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The Gael force of Saint Mary's to play in 'The Basketball Tournament'



Rob Jones

Photos Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdon

The Basketball Tournament (TBT) is a winner take all tournament with a grand prize of \$2 million. TBT began in 2014 with the winning team receiving the entire \$500,000 purse. This year, there will be 64 teams competing in the event. Ninety percent of the purse will go to the players on the winning team and their top 1,000 fans will share the remaining 10%. The games will be televised on ESPN. The "Winner Take All" format and with the quality of the play has generated tremendous interest in the TBT tournament. This is where Saint Mary's College, the Gael Force and its former players come into this story.

Over the last 16 years, the Saint Mary's men's basketball team has enjoyed tremendous success and has had many excellent players who have gone on to play in the NBA and on professional teams overseas. During this time period, the team has compiled a won-loss record of 390-142. With a loyal following of alumni, former players and the entire Lamorinda community, the basketball season is awaited with great anticipation each year. Until the start of the next season, the fans have to live off the success of the previous teams, the freshest memories being the defeat of Gonzaga in the WCC final tournament and losing a close game to Villanova in the opening round of the NCAA tournament.

Starting on July 19, all fans of Gaels' basketball will have the rare opportunity to see firsthand an all-star compilation of Saint Mary's basketball players competing in TBT. The competing teams comprise some former NBA players and many players who are currently playing professionally on teams overseas. There has been no shortage of talent in these tournaments. Former NBA players such as Jason Williams, Mike Bibby, Brian Scalabrine and Greg Oden have competed for various teams.

The team representing Saint Mary's, appropriately named Gael Force, is made up of 10 former Saint Mary's players representing every team from 2003 to 2019: E.J. Roland (2003-2005), Ian O'Leary (2005-2009), Diamon Simpson (2005-2009), Omar Samhan (2006-2010), Mickey Mc Connell (2007-2011), Rob Jones (2010-2012), Stephen Holt (2010-2014), Calvin Hermanson (2004-2018), Joe Rahon (2015-2017) and Jordan Hunter (2015-2019).

TBT consists of eight regional tournaments that will determine the final eight teams that will be competing in the finals in Chicago for the winning purse. The Gael Force will play their regional games in Memphis on July 19-21 and they have been given the No. 1 seed among the eight teams.

Current college coaches are not permitted to coach TBT teams. As a result, the Gael Force has done the next best thing, choosing Dan Shell

to lead the team. Shell was an assistant coach with Saint Mary's from 2001-2008 and is obviously familiar with the system that Saint Mary's head coach Randy Bennett implemented upon his arrival in 2001. "Coach Shell was a perfect choice," said Samhan. "He was really excited and has been a great help to us. Though Coach Bennett is not allowed to be our coach, he is serving as our General Manager, helping us to pick the team and suggesting some plays to run."

This will be the second year that a Saint Mary's team has competed in this tournament. Samhan, who has been playing professionally overseas for the last 12 years, put last year's team together along with McConnell and they made it into the round for the final 16 teams last year.

With pride and a very substantial purse waiting at the end of the tournament, the players are taking these games very seriously, says Samhan: "We're in a unique situation this year. Our team is entirely comprised of professional players from Saint Mary's and we've even had to turn some players down. We looked at all the players that have been playing professionally and who have been playing well."

Besides the improved quality of the team, there is also increased preparation by the team as a whole, says Samhan: "Our biggest advantage is that we have the chemistry necessary since everyone has played in the same system."

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Omar Samhan



Mickey McConnell

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