

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Saint Mary's vs Alabama

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Saint Mary's Gaels

Randy Bennett

Mitchell Saxen

Augustas Marciulionis

Media Conference

Alabama 80, Saint Mary's 66

RANDY BENNETT: This is an easy one. This is a great group of seniors, two of them sitting here, and Luke is the other one. As good as we've had in our program since I've been there. A great year. Really good team, one of our best that we've had since I've been there. Yeah, they checked about every box. They had a few goals up there, and they just kept checking the boxes. About the only thing we didn't do was, we didn't win the conference tournament championship but won the conference by three games. It's so hard to do.

One of our goals was to be the first team at Saint Mary's to win the league out right two years in a row, and we did that, and it was because all of these three seniors and the team. It was a special team. I have nothing but positive feelings. Obviously, you don't like to lose, and we didn't play good enough to win and we played a good team.

Alabama is very good.

I'll miss coaching these guys. That's the one negative is, I don't get to coach them anymore. This was a team I looked forward to coming to practice to coach every day, and something wasn't going well, all I needed to do was get to practice because it started going well as soon as I got there with these guys.

It was special. I've done it long enough. I know when it's special. This group was special, and I just thank them and appreciate them for making it that way. It's not that way very often.



Q. Basketball-wise, did it feel like the second half the other night, you started to come back, started to be more efficient on offense? The second question is, the emotion of knowing your careers at Saint Mary's are over.

MITCHELL SAXEN: It definitely felt at points like we were chipping away at the lead and getting back in it. We just couldn't string together enough stops to ever close it below nine or so.

I mean, it never felt like we were fully out of the game, but we never really got close enough to feel like we're about to win this. There was never a lack of fight, a lack of belief that this team that we could get it done. But just didn't have it tonight.

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Yeah, I feel like we played much better in the second half, but Alabama is a really good team. It's not enough to play only 20 minutes. Yeah, I think we kept fighting. I'm really proud that we just kept trying to get back into this game, and I think at one point it was like a six-point game in the second half, and it did seem like Alabama would have to play 40 minutes, not 20, to get that thing done.

Q. Mitchell, you and Luke specifically have talked about the guys who came before you, the Bowens and the ^ ck Ducases and Logan Johnson and Cousy and what they meant to you. What do you think you guys will mean to the guys behind you?

MITCHELL SAXEN: I mean, you never feel like you're doing it as well as the guys before you when you're in that position. I mean, you've tried to learn from them your whole careers. But I hope that the guys below us can take the same type of mental notes and learn as much from us as we learned from them.

I'm really, really proud of what this group has accomplished, and that's all 15. Like, us three seniors have been doing it a while, but the young guys really stepped up. We have really, really good practices all season, dudes going at it, and I think that's a recipe for success long-term. I hope the younger guys were taking notes like me and Augustas were taking notes.

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Same thing as Mitchell. You feel sometimes special when you're young, like you feel like those seniors do so much and they're so good and so smart about bringing it every day and doing the stuff right, and when you're a senior it feels like you could do more, like you don't know if you're doing as good of a job as they did.

But yeah, I feel like now there's a lot of emotions and a lot of thoughts, but I really hope that we did it really -- that we did a good job, us three, showing example to the younger guys. We have great guys, a lot of talent and great dudes in general, and I really hope that we can leave a positive impact on them, and yeah, that they're going to make this place even better.

Q. Gus, you said you can't play 20 minutes against Alabama, you've got to play 40. What wasn't working in the second half? It seemed like you guys got pretty good shots. Was their length affecting you? What happened? You guys have been pretty good from three and in the last two games struggled. Why do you think that is?

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Yeah, I think first half we did -- like our offense, I felt like it was working, we just couldn't finish floaters, lay-ups and got a couple threes, as well. It's tough to say. Like sometimes you have that. I feel like we definitely played better offensively in the first half against Vanderbilt, but sometimes it just happens.

I don't know. Yeah, they have a lot of good athletes, good players, but I feel like we just should have -- if we had made our shots, made our lay-ups, it would have been a close game at halftime and then who knows. But yeah, we just didn't.

