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Saint Mary's Overwhelms USF

By Bryant West



Kenton Walker II Photo Tod Fierner

The #23 Saint Mary's men's basketball team won four straight contests and are just a win in San Diego away from their first regular season conference title since 1997.

With a victory in San Diego tonight, Saint Mary's would guarantee at the very least a tie for the regular-season conference title. If the Gaels beat USD and then defeat either Gonzaga or Portland a week later - both home contests - they would stand alone atop the WCC before the conference championships in Las Vegas in early March.

The Gaels managed to fend off two less successful conference teams at home - getting a 79-71 win over Pepperdine on February 3rd and a 79-70 win over Loyola Marymount two days later. Saint Mary's then headed out for two road contests last week and bested Santa Clara 65-59 on Thursday and a notched a 86-68 demolition of the second seeded Dons on Saturday.

The Gaels' two home contests against Pepperdine and Loyola Marymount were closer than to be expected.

Senior guard Mickey McConnell scored 26 points and had eight assists in the 79-71 win over the Waves, while junior forward Rob Jones had 20 points, eight boards and two steals. The Waves, who sit at sixth in the conference, shot 55 percent for the game and held Saint Mary's to 46 percent, but had 21 turnovers to the Gaels 13. Guard Keion Bell had 24 points and kept the Waves in it, but to no avail.

The victory over Loyola Marymount two evenings later secured the Gaels 20th win on the season, as they survived another contest where they let their opponents outshoot them. The Lions shot 52 percent and the Gaels 49 percent. Rebounding was the major difference as Saint Mary's grabbed 36 boards and the Lions gathered just 21. Sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova had 23 points, while McConnell had 16 and 10 assists. Ashley Hamilton had 16 points for the Lions.

After scraping by their Southern rivals, the Gaels headed out to face off against their Bay Area rivals - the first of which came Thursday night. The Gaels survived a late rally to pull off a 65-59 win over Santa Clara. SMC made just one basket in the final 12:45 of the game but took advantage of the free throw line, making 20-of-24 attempts in the second half.

"You're not going to get many style-points games at this time of year," head coach Randy Bennett said. "Everybody knows everyone. ... I knew it was going to be that way, and our guys were able to get it done, so I was pleased with them."

McConnell again led the way with 25 points, while Jones had 10 points and 16 rebounds. Sophomore forward Mitchell Young had 10 points and seven boards. Broncos guard Kevin Foster had 25 for the Broncos. They held Saint Mary's to 37.5 percent shooting.

Saturday's match with the Dons, who sit second in the conference, didn't live up to the hype. While the Dons' fast paced offense worked well in the first half, and the Dons' tied it with a jumper at 36-36 with 19:17 to go in the second half - Saint Mary's took over from there, finishing out the game on a 50-32 run. Saint Mary's outshot the Dons 66.7 percent to 33.3 percent in the second half, and the Dons couldn't muster a comeback much to the disappointment of the sold-out crowd.

"To have a good offensive game against their team, which is good defensively, on their court was a big step for us," head coach Randy Bennett said after the win in San Francisco.

The Gaels play today, February 16, in San Diego for at least a share of the conference regular season title, but Saturday's game is equally important. Saint Mary's will face off at home against Utah State in the 2011 Sears Bracketbuster contest. The contest against the #21/#17 ranked Aggies could really help - or hurt - NCAA Tournament hopes come March.

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