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Saint Mary's Dances Friday as No. 7 Seed

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Saint Mary's wins WCC Tournament and earns automatic berth to the NCAA tournament Photo Tod Fierner

After an historic season, the Saint Mary's men's basketball team marches on to Omaha to face Purdue in the first round of the NCAA Tournament this Friday at 4:30 p.m.

The Gaels won both the WCC regular season title outright and the tournament championship for the first time in program history, and found out their fate on Selection Sunday. They were given a No. 7 seed in the Midwest Bracket. The winner of Friday's game will go on to play either Kansas or Detroit.

"We're excited," Saint Mary's head coach Randy Bennett said. "We're in the competition. This is what you play all year for, to get in this tournament."

Because they won the WCC Tournament by defeating rivals Gonzaga last week, the Gaels had an automatic bid to the tournament. That doesn't mean it wasn't tense for the coaches and players as they waited to hear their team called because Saint Mary's was one of the last teams announced.

"Last time we had an automatic bid we were also one of the last teams called, and I remember [former center] Omar [Samhan] looked over at me and he said, 'we're in, right?' This year it was similar. But the build-up makes it fun," said Bennett.

"We were getting a little bit nervous," added star junior guard Matthew Dellavedova. "I had to make sure we were still in it."

Watching the Selection Show in McKeon Pavilion, the team wore t-shirts emblazoned with WCC championship belts. Approximately 600 fans served as the team's backdrop for the CBS cameras.

While Purdue (21-12) is a bit of an unknown for most of Bennett's players, the Saint Mary's head coach said that he's aware of the Boilermakers' tradition.

"I know Purdue's program. We know how they play," Bennett said. "They're hard-nosed, tough, and well-coached. It'll be a good match-up."

Bennett equated Purdue's style to that of the 2005 Southern Illinois team the Gaels faced in that year's edition of the national championship, when the tenth-seeded Saint Mary's fell 65-56.

As the seventh seed, the Gaels will enter Friday's game as the favorite, but when so many teams in the field of 68 have similar records and schedules, that seed is really just a number.

"Five through 12, throw them in a hat," Bennett said. "There are some teams that are a 10 or 11 that are playing really well and there are probably some 5's and 6's that aren't, but that's where they're seeded based on what they've done all year long."

The fact that the Gaels (27-5) don't play until Friday helps the team out in terms of preparing for their opponents more extensively. It also gives sophomore guard Stephen Holt another day to rest his injured right knee. Holt missed the WCC Tournament because of the injury.

"He needs practices so he's in sync with our team," said Bennett.

Friday's contest will be the Gaels' first since the WCC championship game on March 5 in Las Vegas, when they defeated rivals Gonzaga 78-74.

The Gaels just missed out on a trip to the Big Dance last year, and will try to replicate the success they had two years ago when they defeated Richmond and Villanova en route to the Sweet Sixteen. Regardless of how well they do, one thing's for sure: this is no fluke.

"We've been consistent over pretty much the last eight years, especially the last five," said Bennett. "We haven't been a one shot wonder."



Photo Tod Fierner



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