



Youthful Saints Finish Strong Season: A Review of 2010-11

The St. Lawrence women's basketball team had an interesting roster that led to many questions coming into the 2010-2011 season. On one hand they returned four starters, two of them All-Conference performers from the previous season when the Saints finished 18-7 and took second place in the conference. But on the other hand, they had nine freshmen on their team and had no returning experience other than the four starters. Would the veterans be able to carry the load without any experience off the bench? How would the freshmen adapt to the college game and would they be able to contribute enough to keep the Saints competitive? Would the Saints be inconsistent, a characteristic that often comes with youth? How would the young players stand up to the intensity that Liberty League play always brings?

The answers for the Saints were written game-by-game during the 2010-2011 campaign. And the team, veterans and freshmen, answered the bell loud and clear! St. Lawrence finished with a 19-6 overall record, and won a Liberty League Regular Season League Championship for the first time since the 2006-07 as they finished with a 10-4 conference record! And they did it without having a single senior on the team and while playing five freshmen every game in their regular rotation. As they did the previous season, they finished strong in the second half of conference play and excelled as the season went along.

With their team success came along individual honors for the Saints. Freshmen Kelly Legg was named Liberty League First Team and was a unanimous selection to the Liberty League's All-Rookie Team. Junior Katie Edgerton was named Liberty League Second Team and sophomore Erica Spera was named Liberty League Honorable Mention. According to Saint's Head Coach Dan Roiger, the team takes the most pride in winning the Liberty League title. "It was one of our

goals this season, and we had to overcome some adversity throughout the year as we went through our schedule," he said. "With a much improved league this year, it was a real testament to our character to come out on top of the League and I know our players take a lot of pride in that, as they should!"

The Saints started the 2010-2011 season with 10 non-conference games, eight before Christmas and two after the new year. After an opening season win over local foe SUNY-Potsdam, the Saints won both their games at the RIT Tournament. Both Legg and junior Casey Capello were named to the RIT All-Tournament team. Coming home, they defeated SUNY-Plattsburgh to start the season 4-0 heading into a big showdown with Ithaca College.

That game ended up being a classic. Both teams played exceptionally well throughout the game, but specifically in the final few minutes. The teams combined to score on 12 of the last 13 possessions. With five seconds to play, the Saints were up by a point only to watch Ithaca make a contested three-point shot at the buzzer to send the Saints to their first defeat. Little did they know that the last second defeat would end up being a characteristic of their season.

The team immediately bounced back though, beating Elmira College and then heading off to Boston where they won the Regis College tournament by defeating the home team in the championship game to finish the pre-Christmas schedule with a 7-1 record. Capello was named the tournament MVP and Edgerton was also named to the All-Tournament team. After the new year the Saints went on the road to beat SUNY-Brockport and SUNY-Oswego to enter Liberty League play with a 9-1 non-conference record.



"The early season play was a great opportunity for us to get some playing experience for our freshmen," said Coach Roiger. "They learned a lot about the college game and realized how physical, quick, and intense this level is. In addition, we needed to evaluate people and determine which players would be ready for the Liberty League. Overall, I liked the way we played and the games helped us recognize our own strengths and weaknesses as we prepared to play League teams. We knew we still had a lot of growth to do, but with the youth on our roster we couldn't rush experience, we just had to gain it game by game."

Starting in mid January, the Saints played their final 14 games against Liberty League foes. Their first trip, to RPI and Vassar, was part of the adversity Coach Roiger saw the team overcome. They opened up League play against RPI, the preseason coach's pick as the top Liberty League team - the Saints were picked second in the preseason poll. Finding themselves down by 16 in the first half, the team mounted a comeback that led to an eight point lead with 2:39 to play. A series of critical mistakes allowed RPI to come back and win the game on two free throws in the final five seconds. The next day the Saints went to Vassar and came out unable to makes shots. Still leading in the final minute, St. Lawrence missed some key free

throws which allowed Vassar to tie the game and send it into overtime. After two extra periods, the Saints found themselves with an 0-2 record in two games decided in the final possession. "It was emotionally devastating," said Coach Roiger. "We had high expectations coming into League play, played well enough to be in position to win both games, and then let both slip away in the final minute or two. I wasn't sure how we would respond to the emotions we were going through at that time. But all you can do is dig in, get to work, and prepare for the next team." To top it off, the Saints learned they lost Capello for some time, as she was fighting tendonitis in her knee, and her prognosis at the time was unknown. She was one of the captains and was named Liberty League First Team in the previous season. Her loss, to a team already shallow in experience, added another obstacle the Saints needed to overcome. In addition, the Saints returned home to face Union College, who led the league with a 3-0 record and came into the contest with a seven-game winning streak.



Now starting two freshmen and having only three veterans with significant experience, the Saints answered the challenge and defeated Union and Skidmore College. Another home victory over Clarkson netted the team a third straight win, and they found themselves back in the playoff hunt with a 3-2 record. The Saints then traveled to William Smith for a tough battle. "I felt like William Smith was as good as any team we faced," said Roiger. "They had a good balance of perimeter shooting, penetration abilities, and one of the toughest post players in the League." The Saints would defeat the Herons in a great game by a final score of 78-75. Then they had another lesson to learn the next day.

"The William Smith game took a lot out of us emotionally, but I thought that with the nice win on the road we would be fired up to play against Hamilton. I was wrong," said Coach Roiger. The Saints played arguably their worst game of the season up to that point, and looked slow and sloppy in playing against Hamilton who was looking for their first conference win of the year. Despite being flat and lacking intensity, they still led by a point in the final minute, but like some previous games, had some critical breakdowns that saw Hamilton sneak out a win in a one possession game.

