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Saint Mary's Basketball Programs Off to a Hot Start

By Spencer Silva



Aaron Bright

With the basketball season underway, the Saint Mary's Gaels once again field two of the better teams in Northern California. Both the men (5-0) and women (5-1) have begun the season strong and appear poised for success in the WCC.

On Nov. 29, the Saint Mary's men defeated the Cal Poly Mustangs 82-56. They extended their home winning streak against non-conference opponents to 33 games, a streak that ties with Illinois for fifth best in the NCAA.

The Gaels are led by senior Brad Waldow, a preseason All-WCC pick who is averaging 21.6 points. The only other returning starter from the 2013-14 squad is senior Kerry Carter, who made four of the team's 15 three-pointers in Saturday's game.

The most noticeable difference from last season, however, is the absence of Stephen Holt. Holt ended his Saint Mary's career 10th on the all-time scoring list and is now attempting to carve out a career in the NBA.

The team is adapting well to its new personnel. Aaron Bright and Desmond Simmons, who are fifth-year transfers from Stanford and Washington, respectively, are new faces in the starting lineup. Redshirt freshman Emmett Naar has also stepped into a starting role and appears to be developing chemistry with Bright and Dane Pineau.

After Saturday's game, Coach Bennett spoke about the outlook of his team.

"This was our best performance yet," he explained, "this team, more than any team I've coached in awhile, has a chance to really improve. They're not close to their ceiling."

The Saint Mary's women also played on Nov. 29, securing a 67-63 win over Idaho State, and with it the title to their third straight Hilton-Concord Classic.

Junior Lauren Nicholson has starred in the early season. She was named tournament MVP Saturday after her 25-point effort in the championship game. She and the rest of the team have been tasked with picking up the slack left behind by Jackie Nared, Danielle Mauldin and Kate Gaze. Nared and Mauldin were First Team ALL-WCC in 2013-14.

"For every three that we lose, we expect that three more girls will breakthrough and contribute," said head coach Paul Thomas. "The culture here with this program is important. We don't coach the starters any different from the bench players. We treat everyone the same."

The team is also bolstered by the return of Carli Rosenthal, a key player around the basket who spent most of last season injured. The starting lineup is rounded out by freshman Stella Beck, junior Shannon Mauldin and senior Hayley Hendrickson.

Thomas enters his ninth year as head coach of the women's team and his emphasis on

consistent free-throw shooting and winning on the road are still key pillars of his philosophy.

"We're consistently Top-5 in the country in free-throw shooting," he said, "and we play a game that travels well. The style of defense and offense we play allows us to win games on the road. Anyone who follows college basketball knows how important it is to win over the road."

The men's next game is at home against Boise State on Dec. 6. The women host Cal State Northridge on Dec. 4.



Lauren Nicholson Photos Tod Fierner

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