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## Moraga Goes Ga-Ga over Gaels

By Sophie Braccini



Basketball fans of all ages rose from their beds early on the morning of Wednesday, March 24th to arrive on the Saint Mary's College (SMC) campus in time for the "send-off" of the men's basketball team as it began its journey to Houston to take on Baylor last Friday, March 26th, in the NCAA championship playoffs. SMC had not seen a team advance to the "Sweet 16" since 1959, and the town rallied around its players.

"The kids really wanted to come," said Brenda Mossotti, the mother of three school-age children, "it was the highlight of their day. They got to see Omar (Samhan), they talked to him, had pictures taken, and were so excited to go back to school and tell all their friends."

All over Moraga, banners supporting the team hung proudly. "This is great for the college and for the town," said Mayor Ken Chew, who attended the arrival and departure celebrations, "It will increase Saint Mary's College's visibility and enrollment and it can be good economically for the town as well."

For the players too, the community fervor encouraged a sense of belonging.

Fans await the Gaels' return last Saturday Photo  
Doug Kohen

"It's just unreal," said Samhan in a pre-game interview for SMC, "You're so happy to see the media and your friends and family and they welcome you with open arms and are so proud of you. There's such a sense of community. The community feels like they're in the Sweet Sixteen. It's such a bond we have with such a small town, you know people come up to me in the streets and say, 'Do it for us!'"

A festive atmosphere enveloped Moraga in the days leading up to the team's final return last Saturday. Community members, alumni, and students gathered to watch the televised games together. On the night of Saturday the 20th, when the team came home at 11:30 p.m. after its victory against Villanova, police and fire department vehicles escorted the team bus and hundreds of supporters gathered at the campus in a boisterous and festive atmosphere. On Friday the 26th, at the urging of Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer (a Saint Mary's alum), staff and students wore red and blue to show their support for the team.

Although the team fell painfully to Baylor, residents again came out for a warm welcome-home when the Gaels returned on Saturday morning. Deafening sirens and supporters brought a lot of excitement to a campus that had been mostly deserted due to the beginning of Spring break. "I have been following the basketball team since 1978," said Rossmoor resident (and former Moraga resident for 37 years) Fred Cady, "It's the best they've ever done, and I'm sure they'll do just as well next year."

Mayor Chew said the town would organize a celebration for the team in the coming days. At press time the date had not been set, but the event should take place at the Moraga Commons in early April. Check our website for updates, [www.lamorindaweekly.com](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com).

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