

Published November 10th, 2010

High Hopes and No Fears

By Bryant West



Matthew Dellavedova Photo Tod Fierner

because of his size, speed and strength.

Dellavedova says the Gaels greatest strength is the team's chemistry. "We're playing well together," he said. "Chemistry is massively underrated (in basketball) - without it, you could have the best players but you won't get anywhere. We've got good players and good chemistry."

Another strength for the Gaels is their depth - Clint Steindl, Jordan Page, Mitchell Young, Tim Williams and a collection of good newcomers - makes this year's team one of the deepest.

But if there is a question mark, it's down low, where the Gaels will start two junior transfers in Kenton Walker and Rob Jones. Over the past four years, Saint Mary's has been spoiled by interior strength, with Simpson and Samhan becoming the school's historical top rebounders. While Gaels fans know what to expect from the guards, it's not as easy to predict how the bigs will perform.

Walker is confident that the post-players won't disappoint. "My expectations are to pick up where Omar left off," he said. "Everyone is telling me I have big shoes to fill, and I'm ready to fill them. I believe we are ready to go... we have the confidence and we have the will power to get everything done during games."

The WCC isn't going to be easy. Gonzaga remains the powerhouse and the perennial favorites to win the championship. Local rival Santa Clara is much improved and has a possible Player of the Year in Kevin Foster, while both Pepperdine and Loyola Marymount could make significant leaps. "I don't see a weak team," said Bennett, and he's right - the WCC, on paper, is arguably one of the strongest mid-majors in the NCAA.

"The WCC looks good, wide open," said Walker. "I don't want to jinx us or anything, but I feel we have a real good shot at repeating. With the guys that we have on the inside and on the perimeter, we have a real good chance."

The Gaels kick off the season with five home games beginning on Friday, November 12th against College of Idaho. Saint Mary's will play some strong non-conference opponents this season, including a home game against Saint John's, an away match at San Diego State, and a matchup against Mississippi State at the Orleans Arena in Las Vegas, home of the WCC Championship.

"We've won quite a few games over the past few years," said Bennett, "so the expectations are pretty high for fans, and probably a little unrealistic, but it is what it is. We do a good job of focusing on our expectations on us, as a team."

If the Gaels keep up their strong guard play and find consistency from their new bigs, they'll have a good shot at meeting those expectations.

Just a year removed from a Sweet Sixteen appearance and arguably the best year in the program's history, it would be easy to understand if the Saint Mary's men's basketball team's was anxious over living up to fans' heightened expectations.

Not so, say the Gaels.

"You can tell, coming into this year, with the excitement and the energy... guys know what it takes," senior guard Mickey McConnell said. "We know it's a long road and we can't just keep looking down that road, but the guys coming back, we know what it takes to get there."

And while this team may lack the star power it's had in the past - Diamon Simpson and Patrick Mills are two years gone, and Omar Samhan has hung up his jersey - the Gaels have the talent, depth and determination to battle for a repeat as West Coast Conference champions.

The Gaels biggest strength is their guards - McConnell and fellow starter sophomore Matthew Dellavedova are a fantastic one-two punch. McConnell has filled in as the team leader; head coach Randy Bennett calls him the team's "wise man." McConnell will be tough on the court as well, his 51 percent clip from three point land was tops in the NCAA. Dellavedova was a selection to the WCC-All Freshmen team last year. He is a strong offensive talent with a great shooting ability and passing skills as well as a defensive force

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA