.



Photo Tod Fierner

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