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Saint Mary's basketball a picture of optimism

By Jon Kingdon



Jordan Ford Photos Tod Fierner

Last season, Saint Mary's head basketball coach Randy Bennett was very much at loose ends as to who would be his top eight players, having lost three all-league players and having players returning from injuries. Despite all those issues, the Gaels had a 22-12 record, winning the WCC tournament and earning a spot in the NCAA tournament. Because of their success last season, Saint Mary's will not be flying under the radar, having been ranked 20th in the Associated Press preseason poll.

Having lost only one starter to graduation, Jordan Hunter, there is a lot more stability with the team's personnel from day one this season. It's been a fairly quiet offseason for the Gaels, unlike last year when Bennett took his team to Australia and New Zealand to play against top competition and enabling the team to go through a bonding process. "This year, some guys played in different events for their countries," said

Bennett. "We can only take a foreign tour once every four years."

The first point of order for Bennett has been to replace Hunter, the star of the West Coast Conference championship game, at center. There are three returning players who will be vying for playing time in the middle. The leading candidate to start is Matthias Tass, who got a great deal of experience last year as a freshman, appearing in every game, averaging 3.7 points and 3.1 rebounds per game. Jock Perry, a 7'1" redshirt junior, has been with the program for four years and 7'3" Aaron Menzies, who missed all last season with a hand injury are both familiar with the team's system and both should find playing time and ways to contribute to the team. "We have good depth here if they can stay healthy," says Bennett.

The strength of the team begins at the guard position with senior Jordan Ford leading the way. Ford, who has started the last 70 games, averaged 21.1 points last season, was named first team all-WCC and is on the Lou Henson Watch List for best mid-major player in the country and the Bob Cousy Award watch list, which recognizes the top point guards in Division I basketball. Ford has shown improvement over last season so far, says Bennett: "Jordan has put on some good weight which will make him more durable and be able to take and give contact better. He has improved each year because he's such a disciplined worker and has made big jumps every year from his freshman year."

Ford has worked hard on all aspects of his game: "This summer I worked on improving my defense and on making the right reads and decision making, like kicking the ball out to find other players rather than going all the way to the basket at times. Still, I'm going to try and play the same style as last year, being really aggressive."

Tommy Kuhse became a starter in the eighth game of the year against California and the Gaels won 18 of their next 27 games and led the team in assists for the season. After two redshirt seasons, Kristers Zoriks is working himself back into game shape and Bennett is counting on him to be part of the mix this season: "If Kristers finally stays healthy, he'll be in the mix. He's been practicing and playing well, all things considered. He's got to work though any element of apprehension he might have and get his game experience back. He's been practicing for four weeks and he has three more weeks to be ready."

Logan Johnson, a transfer from the University of Cincinnati who was a 4-star recruit when he came out of St. Francis High School in Mountain View, just received his waiver to be eligible to play this season. Bennett is excited about Johnson's potential to help the team this season though it will take some time: "Logan's going through an adjustment period with us in learning the way we play offense and defense and that just takes practices and time. He's really quick, rebounds, attacks the basket well, and plays hard. He brings pieces that can help us win right away."

After redshirting in 2017-18, Malik Fitts established himself as a top forward in the WCC. Fitts started all season and was selected to the All-WCC Second team after averaging 15.2 points and leading the team with 7.6 rebounds per game.

Senior Tanner Krebs, 6'6", who was third on the team in scoring last season with an 8.9 scoring average, will be the other forward. Dan Fotu appeared in all 34 games last season as a freshman, averaging 2.8 points per game. After suffering a broken foot, Fotu was just recently cleared to play and only needs to get used to playing again. Elijah Thomas, who started 12 games last year, should also see considerable playing time. Freshman Alex Ducas, another Australian import who can play forward and guard, has shown well in the preseason is also in the mix.

The Gaels have a particularly competitive nonleague schedule opening the season on Nov. 5 against Wisconsin in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Saint Mary's will also be playing against Fresno State, at California, Long Beach State, Lehigh, Utah State, Dayton, Nevada and Arizona State among others. There's no group that Bennett can complain to over the strength of his schedule: "I am the scheduling group," said Bennett. "The key is to have a non-conference schedule that your team can handle. We have a team that is experienced enough that they can be up to the challenge of the schedule."

Bennett has welcomed two former Gaels players onto the coaching staff, Mickey McConnell and Rob Jones: "It's the best to have those guys back. They're Gaels and were great players and were part of our best times in basketball as far as success. It's good to have them help us try and keep this thing rolling. There's no question where their hearts lie."

Ford has really benefited from the tutelage of McConnell: "Mickey has been sharing so much of what he knows from playing professionally for such a long time. He's really good on the offensive side of the ball and I really love listening to him."

After such a successful season last year and with so many returning veteran players, Bennett appreciates the team's confidence and attitude he's seen so far: "They should be more confident. It's a different confidence and they have it. That's the advantage of having guys that played in the NCAA tournament that actually know what it feels like and how hard it is to do what we did last season and know the boxes you have to check to get there. It happened. They went through it. They did all the things they had to do to get into the position and then won the games that they did. They know they can do it. They've done it. That's where we're at."

Ford echoes Bennett's sentiments: "Our practices have been a lot more competitive than it's been in my previous years. We're really hungry to do more than what we did last year. My years at Saint Mary's have really flown by quickly and I'm just going to enjoy my last season with my brothers and hopefully do something special with them."

Saint Mary's first home game will be at 6 p.m. Nov. 11 against Winthrop College (S.C.).



Malik Fitts Photos Tod Fierner

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