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SMC Reaches Elite Eight

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Doug Herrick #1 Photo Tod Fierner

The most successful post-season run in Saint Mary's athletic history ended on Saturday.

The Gaels' men's soccer team was only the second team in school history to advance to the NCAA Elite Eight tournament, the first in over 50 years.

The Gaels fell to top-ranked North Carolina 2-0 on December 3 as Matt Hedges and Ben Speas scored goals to lead the Tar Heels (20-2-2) to the Final Four.

En route to the loss, the Gaels (11-7-5) became the Cinderella team of the tournament by garnering road victories over #25 CSU Bakersfield (1-0), #7 UC Irvine (2-1 in double overtime), and #15 Brown (3-2 in overtime), racking up the most post-season wins ever for a Saint Mary's athletic team.

"We've been the underdog all season," said Gaels' head coach Adam Cooper, who also led the team to its first-ever WCC title this year. "Our conference picked us to finish fifth. Nobody expected us to win the WCC. We [were] always the underdog."

For a Gaels team that hit the back of the net only three times in their first eight games, the run to the Elite Eight was indicative of a team hitting its stride at just the right time of the season.

"At the beginning of the season, I think we just got a little unlucky, and there was a lot of pressure to score, especially after getting shut out for a couple games," said

junior defender Trevor Newquist, who scored two goals in the Sweet 16 win over Brown and was named National Player of the Week for his performance. "Towards the end of conference we got in a groove, and I think in the tournament you get so few opportunities that when you get one you have to score it."

In addition to finding their scoring touch, scoring six goals in the four tournament games, the Gaels found a way to cope with the travel, which took them nearly 10,000 miles up and down the state of California, out to Rhode Island and back, and then finally to North Carolina.

"It would it be hard-pressed to find any pro teams, in any sport that have had the travel that we've had to go through the last few weeks," said Cooper.

That, along with the resilient team effort, resonated with the Saint Mary's community. Students, faculty, and fans greeted the players each time they returned from their travels, and fans packed the school's Dryden Hall to watch a live stream of Saturday's loss to North Carolina.

Senior goalkeeper Doug Herrick, who set a new school record for shutouts this year with 11, offered to take a test for one of his classes before the North Carolina game, but his professor said he could take it once the tournament was over so his focus would be solely directed towards the next game.

"It's the coolest thing in the world, because everyone knows what's going on, realizing that this is a once in a lifetime experience," Herrick said.

Herrick also acknowledged dedicating this season to the late Connor Redd, who backed up Herrick as the Gaels' second keeper before his death in April of last year.

"I play for Connor in every game, and I think all of our guys would say the same thing," Herrick said. "There's nothing better than to take Connor all this way with us, and really live one of his dreams. I can only imagine how ecstatic he would be going to the Elite Eight. I'm so happy we can do that in his name."



Trevor Newquist #2 Photo Tod Fierner

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