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

By Jon Kingdon



Rob Jones Photo Tod Fierner

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 win-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. Though we were all familiar with each other, last year we did not practice a lot prior to the tournament. Coach Bennett has always run the same system and we've been focused on that. That is our strength and we really have to build on it."

McConnell agrees with that strategy: "We're practicing so that we'll all be on the same page. We're just working on everyone's schedules to make it work out. We've all stayed in touch with Coach Bennett over the years and we're all familiar with his system. Regardless of the year we played, we all fit in with each other's games."

Rob Jones, who is currently a graduate assistant coach for Saint Mary's, brings a coach's perspective to this team: "I think the Gaels were ahead of the curve with our shooting and open spacing. The emphasis changes some with every team. For example, when Omar was here, we went into the post a lot. When I played, we did not have a dominant center. You change to your personnel, but it's all the same concepts."

The team has tried to address their shortcoming from last year, said Samhan: "We came up just short last year after leading at halftime, losing to a team that had former Warrior James McAdoo and former Cal

star James Randle who gave us fits with his athleticism. This year we have added guard E.J. Roland for his speed and athleticism and Jordan Hunter for his size and overall skills."

McConnell, who lives in Pleasant Hill, looks forward to competing against a number of players that he has competed against overseas: "We had a lot of fun last year. We got to see a lot of players that we were familiar with. It's good to see how many of them have progressed."

Samhan, who grew up and still lives in Danville, sees many positives in the event: "It's tons of fun. It feels like we're back in college. We're with our teammates and are put up in a hotel. With such top competition and the games being on ESPN, it's like an NCAA tournament. Plus, a lot of my friends, family and fans get to watch us again since they don't get to see us playing overseas."

Watching Saint Mary's take on Villanova in the NCAA tournament this past season brought back many memories to Samhan and McConnell, both of whom played on the Saint Mary's team that upset the No. 1 seeded Villanova in 2010. "There were tons of memories hearing the announcers talk about our victory over Villanova," says Samhan. "It was a great experience for the Gaels and the fans to kind of relive what turned out to be our best year ever."

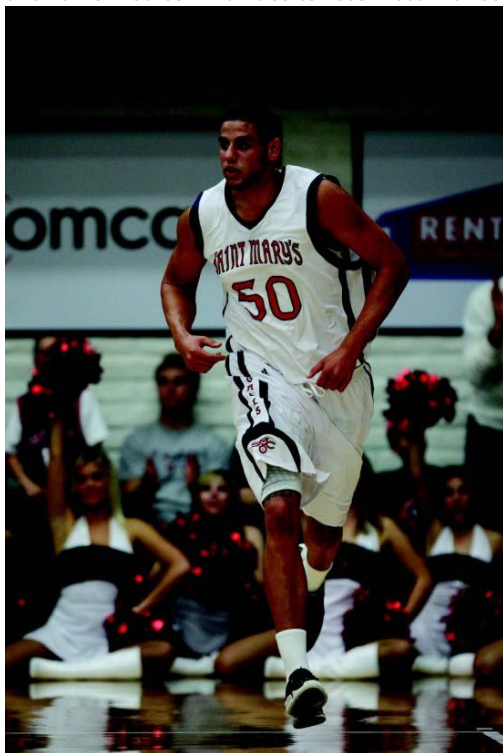
McConnell appreciated how Saint Mary's has improved over the years: "Against Villanova, we were completely an underdog and it's been great to see how Coach Bennett has taken the program to another level. It was cool to see this matchup against Villanova once again. We had to go cross country for the early game and the team had to do the same thing this year. We don't get many favors from the NCAA."

Both Samhan and McConnell have greatly enjoyed their time overseas: "It's been an unbelievable cultural experience," said Samhan. As a small-town East Bay kid, it's been really nice to get out and see the world. It's been a great run and I plan to play a few more years though the wear and tear adds up."

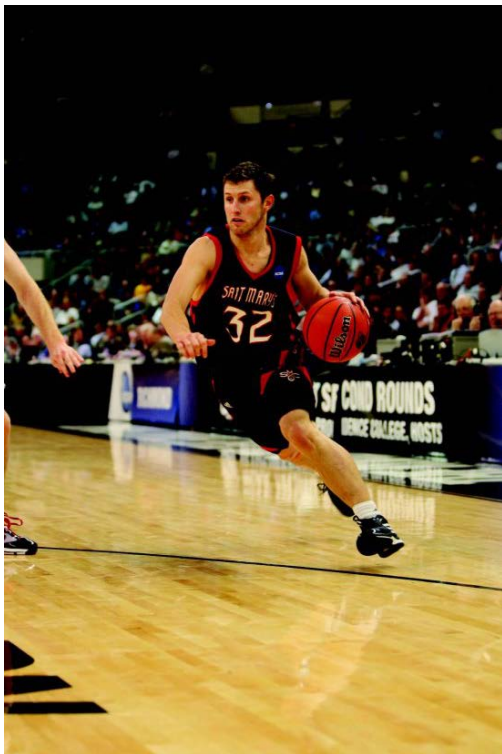
McConnell has played for several teams around the world: "I've bounced around to a lot of countries. I've been lucky playing in a lot of good places with a lot of good teammates. I just finished my eighth year and am going to take it year by year."

Jones, who played overseas in Poland, Greece, Australia and Puerto Rico, broke his foot and returned to the United States for surgery and rehabilitation. He will be receiving his master's in education and leadership in August. It was at this point that Jones chose to retire from playing and to begin a career in coaching: "As I was rehabbing and training and talking to the players on the team and working out with them, It really opened up my eyes that coaching was something that I wanted to do. I talked with Coach Bennett about the steps that would be necessary to make this happen. It's something that I always wanted to do. It's thinking about the players and the team and not about yourself. It's been a real blessing for me."

TBT should not only provide great basketball but it will be an excellent opportunity for the Saint Mary's and Lamorinda communities to reconnect with so many outstanding former Saint Mary's players.



Omar Samhan Photo Tod Fierner



Mickey McConnell Photo Tod Fierner

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