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## SMC celebrates Randy Bennett's 500th win and big Gonzaga victory

By Jon Kingdon



Coach Randy Bennett and team after his 500th win at Saint Mary's. Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

Gonzaga's having a great year and we are having a really good year and when you put that crowd on top of that, it was just an incredible basketball game because Gonzaga is Gonzaga."

This was a far from an easy victory for the Gaels, who trailed for almost the entire game. Saint Mary's was fortunate to be only trailing 32-24 at the half having connected on only 34% (11-32) of their shots, while Gonzaga was hitting 48% (12-25) of their shots.

At one point in the second half, Saint Mary's starting guards Logan Johnson (2-12) and Aidan Mahaney (1-10) shot a combined 3 for 32. Johnson would eventually finish with 12 points before fouling out with 4:51 left in the second half. After scoring only two points in the first half, Mahaney finished the game with 18 points and late in the game he was responsible for 19 of Saint Mary's 21 points, either scoring or being credited with assists.

Despite the lack of offensive output in the first half, Bennett credited the other strengths of the team in keeping the score manageable. "We were bad offensively in the first half," Bennett said. "Our defense and rebounding kept us in the game. We rarely turned the ball over and did a good job in not allowing them to transition from defense to offense."

It's a style that Bennett uses all the time, not just against Gonzaga. "It's just how we play," Bennett said. "Gonzaga wants to play up and down and it's to their advantage to push hard but we're a good transition D team and we work on it a lot. We try and slow down everybody we play. You're just not going to get easy baskets on us and it's the best way for us to win at Saint Mary's."

At the half, Bennett did not make many adjustments. "We were pretty calm because I thought we were doing a good job," Bennett said. "We just weren't scoring, and our shot selection wasn't good. I just said, 'Hey, let's make this happen. I think things will turn our way if we just clean up our shots.'"

Clean up they did with Saint Mary's connecting on 17 of 29 shots after the first half.

Even with a poor shooting first half, Mahaney never changed his mindset. "I just trusted myself and trusted the work I've put in," Mahaney said. "I figured the ball would eventually go in if I just keep trusting it. It's about confidence and my confidence isn't fake because I put in the work."

After hitting a key 3-point uncalled bank shot, Mahaney accepted the basket philosophically. "I felt I was due for one," Mahaney said. "I had a couple of ins and outs in the first half so I'll just call it the law of percentages and it just evened out the right way."

Based on that week's performance, Mahaney was again named the WCC freshman of the week for the sixth straight week and the ninth time out of 13 weeks.

Bennett shared the confidence that Mahaney had for his game. "I think Aidan just has 'it,'" Bennett said. "A lot of guys would fold, hanging their heads and finishing the game like that, but that's where Aidan is special. He's a really good competitor and he plays to win and has a great belief in himself."

The front court of center Mitchell Saxen (who was just named WCC player of the week) and forwards Alex Ducas and Kyle Bowen controlled the boards with 27 of Saint Mary's 37 rebounds, and only allowed Gonzaga to get two offensive rebounds. Saxen with 15 points and 11 rebounds had his third straight double-double and he put the game into overtime with a layup in the last five seconds of regulation.

"Mitchell had a sneaky good game against Gonzaga's big men," Bennett said. "He was able to control the boards and was able to help out on (Gonzaga's All-American forward Drew) Timme. That adjustment made us better defensively and we were able to take the lead and win the game. By the end, they were tired of chasing us around and we were tired of chasing them around but eventually defenses will break after that long. That's what happened and Aidan hit some shots."

Despite an off night shooting from the outside, Mahaney was particularly effective driving to the basket and scoring with either hand, something he had not been successful with at the beginning of the season. "I was going to the basket early in the season, but I just wasn't making the shots," Mahaney said. "I trust my work. (Grad assistant) Cory Lazarz is out there with me every day. I'm here exactly two hours and five minutes before every single game to try to get my shots up. Everything I do is to try and get better. I've been able to finish my legs recently, using my left hand and right hand, trying to be unstoppable, finishing it on either side."

After outscoring Gonzaga 17-9 in the overtime period, the players were pleased that the fans did not storm the court. "We are making this a thing now where we want to be able to rival with Gonzaga every time," said Mahaney who was playing his first game against the Bulldogs. "This wasn't an upset or anything like that. We're not just going to talk about it, we're going to put in the work."

Having just played Gonzaga for the 61st time, Bennett had a different perspective. "I wish they would have rushed the court," Bennett said. "Doggone it, we should have waved them out. The kids want to have fun, let them have fun. Some may say that we were supposed to beat them, but to me, the reality is, it was a heckuva win. Gonzaga is good and no one's run a program better in the last 15 years. So, when you win a game like that, storm the court and celebrate the victory!"

The intensity of the crowd brought Bennett back to an NIT game in 2009 when Saint Mary's defeated Davidson 80-68 despite Stephen Curry scoring 26 points. "That's the only game where a crowd compared with tonight's crowd."

When the fans stormed the court after that game, Davidson Coach Bob McKillop was awed with the support given to the Gaels: "It just blows my mind that they have this kind of crowd. This is very similar to [Duke's] Cameron [Indoor Stadium] in terms of the noise level, the heat, the intensity, the passion. Saint Mary's deserves credit for that."

Besides leading the West Coast Conference by two games, the Gaels are now ranked 15th in the Associated Press Poll and 14th in the USA Today Coaches Poll, moving ahead of Gonzaga who are now ranked 16th.

After the win over San Francisco, Bennett took the time to reflect on his 22 seasons at Saint Mary's and what it took to win 500 games at one institution, sharing the credit all around: "First, I work in a great place, and it doesn't happen unless you want to keep your job. Two, have great players and coaches which help you keep your job and then three, work at a place that supports you and gives you the opportunities, the resources, and values men's Division I college basketball. I know the deal. I'm very, very blessed and very appreciative of the opportunity I've been given and I've just been lucky to have a lot of good people along the way so I totally see it as a good thing."

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