

Published February 21st, 2018

Saint Mary's women's basketball's South Pacific influence

By Jon Kingdon



From left: Milly Yates, Megan McKay, Carly Turner and Jasmine Forcadilla Photos Tod Fierner

There have been numerous articles written about the influx of Australian players on the Saint Mary's College men's basketball team. Overlooked has been how Paul Thomas, the Saint Mary's women's head coach, has utilized the talents of the women from the South Pacific with great success over his 11 seasons at Saint Mary's.

With four Australians on the roster - Jasmine Forcadilla, Carly Turner, Megan McKay, Milly Yates - and one New Zealander (Stella Beck), the South Pacific is well represented on the Saint Mary's roster this season.

Assistant coach Tracy Sanders, a Campolindo High School and Saint Mary's graduate, has made several recruiting visits to Australia. "I have to prepare a great deal by watching a lot of video tapes and setting up my visits," Sanders says. "It's a long trip and I am over there for three days doing a lot of recruiting."

After flying for 14 hours to get to Australia, Sanders flew an additional five hours to meet with McKay, convincing her to enroll at SMC. McKay says she had several offers but when Sanders made an extra five-hour flight to visit her, she was impressed with how committed she was to her "and that convinced me to make that commitment to Tracy and Saint Mary's."

The Australians at Saint Mary's have worked well together, according to Sanders. "There is a family network and the girls look out for each other. We are so well connected over there, it gives us an advantage in recruiting with a number of players reaching out to us."

The Americans on the team have had no problems bonding with their overseas teammates. "They have done a great job in fitting in," Sanders says. "We are a very close team. Their teammates have fun with the language."

Playing on a club team is a way of life in Australia and New Zealand. The experience is something that all the players felt they benefited from. Says Beck: "I really benefited from playing on a national scale. All the girls were good at teaching me the game as I grew up. It's responsible for about 70 percent of where I am today as a player." Forcadilla agrees. "It prepared me for the physicality and athleticism that I am playing against over here," she says. "I also got used to playing in front of big crowds." McKay felt it helped her greatly. "It was the best experience I ever had. I learned so much from the players and the coaches. I appreciated how much faith they put in me and what I needed to be."

Turner, who suffered a serious knee injury playing for the Australian National team and is taking a redshirt year, also sings the praises of the club system. "I loved it. The trips lasted up to a month long and we would go to different countries. You had to grow up very quickly."

Such experiences for these women facilitated the transition from traveling over 8,000 miles to attend college and play basketball. Turner, a senior, says it is like a family situation at Saint Mary's. "Once they come over, we Aussies all look out for each other. I moved out of home when I was 16 to go to the Australian Institute of Sport so I was quite used to being away."

With a climate similar to Australia, it makes Moraga that much more appealing to the Australians. "The Australian connection is huge," McKay says. "There are people here to celebrate Australian Day and Christmas with. I get a number of calls from Australians and I have been happy to recommend the school to them." Forcadilla considered one other school besides Saint Mary's: "I looked at the University of Maine which was very different and very cold."

Though basketball is basketball, there was some adjustment to the American game for the women. According to Beck: "The U.S. players are a lot more individual skill focused. In New Zealand there is a lot more moving the ball and pass focus." Forcadilla did not see as much structure as she was used to: "We had a lot of set plays. Plus the shot clock is 30 seconds over here and 24 seconds in Australia." For McKay it was off the ball contact: "Position was not as important as it is in America. It's more physical off the ball than it is in Australia." Turner found the American players quicker and more athletic with more passing and ball movement back home.

Adjustment to the American culture was not a major issue. According to Beck, whose father is from Bethesda, Maryland, "Everyone was very nice and welcoming to me though a lot of people did not know where New Zealand was." Forcadilla's issue was with checks at restaurants: "The whole concept of tipping is strange and how the taxes are included." McKay and Turner discovered a great love for Mexican food.

"Mexican food is huge over here and I love it," McKay says. "I'm still learning how to pronounce their dishes. I just order what everyone else has ordered." Turner has developed a real taste for Chipotle. Most miss the meat pies that are a staple in Australia and "Mum's home cooking."

Turner, who has another year of eligibility and will be entering the MBA program next year, really appreciates the effort made by the staff and the community to ease the transition for the players. "They make it very easy for us to adjust and be away from our family," she says. "The coaches made sure we were well taken care of. Having watched a lot of American TV and movies, the small differences in our languages were not a problem."

Though there was some initial homesickness upon arrival at Saint Mary's, community involvement proved to be a great distraction for those feelings. "We do a bunch of stuff in the community. We all babysit and get to know the kids," Turner says. "We are involved with Special Olympics and we will go to the local schools and read to the students. We will also do practice sessions with the local schools and find they are always amused by our accent."

Beck will be graduating this year and the other women want to continue to play basketball on the next level, whether it be in the United States, Australia, Europe or Asia. "I'm looking for a good league," Beck says, "and I'm not closing any doors."

Will there continue to be a pipeline to Saint Mary's from the South Pacific? With such positive ambassadors for the school, no worries mate!



Stella Beck

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