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Future is Bright for Gaels' Volleyball

By Dean Boerner



Lindsey Knudsen (17) and Sarah Chase (15)

Photos Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's women's volleyball team is an intriguing mix of inexperience and raw talent. After graduating seven players last spring, coach Rob Browning has faced the challenge of balancing a bundle of new players, mostly freshman, and preparing his team for grueling matchups against quality WCC opponents.

"Our conference is so good that it maybe looks like we're not that good, but we're actually pretty good," Browning explained.

The Gaels' inexperience and raw talent was never more apparent than their recent loss to conference opponent Loyola Marymount (LMU) last Thursday. In a five-set loss to LMU, the Gaels played the more polished Lions into a deciding fifth set where they just couldn't overcome their more disciplined, experienced opponents.

The Gaels roster features youth across the board. Out of the team's 11 players, there are five freshmen, five sophomores, and only one junior. Making an immediate impact this season for Saint Mary's has been a quartet of starting freshmen: Lindsey Knudsen, Sarah Chase, Payton Rund, and Lindsey Calvin.

According to Chase, who stands second on the team in kills and points,

inexperience has contributed to some of the closer losses suffered by the Gaels this season. "We've been really close with all these teams and just finishing off the last five points has been a real struggle for us," Chase said.

Similar to Chase, freshman Lindsey Knudsen, from Valencia (Calif.), has played extremely well in her first college season. Leading the team in both kills and service aces, she has played in all 74 sets this year for Saint Mary's. She credits the team's de facto veterans – sophomores Mary Hernandez, Madi Wilkerson, and Alexis Salmons – with ensuring a smooth transition to college volleyball for her and her fellow freshmen.

The team embraces the challenges that come along with inexperience, but acknowledge that in order to reach their ceiling, they need consistency. "One of the things that is a sign of inexperience or being young is inconsistency," coach Browning said.

Alexis Salmons, a redshirt sophomore and player who has suddenly been thrust into a leadership role, echoed her coach's sentiments. "Rob says we ride a rollercoaster a lot," Salmons explained. "Sometimes we can be playing super well and sometimes we can go down and get into a rut."

While slumps have hindered their success this season, the Gaels' brief explosions of dominance offer glimpses into what should be a bright future. In early October, for instance, in a match against conference leader USD, currently ranked 24th in the country, the Gaels dropped the first two sets, but then, in the third set, took an 18-10 lead and eventually won 25-19.

Browning, who is now in his 11th season at Saint Mary's, has high expectations for his team going forward. "We're going to be very, very good next year," said Browning. "The trajectory they're on is really exciting."



Alexis Salmons

NCS Water Polo Playoffs Begin



Tyler Abramson

Photo Gint Federas

The NCS released its playoff brackets Nov. 1 for boys and girls water polo. For the girls, the first round begins Wednesday, Nov. 4. The boys' tournament begins Thursday, Nov. 5.

Girls

The Lamorinda girls' programs earned the top three seeds in the Division II NCS bracket:

The No. 1 seed Miramonte Lady Mats (17-6 overall, 5-0 DFAL) ended league-play on a high note, beating both Acalanes and Dougherty Valley, polishing off a perfect record in league and securing the DFAL title. Also, on Oct. 27, the Mats handed San Ramon Valley – NorCal's top team and perennial powerhouse – its first loss of the season. The girls took fifth place at the NorCal Championships Oct. 31 at Sacred Heart (Palo Alto, Calif.), defeating the Campo Lady Cougars 10-7. On Wednesday, Nov. 4 the Mats will host No. 16 Marin Academy at 6:45 p.m.

On the other side of the bracket are the No. 2 seed Lady Cougars (13-9 overall, 3-2 DFAL) and the No. 3 seed Acalanes Lady Dons (14-8 overall, 4-1 DFAL). The two teams met last month in one of the season's most thrilling matches, where the Dons beat the Cougars at home in triple overtime. The Cougars will meet No. 15 Bishop O' Dowd in Moraga at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 4; The Dons will host No. 14 Ukiah at 6:45 p.m. Wednesday. The two teams could meet again in the NCS semifinal match on Wednesday, Nov. 11.

Boys

In Division I boys' water polo, DFAL co-champions Miramonte (14-10 overall, 4-1 DFAL) and Campolindo (15-9 overall, 3-2 DFAL) find themselves in a unique situation. The No. 3 seed Mats and the No. 6 seed Cougars have met in the NCS championship each of the last two seasons – Campo won in 2013, Miramonte in 2014. This fall, however, the two are on the same side of the bracket and, should they win their opening-round matches Thursday, Nov. 5 – at home against No. 14 Washington (8 p.m.) and No. 11 Alameda (6:15 p.m.), respectively – the two would meet at Miramonte on Saturday, Nov. 7. The Mats beat the Cougars 9-7 in Orinda during the regular season on Oct. 14.

The No. 5 seed Acalanes Dons (13-10 overall, 3-2 DFAL) finds itself on the opposite side of the bracket as its rivals. The team had an up-and-down October, at one point dropping six of seven matches. The team ended the season on a high note, however, beating St. Francis (Mountain View, Calif.) 12-9, losing a close match to EBAL champions and No. 2 seed San Ramon Valley, and polishing off the regular season with a convincing 20-7 win over DFAL-rival Alhambra. The team will open the tournament at 8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 5 at home against Mission San Jose (Fremont, Calif.). S. Silva

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