

Published November 8th, 2023

Success continues to breed success for Randy Bennett and the Gaels

By Jon Kingdon



From left: Aidan Mahaney (20) and Augustas Marciulionis (3) Photo Tod Fierner

little bit more national attention."

This is a team with an interesting mix of youth and experience made up of 10 freshmen and sophomores and five juniors and seniors. However, four of the sophomores had significant playing time last season led by guards Aidan Mahaney and Chris Howell, forward Joshua Jefferson, and center Harry Wessels. "The most comforting thing for me is that most of our guys know our system so we've been able to move pretty fast as far as teaching, putting stuff in and advancing," Bennett said. "Our leadership's intact with our older players like Alex Ducas, Mitchell Saxen and (Harvard transfer/redshirt) Mason Forbes. It's actually a pretty good balance this year and that's the way you want it."

Bennett is very comfortable with the team's starting guards, junior Augustas Marciulionis and Mahaney, both who played in every game last season as starters and substitutes. Each is able to play the point or two guard and Bennett is effusive in his praise of both: "Augustas has really improved as a shooter that can score. When he was a freshman, he was just a really good kid, coming into a country where English was not his native language, dealing with so many things growing up so far away from home and he's matured in so many ways on the court, we feel his impact a lot more now."

After averaging 13.9 points a game last season, Mahaney received many accolades - named WCC's Freshman of the Week 10 times, becoming the second freshman (Patty Mills) in the program's history to be named First Team All-WCC and has just been named a top-20 finalist for the Jerry West Shooting Guard of the Year. "I just know he's gotten better," Bennett said. "He's gotten stronger, more durable, and faster along with being even a better shooter by being more on balance and is a better defender. He's pretty conscientious about trying to improve his weaknesses and strengthen his strengths. He and Augustas are able to play off each other now. They definitely move the ball better than we did last year, and I think they really enjoy playing with one another."

Redshirt sophomore Chris Howell will be the first guard off the bench. "He's a good size guard that can play all three positions," Bennett said.

Redshirt freshmen Rory Hawke and Cade Bennett and freshman Jordan Ross will be competing for playing time in the backcourt. "Hawke is a two-guard who is growing right now and is going to be a good player," Bennett said. "He's really tough and has a good work ethic and attitude. He can get to the basket and shoot it along with bringing it on defense. Cade has the advantage of having been in our program, so he's been through it, and he's been doing well. Jordan has really improved the last few weeks. He's getting better offensively and defensively and he's learning to bring it every day and could eventually be the backup point guard to Augustas and Aidan."

The forward position is also blessed with talent, experience, and youth. Fifth year senior Alex Ducas is ranked sixth at Saint Mary's in most 3-point field goals made and fifth in foul shot percentage (83.9%) for his career and has been named honorable mention all-league the past two seasons. Backing him up will be redshirt junior Luke Barrett. "Luke Barrett has also gotten better and is going to be a backup perimeter player that gets stuff done and gives us something different on the perimeter and is going to see good minutes for us," Bennett said. "He plays really hard and has become a good defender."

With a streak of 16 straight years making it to the post-season, (17 in total), a No. 5 seed the last two years in the NCAA tournament along with five West Coast Conference Coach of the Year honors, Saint Mary's head coach Randy Bennett, starting his 23rd season leading the Gaels, is able to keep things in perspective.

Bennett reacted with a shrug when informed that Saint Mary's was the favorite to win the WCC and even chosen by one analyst to make it to the NCAA final four. "Teams change because players are different, but this is not unfamiliar territory for us," Bennett said. "We've been picked to win the league before and whether we're picked or not, it doesn't matter, but the point is valid though it isn't affecting anything. It's all about getting better and our team goals are pretty high. There are going to be challenges and it's going to be hard to get it done so all we can do is to bring it every day and that's our mental thought process, though we are getting a

The power forward position is going to be manned by Mason Forbes and sophomore Joshua Jefferson. Forbes' playing time at Harvard was limited due to injuries and the COVID pandemic. Forbes reminds Bennett of Diamon Simpson (2005-2009), Saint Mary's career rebound leader and Dane Pineau (2013-2017), a 61.6 shooter from the field and the Gaels' fifth all-time shot blocker.

