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Saint Mary's Men Play in NIT

By Bryant West



Photo Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's Gaels men's basketball team failed to secure an NCAA Tournament bid after losing to rival Gonzaga in the WCC Championships last week. The Gaels also watched all the at-large bids go elsewhere on Selection Sunday. After last year's run to the Sweet 16, the Gaels instead played in the National Invitational Tournament. The first game was yesterday, Tuesday, March 15 against Kent State.

After hosting a Selection Sunday gathering at McKeon Pavilion, head coach Randy Bennett and the Gaels expressed their disappointment. "It's tough, that's the only way I can explain it," Bennett said. "It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me how we're not in... but we're not, and that's reality."

While their record and tournament resume alone would have guaranteed them a spot in the NIT, the Gaels also had guaranteed a spot in the NIT since they'd been the conference's regular-season co-champions.

The Gaels advanced to the WCC Championships for the third straight year thanks to a 73-64 over Santa Clara on Sunday, March 5th. Sophomore forward Mitchell Young had 17 points and seven

rebounds, while freshman guard Stephen Holt had 15 points. Santa Clara's Marc Trasolini scored 22 points to lead the Broncos.

The championship game against Gonzaga was the third straight Saint Mary's-Gonzaga finals. The two teams split the previous two contests. Gonzaga secured the conference title and the automatic ticket to the NCAA Tournament with a 75-63 win over the Gaels, as Saint Mary's couldn't close out and failed to score a field goal in the final four minutes.

Senior guard Mickey McConnell had 24 points while sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova had 21 but the Gaels lost the inside battle as two of their strongest big men - junior Rob Jones and Young each fouled out in the second half for Saint Mary's. Steven Gray had 15 and seven boards to lead the Zags, who had four players in double figures.

"I'm not sure what changed offensively for us," Bennett said afterwards. "Obviously, playing without Jones is a pretty key part of our deal. Foul trouble affected us."

The Gaels had one final contest before Selection Sunday, and made the best of the opportunity as they blew out Weber State 77-54. Saint Mary's had hoped it would be the final home game for their seniors - McConnell and forward Phil Benson - but Sunday's NCAA Tournament decision and the NIT birth changed that fate. Jones had 20 points and 13 boards in the win, while McConnell had 15 and eight assists on his senior night.

While Sunday wasn't a happy occasion in Gael-land, both Bennett and his players did their best to move forward. "We can't let ourselves get deflated... We've got more games left," Jones said. "The season continues."

The NIT Opening round contest on Tuesday night against Kent State was played after press time. If the Gaels won, they will play the winner of Fairfield and Colorado State sometime later in the week.



Mitchell Young (3) shoots against two Santa Clara defenders in the semi-final game of the WCC tournament Photo Tod Fierner

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