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Saint Mary's Basketball Struggles on the Road

By Bryant West



Rob Jones (22) notched 18 points against his former team, USD. Photo Tod Fierner

dunk by Jones with 7:38 to play - but Vanderbilt never relinquished the lead.

The difficult road trip continued to Spokane. The Gaels have never beat Gonzaga in their building in Bennett's tenure. But thanks to senior guard Mickey McConnell's late game heroics - hitting a game winning shot around Bulldogs' center Robert Sacre with 1.2 seconds to play - the Gaels managed a stunning victory that silenced the rarely silent Kennel. Gonzaga was 44-1 in conference play at home to that point - losing only once before, to the Gaels in 1995.

"Gonzaga is a good team," Bennett said afterwards. "I felt like we beat a good Gonzaga team. We played well... we are happy as heck to get out of here with a win."

McConnell led the Gaels with 27 points, six assists and four boards, while Jones added 15 points and 13 boards. Sacre led the 17 and eight boards, while guard Steven Gray had 14 before fouling out with four minutes to play.

"We wanted to get one shot and that was the last shot so that was the main thing," McConnell said. "We wanted to switch Sacre and get the mismatch."

That was exactly what the Gaels got. Zags' guard Marquise Carter hit two free throws with 10 seconds to play that tied the game at 71-71. McConnell took the ball up, and a screen later found himself guarded by Sacre. He curved his body around the seven-foot center, shot a 10 foot jumper off-handed, and hit the game winner with 1.2 seconds to play.

But perhaps the victory over rival Gonzaga left the Gaels a little bit on the weary side as they lost to Portland 85-70 on Saturday. Portland used a 27-2 run to start the second half that buried the Gaels, and the Saint Mary's run - the Gaels cut it to eight at 76-68 with 51 seconds left in the game - came too late.

When asked if the tough trip had fatigued the Gaels, McConnell said he didn't think it had. "I think our guys felt alright. It is just a normal road trip... We really just didn't defend and do the little things we needed to do to get this win."

In the span of two days, the Saint Mary's Gaels played their best game and then their worst game. They went from stunning a Spokane crowd with a win over the WCC-dominant Gonzaga Bulldogs to witnessing the Portland fans rush the court after the Pilots beat them 85-70.

In a four game stretch that featured two games of great basketball and two games of not-so-great basketball, Saint Mary's bested San Diego at 67-56 in Moraga, lost on the road to Vanderbilt at 89-70, beat heated rival Gonzaga 73-71 in Spokane, and were downed by the Pilots 85-70.

"We just did a bad job preparing and executing," head coach Randy Bennett said after the loss in Portland. "I was proud of our guys. They competed to get that thing back reasonable... (but) We were never a threat to win the game."

San Diego sits last in the conference but gave the Gaels a fight. Still, Saint Mary's prevailed 67-56. Junior Rob Jones, who played his first two years at San Diego before transferring, led the Gaels with 18 points and 13 boards. With the score tied at 33-33 with 14:48 to play, Jones hit a three that started the Gaels' run and put them up for good.

On Saturday, January 22nd the Gaels got off to a good start in Tennessee before Vanderbilt took over, giving the Gaels their third loss of the season at 89-70. Sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova led the way with 19 points and four assists but Saint Mary's couldn't stop the Commodores' offense, allowing them to shoot 52 percent from the field and 50 percent from downtown.

Saint Mary's held a 19-13 lead after a three from Jones with 12:58 to go in the half, but Vanderbilt outscored the Gaels 30-9 the rest of the period and held a 43-28 lead at halftime. The Gaels managed to cut into the lead multiple times- narrowing it to seven at 67-60 after a

To the Pilots' credit, they have bested the Gaels in each of their past two meetings in Portland, but have both years been knocked out of the Conference tournament by Saint Mary's. McConnell had a career night, scoring 32 in the loss but the Gaels shot just 39 percent from the field.

The Gaels sit at 6-1 in conference, one game ahead of second place San Francisco at 5-2. Both Santa Clara and Gonzaga have a 4-3 conference record, but the Broncos currently rest in third thanks to win over the Zags earlier this month. Saint Mary's returns home this week, taking on Pepperdine on Thursday and a Saturday matchup with Loyola Marymount.



Mickey McConnell (32) hit the game winner against Gonzaga Photo Tod Fierner

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