

LAMORINDA SPORTS

Saint Mary's Basketball Storming Through Schedule at WCC Midpoint

By Karl Buscheck



Jock Landale (34) and Emmett Naar (3) Photos Tod Fierner

Last March, Randy Bennett, the head coach of the Saint Mary's men's basketball team, found out that his squad had been left out of the NCAA tournament before the bracket had even been announced.

While he was watching the official selection show, a staffer informed Bennett that a bracket had been leaked online and that his 29-6 Gaels were not among the teams invited to the Big Dance.

"I think the players would have liked to be in the tournament. I would have too," Bennett admitted, some 10 months later. "But last year we rolled. We threw almost a perfect game. So, it was outside of our control and the only way you can control it is to win the conference tournament."

Bennett, whose 17-2 Gaels are well on their way to a 10th consecutive 20-win season, insists that the snub didn't put a chip on the team's shoulder.

"I just felt like we left everything out there and our guys did a great job and we got left out," Bennett said. "That's kind of how the system's set up a little bit, but somebody good is going to be left out. It happened to be us."

As the team hits the midway point in the West Coast Confer-

ence schedule, Saint Mary's is doing everything it can to make sure it avoids a similar fate this time around.

Ranked No. 23 in the Associated Press Top 25 Poll, the Gaels have lost just twice. The first defeat came at home against the University of Texas at Arlington back on Dec. 8. The second came on Jan. 14 in a road game against WCC giant Gonzaga – the same team that wrecked the Gaels' NCAA hopes last spring by beating them in the conference tournament title game.

From junior guard Emmett Naar, to senior forward Dane Pineau, to junior forward Calvin Hermanson to freshman guard Tanner Krebs to senior guard Joe Rahon, Bennett rattled off a long list of names when asked to single out the team's key contributors.

"We have a tight team," Bennett explained. "We have a team where everybody is trying to carry their load, so some guys more than others. But Rahon, you wouldn't see it in the numbers maybe scoring-wise, but he's as key as anybody to this team. He's very good defensively. His assist-to-turnover ratio is almost 5-1. He's just a great, (a) tremendous leader – as good as we've had."



Dane Pineau

The list wouldn't be complete without mentioning junior center Jock Landale.

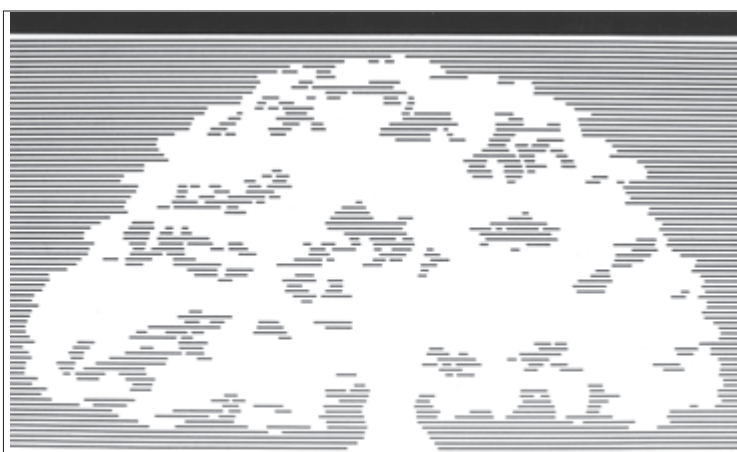
"He's been really good," Bennett said. "We play off him a lot. He's getting better all the time. I think he's gained a lot of confidence as the season's gone on. I think, now that we have as many games under our belt as we do, he sees a pretty heavy scout all the time and he's a willing passer. (He's) unselfish, yet he's our leading scorer and leading rebounder."

The 6-foot-11 Australian, who is averaging 16.9 points and 9.5 rebounds per game, has been a one-man wrecking crew in the paint. His interior presence opens up the floor for a Gaels team that has hoisted the third-most 3-pointers in the conference.

As Saint Mary's makes its second trip through the WCC schedule, Bennett isn't stressing about whether the Gaels are on their way to the program's first NCCA appearance since the 2012-13 season. Instead, the veteran coach is focused on getting the most out of each day he spends with his talented team.

"They're just a great really unselfish group of guys that care about being a team and that's what makes it special," Bennett said.

"I go to work everyday just enjoying the moment because it's not always like this," Bennett added. "The byproduct of that is that they've been good enough to win a lot of games, but it's because of that. They show up and they're going to give you the best shot every practice, every game and it just makes it very enjoyable."



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