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LAMORINDA SPORTS

Saint Mary's women's basketball: an amalgam of experience, youth and size

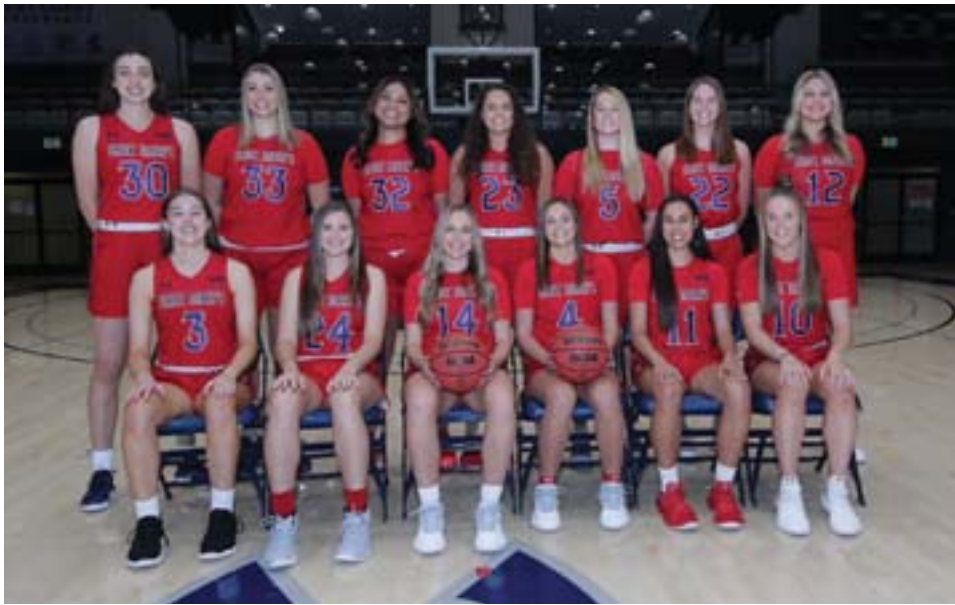


Photo provided

By Jon Kingdon

After winning at least 20 games in nine of their last 10 seasons (19 in 2010-11), prior to last year's 12-19 record, head coach Paul Thomas is very optimistic about this year's team. With six veteran players and six new players on the roster, it's a group that Thomas feels is more athletic, bigger and stronger than last season.

Despite not being able to practice during the offseason, Thomas and his assistants did whatever they could do to improve the team from afar. "The extended offseason was extremely valuable to our team," Thomas said. "We spent it all on the mental parts of the game. Two of my assistants, Allyson Fassnacht and Heidi Heintz did a 12-week symposium with Zoom meetings with the players. Having these weekly sessions and utilizing the information they came up with has proven to be very valuable. We've been together for about two weeks now and there has not been a day in which we have not referred to those educational moments and revisited the topics that were discussed."

The team has been undergoing regular testing without any positives so far, said Thomas: "We're all part of the

testing. I feel safe coming on to campus with the precautions we've taken and the fact that there is only one way onto campus, and there are no outside people on campus without authorization."

However the team did suffer a loss due to the virus. Junior Sam Simons, who was all league last season in the WCC and was the Gaels' leading scorer last season, chose to redshirt this year due to the virus. "Sam's family thought it was best that she stay at home in Australia as there have been zero cases where she is from (Adelaide)," Thomas said. "We respect her decision and have let her know that she will always be a member of this team and we will accept her back with welcoming arms."

The Gaels' offense is not going to be short of scorers. Senior Emily Codding (14.7) is coming back after off-season leg surgery, junior Tacy Wedin (12.8) and senior Madeline Holland (12.6) were the three leading scorers after Simons last season.

There will be a number of new players contributing this year, though only three are freshman. Sophomores Amy West and Jade Kirisome both practiced all last season with the team but had to sit out the season due to transfer rules. "We do have a team that has numerous veterans and we

have done a really good job of mixing in our new people," Thomas said.

Saint Mary's will be a much taller team this year though, without anyone listed as a center, it will be a starting lineup with three forwards. "We look like a completely different team," Thomas said. "Last year, our average height was about 5'11" and this year it's 6'1". We haven't had a true center since Meghan McKay (2017-18). Amy is a legitimate 6'4" forward with good range. She along with sophomore Finau Tonga will give us a post presence as each has lots of skills near the basket." Sophomore Mia Griseliz and freshman Ellie Croco also bring good size and the ability to score from the outside.

Most of the experience on the team is in the backcourt. There will be three primary ball handlers - Holland, who led the team in assists last season (137), Kirisome and freshman Tayla Dalton, who has been impressive in the early practices, said Thomas. "Tayla is a scorer more than a shooter. She is a very good athlete who is fast, quick, powerful and plays with toughness. She will be a great person to get on the court because she is so coachable and loves the game. And people are going to be really impressed when they see Jade play with the ball in her hands. She is an exciting player."

Last season, Wedin was named honorable mention all WCC and established herself as one of the top three-point shooters in the nation, setting the West Coast Conference record for three-pointers made in a single-season with 104, a mark that ranked fourth-best in the NCAA and second in the NCAA in three-pointers per game with 3.35.

With more size and depth, Thomas is looking for a different type of offense this year. "We are going to be faster and more balanced. Last year, we set a record for three-point attempts but I don't see us shooting that many this year. We are going to be stronger and more physical inside. Jade, Tayla and Maddie are strong getting to the basket so we will be better getting the ball inside with passes and on drives."

Last year, Saint Mary's gave up 71.8 points per game with the additional size up front and Thomas anticipates improvement with the Gaels' defense: "We will be better because we have more depth this year and more options to put out on the floor. We can now have 6'4" and 6'2" players to defend the other team's post players, which is something that we did not have last year. We were forced to play everybody's post players with our perimeter players which always put us at a disadvantage and now we should be able to keep our opponents out of the paint this year."

Under all these conditions, leadership becomes that more crucial and Holland and Codding have taken on that responsibility: "Maddie and Emily have been our leaders on and off the court," said Thomas. "They have taken on that role and done a great job for us."

"I'm excited to be a top leader on this team along with some of my other teammates," said Holland on the Saint Mary's website. "We have a lot of new people and people coming up so I'm looking forward to guiding them in the right direction with our plays and our defense."

If there is any positive to all that has been going on with the virus, it's clear how much the players and coaches have missed the game. "When something is taken away and it's not part of your life anymore and then you get it back, you learn to appreciate it more and more," said Thomas. "I think our team and coaches feel that way now. Still, when we get out on the court, we do know that it could be taken away. These are hard times, but hard times make for tough people and I can't tell you how often I've said that."

Saint Mary's will open its season with a three-game tournament beginning Nov. 25 with opponents still to be determined. They will also play on the road against Fresno State (Dec. 11) and Ohio State (Dec. 15). The first home game for SMC will be against Nevada on Dec. 21 and the first league game against Pacific will be at home Dec. 30.

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