That loss put the Saints record at 4-3 in Liberty League play. The conference ended up being a six-team battle for the four playoff spots, and halfway through the season, three teams were tied for first with a 5-2 record, while three others were at 4-3. That trend would continue throughout the year.

And the Saints would play two of those teams next, facing Vassar (5-2) and RPI (4-3), seeking revenge from their road losses to start League play. SLU would outlast Vassar in the first game of the weekend, and then found themselves in a tough situation against RPI. They were facing a 12 point deficit with about 10 minutes to play and nothing seemed to be working for the Saints against RPI's zone. "This is the time I look back on the season and recognize as the key moment of growth for us," said Coach Roiger. "I felt like we were struggling at that time by the way we

were playing, and challenged them to fix it right now, not Monday in practice. They were able to refocus and start playing well, and it propelled us to a great finish."

The Saints came from down 12 points to win the game. It took overtime to do it, but it was a great win for the Saints where they began to realize that they had the potential to play with any team, and the ability to dig deep within themselves to raise their level of play. A trip to Clarkson saw the Saints win a third straight, and get near the top of the league with a 6-3 record. They dominated Hamilton to get a fourth straight victory, and then lost their fourth game of the conference season, and fifth overall, in a one-possession game when they lost to William Smith in overtime.

"At that point, we had lost five games by a total of eight points if you count overtimes as one point losses," said Coach Roiger. "In each of those games we had the lead in the final minute and couldn't make it stand up. We were frustrated and disappointed, yet at the same time we weren't negative about it, we realized we were just a few plays away from taking it to another level. It helped us realize that every play was important, and that we needed to play that way on every possession. It forced us to grow, and we needed that."



Going into the last weekend, the Saints still found themselves in good shape as they were in a three-way tie for first place. But three other teams were still just one game off the pace. Heading into the final week, the Saints could finish anywhere from first to sixth, but they were the only team in control of their own destiny. They had to go on the road though and face one of the teams they were tied with and one that was a game below them. "I told the team that if they wanted to be champions they were going to have to earn it," said Coach Roiger. "If they did it, then they deserved to be champions, and if we didn't, we didn't deserve it. If you want to be the best, you have to play the best, and the way our schedule worked out it forced us to do that. But it sure is fun to play meaningful games at the end of the season!"

St. Lawrence had to travel to Skidmore who had a lot on the line. Defeat the Saints and Skidmore found themselves in the playoffs, lose to the Saints and they were out. Their motivation was high! It was a battle throughout all forty minutes, and neither team led by more than three points in the whole second half. This time it was the Saints who would execute in the final minute, getting a big stop and rebound on defense, and making a basket with a second to play to break a tie. The Saints celebrated at midcourt but their work wasn't yet done.

They had to face Union College the following day. And motivation was extremely high for both teams. If SLU won, they were conference champs and hosted the Liberty League Playoffs. If Union won, they were the champs and hosted the tournament! The Saints came out firing, and jumped to a 15 point lead in the first 10 minutes. They had to fight off a few challenges, but

rode a 10 point win to their first Liberty League Regular Season championship in four years! "It was great!" said Coach Roiger. "We really stepped up and played well and it was exciting for me to watch the players celebrate! It was neat to see them experience success after battling through so many emotional roller coasters with all our close losses. I was very proud of them and happy for them!" he added.

The season concluded with a loss on their home court in the conference playoffs. It was a disappointing game for the Saints, who played tight and nervous and for the second consecutive year, lost to the eventual playoff champions. "It left a sour taste in our mouths," commented Coach Roiger, 'and one we have to live with that for the next eight months. But maybe that's good, maybe it will keep motivation high because we didn't reach all of our goals."



Without a senior on the roster, SLU returns all their players for next year. For the first time in Coach Roiger's two-year SLU tenure, the Saints will have a veteran team. They will have senior leadership, and the majority of their roster has significant playing experience and stressful experience as they battled their way to a League title. In addition, the Saints have two recruits who committed early decision, both of which are very accomplished players on successful

teams. As of this writing, they are also recruiting some other excellent players who could help the team out immediately and into the future. "We would like to bring in a total of four players, and have our eyes on a few that would really make this a good recruiting class."

In two seasons under Coach Roiger's leadership the Saints have a 37-13 record and finished first and second in the Liberty League. In addition, they are the only team in the League that made playoffs in both of those seasons. With everyone returning, and a second consecutive solid recruiting class, the future looks bright for the Saints. But it won't be easy. The Liberty League will continue to be formidable, and with 12 of the 16 All-League players returning next season, nearly every team will be better. The Saints want to be in the mix of the top teams again.

"No one likes to lose their last game," mentioned Coach Roiger. "But within a day or two I had turned the page and started looking towards next season, and I am very excited by what we can do! We still need more depth, both from new recruits and from our current players improving, we need to become more consistent, and we need to improve our skills, especially shooting. But we have great people on our team, hard workers who are willing to step up to challenges, and I am confident that they will work hard at improving this off-season. We want to take the next step, compete for a conference title again, and then become a national level team. That's very hard, but our players have that dream and are willing to work towards that goal."

It was a great season for the youthful Saints, and one they will look to build on as they accrue experience and talent. Congratulations to the players and coaches of the St. Lawrence Saints on an excellent 2010-2011 campaign!