

## Experienced Saints March on to NAIA Second Round

**SIoux CITY, Iowa** – Playing in its fourth straight NAIA DII Women’s Basketball National Tournament, the University of St. Francis women’s basketball team’s experience was evident throughout its 73-63 first-round victory over Milligan College (Tenn.) on Thursday morning at the Tyson Events Center.

Seven of the 10 Saints that saw the floor on Thursday had played on the national stage before. No. 14 USF (24-8) leaned on that experience and maintained control throughout Thursday’s contest on its way to advancing to the second round for the third year in a row.

“It’s really important,” Brooks said when asked about the experience of his group. “Being here is a big deal for us. You know you have to come ready to play because you’re going to play good teams.”

St. Francis did come ready to play. USF scored on its first possession and never trailed in the contest. Starting quickly is something the Saints have struggled with this season, but the bright lights seem to bring out the best in the brown & gold.

“It was really important for us to get off to a good start,” said Brooks, coaching at the tournament for the 16th time. “It’s something we haven’t done well this season but today they came out and played well.”

**Kaitlin Aylward (Elmwood Park, Ill./Trinity)**, who came into the game averaging 15.1 points in her seven career NAIA tournament games, was the catalyst on offense early. She scored 13 first-quarter points as the Saints jumped ahead 19-9 after 10 minutes. USF’s leading scorer finished with a game-high 28 points, her career-high in Sioux City.

Aylward combined with the other two starting forwards, **Nichole Davidson (South Elgin, Ill./St. Charles North)** and **Jordan Pyle (Traralgon, Australia/Eastern Illinois)**, to post 55 of USF’s 73 points. St. Francis’ motion offense was sharp, finding cutters for layups and only turning the ball over four times.

“We read their defense really well,” Brooks said. “They were patient and made the right play at the right time.”

But no lead was safe for the Saints against a pesky Milligan (26-7) squad. Twice, the Buffaloes sliced a double-digit deficit down to just one point. USF’s poise was especially prevalent in those big moments.

“Basketball is a game of runs,” Brooks said. “They made some runs and we answered, which was big.”

USF used a 9-0 spurt in the third quarter to extend another double-digit margin at 46-36. This time Milligan could not recover, and the Saints held a lead of at least seven for the remainder of the contest.

Turnovers were also the story for the Saints on the defensive end as USF turned 14 Milligan miscues into 21 points.

Starters and NAIA tournament veterans **Ivana Markovic (Wheaton, Ill./Glenbard South)** and **Madi Canady (Warren, Ind./Huntington North)** added eight and six points respectively. **Andriana Acosta (Crest Hill, Ill./Joliet Catholic)** grabbed 11 boards, including seven on the offensive end.

Sarah Robinson led the Buffaloes with 18 points and seven rebounds.

Next up for the Saints is a rematch with the defending NAIA National Champions, third-ranked Dakota Wesleyan University at 3:30 p.m. on Friday. In December, then No. 1 DWU defeated USF 74-51 at the West Palm Beach Invitational. On Thursday, the Wildcats dispatched No. 8-seed St. Thomas University (Fla.) 97-66.

“We get a chance to play again and we’re excited about it,” Brooks said.