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## Saint Mary's women's basketball a picture of size and strength

By Jon Kingdon



Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

length, we can put a lineup on the floor with everyone over six feet. Our team has a much better mix and flow to them. Our balance and rhythm between the perimeter and the paint has also improved. We can throw the ball inside and create a lot of things. We don't have to pound inside for every basket, but it will initiate what we can do."

With Ali Bamberger, Amy West, Mia Griszelj, Aspen Garrison, and Ellie Croco, it's a solid base of youth and experience in the front court. Bamberger, a sophomore, who transferred from the University of Washington, redshirted last season, recovering from a knee injury. She has made a complete recovery and is being counted on to be a key force for Thomas: "Ali should be a double figure scorer for us. She is one of those bigs that feels very comfortable stepping out and shooting the ball and we feel very comfortable with her out there. She will make a big difference in our ability to finish."

West, a junior, only played nine games last year due to an injury but the Gaels are expecting big things from her this season. "Amy is healthy right now and at 6'4" can really run the floor. We're looking forward to seeing her fulfill her potential," Thomas said. "She gives us a whole different dynamic and should be a big part of our success."

The back court starters are seniors Tayce Wedin (12.5 PPG) and Maddie Holland (11.3 PPG). Wedin is second on the team in career 3-point field goals and was Honorable Mention All WCC last season. "Maddie is definitely the quarterback on the court though she won't always be the point guard," Thomas said. "Tayce is currently out with an injury but should be fine in a couple of weeks." Freshman Addison Wedin, currently rehabbing a knee injury, is a strong shooter like her sister and should be available to play soon.

So far, the team has been shooting much better in the team scrimmages. The staff has been working very hard with the players in understanding and improving shot selection.

Thomas does not want the guards to be strictly shooters, encouraging them to be aggressive to the hoop. "Jade (Kirisome) is more comfortable in driving to the basket as are Leia (Hanifan) and Tayla (Dalton). We've challenged Briana (Simonich) to be more aggressive and she has also looked good in practice. I expect her to be able to average in double figures. Our offense will play with 4 out and 1 in, spreading the court while still having two bigs in there because rebounding is going to be so vital to our success. If we're efficient with our shot selection and can get on the offensive glass, we can really have something."

Ironically, the pandemic has contributed to the depth of the team. "The pandemic affected all of us, but it allowed our seniors to come back for another year," Thomas said. "Maddie and Briana, who both have shown how much they love Saint Mary's, were able to get another year and they want to go out with some good juice, and they have been our hardest workers."

Thomas is also counting on a strong freshman class to contribute through the season. Aspen Garrison will provide size and depth in the front court and Makena Mastora and Maddison Wedin, Tayce's sister should all find playing time. "Addison should be back for our league games. Makena is a left hander who brings a lot of smoothness to the game. She has different gears, can shoot the ball, loves to drive, and has a great pull up jumper. Our new people are going to be able to help right away and several of them should be able to get some high quality minutes."

After eight consecutive 20-win seasons, the Saint Mary's women's basketball team had two consecutive losing seasons for the first time in 13 years. Head coach Paul Thomas learned that size and injury avoidance matters. "We're a lot bigger and stronger than we've been the last couple of years," Thomas said. "We're healthier today than we've been over that period as well. When you have injuries, you quickly discover that your best players are the ones that are available."

Balance is the key for Thomas, starting with the front court. "I believe that the game starts from the inside out," Thomas said. "If you're strong inside, it will make your perimeter better. We were a top 10 rebounding team in the country for years and that has been my challenge to get this team back up there. That takes work and commitment and the toughness and the intangibles that we love our kids to have. With our

With the additional size, the Saint Mary's defense will also have a different look from the last two seasons. "This year we're going to play more zone defense because of our length," Thomas said. "We gave up a lot of points these past two seasons. Those numbers are part of our legacy. We just didn't have the bodies because we suffered too many injuries. In the past, we set all kinds of records for 3-point shots attempted and made. We're not that team anymore and we've adjusted to our personnel."

Once again, Thomas is looking to address the turnover issues by the offense. Last year, the opponents scored 21.3 points off Saint Mary's turnovers. If the offense can reduce their "live" turnovers (bad passes, bad catches), the defensive numbers should improve. "With live ball turnovers, we're losing. This allows the other team to get down the court before we can set up our defense. We're constantly working on our ball handling skills. When we can defend a team in the half court, we're very good."

The team is going to be traveling back East to play North Carolina State who came to Saint Mary's three years ago and Coastal Carolina whose coach, Jaida Williams, played for Thomas when they were both at Cal Poly Pomona. Coming to Moraga are TCU, Fresno State, Western Michigan, San Jose State and UC Santa Barbara and the team is also playing at UC Berkeley.

"It's always good to take the team on the road, seeing a different part of the country and being able to play against two really good teams," Thomas said. "We don't shy away from competition. We can tell our recruits that we are playing against top ranked teams, knowing competitors want to play in those games."

The key to being successful this year, according to Thomas: "Staying healthy is always at the top of the list," Thomas said. "If our rebounding numbers are high and steady, you are going to see our win totals high and steady because the rebounding will solve a lot of things. This team has a good understanding of shot selection so add that to rebounding and we're good."

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