

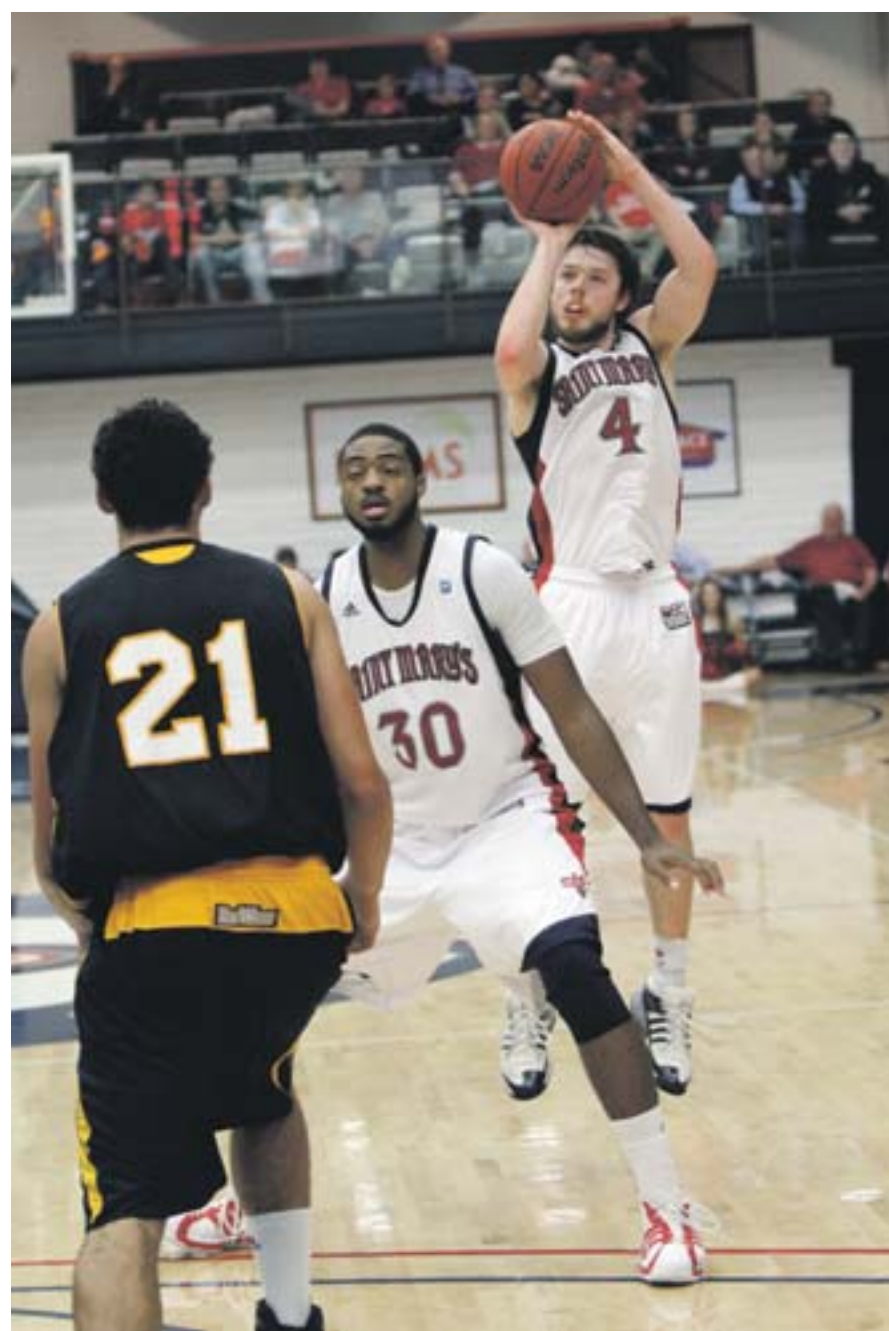


SPORTS

LAMORINDA'S LOCAL SPORTS

Gaels Win Three in a Row

By Bryant West



Sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova (4) had 23 points in the win against UC Riverside. Photo Tod Fierner



Junior forward Rob Jones (22) calls for the ball. He notched a double-double against Denver. Photo Tod Fierner



Sophomore forward Mitchell Young (3) rejects the shot attempt. Photo Tod Fierner

After facing two top 20 squads in road contests – and losing both – the Saint Mary's Gaels basketball needed a home-court recovery.

