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Saint Mary's Finds Providence in Las Vegas

By Justine Sgalio



Photo Tod Fierner

Saint Mary's made the Gael Nation proud at the West Coast Conference Tournament. The Gaels beat the #1 seed and WCC Champions the Gonzaga Bulldogs by 18 in Las Vegas on March 9th. The win marks the first time Saint Mary's has triumphed over the Zags since 2008, and its first WCC Conference Tournament victory since 1997. With the win, the Gaels received an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament.

"It was a breakthrough...something our program needed to accomplish," said Saint Mary's Head Coach Randy Bennett. "We needed to win this [WCC Conference Tournament] to raise the level of our program, and we did. We got it done."

Leading up to the Championships, the Gaels faced off against the #3 seeded Portland Pilots in the semifinals on March 7th and came away with the 69-55 victory. Freshman guard Matthew Dellavedova, junior guard Mickey McConnell and senior center Omar Samhan all finished the game with 16, and freshman guard Jordan Page scored his Saint Mary's career-high with 14.

The win advanced the Gaels to the WCC tournament championship game.

The Gaels held the Zags scoreless until just under the 17 minute mark thanks to a three pointer and two layups by McConnell, who finished the half with 14 points for the Gaels. Saint Mary's didn't let the Zags take the lead the entire half, and heading into halftime had a 30-29 lead over the Bulldogs.

Gonzaga took two brief one point leads at the beginning of the second half and tied it up 35-35 with 14:26 to go in the game but the Gaels weren't giving in. Saint Mary's took back the lead after a three pointer by Dellavedova and never looked back.

"A lot of people said we couldn't do it," said senior center Omar Samhan. "At the beginning of the year nobody had us in the NCAA tournament, especially as an automatic bid...but here we are."

Saint Mary's Head Coach Randy Bennett started taking out his starters with 1:23 left to play and, along with the rest of the coaching staff and players on the bench, took a minute to realize what was happening.

"At that moment I was just so proud," Bennett said. "Proud of our guys, proud of what this team had accomplished."

His "my team is going to the NCAA tournament smile" was matched with a roaring crowd of Saint Mary's fans rushing the court to celebrate as the clock hit zero. The Gaels' 81-62 win over Gonzaga was followed by the announcement of WCC Tournament MVP Mickey McConnell, who had a career high 26 points for the Gaels, and all-tournament team members senior forward Ben Allen, who also had a career high of 20 points in the game, and senior center Omar Samhan.

Selection Sunday named Saint Mary's a #10 seed in the Southern Regional of the NCAA tournament, scheduled to take on #7 seeded Richmond on Thursday in Providence, Rhode Island, at 11:50 a.m.

"Hopefully they're prepared," said Bennett. "There's nothing you can do, tournament experience is tournament experience. Mickey [McConnell] has it. Ben Allen has it. Omar Samhan has it. They have an understanding of what it means to be in the tournament and play. Our other guys don't have that, but hopefully the season has prepared them."

The Richmond Spiders enter the game with a 26-8 overall record, coming off a loss to #17 Temple in the Atlantic-10 Tournament Championship. The Spiders have won 12 of their last 14 games and finished the Atlantic-10 season with a 13-3 record. Richmond is led by junior guard Kevin Anderson, the Atlantic-10 Player of the Year who averages 17.8 points per game, followed by David Gonzalez, who averages 14.5.

The winner of Thursday's game will meet the winner of #2 seed Villanova and #15 seed Robert Morris in the second round on Saturday, March 20.



Omar Samhan #50 Photo Tod Fierner

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