

Published March 30st, 2010

## Saint Mary's Cinderella Season Ends in the Sweet 16

By Mikaela Cowles



Sweet Sixteen team Photo Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's men's basketball team ended its NCAA Tournament run with a 49-72 loss to Baylor in the South Regional semifinal at Reliant Stadium in Houston, TX on Friday, March 26. The Gaels finished their Cinderella season with a 26-6 record.

Prior to the game, head coach Randy Bennett said, "(Baylor is) long and is one of the leading shot-blocking and rebounding teams in the country...They will have some answers for our inside game and they play a lot of zone."

He couldn't have been more right. Baylor's zone was packed tight in the middle, forcing Saint Mary's to rely on their perimeter play. The Gaels slipped to a 17-46 deficit in the first half, shooting just 23.3 percent from the field.

Despite a six point run by Ben Allen early in the second half, the Gaels were unable to come back. Though their shooting improved, pressure defense and quick rotations on the outside limited the Gael's three-point shooting to 27.3 percent for the game. Their season's three-point percentage was 41 percent. Saint Mary's also struggled on the boards, pulling down 25 rebounds (eight offensive) as a team to Baylor's 37 (14 offensive). The

Gael's scored only four second-chance points.

Ben Allen, a senior, finished his career with a team-high 16 points. Senior and West Coast Conference Defensive Player of the Year, Omar Samhan, finished with 15 points and 9 rebounds.

The Gaels beat Gonzaga to win the WCC Conference tournament and the automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament. On Selection Sunday, Saint Mary's began to prepare for No. 7 seed Richmond, whom they beat 80-71. They followed the win up with a 75-68 upset over No. 2 seed Villanova (75-68) in Providence, RI.

Samhan led Saint Mary's to the seven-point victory over the Villanova Wildcats with 32 points and seven rebounds. The Gaels shut down the Wildcats' top three scorers. Through hustle and a little luck, Saint Mary's turned each opportunity in their favor.

When Matthew Dellavedova nearly lost the ball and fell to the floor, he maintained his dribble and recovered quickly. Dellavedova scrambled from the boards, and pulled up for a three, regaining the lead for the Gaels, 64-61. Junior Mickey McConnell fired a 25-footer that banked high off the glass with 1:15 left in the game. Saint Mary's once again took the lead, 68-65.

With 46 seconds left, Samhan blocked Reggie Redding's shot. McConnell was fouled and sank both ends of the one-and-one. As they continued to convert free throws, the Gaels were unable to control their smiles and excitement as they enjoyed their victory.

Saint Mary's Sweet-16 finish is the first time in over 50 years that the team has won an NCAA Tournament game. The last time Saint Mary's advanced was in 1959, when they went to the Elite 8. They were led by alum, Tom Meshery, whose jersey hangs in McKeon Pavilion.

Bennett is now 2-3 in NCAA tournament play. Before the tournament began he said, "There is nothing like experience." Experience the Gaels now have.

### The Journey in a Nutshell

(Selected quotes from SMC Media Day player interviews)

Mickey McConnell: "I think early on, even before the season started, the way our team kind of bonded and with the chemistry (we had) we could tell that this team was something special."

Beau Levesque: "It's weird that it's never happened before, because we've had such good teams come through here... It's just crazy to be a part of the first team that's gone this far in so long!"

Omar Samhan: "I'm just a work horse, that's all I have. I lace my boots up, put my hard-hat on, bring my lunch pail."

Ben Allen: "When we got back off the bus there were some 200-300 people waiting like three hours for us. It was freezing cold out there, and that's the kind of support that really makes it worthwhile. You go win games and come back, everyone loves it and the feeling is just awesome."

Randy Bennett: "We understood we were going to the Sweet Sixteen when we won that game and that was great. We didn't understand how big of a deal it was to the community, the people at school, and people around the country."



