

LAMORINDA SPORTS

SMC Volleyball Advances to Second Round of NCAA Tournament

By Michael Sakoda



Lauren Corp



Dallas Dodd

Photos Tod Fierner

Saint Mary's College's volleyball team wrapped up a strong season, earning an at-large bid to the NCAA Tournament, the team's sixth tournament berth. The Gaels finished with a 17-10 record, including a 12-4 conference record, good for third place in the WCC.

Head coach Rob Browning said their performance was impressive. He also noted that the success came after a conscious effort. "Right after we started conference, the girls decided to fight harder and be tougher," he explained. "We won some close good matches against really good opponents, and that might have been the difference in those matches."

The Gaels faced San Diego State in the first round of the NCAA tournament, and prior to the Nov. 29 game against the Aztecs, Browning said that his team was looking forward to the match. "SDSU is really good. We'll have our hands full with them to say the least," he explained. "I don't see anything that is blatantly a weakness for them that we can exploit...they get after it, and we're

ready to get after it too."

Browning's assessment was accurate and the game was a battle. After dropping the first two sets 17-25 and 23-25, Saint Mary's rallied. The Gaels won three straight sets 25-23, 25-22 and 15-12 to earn the win and a trip to the second round.

Junior Kristina Graven finished with a season-high 23 kills and a team-high 17 digs, and redshirt freshman Dallas Dodd chipped in 28 assists to help lead the Gaels to victory.

The highs of the first round comeback were short lived, though. The Gaels were eliminated from the tournament on Nov. 30 by No. 4 USC in straight sets, bringing an end to an outstanding year for volleyball program.

Still, there is much for the Gaels to be proud of this season, including strong performances from multiple players.

"We're a very talented team, very highly skilled," Browning said. Four players—seniors Gabby Jolly and Lauren Corp, along with Graven

and Dodd—earned All-WCC honors.

Graven, who led the Gaels with 310 kills (3.37 per set) and Jolly, the Gaels all-time and single-season record holder in attack percentage (.323/.370), were named to the All-WCC First team. Corp, third in all-time kills at SMC with 1,254 and MVP of the Sacramento State Tournament, was selected to the honorable mention team, her fourth time on the WCC All-Conference Team.

"All totally deserving... [but] we've got a few other players that could, would, should be on that list...there are just so many good players in our conference," said Browning. "But we're happy. Those players have been really great."

Dodd, who has a team-leading 31 aces on the season, including six in the match against Morgan State, which tied the school's single match record, earned a spot on the WCC All-Freshman team.

The Gaels graduate four seniors, but return a strong core for next season.

From Novice to Champion

Hard work pays off for Rower of the Year

By Rebecca Eckland



Alia Shafi Photo provided

Imagine pursuing a sport six days a week, at least 2.5 hours a day in order to be the best athlete you can. Acalanes senior Alia Shafi did just that and her hard work was rewarded. She was named Junior Rower of the Year by USRowing and row2k Media-- the sponsoring bodies of pre-collegiate rowing.

Shafi's rowing career began two years ago. Already athletic-- track and soccer were her other pursuits-- a friend persuaded Shafi to do something "different." So, Shafi traded land for water, joining Oakland Strokes Crew, a club team with members from Lamorinda, Oakland and Piedmont.

At first, Shafi says she wasn't very good. Yet, that is what kept her attending practice after practice. "I don't like quitting because I'm not good," she explained. "I just wanted to stick with crew to see where it would take me."

She knew that if she continued to practice, she would improve. "It's like running-- it's physically demanding. And if you work hard, you'll get bet-

ter at it," she said.

Her determination paid off. Shafi was second at the junior lightweight 8+ at the youth national championships as a sophomore.

Last year, as a junior, she was voted the "most inspirational" by her team and coaches.

Though she'd be the last to admit it, Shafi's no longer a mere inspiration--she's become a star.

This year, Shafi led Oakland Strokes to 17 victories in 19 races, including gold medals at the San Diego Crew Classic, the 2012 USRowing Youth National Championships, the USRowing Southwest Junior Regional Championships and at the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta.

For Shafi part of the appeal of crew is that it is both an individual and team sport. "Practices are like competitions," she said. "You have to compete with your teammates to win your spot in the Varsity boat." But when

competition days arrive, the atmosphere changes: "it's very 'teamy'-- when we're in a race, we move like we're one rower."

In fact, it was the team coach who would nominate Alia Shafi for the national distinction of "Junior Rower of the Year." Shafi was pitted against many others, and 33,000 votes in total were cast to determine a winner. Among thousands of candidates, Shafi was the clear winner, a distinction hard-won from her work ethic of "you get what you give."

Shafi has signed with Brown University and will continue her rowing career as a collegiate athlete in the fall.

When asked where rowing might take her in the future, Shafi was modest. "I hope it takes me somewhere awesome," she speculated. "I'm pretty small for a rower, but..."

If Shafi's record says anything, size is nothing compared to hard work.



Women's Youth 8 at Charles Regatta in Boston/Cambridge on October 21. From front: Coxswain: Amanda Rutherford; Stroke: Alia Shafi Sr. Acalanes; Indigo Catton Jr. Campolindo; Camille Triebisch Sr. Campolindo; Ellen Pate Sr. Miramonte; Katie Hubert; Zabe Elmgren; Lizzie Pate Sr. Miramonte; bow: Laura Rosas, Sr. Miramonte Photo provided

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