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Last Season's Success Leaves SMC Men's Soccer Hungry for More

By Bryant West



Justin Girder (15) was named WCC Defensive Player of the Year last season. Photo Tod Fierner

Last year was an historic season for the Saint Mary's men's soccer team - a second place finish in the West Coast Conference and 10 wins led them to the program's first appearance in the NCAA tournament. All this success came in a conference that finished fourth out of 23 in the nation and had four squads make the big dance.

And while Gaels Head Coach Adam Cooper acknowledged that one of the team's biggest weaknesses is inexperience - 15 Gaels were not on the team last year - he said that the team expects to return to the NCAA Tournament this winter.

Cooper was named WCC Coach of the Year last season after the Gaels historic run, and said the tournament appearance last year makes his players determined to repeat the experience. "I think we got a taste of the tournament and that made us hungry to get back and really push to go further and do better. We've got to do the little things that will get us back there."

On September 3, Saint Mary's started the season in the right direction. The Gaels hosted the Saint Mary's Tournament and won their own show after a 0-0 tie against CS Fullerton and 3-2 victory over #9 Northwestern. While Saint Mary's and University of San Francisco both finished with 1-0-1 records in the tournament, the Gaels took the crown with more goals scored.

Sunday's win over Northwestern really was, as Cooper called it, a "tale of two halves." The Gaels scored all three of their goals in the first 18 minutes of the contest - junior Tom Mohoric, sophomore Jose Cabeza and sophomore Trevor Newquist each scored as the Saint Mary's energy powered past the lackluster Northwestern performance. Northwestern made a run in the second half - scoring twice and threatening late to tie - but the Gaels' defense stepped up and prevented a meltdown against the ninth ranked team in the nation.

"We've got a lot of young guys," Cooper said after the game. "This year, we've got fifteen new players so incorporating them with the returning guys is one of our biggest priorities and the guys have done very well at adjusting so far."

But while the large number of newcomers is a weakness, Cooper says the veterans of the team are the Gaels' greatest strength. Four players received WCC Honors last season, including junior Justin Grider (Defensive Player of the Year and All WCC first team), senior Dylan Leslie (All WCC first team), Cabeza and Newquist (both All Freshmen Team) - and the experience will help the newcomers.

The Gaels were picked fourth in the WCC Coaches Poll before the season, earning one first place poll and finishing behind Loyola Marymount, Portland and San Diego. Portland is currently ranked 16th in the NSCAA/Adidas Division I Rankings with Loyola Marymount and Saint Mary's both receiving votes. But with the strength of the returners, Cooper has high hopes for another historical season. "It's like a shark sniffing the blood in the water," he said. "They sniffed it, they got a taste, and they want more."

Saint Mary's defeated #19 Cal Berkeley 2-1 on September 10 in double-overtime.



Photo Tod Fierner

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