

Published November 9th, 2011

SMC Basketball Season Starts Friday Gaels Picked to Finish Second in WCC

Alex Kozela



#3 Mitchell Young Photo Tod Fierner

Despite losing reigning WCC Player of the Year, Mickey McConnell, the Saint Mary's men's basketball team starts the new season with a healthy team brimming with confidence.

"There's a reason he's Player of the Year. We're going to miss him in a lot of ways," said Gaels' head coach Randy Bennett of McConnell.

The Gaels tied for the regular season WCC title last year despite sustaining a number of injuries and playing with only eight healthy bodies for the better part of the season, and will look to use this year's depth to help the team build off of last season's first round NIT loss.

"Practices are a lot more competitive now, we can go longer, we can go harder," said Bennett. "We didn't have enough players to go five-on-five [before]."

Sophomore guard Jordan Page and forward Beau Levesque, who were both injured for most of last season, are now practicing regularly.

"With not having guys healthy last year, you can't go as hard, you can't put your body on the line as much as you can now," said junior forward Mitchell Young. "Now we can go 100 percent with all the plays."

The team, picked to finish second in the WCC just after perennial favorites Gonzaga, will miss McConnell's leadership and organization, but can look to returnees Matthew Dellavedova and Rob Jones, who received All-WCC preseason honors.

"It's been a bit different the first couple of weeks not having Mickey around," said Dellavedova, a junior guard who can expect to get more playing time at the point guard this season. He'll also see an increased leadership role, partly due to the experience he gained playing with the Australian national team over the summer.

"He's been around the block for two years and this summer played against the pros," Bennett said of Dellavedova. "His confidence level is very high. He'll be better because the ball is in his hands more, and he's really good in that situation."

Other changes this year for the Gaels include new additions Kyle Rowley, a 7'0" center transfer from Northwestern who sat out last season due to NCAA transfer rules, and junior transfer Paul McCoy, who also sat out last

year but will most likely be sidelined by a knee injury the entire year.

Despite the unfortunate news concerning McCoy, the team is content with the players available and has begun to adjust to playing as a collective unit.

"Coming in we had a lot of guys that hadn't played last year so it was a bit up and down early with gelling as a team, but we've made a lot of progress and we're starting to gain an identity," said Young.

The Gaels are confident that they can win the WCC title and progress into the NCAA Tournament, which they missed out on last year. Winning the WCC title will be just a little more difficult this year, however, due to the addition of BYU, who is ranked third in the WCC preseason poll, as well as the presence of improved Gonzaga and USF teams, ranked first and fourth, respectively. Santa Clara rounds out the top five. Last year, USF and Santa Clara both had winning records for the first time since 2004 and are expected to continue to improve over the course of the upcoming season.

"We have a great conference, one of the better ones in the west, and I just think that bringing in BYU just elevated it," said Bennett. "I think we made a move on some other conferences as far as we're up there at the top, along with the Pac-12 and the Mountain West."

The team begins non-conference play Friday at home against Fresno Pacific and WCC play December 29

against BYU. Non-conference highlights include the Las Vegas Classic games against Baylor, who defeated the Gaels 72-49 in the Sweet 16 two seasons ago and Missouri State on December 22 and 23, respectively.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA