

Published October 27th, 2021

Saint Mary's men's basketball - more of the same only better

By Jon Kingdon



Logan Johnson Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

It was Mark Twain that said, "Familiarity breeds contempt." It's certain that he was not referring to this year's Saint Mary's men's basketball team. Head coach Randy Bennett's Gaels are only one of two college teams returning every player that played every single minute last season.

Bennett appreciates how more efficient his practices are with all of the veterans on the team (and three freshmen): "It's refreshing. You know what they can do and what they bring to the team and that's where it's an advantage. You can teach things so much quicker in that the players already know the drills so you can move faster. Now in practice, we can put in three plays rather than one play and they'll pick it up like that."

Last year's team (14-10) dealt with many issues - the coronavirus (6 canceled games), youth (6 new players on the roster) and injuries with only three players appearing in every game. "I know our team better this year because of what everyone went through last season," Bennett said. "Our young players were thrown into the fire, and I feel they know it now. I feel their maturity, growth and toughness and it often gets down to that. I feel good here."

With five sophomores and two recruited freshmen, Bennett appreciates the leadership that the upperclassmen are providing. "We have a group of seven older players that have been through the good and bad for us," Bennett said. "It's not one individual. (Tommy) Kuhse, (Logan) Johnson, (Matthias) Tass, (Dan) Fotu, (Quinn) Clinton, (Kyle) Bowen and (Alex) Ducas have all been very good leaders as a core group. I feel that as much with this team as with any other team I've coached that this group of older guys has ownership of this program right now, in a good way."

Bennett is excited at the improvement he has seen from last year's freshman class. "It was a big adjustment for last year's freshmen, but they have all made a big jump into their sophomore year," Bennett said. "Last year with only 10 players that were healthy at times, they had to practice every day and play in the games. We had to overcome much and we were forced to play a lot of young guys, yet through all that they got tougher and better. They grew up a lot and I can see it now in practice."

There is great depth and size at the guard position for the Gaels. Returning starters, leading scorer Tommy Kuhse and 2nd team All-WCC Logan Johnson are backed up by junior Quinn Clinton, sophomores Jabe Mullins (6'6"), Leemet Bockler (6'7"), Luke Barrett (6'6") and freshmen Augustas Marciulionis (6'4") and Chris Howell (6'6"). This will allow Kuhse who led the team with 36 per game and Johnson with 32 minutes per game to play less and not be as worn down later in the season.

Bennett is particularly excited about his two freshmen recruits: "Marciulionis and Howell are both really good. It will take a little while for them to get comfortable and learn our offense and defense, but they are on track to be able to help us this year."

Marciulionis' father, Sarunis, played six years for the Warriors and is in the NBA Hall of Fame. "Sarunis is very familiar with the area and people really love him around here," Bennett said. "Augustas has got a lot to learn but having played against older and bigger players, he knows what to do offensively and it helps that we play a lot like the European teams."

The front court does not have the depth the team has at guard. Returning at the forward positions are senior Dan Fotu and juniors Alex Ducas and Kyle Bowen. Sophomore Judah Brown should also see time in the front court along with being able to play guard. "Those are the guys we have, and we want them to stay healthy," Bennett said.

Senior center Matthias Tass, a three-year starter who averaged 10.9 points and 5.3 rebounds a game, is backed up by sophomore Mitchell Saxen who appeared in all 24 games last season and was named to the All-WCC Freshmen team. "Last year, it was a new role for Tass to be one of the go-to guys in our offense but he needs to make another jump this year if we're going to be really good," Bennett said. "We have good depth with Saxen who played well for us and has shown a lot of improvement." Matt Van Komen is coming off a foot injury and may redshirt this season.

After averaging 75.3 points per game in 2019-20, the Gaels scoring average dropped to 64.3 this past season and it's an area that Bennett has been focusing on. "Last year was an aberration. When we lost our two best shooters (Bockler and Mullens), we didn't have much shooting to replace them. "Because of that, we focused on our defense and tried to score enough to win," Bennett said. "If we're going to be good, we're going to have to score points so we're working on our team chemistry. We must be better offensively, scoring in the low post, throwing it out of the low post, kicking it out on penetration and making better shot selection. I feel we've gotten better in just our first three weeks of practice. We have the personnel where we can get eight or nine guys scoring in double figures so it's not just a matter of someone putting up 20 points."

Still, it's not as easy as it sounds. "Our guards have to be willing to find the guys that are open," Bennett said. "We did not shoot with a high percentage and that's why we struggled in the league. Knock on wood, we have our injured players back and the team has been shooting the ball very well. The team has improved as much as any team that I can remember thus far."

Saint Mary's does have a favorable schedule with eight non-league games at home, two on the road and four on neutral sites. The Gaels will open with four home games before heading to Las Vegas to play Notre Dame and either Oregon or Chaminade.

Though things have improved with the virus, Saint Mary's is requiring proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID test for anyone to be allowed into the arena.

I'm looking forward to having fans again," Bennett said. "It wasn't the same last season without them. It'll be fun playing in front of crowds again."

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