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Addition of indoor track fosters growth of SMC's men's and women's track teams

By Jon Kingdon



Women's Head Coach Marty Kinsey Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

Marty Kinsey's success at Saint Mary's began when he was a student running on the cross-country team from 1997-2001. As the captain of the team, the Gaels would earn its highest finish in program history at the West Coast Conference and NCAA West Region Championships.

When Kinsey returned in 2010 to be the men's and women's cross-country coach, very little had changed from his time as a student. The budget for the men's and women's teams was \$9,500 for the men and \$8,500 for the women, which covered all the operational costs of the teams. "It was more like running a club team with a very small budget," Kinsey said. "I was hired to change the direction of the program and to build it up, which we have been doing each year. My intent was to start a track team even before I was hired and determined what we needed to do to start the program."

Kinsey approached then Athletic Director Mark Orr (now the AD at Sacramento State), with a major

presentation to begin the program. "We made a giant proposal, and he was on board with it though we had to rework some of the numbers that I had brought in," Kinsey said. "We studied the track teams in the WCC and showed Mark how the experiences, and competitions those athletes were participating in, attracted the top recruits to those schools."

Kinsey made it clear that if Saint Mary's wanted to be able to recruit the top distance runners, having a track team was essential. "Track is the gold standard in that it's the Olympics and there is no cross country in the Olympics," Kinsey said. "If you can't offer track as a sport, it makes it really hard to recruit top cross-country runners," Kinsey said.

When the track teams began in 2012, it was a slow beginning but a beginning none-the-less. "We had to reach the minimum standards set by the NCAA which was to have at least 14 athletes each on the men's and women's (they had 16) rosters," Kinsey said. "We then had to compete in at least six competitions, and we were then able to send individuals to many more than those six races and travel meets."

With a brand-new team, Kinsey took a unique approach to recruiting athletes that first year. "We sold our recruits by telling them that they had the opportunity to be here at the beginning, to be a part of the process that would build the Saint Mary's track team and when you graduate, you can look back at the success of the program, 10 and 20 years later, taking pride and being able to say that you were the one that started it. Just four years later, we got our first two NCAA qualifiers which was pretty cool."

Over the next 2 1/2 years, Kinsey was able to increase the size of the track team from 28 to 65 though the growth of the team, oddly enough, could be attributed to the pandemic. "When the coronavirus hit, Saint Mary's enrollment was struggling," Kinsey said. "We were one of the few institutions on the West Coast that was able to practice during the pandemic. We had COVID testing twice weekly and that was just for practice. It was all very regulated, so my associate head coach, Harlan Lopez took over the men's practices and I took over the women's and we got more and more athletes to join the teams. It was then that we unofficially separated the teams so we could have more of a focus on each gender."

With the increased size, came an increased budget from the athletic department and outside sources. With a deal that was struck with Under Armour, providing gear starting in 2015 and outside fundraising, the budget for the track teams increased exponentially, well into six figures.

For Kinsey, the final piece of the puzzle was to have an indoor track team which had become an essential part in recruiting for the cross country and outdoor track teams. This was made clear to Mike Matoso, Saint Mary's Athletic Director, when he was at the 2021 cross-country championship which Saint Mary's hosted, and he saw how well Gonzaga had performed when historically they had not been that good. "I told him their plan was increased scholarship dollars, separating the men's and women's programs, and having an indoor track team," Kinsey said. "Within a year, Mike made all that happen for us because he is competitive and he wants us to be successful and we both knew that the better our teams are, the better the experience it is for our student athletes."

With the indoor track season beginning this year, Kinsey took the same approach in recruiting that he did when he started their track team, though now there was more talent to begin with. "Last year, our women's cross-country team shattered all our records and four of them are on our top 10 list of all time and we even beat Cal which had always been a big goal of mine," Kinsey said. "We identified recruits that had an underdog mentality and wanted to be part of the new and the firsts and we're still going through that. We told them that we are looking for athletes that want the unique opportunity to come build the foundation and be part of a team."

There are no indoor track facilities at any college in California, so this first season, the Gaels will be traveling to Seattle and Portland twice and Spokane. "Adding indoors is the final piece to the student-athlete

experience for our track athletes in being able to travel and compete more," Kinsey said. "It will definitely help with recruiting for our track and cross-country programs and will dramatically benefit us as we take it to the next level. Our cross-country and outdoor track team is now on a par with Cal-Berkeley, Stanford, USF, Santa Clara, and Gonzaga. With the indoor team, we've been able to add two Division 1 sports to Saint Mary's. We're in the middle process of getting up to 5 1/2 scholarships for the men and 6 1/2 for the women which are very competitive numbers in our conference."

As helpful as it would be to have an indoor track at Saint Mary's, particularly with the recent rainstorms, Kinsey appreciates the many places that the team is able to train. "We're pretty lucky with the locations that are available to us to run on such as the Iron Horse Trail, Redwood Park, the Steam Trail and the Lafayette-Moraga Trail," Kinsey said. "If there is too much standing water, we can work out on campus on the roads around the campus loop or the paved trails. When it was really hot in Moraga last fall, we would hop into a van and go to Inspiration Point in Tilden Park where it was only 85-88 degrees which allowed us to run more comfortably."

The women's indoor team will have 25 athletes, two on the heptathlon, three on hurdles and sprints to middle and distance runners. Leading the team is redshirt junior Rayna Stanziano. "Rayna is one of the best runners to ever come out of the East Bay," Kinsey said. "Last season, she was all West Coast Conference and qualified for the NCAAs in the 800, 1,500 and 5,000 meters and was the only female in the entire west region to do that. We're looking for this indoor season to be a learning experience for her and building fitness for the outdoor season. Rayna has a shot at making the NCAAs which requires her to finish in the top 16 in the country in her event."

Harlen Lopez, who was initially hired in 2018 and now exclusively coaches the men's teams, gives all the credit to Kinsey, Matoso, and Kami Cray, the team's sports supervisor, for the growth of the teams. "When we split the programs, we got more funding which really helped us to recruit more athletes and now adding indoor track, it gives our athletes another experience to go compete," Lopez said. "This will allow them to be sharper and more ready when the outdoor season starts."

The men's team is led in the longer distances by sophomores Blaine Reynolds and Curtis Volf and in the shorter distances like the 800 meters by grad student Reinder Prince and freshmen Jason Habash and Noah Pagaran. "We're really a young team but they all should do really well," Lopez said.

"Now that we're in line with the top teams in our conference, it's a good time to be a Gael," Kinsey concluded.



Rayna Stanziano (226) Photos SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

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