

Mahaney's seamless transition from Campo to Division I basketball at SMC



#20 Aidan Mahaney

Photo SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdom

For many high school seniors, it can be a difficult time progressing from high school to college, whether it's in the arts, theater, academics or sports. In his time at Campolindo High School, Aidan Mahaney and the basketball team had four years of unparalleled success. The Cougars had a composite 96-15 record, a state championship, a co-state championship and in his senior year, Mahaney was named the Bay Area Player of the Year and he was selected to MaxPreps's All-state team.

It would not be an overstatement to describe Mahaney's passage to Saint Mary's College as seamless, athletically and academically. In six of the first 10 weeks of basketball season, Mahaney has been named the freshman of the week by the West Coast Conference. After completing his first semester with the Gaels, Mahaney downplayed the effort necessary to keep up his academics and play for a Division I basketball team. "It's good and a little busy balancing basketball and school," Mahaney said. "All in all, I enjoyed it."

Mahaney, a communications major, credits Campolindo for his handling the academic demands at Saint Mary's. "I really enjoyed my time at Campolindo," Mahaney said. "The academics were amazing and coming to Saint Mary's has been easier for me than other people because of the academic foundation I had there but more so for me was my becoming a better person."

Mahaney learned quickly how different it was playing at the college level. After scoring 25 points in the opening game against Oral Roberts, he followed that up with a 3-point game against Vermont, hitting only one of six shots. "In high school, you can get an easy game, but you get no off nights in college," Mahaney said. "We talk about being an everyday guy because you're always going to be playing against a team that can beat you, so I have been focusing on that and being consistent."

With the help of two former Saint Mary's guards on the staff, Mickey McConnell who was the WCC player of the year as a senior and Joe Rahon who was named West

Coast Conference Defensive Player of the Year, Mahaney has been able to improve his offensive and defensive skills.

"I didn't fully understand how beneficial it would be to have two former point guards on the staff," Mahaney said. "I watched Joe (2014-2017) when he was playing, and Mickey (2007-2011) was the first Saint Mary's player that I remembered watching in person. They have so much knowledge and they have been a great help to me and are helping me get through my journey. I couldn't be happier that they are here."

In Mahaney's first nine games, he averaged 13.0 points per game, connecting on 38.3% of his shots. At that point, Mahaney was moved into the starting lineup and in the next 11 games, he has averaged 16.9 points/game and has connected on 52.4% of his shots, raising his season average to 15.2 with the Gaels winning 10 of those games.

It's Mahaney's ability to score that led head coach Randy Bennett to put him in the starting lineup. "We needed his shooting on the floor," Bennett said. "Aidan's been playing well, and he's earned it. He's a good teammate and only cares about winning. He doesn't get caught up in all that other stuff. There are going to be a lot of things brought up about his scoring as a freshman and a lot of comparisons being made but all he's really keeping track of are the wins and losses. He's a really good worker. We have a day off but he won't take the day off and most guys aren't like that. He understands the value of hard work."

Former Saint Mary's and current NBA players, Patty Mills and Matthew Dellavedova played for Bennett and he sees a key characteristic they all share. "Confidence," Bennett said. "Patty and Delly had all the intangibles. Aidan has the confidence piece. He's seen all the good ones going back as far as the fifth grade. It's not like he's wondering if he can play."

Confidence in his ability to put the ball in the basket, was never something that Mahaney was short of and that has carried over to Saint Mary's. "It is a little bit harder because you have bigger guys at the rim, but I also think with our offense and with Coach McConnell calling

many of our plays, our offense has been putting me in good positions to shoot," Mahaney said. "There's a lot more action in our offense which gives me more of a running start and an advantage into the ball screen so although it can be harder to get off a shot, I'm also playing with better players and really good coaches who make the work load a lot easier for me by giving me good plays and surrounding me with good shooters."

