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## Saint Mary's Beats Gonzaga For First Time Since 2012

By Dean Boerner



Evan Fitzner

Photos Tod Fierner



In front of a deafening McKeon Pavilion crowd last Thursday, the Saint Mary's men delivered a dramatic victory over perennial powerhouse and conference rival Gonzaga, 70-67. With the win, the Gaels (17-2, 8-1) captured sole possession of first place in the WCC and continue to bolster their case for an NCAA tournament bid in March.

The Gaels overcame a miserable first half against the Zags in which they shot just 38.5 percent from the field. The Gaels' struggles extended into the second half too, as they fell into a daunting 15-point hole with only 13 minutes left.

"For 32 minutes, it just wasn't going our way," said junior guard Joe Rahon.

Then, all of a sudden, something clicked. Thanks in part to three-pointers from Emmett Naar and Calvin Hermanson, the Gaels chipped the Gonzaga lead to 10 with about seven minutes left. At that point, the most efficient offense in the nation was just getting started.

"The last 8 minutes were pure chaos," said Rahon, who along with Naar played a game-high 40 minutes. "You can't really hear what each other is saying, so you're relying on your signals to call plays."

The Gaels would go on a quick 7-0 run, dwindling Gonzaga's lead to just three at 58-61. Gonzaga guard Eric McClellan promptly responded with a step-back trey for three of his game-high 23 points.

"McClellan was hitting shots that that we didn't really think he could make," remarked Gaels coach Randy Bennett after the game. McClellan, who came into the game shooting just 27 percent from beyond the arc, scored 16 points in the first half.

A Rahon three-pointer put the Gaels within three once again, and a subsequent steal by Rahon led to an Evan Fitzner fast-break layup and a one-point game.

"Fitzner had a great second half against a preseason All-American in Kyle Wiltjer," said Rahon. While leading the Gaels with 20 points on the night, the redshirt freshman Fitzner helped hold Wiltjer to a season-low six points.

By the time Joe Rahon finally put the Gaels up 65-64 on a driving layup with less than three minutes to play, McKeon Pavilion had turned into absolute bedlam. "That was one of the loudest games I've heard in here," said a relieved Bennett after the game.

A layup by Fitzner put the Gaels up 67-64 with a minute to play, but a free throw by Gonzaga forward Domantas Sabonis and layup by Kyle Dranginis tied the game at 67 with just 21 seconds remaining.

Instead of holding for a final shot, Rahon drew a questionable foul on a fading jump shot and made his way to the line. Rahon made the first free throw, but drew iron on the second. Rahon intentionally fouled a dribbling McClellan, mistakenly believing the Gaels had a foul to give – Rahon called it a "brain fart" after the game.

What could have spelled disaster for Saint Mary's, however, turned into a mere footnote, as McClellan missed the first free throw and Fitzner iced the game with two clutch foul shots.

After a last-second Gonzaga heave fell short, the Gaels finalized their first win over Gonzaga since 2012 – the last time they won the WCC.

With the win, the Gaels – who were projected to finish fourth in the WCC – are no longer conference underdogs. Behind a potent, methodical offense, Saint Mary's has defeated quality opponents like BYU, Stanford, and now Gonzaga. Before the Gaels can start thinking about NCAA tournament aspirations or even the WCC Championships though, they have highly consequential road games scheduled against WCC powerhouses BYU and Gonzaga. For a team hovering just outside national rankings, these two games will determine exactly how well the Gaels are positioned come March.

On Saturday night, the Gaels finished the week by thoroughly dismantling the Portland Pilots 89-74, and shooting 63 percent from the field. Australian imports Dane Pineau and Emmett Naar led all scorers with 20 points apiece.

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