"Mason is going to really improve as the season goes on and he continues to learn our system," Bennett said. "He just keeps improving every day because he was able to redshirt for us last year and he's made a big jump in our first four weeks of practice. He can score inside and can also hit the three-point shot enough to keep you honest. He's a rim protector and scores around the basket."

In only his second season, Jefferson has established himself as an all-round talent. "Joshua is a good scorer on the boards and is a terrific passer," Bennett said. "He is different because he's such a high IQ player and he complements our group. He has become a good defender and offensively, he just makes everyone else better."

Kevin Gad, who redshirted last year, has been out with an ankle injury since December and has started practicing and is doing well. Freshman Jensen Bradtke, from Australia, is still in a learning situation. "Jensen is getting better, but he is in the normal freshman growth situation and will keep improving as he keeps going."

At the center position, returning starter senior Mitchell Saxen will be backed up again by sophomore Harry Wessels. "Saxen and Wessels have both really improved," Bennett said. "Mitchell has put on 15 pounds, gotten stronger and is a better scorer and more confident. Wessels is weighing 275 now. He has improved, is more confident and a better scorer around the basket, giving us an additional low power player. Freshman Andrew McKeever (Livermore), gets to play against these guys every day in practice and he's getting better fast."

With so much talent on the team, the key for the team's success, according to Bennett, is to avoid injuries. "Staying healthy - that's the big one," Bennett said. "We also have to be unselfish. We do have that character but that doesn't mean it's an automatic and you have to deal with it and we want to make sure that's our identity. If we can do those two things and keep improving, which is easy to say and hard to do, we have a chance to have a really good year."

Bennett's particularly proud of the way so many players have developed since their arrival at Saint Mary's: "We've always been good as far as the development of players. We see Jordan Ford go from a guy who had to work to get any minutes as a freshman to now playing in the NBA (Sacramento Kings). (Assistant coach) Mickey McConnell being a player that had a lot of DNP's (Did not plays) as a freshman to being named the Player of the Year as a senior in the WCC and Jock Landale going from playing about 15 minutes a game as a sophomore, along with his DNP's as a freshman also getting named Player of the Year and also playing in the NBA (Houston Rockets), and that's been kind of our narrative. "

Although each team that Bennett has coached has had unique talents, character and personalities, there has been four constants that he has addressed with each team. "The first things I talked about to the guys I inherited in my first season are the same things that I talk to our guys about right now," Bennett said. "We had to do the things that we could control. The big things were work ethic, which was something that we could not get around if we were ever going to be any good at Saint Mary's, and we can control that. Then there's attitude which is another thing that we can totally control and we had to start developing that. We also needed leadership, which is something that they did not have, and I had to start developing that, which was hard. When you inherit a team (2-22) that is really beat down and struggled as far as winning and losing, we had to get some senior leadership, then develop it from our younger guys and then become an unselfish team. At that point, we hammered it, and we still hammer it because we had success with it. It gets down to the same stuff, but we're playing for different stakes now. We did those things early and we were able to recruit players like Anthony Woodards and Adam Caporn and Samuel St. Jean (all 2001-2003). Players like that helped us start building the program and then here comes E.J. Rowland and Daniel Kickert. Those guys were talents and now some of the foundation had been laid. When we were able to finally build it with freshmen like Diamon, Omar Samham, Wayne Hunter and then Patty Mills, Mickey McConnell, and Matthew Dellavedova, we've been pretty much freshmen ever since."

Bennett also identifies with successful programs at Duke, North Carolina and Syracuse that have had such little turnovers with their head coaches. "Continuity with a successful team is so underrated if you can do it right, keeping your players and assistant coaches, but most importantly, with the head coach because you can build a family, you can build a program, you can build tradition. It's hard to beat if you get the right people and double down on it."

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