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Lamorinda Soccer Teams Begin DFAL Play

By Spencer Silva



Drew Wondolowski (17) and Joe Moran (4)

Photo Gint Federas

On Friday Dec. 11, Miramonte (1-1-2) hosted Campolindo (2-1-2) in a sleepy rivalry match that ended in a 0-0 tie. In fact, the varsity match was moved from 6:15 to 4:15 to allow the Cougars players and coaches to support the football team in their bid for consecutive state titles.

Both teams emphasize possession-style soccer, and while each had their chances early, neither was able to put the ball in the back of the net. Senior goalkeeper Garret Johnson made two spectacular saves for the Mats, including a stop on a ball that looked destined for the far post well to his left.

"It was a quality match," said Campo head coach Shane Carney. "I think both teams would have preferred a winner/loser, but we do get to play again."

Carney and Mats' head coach Massood Ahmadi have also discussed scheduling a third match between the two toward the end of season, since the two teams will not meet in the playoffs -- the NCS re-aligned its soccer divisions, sending the Mats down to Division III while the Cougars remain in Division II.

The Mats are encouraged by their play so far, despite their so-so record. The team's lone victory came against a familiar opponent: De Anza, the team that eliminated them from the NCS playoffs last fall. Senior Coleman Fine delivered the game-winning goal in thrilling fashion, when he sent a left-footed shot from 15 yards to the far upper post to clinch the 2-1 victory.

The Mats are anchored by seniors Joe Wang -- who exited Friday's match with a pulled hamstring -- the aforementioned Fine, and attacker Clark Jordan. Ahmadi is pleased with his talent, though the first-year coach admits he's still figuring out how to best use his players.

"We have so much talent," Ahmadi explained. "It's just my job to put them in the right

spots and be creative."

The Cougars -- who have won the DFAL in consecutive seasons -- are dealing once again with hefty turnover. They bid farewell to 14 players from last year's championship team after losing 20 the year before. Adversity, it appears, is a way of life for Cougars soccer.

"A lot of coaches and programs make excuses and talk about how they are 'rebuilding,'" Carney said. "I don't like excuses and prefer to look at it as the opportunity to reload each year."

The team features 10 freshman, and the benefit of inexperience, as Carney noted, is quick improvement. Seniors Ryan Rossi, Shea Danforth, Amir Aliakbari, and Kyle O'Connell anchor the team. The team will also get a shot in the arm once junior Matt Renguist returns from outrunning defenders for the school's football team.

"We have a lot of young and/or very small guys, but we'll be scrappy and put a fight up against any opponent," Carney said.

The Acalanes Dons (3-2) lost to Concord High 0-2 this weekend, but remain confident heading into DFAL play. The team graduated 12 seniors, but veteran head coach Paul Curtis isn't concerned about the loss of talent.

"I think we'll be competitive."

The Dons are known for their unique playing style and formation, which extends from the freshman team all the way to varsity. In fact, the program emphasizes camaraderie and personal responsibility above all. It's not uncommon, for instance, to see juniors and seniors at a freshman match cheering on the youngest Dons.

Senior captain Ian Franklin, who has been on the team since his freshman year, leads the varsity team. The team is "getting organized" and polishing up its game before heading into DFAL play.

The Dons travel to Campolindo Dec. 16 for their first rivalry match of the fall.

Saint Mary's, Cal Rekindle Decades-Old Rivalry in Thrilling Fashion

By Dean Boerner



Joe Rahon's (25) 16 points led all scorers Saturday

Photo Tod Fierner

On Saturday Dec. 12 at Berkeley's Haas Pavilion, the Saint Mary's Gaels (6-1) and California Golden Bears (8-2) rekindled the dormant rivalry in thrilling fashion, with the Bears eventually handing the Gaels their first loss of the season 63-59. It was the first time the two schools, just 10 miles apart, had met in 11 years.

In the opening half, the Golden Bears dominated Saint Mary's on the boards, outrebounding them 19-12. With 7:00 left and the Gaels up 21-20, Cal embarked on a punishing 17-5 run to close out the half with a 37-26 lead.

Nevertheless, Gaels head coach Randy Bennett made the necessary adjustments at half-time and their offense came out in sync. Saint Mary's slowly crept back into the game thanks to an 8-0 push featuring two Evan Fitzner 3-pointers and what Bennett called an "inspiring" effort on the glass from junior forward Dane Pineau.

"We changed a couple things offensively," Bennett said. "We definitely got better shots in the second half."

By the eight-minute mark in the second half, the Gaels had outscored the Golden Bears 24-9, taking a 50-46 lead, quieting those in the Haas Pavilion crowd not wearing red.

Neither team could separate in the game's final minutes. A Calvin Hermanson 3-pointer gave Saint Mary's a 55-52 lead, which was promptly countervailed by a timely 3-point jumper by Jabari Bird with 3:30 left on the clock.

The last bucket for Saint Mary's came on a layup from Joe Rahon with 1:47 to play, putting Saint Mary's up 59-58. While the Gaels had several opportunities to bolster their lead thanks to the offensive rebounding of Pineau, a block by Cal forward Ivan Rabb secured possession for the Golden Bears and allowed Cal head coach Cuonzo Martin to draw a play up for Bird in a timeout.

With less than 20 seconds left, Cal down 59-58, Bird nailed his third 3-pointer of the afternoon, giving the Golden Bears a lead they wouldn't relinquish. Saint Mary's had a chance to extend the game into overtime, but a missed free throw by game-high scorer Rahon sealed the Gaels' fate.

"It was the first real close game we've played as a group this year," said Rahon. "We made a lot of mistakes down the stretch."

Both players and coaches alike expressed satisfaction at the thought of making Bay Area contests like this one more commonplace. The game was no doubt a reminder for Bay Area basketball fans of what they've been missing.

"This is what should be going on," said Bennett after the game. "It would be good to get some rivalries going in the Bay Area." Earlier this season, Bennett's squad had an impressive 78-61 victory against Stanford in front of a packed house at McKeon Pavilion.

Cuonzo Martin showered praise on the oft-overlooked Saint Mary's program. "This is probably the best team we've played on both ends of the floor," declared Martin. "They play hard. They play together. Great game for the Bay Area."

The Saint Mary's men's team isn't the only one embroiling itself in more Bay Area competition. The women's team upset No. 18 Cal on path to a Cal Tournament championship earlier this month. With Cal up one and only seconds left, Saint Mary's freshman Sydney Raggio hit a clutch jumper to give Saint Mary's a dramatic road victory.

The theatrics of Saturday afternoon's matchup is another episode in what might be a revived sense of competition in Bay Area college basketball. "You can see the fan support (Saint Mary's) had tonight and both teams really had a bunch of fans rooting for them," said Rabb, a Cal freshman. "We gave them a thriller."

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