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## A new year with new challenges and new optimism for Saint Mary's men's basketball

By Jon Kingdon



2020 SMC men's basketball team Photo Tod Fierner

same space. Our guys were in really good shape and we've been healthy, and it's been a productive five weeks so far."

Besides the offseason and preseason preparations, there are many changes on the team's roster. Despite losing 72% of scoring from last year's offense, there is a core of seven veterans that have taken on the responsibility of instilling into the five freshman and one redshirt player, the team's system and work ethic, Bennett said: "I'm proud of our veterans. They have done a great job with the young guys. They are doing a good job of leading while developing their own games. That is why I feel good about this group - they want to make it work. It won't be easy, and it never is but they're giving it their best shot."

Bennett has had center-oriented and guard-oriented teams in the past, but this is a team whose identity is still to be determined. "We don't return an all-league guy or a top scorer," Bennett said. "We're going to be more balanced. More guys will contribute though it won't be equally and that will take shape as we go. It won't be like last year when we played off (Jordan) Ford (21.9 ppg) and (Malik) Fitts (16.5 ppg). On this year's team, every position can score pretty well, and we definitely have better passers. In our normal offense, our guards get a lot of opportunity to score. That's where I think it will be more balanced with more double-digit scorers."

Originally a walk-on, senior guard Tommy Kuhse will be running the team's offense this year. "Tommy's made a huge jump," Bennett said. "He just kept getting better and better and I think he going to have his best season this year. I'm proud of him."

The other starting guard will be Logan Johnson a transfer from the University of Cincinnati. Without a redshirt year and absent during the summer, it was a tough adjustment for Johnson to fit into the offense, according to Bennett: "We threw Logan into a situation that would have been tough for anyone. He's the whole package now. He's athletic and quick, has a good nose for the ball, and is not afraid to go get it. The best thing about him is that he competes. He'll bring it. I feel confident with him and Tommy in the backcourt. They're gritty and tough."

The backup guards bring a lot of size. Freshmen Jabe Mullins (6'6"), Judah Brown (6'5") and Lemmett Bockler (6'7") have all shown the potential to get playing time this year. "They're all bright, talented kids," Bennett said. "Judah is a wing player who is an elite athlete and Jabe has a quick release and his style reminds me of Delavadova, and I don't throw out that comparison very often. Bockler can be a top scorer but he's got to figure out the other things." Sophomore Quinn Clinton, who is coming off a foot injury, is a top shooter and he has also been playing very well.

In the frontcourt, Dan Fotu and Alex Ducas got a lot of playing time last season and they will be starters when the season begins. When Tass went down with his injury last season, Fotu (6'7") was called upon to play center a number of times, an experience that has helped his overall game, according to Bennett: "It made Dan a better scorer in the post as a drive and finish player. He shot 65% playing at the five and he will shoot more threes this year as he has developed that part of his game. He has an inside out game and the ball will be in his hands a lot."

Ducas will be lining up as a guard/forward. "Alex is a sneaky, good defender and rebounder and is a good

passer that can score," Bennett said. "He's a smart player that makes good decisions and has a good feel for the game." Kyle Bowen who played in every game last year will be the first backup forward. Freshman Luke Barrett out of Piedmont will also be competing for playing time.

Returning as the starting center is Matthias Tass who suffered a torn ACL in the 14th game last season. So far, Tass appears to have made a complete recovery and is being counted on by Bennett to be more of a force on offense this year: "You wouldn't know Matthias was coming off a surgery in the way that he is moving other than his wearing a knee brace in practice."

Freshman Mitchell Saxen (6'10") who has a similar style to Tass will be his first backup and may also play some forward. Matt Van Komen (7'4"), who transferred in from the University of Utah, is coming off ankle surgery so his development has been a bit delayed, but is someone that Bennett is looking to contribute down the line: "Matt is a changeup for us. He is a big presence inside that can make baskets. He's starting to get it. We will need all three of our centers to play this season."

With this balanced offense, Bennett has a lineup that knows how to share the ball at each position: "Kuhse and Johnson can play pass first as well as looking to score. Ducas and Fotu are both good passers with good vision and Tass is a really good passer at the five. I just feel it in practice. The ball moves better, and more guys are getting an equal amount of shots."

Last year, Saint Mary's held their opponents to 66.9 points per game and the team had more steals and forced more turnovers than their opponents. Still that was not good enough for Bennett and he has made excellent defense a priority for this year's team: "We need to improve our defense and that's on me. We were small when we lost Tass last year and our guards were not big. We were really good offensively and that saved us last year. We weren't up to the level where we should have been on field goal percentage defense overall and from the threes. We weren't there on rebounding either. Those are two areas that we've been pretty consistent at over the years and we are going to get back to that."

Historically, Bennett has preferred to have a rotation of eight players on the team but without any scrimmages, it's going to be a constant process to establish who those players will be.

"Our new players are going to have to be a part of our top 10 this year so how fast we can get them up to the level they have to be against good teams is the question," said Bennett. "They're learning and catching on quick and will help us. We should get better as the season goes on because they are some of our top talent."

Under these trying conditions, team unity is that much more difficult to maintain, but Fotu hasn't seen that as a problem: "The new players have adapted to our system and culture. They're seeing that it's a family mentality here and we push each other to be our best."

It's not by accident that these are the types of players that are on the Gaels' roster, Bennett said: "That's how we run our program. We recruit guys who value and want that culture. We look out for one another and care for one another and spend a lot of time together. These guys have gone through something that's been tough for all of us and they have had to fight through it all summer and fall, so when you go through tough times together, you become pretty tight. This will be a tough and gritty team. There are several guys on this team that see themselves as hard-nosed, tough and competitive and hang their hat on that and I feel it in practice every day."

Saint Mary's will open their season at the Bad Boys Crossover Classic in Sioux Falls, South Dakota against the University of Memphis. The team's first home game will be on Dec. 1 against Nicholls State and its first league game will also be at home against Pepperdine on Jan. 2

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