Coach Randy Bennett Photo Tod Fierner



Mickey McConnell banked in a three-pointer against Villanova to propel the Gaels to the Sweet Sixteen Photo Tod Fierner



Saint Mary's freshman guard Dellavedova drives against Portland big men. SMC avenged its season loss against the Pilots in the Semi-Finals of the WCC Tournament, defeating them 69-55 Photo Tod Fierner



Fans greet players as they arrive home Photo Tod Fierner



Awaiting the team Photo Doug Kohen

Omar notched 15 points and nine rebounds in the loss to Baylor Photo Tod Fierner



One of many signs around town. (Brad Noggle at 5A Rent a Space) Photo Andy Scheck



Brother Dominic celebrates Saint Mary's victory over Villanova with students at the Showing Party in Dryden Hall Photo Ohlen Alexander



Saint Mary's fans show their school spirit outside Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas Photo Tod Fierner



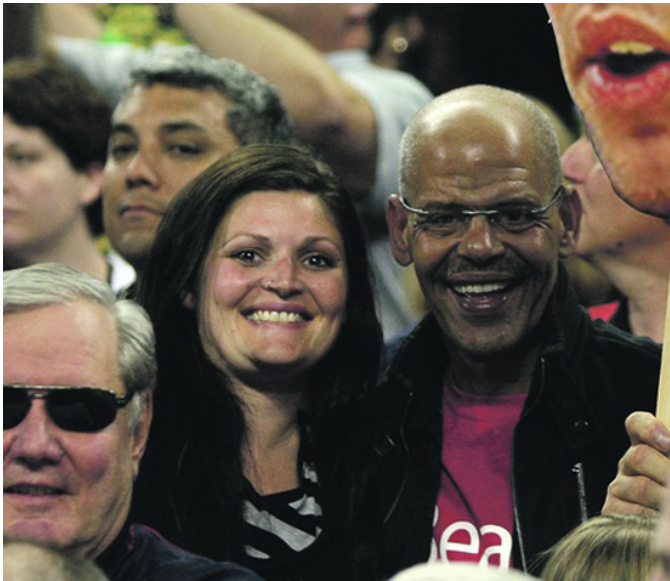
Omar takes a moment to pose with young fans before leaving for Houston Photo Ohlen Alexander



Saint Mary's senior John Dixon is tense during the Baylor game Photo Michael Fox

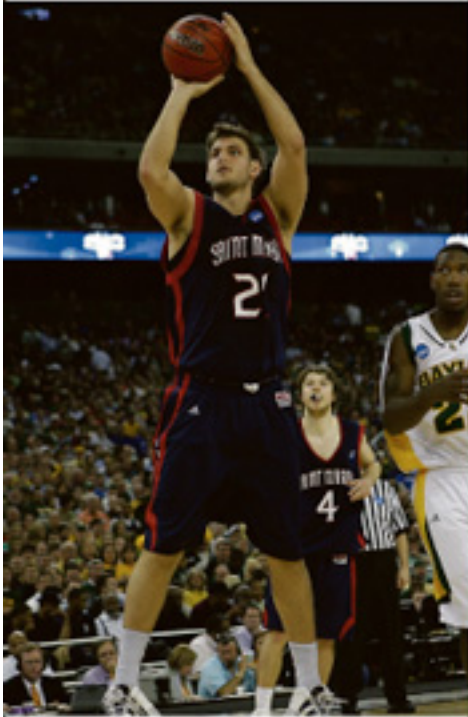


Saint Mary's students traveled to Houston to represent Gael Force and support the team Photo Tod Fierner



Gaels' fans include Samhan's father and sister

## Allen, Ben



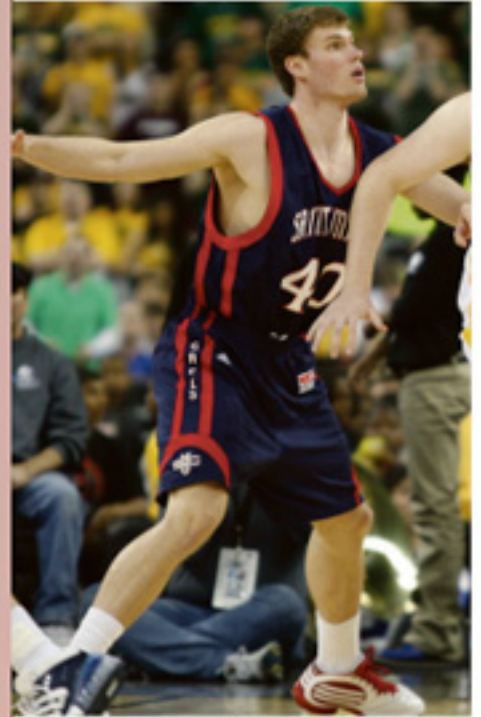
# 21, Center  
Height: 6-11, Weight: 250  
Redshirt Senior  
Hometown: Melbourne,  
Australia (Indiana/Aus-  
tralian Institute of Sport)

## Anderson, Trey



# 23, Guard  
Height: 6-4, Weight: 175  
Redshirt Freshman  
Hometown: Carrollton, TX  
(Hebron HS)

## Benson, Phil



# 40, Forward  
Height: 6-8, Weight: 230  
Redshirt Junior  
Hometown: Scottsdale, AZ  
(Canisius College/Horizon HS)

## Dellavedova, Matthew



# 4, Guard  
Height: 6-4, Weight: 185  
Freshman  
Hometown: Maryborough,  
Victoria, Australia (AIS)

## Harris, Tim



# 12, Forward  
Height: 6-4, Weight: 190  
Freshman  
Hometown: San Jose, CA  
(Valley Christian HS)

## Hunter, Wayne



# 24, Guard  
Height: 6-4, Weight: 210  
Redshirt Senior  
Hometown: Sacramento, CA  
(Bridgton Prep/Valley HS)

## Levesque, Beau



# 15, Forward  
Height: 6-5, Weight: 215  
Freshman  
Hometown: Lafayette, CA  
(De La Salle HS)

## McConnell, Mickey



# 32, Guard  
Height: 6-0, Weight: 175  
Junior  
Hometown: Mesa, AZ  
(Dobson HS)

## Page, Jordan



# 1, Guard  
Height: 6-1, Weight: 175  
Freshman  
Hometown:  
Maroochydore, Queens-  
land, Australia (AIS)

## Samhan, Omar



# 50, Center

Height: 6-11, Weight: 265

Redshirt Senior

Hometown: San Ramon,  
CA (San Ramon Valley HS)

## Steindl, Clint



# 11, Forward

Height: 6-7, Weight: 180

Sophomore

Hometown: Mackay,  
Queensland, Australia  
(Australian Institute of Sport)

## Walker II, Kenton



# 30, Forward

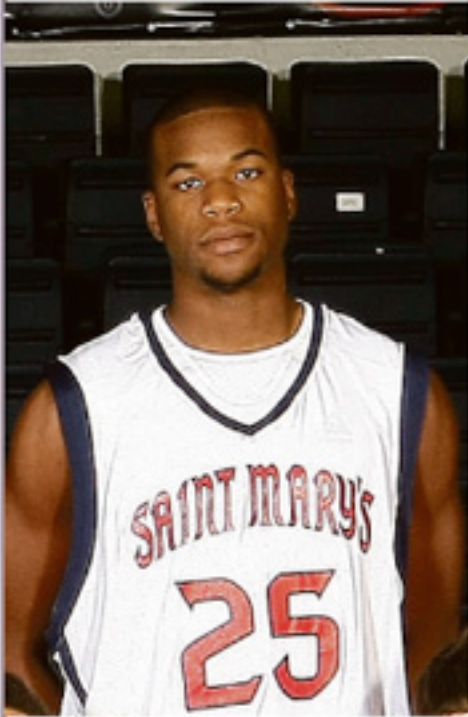
Height: 6-9, Weight: 235

Junior

Hometown: San Diego, CA  
(Creighton)



## Williams, Tim



# 25, Forward  
Height: 6-9, Weight: 235  
Redshirt Freshman  
Hometown: Antioch, CA  
(Antioch HS)

## Young, Mitchell



# 3, Forward  
Height: 6-9, Weight: 225  
Freshman  
Hometown: Logan,  
Queensland, Australia  
(AIS)

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