



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published March 30th, 2011

SMC Men's Basketball Season Review

By Bryant West



Rob Jones Photo Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's men's basketball team met a bitter end to a strong season in the first round of the NIT, losing to the Kent State Golden Flash 71-70 on March 14th.

The Gaels, who led by as much as 12 in the second half, couldn't stop Kent State's comeback and a go-ahead layup from Justin Greene ended up the game winner for the Golden Flash. Junior Rob Jones had 21 points and nine boards for the Gaels in the loss.

Senior guard Mickey McConnell, the WCC Conference Player of the Year, had just five points in his final game. "When you're sitting there, it's kind of an emotional time," he said bleary eyed after the game. "You're just sitting at your locker thinking you're not going to be in that situation again with a group of guys you've been together with for so long."

Head coach Randy Bennett said afterward that while the loss was tough, there were "a lot of good things that have happened this year and we have to keep those in mind." When asked about McConnell, Bennett said he had "been a stud for us all year. We wouldn't be in this situation if he hadn't done what he's done all year... We haven't had a better leader in our program."

The Gaels finished their season with a 29-6 record, the fourth straight season with 25 wins or more. Coach Bennett, the winningest coach in Saint Mary's history, earned his 200th career win in the 67-56 win over San Diego on January 19th. Bennett was also named the WCC Coach of the Year.

McConnell, in addition to his WCC Conference Player of the Year, was named to the Mid-Major All American Team after averaging 16.4 points and 6.1 assists per contest. Sophomore guard Matthew Dellavedova and forward Jones were named to the WCC All Conference Team, with Dellavedova averaging 13.4 points and 5.3 assists and Jones averaging 13.8 points and 7.7 rebounds. Freshman Stephen Holt was named to the All-Freshman team and became increasingly important late in the season for the Gaels as arguably the team's best defender.

The season produced a lot of positives for the Gaels, capped off by a 73-71 win in Gonzaga that propelled the Gaels into the elite of the conference and left the Bulldogs reeling. McConnell hit an acrobatic turnaround jumper for the victory that gave the Gaels a then 6-0 conference record. Gonzaga was 44-1 at the McCarthey Athletic Center before the loss.

The Gaels played a strong non-conference schedule, including a win over 76-71 win over St. John's on November 15th in Moraga and a 94-76 win over Mississippi State in Las Vegas on December 29th.

The Gaels non-conference losses were all against teams that found their way into the NCAA Tournament, including a 74-73 loss to BYU in the 2010 South Padre Classic on November 27th and a 69-55 loss to San Diego State four days later. Both BYU and San Diego State finished with top 10 rankings and made it to the Sweet Sixteen in the NCAA Tournament.

But some late season losses meant the Gaels had to win the conference tournament in order to secure a NCAA Tournament berth and they did not beat the Zags again.

While the season certainly didn't end as the Gaels would have liked, the future still looks good for Moraga fans. McConnell leaves along with forward Phil Benson, but the Gaels retain the remainder of their team including Dellavedova, Holt and Jones. The Gaels also add some more size - something that was lacking throughout the season - with both 6-foot-9 freshman Brad Waldow coming and 7-foot center Kyle Rowley, a transfer from Northwestern, eligible next season.

Rumors swirled after the NIT loss that Bennett was interviewing with Utah for the open coaching spot left by Jim Boylen, but Bennett has continued to deny the rumors and stresses his optimism for the team's future.



Matthew Dellavedova Photo?Tod Fierner

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA