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Saint Mary's Falls 1-2 on the Road

By Bryant West



Rob Jones (#22) Photo Tod Fierner

Facing three of the best squads they will play all season, the Saint Mary's Gaels went 1-2 over the past week and a half, defeating Texas Tech 88-68 on Nov. 26 but losing to #23 BYU 74-73 and #17 San Diego State 69-55.

These three games -especially the road contests against ranked BYU and San Diego State - were important games for the Gaels, who hope to make it back into the NCAA Tournament again this year. With the exception of a 76-71 win over St. Johns on Nov. 15, the Gaels had played a weak non-conference schedule to begin the season, with wins against two NAIA teams and a 121-52 win at home against Chicago State.

Texas Tech may not have been up to the standard of the ranked BYU and San Diego State squads, but the Gaels 88-68 victory was one of the better of the season. The contest against the Red Raiders, held in South Padre Island, Texas, was the third round of the South Padre Island Invitational and earned the Gaels a spot in the Invitational Championship.

The Gaels dominated the Red Raiders down low with 48 points in the paint and shot 59.3 percent from the field. Backup big Tim Williams led the way with 20 points and 10 boards for his second double-double on the season, while senior guard Mickey McConnell had 18 points and sophomore Matthew Dellavedova had 10 points and eight assists.

The contest with BYU was the championship of the Invitational but also a preview of seasons to come. BYU will join the West Coast Conference next season and, along with Gonzaga and Saint Mary's, makes the conference one of the more respectable mid-majors in the NCAA.

Saint Mary's took the largest lead of the game - 66-63 with 4:08 remaining - after two layups from Young. Dellavedova gave the Gaels a 70-69 lead with 25 seconds left after he sank two free throws.

Saint Mary's dueled the Cougars to a stand-still, but a three by Jimmer Fredette with ten seconds left put BYU up 74-70. Dellavedova missed a runner in the paint, and a three in the closing seconds from McConnell put the final score at 74-73.

"I was proud of the team, they played well and competed hard," head coach Randy Bennett said. "They know they played a good team and we played pretty well. If the shot doesn't go in it's a different feeling."

Junior forward Rob Jones had 18 points, while sophomore big Mitchell Young and McConnell had 12 points and Dellavedova had 11 points and five assists.

The Gaels fell behind early and couldn't come back in the 69-55 loss to #17 San Diego on Thursday. The Aztecs started the contest with a 14-2 run, capped off by a jumper from Billy White with 15:21 left in the half.

"We came in here and spotted them 10 points at the start of the game," Bennett said. "This was our first true road game and it showed. I give them credit though. They exposed us. They exposed a lot of things. Most of all we have to get mentally tougher and be better competitors on the road."

Saint Mary's got back into the game - a layup from Dellavedova cut the lead to 23-19 - but the Aztecs pulled away after that and the Gaels couldn't recover.

"We started off flat and gave them a lead," Jones said after the loss. "We got back in the game, and then let them get away with it again. That's maturity on our part. We have to be tougher than that." Jones led the Gaels with 17 points, and Dellavedova chipped in 15, but the Aztec's Chase Tapley had 14 and big man Thomas Malcolm had 12 points, six boards and six blocks.

The matchup against the Aztecs was the third meeting in three years for the Gaels, who saw their season end two years ago with an

NIT loss at San Diego, but won a home contest against the Aztecs last season.

The Gaels return home to meet Denver tonight, Wednesday, December 8th. Saint Mary's has two more strong non-conference opponents - an away contest at New Mexico State on December 23rd, and a matchup against Mississippi State in Las Vegas on December 29th - before the start of conference play.

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