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Saint Mary's Clinches WCC Conference Title, First Since 1997

By Bryant West



Photo Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's Gaels accomplished a goal 14 seasons in the making - a regular season crown.

Reaching this end point was a roller coast ride, especially the last two weeks: Saint Mary's suffered a three game losing streak which dropped their RPI from 30 to 56, but Randy Bennett's squad has a lot to be proud of. A home win against Portland on Saturday secured a share of the regular season championship which Saint Mary's hasn't had since 1997. Saint Mary's shares the title with rival Gonzaga.

Head coach Randy Bennett said after the Gaels victory on Saturday that winning the regular season title gives him more pride than the tournament title. "I think it's harder to do," Bennett said. "There aren't many upsets in winning a conference regular-season championship. You can have upsets winning a conference tournament, so that's why I think it's special."

Three straight losses - a 74-66 loss to San Diego, a 75-65 loss to #24/25 Utah State, and a 89-85 defeat to Gonzaga - were not favorable to a once secure Gaels team. But a 83-69 win against Portland on Saturday night earned a 11-3 conference record and gave Saint Mary's a share of the regular season title.

The Gaels letdown, 74-66 loss, against San Diego on February 16 postponed the chance to tie for the conference title.

While Saint Mary's held a decent halftime lead at 32-24, San Diego caught fire and scored 50 second half points, including going 6-of-7 from beyond the three point line to stun the Gaels.

Senior guard Mickey McConnell scored 21 points and had six assists, while sophomore forward Mitchell Young had 24 and nine boards, but four Toreros scored in double figures. Matt Dorr and Chris Manresa each notched 17 points.

While the Gaels played much more talented competition on Saturday, February 19, Utah State sat at #24/25 in the rankings, the game was eerily similar to the contest against the Toreros.

The Gaels played well in the first half, holding a 36-27 advantage that Bennett later said was one of the best halves they'd played all year. But again, a comfortable halftime advantage quickly dwindled away as the Aggies shot 55.6 percent, scoring 48 points in the second, while holding Saint Mary's to 28.6 percent shooting. McConnell had 16 points and four assists, while Tai Wesley and Brockeith Pane each had 22 for the Aggies.

Returning to regular season play against Gonzaga on February 24, the Gaels contest with Bulldogs became more than a rivalry game, with the conference regular season title at stake. A win could have helped the Gaels outright win the conference title.

Saint Mary's trailed by 10 in the second half at 55-45 with 14:49 to play, but Saint Mary's stormed back and tied it with 7:19 at 65 a piece after a three by Dellavedova. The teams traded buckets from there, but a three pointer from junior forward Rob Jones gave Saint Mary's a 76-73 advantage with 1:40 to play. Tough Saint Mary's defense stifled the Zags next offensive play, but a loose rebound was tipped right to Zags guard Marquise Carter who sank a tying three at 76-76 with 1:13 to play.

Both teams missed their next shots, and the Gaels had the ball with nine seconds left and a chance to win. But McConnell missed a potential game winning three, and it was all but over from there - Saint Mary's were stagnant offensively in overtime, making just one of their seven shots as Gonzaga went on to win 89-85.

The loss tied up the conference standings and gave the Gaels their third straight loss.

McConnell had 15 points and nine assists, and sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova finished with 24 points and five assists, but five Zags, led by Sam Dowers' 21 points, scored in double figures.

"How many big shots has Mickey made for us?" Bennett said afterwards. "Nobody hits them all."

The match-up against Portland last Saturday was the Gaels last chance to secure the conference title and they did not disappoint.

The Gaels trailed 39-38 at halftime but picked up their offense and defense in the second half. After shooting 38.5 percent in the first

half and allowing Portland to shoot 55.6 percent, the Gaels started the second half on a 11-2 run capped off by three, three-pointers from freshmen guard Stephen Holt. The Gaels shot 57 percent in the second half and sank 20-of-24 free throws to hold off the Pilots.

Immediately after the game, the players and fans celebrated the team's first conference regular season title in 14 years.

"There are a lot of guys who haven't won this," Bennett said. "They better enjoy it tonight. We all feel good tomorrow. And then this week, we'll try to get better and go into this tournament playing well."

The Gaels will travel to the WCC Championships this weekend, and will play Loyola Marymount, Portland or Santa Clara in the semi-final round, which will be held on Sunday, March 6th. Should they win that contest, they will advance to the finals for the third straight year, which will be held Monday the 7th.

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