

## Cinderella Saints Do It Again, Knock Off No. 2 Oklahoma Wesleyan

**SIOUX FALLS, S.D.** – The University of St. Francis men’s basketball team isn’t going anywhere.

Surely the team’s rallying cry, “we ain’t going nowhere, we can’t be stopped now,” could be heard all the way back in Joliet as the unranked and eighth-seeded Saints authored another chapter to their Cinderella run, sending shockwaves throughout the NAIA DII Men’s Basketball National Championship with a 74-70 upset win over the second-overall seed, Oklahoma Wesleyan University. The above lyrics from P. Diddy’s Bad Boys for Life remain on beat as USF advances to the second round for the first time in program history.

Next up for St. Francis is a showdown with No. 14 Indiana University East at 10:15 a.m. on Friday. But before turning his attention to the Redwolves, USF head coach **Ryan Marks** took a moment to reflect on the historic victory.

“I am excited for USF, our program, and especially for coach Pat Sullivan, coach Jack Hermanski and all of the great guys that coached and played in this program,” Marks said. “Without them there is no such thing as USF basketball, our program is not where it is today and a moment as special as this one is not possible.”

Playing the role of underdog for the fifth consecutive game, the start was not what the then upset-hopefuls were looking for. USF (20-14) missed its first 13 shots and trailed 13-3, its largest deficit, nine minutes into the contest.

“Against a team as good as Oklahoma Wesleyan, the last thing we wanted was to get down early,” Marks said. “But I thought we were playing good defense and taking good shots that just weren’t falling. If we kept competing, those shots would start to go in.”

The shots did start to fall, and USF worked its way back into the game. **Lewis Holey (Sydney, Australia/Vermont Technical College)** put in the Saints’ first basket at the 10:44 mark, a three-point play that turned into an 11-2 run.

St. Francis continued to trail until the first-half buzzer when **Jarret Gmazel (Burr Ridge, Ill./Joliet JC)** sent USF into the locker room up 26-25 with his second 3-pointer of the game.

Marks pointed to his players’ belief as the key to not just turning around Wednesday’s game but also to thriving in the underdog role.

“They believe that we belong,” Marks said. “After we won the St. Ambrose game (USF’s regular season finale), we got our mojo back and the doubts started to go away. We’ve played so many close games all year, so we’re comfortable in those situations.”

In the second half, neither team gained separation of more than one possession until **Malik Bailey (Tutwiler, Miss./Coahoma CC)** hit a 3-pointer with 5:36 remaining that capped an 8-3 run and put USF ahead 59-55. It was one of the Saints' seven treys in the second half on 13 attempts (53.8 percent). The hot shooting also included one from **Reilly Goulet (Cave Creek, Ariz./Phoenix College)** that gave St. Francis its largest lead of the game, 66-60, with 3:32 remaining.

Although the Saints stayed in front until the final horn, the No. 2 Eagles (30-4) did not go quietly. Oklahoma Wesleyan pulled within two points four times in the final minute and had one look at a go-ahead 3-pointer. Rebounds were hard to come by for USF against the team with the top rebounding margin in NAIA DII this season, but Goulet squeezed the Eagles' 3-point miss with 16 seconds left. On the other end, he hit the first of three pairs of free throws, all of which extended the Saints' lead back to two possessions and eventually sealed yet another celebration at midcourt.

As has been a theme during its run, St. Francis controlled the 3-point line, holding one of the top 3-point shooting teams in the nation to just seven on 25 attempts. USF outscored the Eagles 33-21 from distance.

Goulet finished with a team-high 12 points while Bailey and **Pietro Badalassi (Canberra, Australia/Central Maine CC)** joined him in double figures with 10. Gmazel and **Mitch Kwasigroch (Manhattan, Ill./Joliet JC)** added nine each. USF's depth was apparent as the Saints totaled 40 bench points, outscoring the Eagles by 18 in that category.

"[The bench was] phenomenal and has been all year," Marks said. "We played 12 guys tonight. We have a group that is willing to share the ball and find the hot hand. Gmazel and Kwasigroch have grown all year as they've gotten acclimated to our system and Reilly [Goulet] has been a consistent presence all season."

Four players reached double-digit points for the Eagles. Joshua Wilchombe grabbed a game-high 12 boards for an Oklahoma Wesleyan team that outrebounded USF 51-33.

IU East, the Liston Bracket's No. 4 seed, is St. Francis' next opponent. Marks knows the Cinderella Saints are ready for this stage.

"We have great respect for IU East's current team and the consistency of its program," Marks said. "Our guys know that when you play on this stage, you earn the right to not just play great teams but great programs. We are excited for the challenge."