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SMC men's basketball relies heavily on younger players

By Jon Kingdon



Saint Mary's guard Augustas Marciulionis (3)
Photo SMC Athletics Dept./Tod Fierner

come to compete," Bennett said. "So, we had to go back to square one on some areas. We're ahead offensively but we did skip some steps along the way defensively. In scrimmages against Arizona and Hawaii, we were exposed in areas where we did not play well but from square one, we were able to accelerate the process a lot faster."

Losing and replacing two all-conference players in center Matthias Tass and guard Tommy Kuhse is Bennett's biggest concern. "We're trying to figure that out right now," Bennett said. "With (junior) Mitchell Saxen stepping in at center, we now have to fill the backup role which Mitch played so well last season along with losing Kuhse's scoring, leadership and toughness."

As a two-time all WCC honors player, fifth-year senior Logan Johnson's return was a mutual decision between Bennett and Johnson. "Logan felt it was the right move to come back for another year and we were glad to have him back," Bennett said. "He will be a key player again and his role will remain the same as it was last season. He's got a good chance to play after college and depending on how good we are, he could play himself into something nice next year."

The other guards that will be seeing substantial playing time are sophomore Augustus Marciulionis, redshirt freshman Chris Howell and freshman Aidan Mahaney. "Aidan and Chris are not there yet but I believe we can get there this year with them," Bennett said. "We're going to be throwing them in the fire and they're going to have to learn right away. Augustas and Aidan are talented at the point and they're just lacking experience but they're going to learn as we go this year. It's just a matter of finding out how much they can handle and that's where I'm at right now."

As difficult as it is for a freshman to adjust to the Saint Mary's system, Mahaney is as well prepared as one can be as a local Campolindo graduate. "Aidan knows our program, environment and the guys on the team," Bennett said "He knows how he fits and how we think and how we want our guys to be unselfish and play off our guards a lot. He's got the skill set, the size and confidence to do it. We just have to keep making him better within what we do which really fits his skills and talents. It's not going to happen on day one but Aidan will fight through it just like Augustas did last year until they both get as confident and comfortable as Khuse and Logan were last season."

The 6'6" Howell is being counted on to fill many roles for the Gaels. "Chris is a jack of all trades that can play the 1-2-3 or 4, but he's essentially a big guard," Bennett said. "He has a really good feel and he's a good defender that can fill that role when Logan is out of the game."

Seniors Kyle Bowen and Alex Ducas are the other two returning starters, lining up at the forward position. "Their roles are not going to change but we need them to get better because they're carrying more of the load this year, at least for a little while," Bennett said.

Redshirt sophomore Luke Barrett (Piedmont) has made good strides and should see a fair amount of time at the three position along with Howell. The pleasant surprise so far this year has been 6'8 235-pound freshman Joshua Jefferson, a physical player who averaged 17 points per game last year at Liberty High School in Las Vegas. "Joshua has a good body and a really good basketball IQ," Bennett said. "He's a good passer and just needs to learn how to play harder and improve his defense. He's going to learn that as he

Coming off a successful 2021-22 season highlighted by Coach Randy Bennett's 15th year with at least 20 wins in his 21 years at Saint Mary's, (and a career winning percentage of 70.6), an undefeated record at home (16-0) for the first time, a victory over a number ranked team in the nation (Gonzaga) and a win in the NCAA tournament, Bennett still remains cautiously optimistic about the upcoming season.

Despite three returning seniors in the starting lineup, this is an uncharacteristically young team with eight freshman and sophomores in the team's top 11 players. "We're taking it a step at a time," Bennett said.

This past August, the Gaels went to Australia and played and won five games which provided the team with some much needed experience though there was a tradeoff in Bennett's mind. "It's a tricky deal because we skipped some steps in our preparation to go and be able to

goes, but we need him, and he's going to help us."

As with all of the other positions, at center there is a veteran starter with Saxen who missed the first four games last season with back spasms, but returned and had a good season. "Mitch kept getting better and he has shown that he is ready to be the starter."

Backing up Saxen is another freshman, 7'0" 275-pound Harry Wessels, another import from Australia. "Harry is a big, strong player and like all freshmen, he has to adjust to the game and figure out how the officials call the game over here," Bennett said. "He can score and rebound and gets a lot done when he plays - sometimes too much - but he is going to be able to help us this year."

With so many freshmen expected to play this season, it brought Bennett back to the 2009 team that had a 28-6 record and had a memorable upset of Villanova in the NCAA tournament. "That year we had three freshmen, Matthew Dellavedova, Mitch Young and Jordan Page, who played a lot," Bennett said. "I'm excited about the young players on our team but we still have to win the games."

Bennett, who is in charge of setting up the team's schedule, has the Gaels playing their first five games at home against teams from Oklahoma (Oral Roberts), U. of Vermont, Texas (No. Texas), Louisiana (Southern) and New York (Hofstra), all teams that will provide good early season challenges. "Vermont's the eighth winningest program in college basketball in the last seven years, North Texas is very good, Oral Roberts is a sweet 16 team along with Southern and Hofstra. Our other non-league home games are also tough with Missouri State, New Mexico State, New Mexico and Colorado State."

The Gaels will also be playing in the John Wooden Legacy Tournament in Anaheim and the Jerry Colangelo Classic in Phoenix. "Those tournaments are hard to get in but we've played in both of those tournaments previously," Bennett said.

The support that the team gets at the University Credit Union Pavilion is one that most schools envy. "It's a tough environment for other teams to play in," Bennett said. "Our fans are a community and we're like the local team. Our students are great, and they take it to a whole other level, but even when they're not here, we still have a great atmosphere which a lot of schools don't have. Our alumni, fans and students like our guys because they're good guys, which is what makes it really special."

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