The Gaels returned to Moraga for two games – and two victories – a 77-47 win over Denver on December 8th and a 75-56 win over UC Riverside on December 14th. The Gaels then traveled to Anaheim, California to compete in the John R. Wooden Classic on Saturday, and earned a 82-74 victory over Long Beach State.

"At the end of the year, it will be a key win for us," head coach Randy Bennett said after Saturday's win. "It's a key win for us now because we had to fight through some adversity on the road and come from behind to win the game. That is where your toughness and belief as a team is built."

The Gaels went through arguably the toughest part of their schedule two weeks ago, with losses to then #23 BYU and #17 San Diego State. Since then, San Diego State has jumped to #10 in the ESPN/USA Today College poll, and BYU to #18.

But a return to McKeon Pavilion proved all the medicine the Gaels needed as they dominated the Denver Pioneers on December 8th with a 77-47 victory. Junior forward Rob Jones earned his second double-double of the season and led the way with 17 points and 10 boards, while sophomore forward Mitchell Young had 14 points. Senior guard Mickey McConnell finished with 12 points and four assists.

The contest was never in question, as the Gaels shot a high 59.6 percent from the floor and held the Pioneers to just 37.5 percent while allowing only 17 first half points. Saint Mary's also outrebounded Denver by a 39 to 15 margin.

The home-winning streak reached seven on the year as the Gaels bested UC Riverside for a 75-56 victory on December 14th. Jones led the Gaels again, this time with 24 points and 11 rebounds, shooting 9-15 from the field and 6-9 from three-point territory. Sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova added 23 points and six assists of his own, and McConnell added eight points and seven assists. Guard Javon Borum had 15 for the Highlanders.

The Gaels only shot 40 percent in the first half, but held a 29-22 halftime lead thanks to their resilient defense, which held UC Riverside to 34 percent shooting. In the second half, the Gaels didn't improve much from the floor – shooting 44 percent in the half and finishing at 42 percent overall – but caught on from downtown, sinking nine-of-19 three point shots and edging away from the Highlanders. Jones and Dellavedova each had 14 second half points.

Last Saturday, Young had a career night and McConnell took over in the final minutes as Saint Mary's prevailed late against Long Beach State in their 82-74 win in the John R. Wooden Classic.

Young scored 28 on the night, shooting 13-of-18 from the field, and added six boards. McConnell had 18 points while junior forward Clint Steindl had 13 points and four assists. All five of Long Beach State's starters had double figures, led by forward T.J. Robinson's 19 points and nine board performance, but got just two bench points.

The Gaels got down early after Long Beach State started the game on a 10-0 run before Young scored the first Saint Mary's point 16:41 on the clock.

"I was proud of our guys," Bennett said. "We could have got frustrated, lost our composure and put ourselves in a deeper hole. We weathered the storm."

The two teams battled back-and-forth most of the game until a three pointer by Steindl gave the Gaels a 68-66 lead with 4:19 to go. McConnell took over from there, scoring eight of his 12 in the final 3:19 to keep Saint Mary's on top.

"It's how we are sometimes - it takes us awhile to get going," McConnell said afterwards. "We found a rhythm towards the end of the game. Our guys knew that once we got the lead, we could go from there. We got some stops down the stretch and that really helped."

The Gaels will head back on the road for their next match, flying to Las Cruces, New Mexico on December 23rd to take on the New Mexico State Aggies, who currently sit at 2-10. Saint Mary's will then fly to Las Vegas, Nevada and take on the 8-4 Mississippi State Bulldogs for a December 29th contest at the Orleans Arena.

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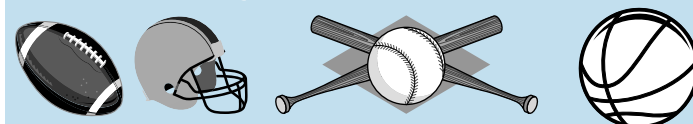
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