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LAMORINDA SPORTS

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



2020 SMC men's basketball team

Photo Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdon

During the 2019-20 season, the Saint Mary's men's basketball team was gripped by ecstasy and then agony. This year it's all about the pandemic, patience, and practice. Last year the team went 26-8, qualifying for the NCAA tournament for the seventh time in coach Randy Bennett's 19 years of leading the Gaels. The ecstasy came to a sudden end when the coronavirus pandemic caused the cancellation of the NCAA Tournament.

With the upcoming 2020-21 season, it's been far from the usual off-season for Bennett: "This has been the longest preseason I've ever had without a scrimmage. The coaches and staff all have to wear masks during our practices, and we follow all of the safety protocols. Still, we've put in our offensive plays and defensive sets. For the most part, our practices have been the same. We have spent a lot of time in Madigan Gym because it was a safer move to practice and also to lift weights in the 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 com-

peting 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.

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Public Notices

PUBLIC NOTICE OF PROVISIONAL APPOINTMENT TO THE MORAGA SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNING BOARD The public is hereby notified that the Moraga School District approved the provisional appointment of Larry Jacobs, as Board member on November 19, 2020, to fill a vacant position created by a Board member's resignation on October 7, 2020. Unless a petition calling for a special election, containing a sufficient number of signatures is filed in the office of the county superintendent of schools within 30 days of the provisional appointment, it shall become an effective appointment.

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