McConnell, who was a teammate of Mills and Dellavedova their first years at Saint Mary's, is able to draw comparisons with Mahaney. "They're all unique in their own way but they all have a lot of confidence and it's not just a false confidence," McConnell said. "Aidan should just keep getting better as he gets more games under his belt. He does not get down when he has a bad streak. Against Wyoming, he started out 0 for 6 and then hit his next five shots. As long as he's playing the right way and shooting the right shots, he has the ability to get back on track."

Under coach Steven Dyer at Campolindo, defense was stressed but it's still been an adjustment for Mahaney to play in Bennett's program. "I wasn't aware of how detailed things were going to be," Mahaney said. "Coach Dyer is a defensive minded coach first as is Coach Bennett. There are a lot of little adjustments I've had to pick up, but the coaches have done a really good job in teaching me how to play defense."

It's just another area where Bennett is looking for Mahaney to keep learning. "For a freshman, Aidan's a pretty good defender but he's got to keep improving," Bennett said. "He wants to be the guy that we don't have to hide on defense, but he has to continue to improve and we're trying to get him there. At this point, he has the advantage of getting trial by fire. He'll fail but he's going to get thrown right back out there. That being said, Aidan is a pretty good defender but good is not going to get it for what he's trying to do."

Mahaney does not argue with Bennett's assessment: "I can improve in every area. My goal is to improve defensively because it's such a huge part of what we do here. I want to become a really good defender, but I can say that for every aspect of the game. Every part of my game has a long way to go. As I improve, our team can improve." Since Mahaney became a starter, Saint Mary's average points per game has gone from 62 to 71.8.

Equally important to Bennett is Mahaney's maturity and leadership. "Aidan has been a very good leader for someone his age and that was a big reason why we recruited him," Bennett said. "It's tricky when you're a freshman and you already have good leadership on the team. You have to use your leadership, but you can't come in and start barking and stepping on toes and we've talked about things like that. Aidan knows how to make people feel good about themselves and how to build his teammates' confidence."

The respect that Mahaney has for his teammates has allowed him to avoid any such issues. "Logan Johnson, Alex Ducas and Kyle Bowen have

been like brothers to me," Mahaney said. "I don't believe I could have a better group to lead us. Playing with Logan has been a blessing for me. There are few people that can give me better advice than him. Besides helping me on offense and defense, if I'm not playing that well, he's right there in my ear giving me positive words to keep me going, even helping me to handle things off the court. I've known Luke Barrett since third grade and it's great to have a lifelong friend in Cade (Coach Bennett's son) to be on the team with me. I've enjoyed playing with Augustus Marcelionis in the backcourt because I feel our games complement each other."

Mahaney had the opportunity to attend any school in the nation but opted for the short trip to Moraga. "I'm very close to my family," Mahaney said. "They are my biggest fans and I'm a big fan of my oldest brother Noah. Seeing his face at every game along with my parents means a lot to me. Plus, whenever my family comes out, Coach Bennett makes sure to say hello to them."

Having a number of players on the Gaels roster from Australia and Lithuania has provided Mahaney with an exposure to different cultures. "My mom wanted me to experience the world, and I

have been able to do that here. Because of the diversity of our roster, I've been exposed to more culture than you would think a kid from Orinda would be."

Bennett has had numerous players go on to play professionally in the NBA and internationally, and is aware of Mahaney's longtime goal to play professionally and he keeps it in perspective. "That's easy to say and hard to do," Bennett said. "One thing for sure, Aidan will put in the work, and I can't say that about all the guys. He understands how hard it is and he will put the time in because basketball is so important to him."

With that goal in mind, Mahaney has had no second thoughts about becoming a Gael and playing for Bennett. "I've been very happy with my decision to come to Saint Mary's," Mahaney said. "My relationship with Coach Bennett goes back a long way and he's as much as I could hope for from a head coach. He knows my goals and he has been holding me to high standards. He's not about a single game or a good practice but it's always a matter of us getting better and reaching our goals. I came here to get better, and I can say that he's been a huge part of that development."

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