Q. Randy, how do you look at first half, second half, what wasn't working? Why did it take a while to get on track?

RANDY BENNETT: I'm not sure why, honestly. We didn't shoot the ball well, I would say, and they did. I don't know if it's that simple. We didn't turn it over, though. What did we have, 15 offensive rebounds to their eight? That's pretty good. We had six turnovers to their 11 or 12. 11.

One of the big keys is taking care of the ball, we did a good job of. We didn't score the ball -- some of it has to do with them. They are long and they're big around the basket.

But I don't think we did a great job defensively, and I'm not sure why that is, because we've been a really good defensive team all year, one of the top five or ten in the country.

I'll just credit them. You can't get down 13 to start in the first half. You don't want to spot them 13, which we did. We had it back to seven, had chances to get it even lower. But they held us off.

At the end of the day, you have to make some shots. We didn't shoot the ball well enough to win that game, I would say, nor did we defend them well enough. They shot a good percentage on us to -- for us to overcome that.

Q. What adjectives would you use to describe this team this season, and what would you say are maybe the two or three biggest highlights of the 24-25 season for the Saint Mary's Gaels were?

RANDY BENNETT: The adjective I'd use to describe them is a tight team. Tight team. You know what? There's a lot of tears in that locker room. I don't think you have that anymore as much, people that really care about each other. They won the championship because their relationships were so tight, they'll have for the rest of their lives. Wins and losses will come and go and they're fun to have, but those relationships is what it's all about, and these guys got it.

There was never any -- what I said at the beginning was 100 percent legit. We never had a bad day. We might have lost a game. We never had a bad day. We didn't have any junk in our locker room or program as far as guys not being all in. Even the guys that didn't play as much as they had hoped, when it came down to -- you had to do what was right for the team to win, and they were all there, and there's some good players sitting on our bench.

But they were tight. They cared about each other.

That was the stuff that made the year special. We won championships. We won games. We advanced in the NCAA Tournament. We won 29 games, second most in Saint Mary's history. We did a lot of things. But the thing they did was they did it right, in my opinion. That's how it should be, and it still can be, and they proved to me it can still be done. That makes me happy.

Q. You guys have made it to the second round three times in four years now, which, as you've said, is very hard to do. What makes it even harder to try to break through that next barrier, besides fueled mostly by the opponent. And the unrelated separate question is, how you view this team going forward, Wessels, Ross, there were a lot of signs today of guys coming back who have made an impact, and I'm curious your view of next year.

RANDY BENNETT: The first question, how do you punch through? Your only chance to punch through is get in the NCAA Tournament. You have to do that first, and that's where we've been -- our group has been impressive. These three seniors did it all four years. Nobody ever at Saint Mary's can say that. Nobody ever at Saint Mary's can say three years in a row until these guys. We've got to keep doing it, just keep knocking on that door, and we'll break through again. We broke through 2010 -- shoot, I didn't know it was going to happen that year, but it happened, and we were able to get Villanova, they were a 2 seed back then, and it happened. It could have happened today, and it could have happened a couple years ago against UCLA.

We've played some good teams. These guys were in the Final Four last year. But the more you do it, the more you feel like you can break through. I feel we can.

The second part of the question is the future. I like our guys. The future is always -- it's a little more unstable nowadays because of just the dynamics of college basketball. But we have some good young guys. Mikey is going to be a good player, and Jordan Ross is going to be a good player. Paul is a good player and he's only a sophomore. And Harry is a good player. There's others, too. Ashton is talented.

We're sitting on some guys. I know we are. We have new ones coming in that'll be good.

Looking forward to putting it together, but right now I can't really wrap my head around it. Still dealing with the emotions of this team.

But I like -- I think we can do it again. I think we can get back here. We'll have enough pieces if we can get them to follow the lead of these three seniors and have that kind of leadership again next year.

I love my coaching staff, and I like the quality of kids we have, and we have enough talent to be -- who knows. We can maybe be better next year. Maybe.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports