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Mills' Return Fails to Convince NCAA

By Mikaela Cowles



Patrick Mills (13) Photo Tod Fierner

Snubbed by the NCAA, the Gaels have to settle for postseason play in the National Invitational Tournament (NIT). It's a disappointment, but everyone knew that something changed on that fated January road trip to Washington.

On January 29th Gaels fans held their breath as Patrick Mills winced in pain at half time of the Gonzaga game. Mills was sidelined for 5 weeks due to two metacarpal fractures in his right hand that resulted in a successful surgery on February 4. Suffering the loss of their star Olympian, the Gaels fell to the Zags 62-69 and continued to lose four of their next five games.

Finalizing their starting line up with fresh faces Lucas Walker, Mickey McConnel and Wayne Hunter, the Gaels gelled as a unit and on February 19th fully found their rhythm against San Diego, winning 61-65. Saint Mary's went on to win the remainder of their conference games, finishing the regular season 24-5. On March 8th in the semi-finals of the West Coast Conference tournament, Mills' reinstatement to the Saint Mary's roster failed to live up to Saint Mary's hope for a positive effect.

Mills' 5 weeks off were spent practicing hesitation and inside out moves with his left hand around cones, finishing his moves with left handed running jumpers and over the rim finger roles. After only one day of full contact practice Mills entered the game against Portland with a swollen hand, a tentative attitude and a lot of energy.

Mills' performance against Portland was less than desired by the Gaels and it didn't pick up much from there as they faced Gonzaga in the finals of the WCC tournament. Saint Mary's fell to the Zags 58-83 and lost the automatic bid to the NCAA tournament.

The Gaels scheduled an extra game against Eastern Washington on March 13, to allow the team to re-gel with Mills and prove to the selection committee they deserved an at-large bid. Mills' play definitely improved. Not only did his shooting percentage rise but the quality of his misses was noticeably better as the Gaels won handily 85-65. Commenting on his hand, Mills told reporters that by Friday night "the swelling had gone down tremendously. The motion and feeling in my fingers and wrist as well was pretty much 100%."

Saint Mary's proved themselves a strong team even without Mills as they beat highly ranked Utah State on February 21. With the return of Mills the Gaels held on to the hope of an at-large bid, however the selection committee had other things in mind.

With a low strength of schedule, Saint Mary's suffered the Mid Major curse and lost the chance at playing in March Madness. However, Saint Mary's will still be playing in the post season, and the nature of the NIT means the Gaels opened the tournament with home court advantage for their first game against Washington State last night (results not available at press time).

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