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Saint Mary's headed to Portland for First Round of NCAA

By Jon Kingdon



Photo Tod Fierner

where we would be playing," Bennett said. "We were prepared for anything but everyone's excited about playing in the West at Portland."

Bennett could not help but appreciate how special this season has been considering how difficult things had been the prior two seasons. "It's fun to get rewarded," Bennett said. "Two years ago, our seniors missed out on the tournament because it was canceled due to the COVID virus. Then last year we had a half to two-thirds of a season, playing without any fans, and it was just funky. To hear our name called and to be playing in Portland just capped off a two-year process and I'm extremely excited, especially for our older guys because of what they've gone through."

Sixth-year graduate student, Tommy Kuhse, also saw this season as the capstone to a two-year season with a lot of bumps along the road. "Coming into this year, we really felt good about our chances. We just kept growing and getting better and better as a team. We're playing our best basketball at the right time. It's super cool that we have the highest seed in Saint Mary's history, but we have bigger goals."

Kuhse has been called upon to fill many roles this season. He started the first 13 games of the season and then became the team's sixth man for the next 11 games and returned to the starting lineup for the team's final six games. His performance was not overlooked by the West Coast Conference as Kuhse was named first team all WCC and the sixth man of the year.

"I'm glad that Tommy wanted to come back," Bennett said. "He really improved and he's just a great story. His attitude was tremendous about becoming the sixth man and it really helped our team. After moving him back into the starting lineup, I let him create the narrative for how this season would conclude because I want him on the court against our opponents' two best guards. I wish I could say I knew that it was going to turn out as well as it did, but I didn't."

As this is Bennett's 15th time that he has taken Saint Mary's to the post season (seven NIT's), he knows what the key is for the team which will be playing for the first time in nine days. "The biggest thing is to be going in fresh," Bennett said. "If you go into the game fatigued, it makes it hard to win the game. We practiced twice last week, and we'll start again this week."

The team's motto, 'Gritty Not Pretty,' which was originated by junior Kyle Bowen, was emblazoned on T-shirts given away to all by the school. "Kyle really put it into perspective as to what we wanted to be as a team," Kuhse said. "We battle on every possession so there are no easy buckets, and pride ourselves on that. We have some of the toughest guys I've ever met on this team and that became our identity and it's what made us so good."

Logan Johnson also credited the team's success to that attitude: "'Gritty Not Pretty' is what we stand on. It's the hard work that we put in all those days in the off-season, like starting at 6 a.m. and doing our run workouts. For us, that's everything that term stands for."

Bennett also was pleased when the University of San Francisco made it into the tournament as a 10th seed. It was recognition of the depth of the West Coast Conference, but for Bennett it was more about their coach, Todd Golden. "We fight and scratch all year long but there's mutual respect for our teams. For me personally, it's for Todd Golden as well. He was a Gael for four years and a captain of that team, so I'll be

In front of an enthusiastic crowd of students and alumnae at the University Credit Union Pavilion March 13, Saint Mary's was awarded the fifth seed (their highest ever seed) in the NCAA East Regional which ironically will be played, to the extreme satisfaction of the team and fans alike, in Portland, Oregon this coming Thursday. This is the eighth time Randy Bennett has taken the Gaels to the NCAA tournament and the first time they'll be playing a tournament game on the West Coast. They will face the winner of the Wyoming and Indiana game which will be played on Tuesday in Dayton, Ohio. With a victory, Saint Mary's will be playing the winner of the UCLA-Akron game on Saturday.

Bennett was hard pressed to keep from smiling over the seeding and location of their first game. What was his first reaction to the news? "It was exciting, and it was fun, even having to wait until the last bracket to find out

pulling for them."

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