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Saint Mary's men's basketball preview

By Jon Kingdon



Photo Tod Fierner

Leading the team to its first 30-win season last year, head coach Randy Bennett is not in a position where he can rest on his laurels. Having lost three all-conference players to graduation - Jock Lansdale, Emmett Naar and Calvin Hermanson - Bennett has to find a way to replace the triumvirate that scored 54 percent of the team's points, collected 47 percent of the team's rebounds and provided 71 percent of the team's assists last season.

Bennett's first goal has been to establish his top eight players. This has not been easy, not because of a lack of talent but rather because of the team's depth, says Bennett: "Our practices have been very even and it has been hard to distinguish which is the best group so far. I like our team. We are more athletic and have better depth this year. Our young guys are not the typical freshmen lacking any experience. They are strong and most have played internationally at a good level."

Though the team returns only two starters from last year, guards Jordan Ford and Tanner Krebs, Bennett is not relying on any one player to fill the vacuum: "We have to replace those players as a group. The entire team has to keep working and developing. A big part of this is that I have to establish our rotation and get them on a roll. It's been hard to do because so many of the players are even and the key is to see who makes the move. They're all pretty good. We have a lot of good options and you can see it in our competitive practices. They have to keep working and developing. That's my message to the team."

With Ford moving to point guard, Bennett does not anticipate any drop off in his scoring, pointing out how "Ford had 45 the other day in a scrimmage against Stanford. He can be our best scorer since Mickey McConnell (2007-2011)." Krebs is also being counted on to improve on his 7.7 average from last season.

The backup guards are young but bring good size and toughness. Kristers Zoriks, a 6'5" redshirt freshman from Latvia, who missed last season due to a knee injury, is a potential starter. Quinn Clinton, a 6'3" freshman from New Zealand, has shown great range in his shooting and 6'5" Alex Mudronja from Australia has impressed Bennett as the "pleasant surprise of the group."

The front court is somewhat wide open as there is not a player that had at least one start last year. Though on the surface the forwards look to be an inexperienced group, this is somewhat deceiving. Junior Kyle Clark, who only played three games due to an injury and was forced to take a redshirt season, will bring much needed experience to this group. Though redshirting last season as well, Malik Fitts had started as a freshman at the University of South Florida. Junior Dan Sheets and sophomore Elijah Thomas are players that have the opportunity to step up and produce this year. Freshman Dan Fotu, from New Zealand, has impressed early due to how competitive he is on the court.

The center position has four players competing for the starting position and playing time: 6'10" Senior Jordan Hunter played the most last season, appearing in all 32 games, averaging 2.9 points a game and had 18 blocks which was second on the team; 7'1" sophomore Jock Perry appeared in 21 games, averaging 2 points per game; 7'3" redshirt senior Aaron Menzies transferred in from the University of Seattle after averaging 11.3 points a game last season; and 6'10" Freshman Matthias Tass may also see playing time, arriving with a lot of international experience while playing in Australia. Bennett is still sorting out this group: "The center position is wide open though Hunter may have a step up on the others but all four can play and help this season."

Still, with all of the changes, Saint Mary's will continue to use the scheme that has been so successful, according to Ford: "We still have the same system. We are going to take good shots and defend well."

Though the system remains the same, Bennett will adjust to the players: "Our offense is the same but we will tweak it as to who we want to take the shots. We were heavy to Landale last year. We will continue to use the pick and roll like we did with Naar, but we will be better getting to the rim as we have a lot of guys that can break down the defense and finish."

Bennett is also looking to address some defensive shortfalls from last year: "We have to do better with our defensive numbers. Our defensive field goal percentage is not where it needs to be. I want to see more pressure on the ball and to get into the passing lanes more than we did. We are a quicker team this year and I want to see us get more in transition."

This past August, the team went to New Zealand and Australia for 12 days, playing eight games against all levels of competition, winning six of the games. The team was also allowed 10 practices prior to departing on the trip.

Bennett saw many benefits to the trip: "It was an opportunity to facilitate the bonding process for the team and enabled us to get in more teaching and coaching. Besides that, it was very educational for the players to be exposed to a different environment and culture." As for the food, Bennett said, "I loved the meat pies but drew the line at the vegemite."

The players from New Zealand and Australia very much appreciated the opportunity to get an extra visit home and provided Bennett with another opportunity to further expose the Saint Mary's basketball program in these countries. Says Bennett: "We saw a lot of talent, particularly with the big men. The players and the public are very familiar with the Saint Mary's program because we have had so many players from Australia and New Zealand."

Besides visiting families and spending time at the beach, the trip was also a way for Bennett to see how well the team would handle adversity: "We put our players in some tough situations. We played against a lot of tough and physical teams, such as the Sydney Kings whose center is former NBA star, Andrew Bogut. We took a number of flights and rode a lot of buses. It was like a minor league baseball schedule, taking our players out of a comfort zone."

McKeon Pavilion has undergone a bit of a facelift with a new 48-foot-wide video board and sound system, changes Bennett appreciates: "The way the gym is set up will be attractive to our students and the community for better game day experience. It will increase the home court advantage and will keep the fans' energy up."

Saint Mary's will open their season at home Nov. 7 against McNeese State. Besides facing several teams that played in the post-season last year, on Dec. 1, the University of California will be playing at McKeon for the first time in 30 years.

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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