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Saint Mary's Men's Soccer performs as a whole

By Jon Kingdon



Steve Dougherty Photo Tod Fierner

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hen an athlete performs to his absolute maximum on the field, it's called "being in the zone." It's not a common event but neither is it a rarity. Seldom is it when a team as a whole performs in said zone. Such is the case with the Saint Mary's Men's Soccer Team this year. The Gaels have won their first 13 games and are the only Division I soccer team that is undefeated and untied, which includes the women's teams as well.

Currently ranked sixth nationally, it's the first time since 2014 Saint Mary's has been ranked at all. Still, the team is taking it in stride says Cooper: "Everyone is in form and the guys are just treating every day like professionals. I know they are enjoying it and are humbled by it and we now have a target on our back. We can only control what we can control."

The team's record is all the more impressive as they were coming off a 6-6-5 record in 2017. Saint Mary's

head coach Adam Cooper attributes the improvement to the growth of the team: "When you look at our record, a lot of it comes down to maturity. A lot of the ties from last season are now becoming wins as the players have grown in the game."

Still, the team has only one true senior, Steve Dougherty, along with seven juniors (two redshirt juniors) and 18 freshmen and sophomores. Cooper admits that "this is still a relatively young team but a number of the juniors are in their third year as starters. I'm not afraid to play freshmen. I want the best 11 players on the field and the young players have to be ready and get the experience."

Cooper is starting two of the 11 freshmen on the team: midfielder Sebastian Schacht and defender James Person with still other freshmen getting significant playing time. Says Cooper: "They are learning quickly though they will make some mistakes but the older players are good at leading the team."

Mark Twain said that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. However, with Saint Mary's, it's a case where the statistics tell the story. Last year the Saint Mary's offense averaged 1.41 goals per game. This year they are averaging 3.15 goals per game. The defense has been even better. In the goal, junior Remi Prieur has only given up four goals for a miniscule 0.31 goals per game with 11 shutouts.

It's not just Prieur's physical skills, it's the intangibles as well, says Cooper: "Remi is a great leader in the back. He is vocal in organizing our team. He organizes the defense and comes up big when needed."

Assistant coach Josh Duffy attributes the success of the defense to the unit as a whole: "The back line, Filippo Zattarin, James Person, Valentin Sponer and Jeremiah Michael, have all stepped up this year." In a classic team performance by the defense in their opening league game last week, a 4-0 win over Pacific, Prieur did not have to make a single save. Pacific took all of three shots the entire game and in fact got no shots off in the second half.

The offensive numbers are equally impressive as the Gaels have outscored their opponents 33-4. They have outshot their opponents 195 to 98 and have 53 more shots on goal as well. Cooper attributes much of the success the growth of the team: "We have a lot of good offensive pieces and the guys are working well together. With the players knowing each other's movements, the offense is getting more shots."

Once again, it's a group effort that should be credited for the success of the offense. Ten different players have scored for Saint Mary's so far this season. There are many reasons for the improved offense, according to Cooper: "We have good attacking players. The team is creating more scoring opportunities. We have different facets to our offense and set pieces. Even some of the defenders have stepped up and scored."

The two leading scorers on the team are junior forwards Jake Rudel (10 goals and 2 assists) and Anders Engbretsen (6 goals and 5 assists). Says Duffy: "Jake is the fastest player in the country. He generates a lot of opportunities with his feet and Engbretsen has a good shot and is a good attacker with the ball on his feet. Our front five attackers have helped us to create a lot of opportunities and chances to score."

A team does not go 13-0 without a group chemistry that allows them to work so well together as a unit. There is a strong international flavor to the team. The roster has 17 players from the United States (13 from

California) and is complemented with 10 players from 10 different countries - The Czech Republic, Germany, Holland, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

Says Cooper: "Our foreign recruiting has been really strong the last four years. The players come from different cultures, background and soccer experiences. They enjoy learning about each other. They come in with different styles and techniques. Still we make sure it's the right fit for the players we recruit. The players like to hang out with each other off the field and that helps on the field. My assistant coaches, Josh Duffy and Charlie Campbell manage the personalities of the team. We have fun in practice, which helps in team bonding. Our co-captains, Dougherty and Prieur, are the team leaders, holding themselves and the team accountable."

Duffy stresses the importance of recruiting the right players: "Soccer is soccer but the guys we bring in have to fit the culture. We want to recruit good people that understand the philosophy of Saint Mary's, which is to come in to learn and leave to serve. The mentality fits the mold."

Saint Mary's was the first team this year this year to reach double figures in victories, leading the nation in shots on goals, and is fourth in offensive scoring and fifth in save percentage. Says Cooper: "This has been a season with a lot of firsts. It's the best start in school history. We are definitely setting a high bar for years to come."



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