

Published December 11th, 2019

## The Saint Mary's men's soccer team finishes another great season

*Submitted by Melanie Moyer*



Photo provided

The Saint Mary's men's soccer team finished another impressive season this year with their second West Coast Conference win and a 7-0 winning streak. This marks another historic season for the team, for they haven't won every game within their conference in fifteen years. Their success comes in the wake of last year's accomplishments when they carried a 6-0-1 winning streak to win the West Coast Conference for the first time since 2011, resulting in a cumulative record for the last two seasons of 34-2-2. The soccer team's past two seasons have held noteworthy accomplishments for both the team and the school, for winning back to back West Coast Conference titles hasn't happened in the past 12 years. This success within the conference also sent them to the NCAA tournament for the second year in a row. The team came into competition with players from 24 other conferences from around the country, putting our small school on the map of the soccer world.

Hosting an NCAA tournament game is an impressive accomplishment for any Division I sports team to make. The Saint Mary's soccer team has hosted tournament games two seasons in a row, becoming the first Saint Mary's sports team to bring the NCAA tournament home with them. This is due to their placement within the tournament's standings, for the soccer team was seeded within the top 15 of the tournament. In 2018, Saint Mary's was seeded No. 8 and in 2019 No. 12. In comparison to past qualifying seasons where the team was ranked in the range of 80-100, this is a major accomplishment.

This sudden improvement of the team can be attributed to many different factors. The improved coaching staff has made a big difference in the abilities of the team. Head coach Adam Cooper has coached the team for 14 seasons, with all titles won under his guidance. This season, the West Coast Conference named Cooper Coach of the Year. Further, the team's roster has proved to be very fruitful, with players hailing from around the world. About 11 of the players have international backgrounds, most coming from Germany, New Zealand, Italy, and other European countries. However, it is the team's defensive effort that has yielded the accomplishments they have today. The numbers speak for themselves, for the team was only scored on twice within their conference this season and only scored on once in 2018. Further, in 2018, their defense conceded the least goals in America. Other accomplishments include the naming of their scoring offense as fourth in the country and their goal assists as 11th. For reference, these rankings are out of 204 teams in the country. Also, in the All-WCC awards, several players were recognized for their playing abilities. Anders Engebretsen was named West Coast Conference Co-Player of the Year for his offensive achievements, having scored 16 goals this season. Filippo Zattarin was named Defensive Player of the Year and Remi Prieur was named Goalkeeper of the Year.

This sudden shift in the team's accomplishments has impacted fans and players alike. Valentin Sponer, a junior on the soccer team, reflected on his team's change since he was a freshman with amazement. When Sponer was a freshman, their statistics were 6-6-5, a number that dwindles in comparison to his sophomore and junior years. During his freshman year, he recounted that the team was unbeaten at home, but their success on the road was a different story. Their hard work on the field did not seem to be transferring to their performance when they left their home grounds. Having witnessed the shift in the team's abilities firsthand, Sponer noted that the team's cultural change was the most significant improvement. They grew a mindset where their games both home and away took precedence over everything else, making them take both their practice and their performance more seriously. This included a greater emphasis on spring training during the off-season, as well as high expectations for all the players. The shift resulted in a more aggressive team on the field, for Sponer describes that the players took pride in and wanted to maintain their ability to keep their opponents from scoring on them. The away games were taken more seriously by all of the players, putting them on a more direct road to victory.

The cultural change to Sponer also existed in the team's dynamics. Their arrival to campus three to four weeks before the rest of the student body had a huge impact on the player's relationships with each other. They bonded over this period of practice called "Captain's Practice," where coaches are not allowed to take part in the team's practicing by NCAA rules. During this time, the freshmen and players that live on campus lived with the other members of the team, sometimes resulting in two-bedroom apartments being shared amongst five or six soccer players. After these student-athletes were allowed to move on campus, most chose to reside with teammates in the college dorms. Besides their living situations, players also bonded over the dinners the team hosted every other night. During these dinners, freshmen volunteered to sing for

their teammates or took part in other fun activities. Last season, older players convinced the freshmen that "Corn Hole" was a game in which they had to eat corn on the cob faster than their fellow teammates. To Sponer, this bonding off the field made a significant difference in the overall playing of the team.

Sponer also described Saint Mary's atmosphere as having a significant impact on the team. Other top 10 schools have huge student populations and big soccer programs. However, since Saint Mary's holds such a small student population, Sponer finds it to be a more humbling program. He finds that he is not treated differently than others by faculty and fellow students alike. After achieving such great accomplishments as a team, they're often greeted with little recognition or acknowledgment by other students, so players can feel like regular students during their studies and team practices. This, Sponer says, pushes them all harder to perform as a team. However, in the future, Sponer hopes to raise awareness for the team's success, especially because of their increase in accomplishments. After winning the West Coast Conference and qualifying for the NCAA tournament two years in a row, the Saint Mary's Men's Soccer team is expecting both a higher interest in their team from fans and students, as well as another successful season next year.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA