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20th win for Saint Mary's in dominating San Diego, 86-57

By Jon Kingdon



Logan Johnson (0) with assistant coach Justin Joyner (center) and head coach Randy Bennett (right). Photo SMC Athletics / Tod Fierner

off assists. The defense held San Diego to 10 points under their average and had nine steals. Logan Johnson led the team with 16 points and had five steals by himself.

"Logan was inspiring with how hard he played tonight," Bennett said. "He showed tremendous leadership just by playing so hard. He got us going defensively and we were really good defensively tonight. He's an elite defender and is as good as anybody in this league and in the West. He just brought that intensity and played with a lot of passion which we need to have on a regular basis."

It's no accident that Saint Mary's defense is ranked eighth in the nation allowing an average of 59.1 points per game. "It was important to get off to a good start tonight for our confidence after the Santa Clara game," Johnson said. "We felt we had to be first to hit our opponent in the mouth, not getting behind for 10 or 20 points. We do a ton of stuff defensively in practice every day and we don't skip steps or short cut routes. It pays off and we're one of the top defensive teams in the nation."

Having played Santa Clara on Tuesday, San Diego on Thursday and going to Gonzaga last Saturday, Bennett was very happy to be able to play all his substitutes. "To be able to give our regulars rest, I was pumped about that. One of the most enjoyable things for me as a coach is when I get to play our young guys. They don't get to play a lot because we have seven older players that get the majority of the minutes."

The improved play gave the opportunity to get a number of minutes in a game like this for sophomores Jabe Mullins, Mitchell Saxen, Leemet Bockler, Judah Brown and Luke Barrett. "It's fun to watch them improve," Bennett said. "It's important for their development when they can get substantial minutes. It's just fun to see them out there getting to do what they love to do."

When a team's record is 10-3, most coaches are loath to make any changes. Bennett was pleased with the way his offense and defense was playing but felt the need to make a change at guard after that 13th game, starting freshman Augustas Marciulionis and bringing senior Tommy Kuhse in off the bench, a decision he put a lot of thought into.

"I found that when we started the game with Johnson and Kuhse the ball stuck in their hands because they're both guys that try to make plays and they're good at it, but things could get stagnant. Augustus is more of a pass first point guard and is a very good defender. If I were to start Kuhse, I might not get to Augustas who needs the minutes to develop. He is really developing, and we are moving the ball better. It also helps that we have a nice scoring punch with Kuhse coming off the bench and it's worked out well. When the change was made, Tommy came to me and said 'Coach if you think this is going to help us, I'm all in.' That's how he approached it."

It has also helped that the team is scoring six points a game more than last year and has improved their overall shooting percentage from 42.2% to 46.5% and connecting on 35.6% of their 3-point shots after shooting 29.4% last season. Kuhse, in particular, has improved his 3-point shooting percentage from 27.5% to 45.1%.

"A lot of Tommy's improvement came from having a good spring, summer and fall practicing in the gym and

working on his mechanics," Assistant coach Mickey McConnell said. "The improvement of the entire team is due in part to having a number of players back that were injured last year. Our shot selection has also been better. Last year with Alex Ducas and Leemet Bockler out, we started to press. This year, we've told the players to take the open shots when you get them. We have a lot of confidence in our players, and they've done a great job in sharing the ball."

The adversity of battling through all the injuries last season has proven to be a positive factor on this year's team. "Last year we scrapped out the majority of our wins," Johnson said. "This year we're putting more points on the board and we're still scrapping. You may have an open shot, but we'll still be looking to find someone who has a more open shot. We've taken the right steps, getting everyone involved offensively and knowing our defensive assignments each game has allowed us to keep growing."

Senior Matthias Tass (12.8) and junior Alex Ducas (11.0) have been the team's leading scorers and keys in the overall play of the team. "Ducas and Tass both really stepped up this year. We've been able to use them in different ways, lining them up in the post and playing off them and then our guards can off-penetrate. The players are really unselfish and have really gotten comfortable with their roles and in sharing the ball. Dan Fotu is playing a short role this year but still is an unbelievable teammate. The players have figured out their roles offensively, cut down on their turnovers and started shooting it better. We had a breakthrough confidence wise and had a better idea of what we wanted to do since the early season Maui tournament."

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