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SMC Basketball's Randy Bennett: 'The Longer I Stay, the More I Want to Stay'

By Nick Marnell



Head basketball coach Randy Bennett has built a winning attitude at Saint Mary's College. Photo Tod Fierner

him. "My dad was having a positive influence on his kids," Bennett said. "He enjoyed the relationship he had with his players. That shaped me."

His father, Tom Bennett, a successful coach in Arizona and a member of the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, coached Bennett at Mesa Junior College. "He never put our relationship ahead of the team," said his father, noting that on a team trip to a Hawaii tournament, Bennett did not even sit near his dad on the plane. He was team captain, and the team came first.

Bennett said his father did not encourage or discourage his desire to be a coach. "But I warned him that he would not find the players willing to put in the time and effort that he did, and it may frustrate him," Tom Bennett said.

"I knew he would be successful because of his work ethic," said Bennett's high school coach Bud Doolen, from whom Bennett learned unselfishness and putting the team first. "He wasn't a rah-rah guy, but he was prepared. I remember before one game, he was sitting in the shower room, alone, meditating and preparing for the game."

Honing Skills to be a Head Coach

Bennett first worked as an assistant in 1985 under Hank Egan, head coach at the University of San Diego, from whom he picked up pieces of his offensive game plan. Bennett remained an assistant for 16 years, never losing his desire to be a head coach. It did not have to be in Division 1; he just wanted to coach. He would have been fine at a junior college, or even high school.

When head coach Brad Holland left USD in 1996 for the San Antonio Spurs of the NBA, the Toreros hired an experienced outsider. "I thought that I would have replaced him. I was naive," Bennett said. After the same thing happened at Pepperdine, he moved to Saint Louis University.

"I didn't want to be an assistant at 50 years old," Bennett said. "I had to make a decent living." He considered leaving for a Division 2 head coaching position and a job at a junior college. Then, in 2001, Saint Mary's opened up. A fateful phone call paved his way.

Bennett's friend Rick Majerus had written a book while head coach at the University of Utah - "My Life On a Napkin: Pillow Mints, Playground Dreams and Coaching the Runnin' Utes." In the

When Saint Mary's College head basketball coach Randy Bennett arrived at the school in 2001, he figured he had four years to prove he could do the job. Fifteen years later, after 333 victories, 10 post-season appearances, three West Coast Conference Coach of the Year awards and two players delivered to the National Basketball Association, he has not only proven he can do the job, he stands atop the school record books.

With so many coaches parlaying success at mid-major schools like Saint Mary's into multi-million dollar coaching positions at large universities, why does Bennett eschew such opportunities? What keeps him in the bucolic town of Moraga, a place as unchanging as the recent run of 20-win seasons for the Gaels?

As a kid, Bennett wanted to be a pro athlete. That dream disappeared in high school. He had seen how happy his dad was coaching, and in college, Bennett realized that was the route for

book, Majerus said his dream job when he retired was to coach at Saint Mary's.

It so happened that the wife of Carl Clapp, then-Saint Mary's athletic director, was a huge Majerus fan. When Majerus called the Clapp home, she answered the phone. Thinking Majerus was calling to pitch the Saint Mary's job, she grabbed her husband out of the shower and made him take the call. But Majerus was calling Clapp to recommend Bennett for the coaching job, and he got the interview.

"I knew a little bit about Saint Mary's," Bennett said. "At the Final Four in Minneapolis, I remember interviewing on the second floor of a Comfort Inn, by a swimming pool, with little kids running around. But it went well."

Saint Mary's brought Bennett to the campus for a second interview and the school called him afterward. The Gaels' record was 2-27, and people weren't exactly beating down the door, so officials wanted to be sure Bennett would take the job. "Are you kidding me? I was lucky. Carl had to take a leap of faith," he said.

It required a leap of faith by Bennett himself.

Building a Winning Attitude

The Saint Mary's brand was down. The two top scorers had transferred. After the school offered a scholarship to a local player who turned it down and enrolled in a prep school that cost \$15,000 a year, Bennett realized that he had better look elsewhere.

Bennett sought a group that wanted to play for Saint Mary's and be excited about it. A friend from Arizona recommended Adam Caphorn, a player from Australia. Bennett did not know who Caphorn was, and he had never seen him play, but he needed a guard so he brought Caphorn to Saint Mary's.

Bennett recruited another guard, Anthony Woodards, out of Richmond. "I had a chip on my shoulder," said Woodards, a captain with the Richmond Fire Department. "I wasn't heavily recruited, and Randy gave me a chance. I was grateful. He gave me the opportunity to make it out of my community, to get an education, and I made sure I played hard for him."

Caphorn and Woodards had not experienced all of the losing. They believed Saint Mary's could win. It was exactly the mindset that Bennett insisted the team project.

The Gaels won only nine games that first season. The confidence and self-esteem were growing, but the team was still not quite there. "We could have won 13. It was psychological. We had no idea what it was to win. We would run off four or five wins in a row, we thought we were decent, then we'd lose six straight," Bennett said.

He and his coaches worked on building more confidence and instilling it in the players. From coaches like Royce Youree, an Arizona coach from whom he learned many of the Saint Mary's defensive schemes, Bennett and his assistants pieced it all together.

Today, the Gaels ooze that confidence. They know what it is like to play with a 13 game winning streak or to play in the post-season. The conference championships, advancing to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament: all have contributed to the team's confidence, as well as to the high expectations.

"What I told the players in 2001, versus what I told the guys a few days ago, is not that much different," said Bennett recently. "Work hard, keep a positive attitude and get your degree." Education is Bennett's non-negotiable standard. He has no time for keeping track of whether his players are going to class, and he refuses to butt heads with them. They have to maintain a balance between athletics and education, and it is up to the players to figure out how to do it.

Bennett met his wife, Darlene, through mutual friends at the Final Four in New Orleans and they married in 1998. They have two boys, Chase and Cade. "I encourage them to try all sports. It's better for their development," said Bennett. "But they do lean toward hoops."

The Future

Is Bennett here to stay?

"Yes," he said. "I don't think I can fairly project out where I'll be in 10 years. But, if after 10 years I'm still here, I'd be pretty happy."

"When I first came here, I had no plan to be here 15 years. You worry about keeping your job. You have about four years to prove you can win. If you do, then comes the opportunity to go elsewhere. And I stayed. The longer I stay, the more I want to stay."

Bennett has followed his father's example in providing a positive influence on his people.

"Saint Mary's is built on intimate relationships," he said. "You have players who have gone through

your program; you've helped them grow into young men. They were part of your family. You feel like you want to be there for them, to have this situation for life. It's what we sell."

"Randy was the best man at my wedding, and he just attended my graduation," said Woodards, who earned his master's degree in leadership at Saint Mary's in May.

"This is a great place to raise your family," continued Bennett. "My boys were born here, their friends are here. It's getting harder and harder for someone to say to me: this new place is better. I don't know if there's a better place to live. Why would you leave?"

One door lies slightly ajar. "The NBA? Not now. Not necessarily as a coach, but on the management side. That would intrigue me. But, is it something I'm trying to do? No. It's great money, but not great stability. Maybe down the road, with the right people.

"Why do I stay here? Why not? I'm happy, my family is happy. What is more important than that?"



Bennett discusses strategy at the 2012 NCAA Tournament with Matthew Dellavedova, now an NBA star with the Cleveland Cavaliers Photo Tod Fierner

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