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Lamorinda Basketball Teams Build Lasting Success

By Spencer Silva



Haley Van Dyke Photo Gint Federas

While the Lady Mats make their historic run to the state championship game this week, other Lamorinda teams have unpacked their lockers and turned their sights to the next season – or the next sport, in many cases. This offseason, however, players from all three programs can hold their heads up high. Each school sent a team to a CIF tournament, signaling the enduring strength of basketball in the area.

The Campo girls had one of their best seasons in recent years. They finished 25-6 and spent most of the winter ranked among Nor-Cal's better teams. They lost to Bishop O'Dowd in the NCS semi final, but the Cougars earned a berth in the CIF Division III tournament because both the Dragons and Lady Mats earned bids in the CIF Open Division tournament – where qualifications are based on rankings rather than school size.

The Cougars netted two home games in CIF play, a rarity in the postseason. They won their first tilt against Tamalpais, though they fell to No. 10 seed Inderkum (Sacramento) last Tuesday, 57-49, in the regional quarterfinal. It was their third appearance in the tournament in the last four years.

"[It] was a really special season," Campolindo girls head coach Art Thoms explained. "They loved coming to practice and being together. Many players said it was the most fun they ever had during a season."

Thoms credits some of the program's suc-

cess to the perennially difficult DFAL. This year, Thoms explained, tight games against Acalanes and Dublin, and the relentless full-court press of Miramonte, helped prepare his team for the next step.

"I believe those games significantly prepared us for the playoffs," he said.

After a runner-up finish in the Division III NCS tournament, Miramonte boys head coach Drew McDonald was hoping for a CIF home game of his own. Instead, the CIF selection committee decided to give their second-round opponent, Sacred Heart Prep, who held a humble 12-17 record, a slightly higher seed, despite an inferior regular-season record – the Mats were 19-11, in contrast. The Mats lost their March 11 match up with the Gators 70-64.

"Maybe the committee knew more than we did, but looking at the resumes, I think we earned a shot at the four seed," McDonald said. "It was a little disappointing not having a home game, I love promoting basketball in Lamorinda."

Despite the disappointing finish, McDonald recognized the specialness of the season. "This was the best season of my four-year tenure," he noted.

In fact, it was a season for the record books. Senior Eddy Ionescu, sometimes overshadowed by his All-American twin sister, Sabrina, had a season for the ages this winter. Ionescu averaged 26 points and 10 rebounds this season. Thanks to solid record-keeping, McDonald said the Mats can demonstrably say Ionescu not only scored the most points in school history this season, but also had the best overall season since the program's inception. He was also the first outright league MVP from a non-DFAL-winning team. He'll play at the University of Oregon next fall.

The Acalanes Lady Dons quietly had one of their best seasons in school history this winter, too. In fact, they earned berths in the CIF tournament in consecutive seasons. This winter, they earned a tournament berth despite moving up from Division III to Division II.

"Making it to the NCS finals was a great accomplishment for the program," said head coach Chad Wellon, who decided to step down after a successful three-year tenure last week. He anticipates, however, that the program's success will persist. "The players mean so much to me and I couldn't have asked for a better group. The Lady Dons are going to continue to compete at a high level moving forward."

After NCAA Snub, Gaels Move Closer to NIT Final

By Dean Boerner



Emmett Naar Photo Tod Fierner

Saint Mary's had one of their best seasons in a decade, but it wasn't good enough to earn a spot in NCAA tournament. Instead, the 27-5 Gaels, who won a WCC regular season co-championship, are settling for a berth in the National Invitational Tournament (NIT).

The Gaels privately watched Selection Sunday unfold on in the Soda Activity Center next to McKeon Pavilion. Not hearing their name called for college basketball's biggest moment elicited feelings of both dejection and acceptance.

"We knew we were on the bubble, and it could've gone either way," said sophomore guard Emmett Naar. "But to not make it after what we thought was such a good year is obviously really disappointing."

Saint Mary's never lost two games in a row, and their only unjustifiable defeats came in two regular season losses to a middling Pepperdine team. Other than those two blemishes, the Gaels' only other losses came to BYU, Gonzaga and Cal. In fact, they beat Gonzaga twice during the regular season for the first time in more than 20 years.

"Honestly if I was trying to explain why we are not in, I really couldn't," said head coach Randy Bennett. "What else could we have done?"

In the WCC postseason tournament, the Gaels advanced rather easily to the finals for a third and final showdown with rival Gonzaga on March 8. Had Saint Mary's defeated the Bulldogs, they would have been awarded an automatic bid as conference tournament champions. In that matchup though, Gonzaga shot a

scorching-hot 62 percent, guaranteeing them a coveted berth in the dance.

Even after the loss, the Gaels still had a decent chance. Along with their stellar record, they boasted top 40 rankings in both BPI and RPI, two metrics used heavily by the selection committee in weighing postseason resumes.

Nevertheless, the Gaels were vying with a host of other at-large teams for a few available spots, and it ended up being larger schools like Tulsa, Syracuse, and Vanderbilt who were selected.

Bennett, whose last trip to the NCAA tournament occurred in 2013, didn't appear too troubled by the results and began looking forward to NIT play.

"The teams that play in the NIT are just like us," Bennett said. "They're teams that could have easily been in the NCAA tournament and didn't get the nod. The NIT is a really good tournament."

The Gaels were deemed as the fourth-best team in the West Coast Conference prior to the season, so by every measure they have both defied and exceeded expectations all without a single senior on their roster. Guard Joe Rahon, one of just three juniors on the squad, will have another shot at reaching the tournament with his teammates next season. He also found no difficulty looking on the bright side.

"You're first reaction is disappointment," said the All-Conference player. "But your next reaction is, Hey, we get to play another game in front of our home crowd and we get to play in a great NIT tournament."

In the opening round of the NIT tournament, the No. 2 seed Gaels played sluggishly against the seven-seeded New Mexico St. Aggies. Saint Mary's held a modest 31-26 lead at halftime and built a considerable 45-32 lead several minutes into the half, but New Mexico St. clawed their way back. A stagnant Saint Mary's offense and a flurry of turnovers allowed New Mexico St. to tie the game at 56. Luckily for the Gaels, an ill-advised foul brought Joe Rahon to the line with less than two seconds remaining. He would knock down both free throws down to secure a 58-56 Gaels win and berth into the second round.

On Sunday night, the Gaels defeated the Georgia Bulldogs 77-65, advancing to the NIT quarterfinals. They will travel to Valparaiso, Ind. Tuesday to play the Valparaiso Crusaders for a chance to compete in the NIT semifinals at Madison Square Garden (New York City) this weekend.

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