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Saint Mary's women's basketball brimming with potential

By Jon Kingdon



Ali Bamberger Photo provided

In what looked to be a .500 season last year, Saint Mary's ended the season with a victorious run as the Gaels won their last three games to win the Women's Basketball Invitational ending the season with an 18 and 15 won-lost record. Building off that success, head coach Paul Thomas and his staff spent the off-season fine-tuning their system for the players.

"We made a lot of tweaks to the offense and defense," Thomas said. "We're looking to do a little more and a little better. We installed things that will showcase and accentuate the people that will be playing more while playing to our team's strengths."

There is no shortage of veteran leadership on the team with two graduate students (Clair Steele and Taycee Wedin), and two redshirt seniors (Jade Kirisome and Amy West) on the roster. With the season just getting underway, Thomas is satisfied with the way that the team is coming together. "Our chemistry is very good, and we build on it every day," Thomas said. "In our scrimmages against Long Beach State and Sacramento State, we found out where our strengths are and most importantly what we need to work on."

What had been an Achilles heel for the Gaels, turnovers, has been addressed with the arrival of Steele, a Lehigh graduate, who led the country last year in assists to

turnover ratio. In the team's first scrimmage, without Steele they had 28 turnovers. In the second scrimmage with Steele, the number was cut down to 14. "Clair has so much to bring for us this year, especially in the turnover aspect," guard Taycee Wedin said. "She can really take care of the ball and lead us to success."

There is still the matter of determining who will be the team's starting five. Steele and Wedin (14.4 ppg) will be the starting guards and Ali Bamberger, the team's leading scorer (15.3) and rebounder (9.3) at forward are the only sure starters at this point. With nine guards and five forwards listed on the roster, Thomas does not feel locked in as to who he wants to play. "I want the five best players on the court," Thomas said. "It will also depend on who we are playing in determining who will be the other two starters."

Upon arrival, Steele's first goal was to grasp the team's system. "It was learning the offense and at the same time, finding what my role would be, finding where I can thrive and find my teammates and do my best to be a great point guard for the team," Steele said. "My teammates have helped me, so it's been a pretty smooth transition."

Steele has filled the role that Thomas envisioned for her. "She is a real leader out on the court and sees the big picture," Thomas said. "She's a bulldog and cares about one thing and that is being better. She will only make our team better by getting the ball to our scorers."

There are a number of players that are legitimately competing for playing time in the backcourt. "(Junior) Tayla Dalton is doing a great job along with (junior) Leia Hanafin, (sophomore) Hannah Rapp, (sophomore) Makena Mastora and (senior) Jade Kirisome," Thomas said. "They are all going to play but it is yet to be determined as to who are going to be the starters."

Thomas has also been very pleased with sophomore Jasmine Farmer who is a transfer from Laney College. "I'm really happy where she is right now and she is going to get some time on the court playing the off guard," Thomas said. "She is a good rebounder and is aggressive to the ball."

There is also a competitive situation in the front court. "Ali Bamberger inside and Addy Wedin on the perimeter can do really good things," Thomas said. "Aspen Garrison had a great fall and has elevated herself along with Amy West and Ellie Croco."

With so many returning players, this is a team that really understands each other's roles, but there is still a concern for Thomas. "The players have a really good handle of what each other can do," Thomas said.

"That's chemistry. For example, they know that they need to get the ball to Taycee on the perimeter and Ali Bamberger closer to the basket, Tayla cutting to the basket and Leia driving the ball. It's just that we don't always show the sense of urgency we need on the court."

Thomas is also looking for more physicality from the team. "We have to be a better and more aggressive rebounding team, particularly from our guards," Thomas said. "It's just a matter of getting after the ball and not counting on a couple of people to do that. On defense it's being in the right position and on offense, it's the most aggressive people that will get the rewards. I'm a huge believer in going after the ball and we need that from the entire team. We're talking about offensive rebounding with four people and leaving one player back on defense and we're not there yet."

Thomas' other concern is with the team's finishing each possession. "They know what their teammates are going to do and what we still need to work on is timing such as not taking a quick semi-contested 3-point shot with 18 seconds left on the clock," Thomas said. "We can be really good and then be really bad all within one 30-second period on offense. We can really move the ball and then randomly turn the ball over or take a bad shot."

This concern also carries over to the team's defense. "We can play really good defense for the first 20 seconds of the shot clock but if one person gets out of position, we get ourselves in trouble and we're trying to correct that. Our margin for error is not very big so we can't play poorly and win a bunch of games."

Addy Wedin, a redshirt freshman, has missed the last two years with injuries and is finally healthy and is someone that Thomas is counting on. "Addy can be a big contributor this year. She can play the 2-3-4, having the ability to play big inside and shoot well from the perimeter," Thomas said. "She can score from all over the floor and has the potential to be our leading scorer at some point."

However, when you talk about their offense, the first name to come up is Taycee Wedin playing in her fifth year for Saint Mary's. Wedin, the career leading 3-point shooter at Saint Mary's and for the West Coast Conference with 323 3-point shots, is in a position that with another solid season, she could end up in the top 10 nationally as a career 3-point shooter. Wedin is very optimistic in how the team is developing. "We have the potential to be really good," Wedin said. "We're a hungry and motivated team that wants to do well this year."

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