

Mount Mercy women eye next step

Written by Jim Ecker

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Aaron Jennings never wrote down "women's basketball coach" when he was asked for his career goals while attending Northwestern University.

He knew he wanted to coach when his playing days were over, but women's basketball? It never entered his mind.

Now Jennings is beginning his seventh year as the women's basketball coach at Mount Mercy and loves it. "Honestly, I don't think I ever thought about being a women's basketball coach until I applied for the job," he said Tuesday.

Jennings was not being chauvinistic at the time. He spent four years as an assistant coach for the men's basketball team at Mount Mercy and figured he'd become a head coach for a men's team somewhere when the time was right, but he enjoys working at Mount Mercy and saw no reason to move when the women's basketball job became available.

He has compiled a 119-76 record with the Mustangs, including a trip to the quarterfinals of the NAIA Division II national tournament in 2012.

Mount Mercy nearly reached the national tournament again last year, but the Mustangs lost to St. Ambrose by two points in the championship game of the Midwest Collegiate Conference tournament with a trip to nationals on the line.

The Mustangs had two shots to tie that game in the final seconds and missed them both. Jennings has never stopped thinking about how close they came last year.

"I'm hoping the team has been thinking of that as well," he remarked.

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Mount Mercy finished 20-12 overall last year and 7-5 in the conference. Jennings thinks they can surpass those numbers this season.

"I think we have the talent to get to 25 wins or more, but talent doesn't win games. You have to execute," he said.

The big key for the Mustangs is finding a way to replace Amanda Frost, who was an NAIA All-American as a junior and a 14-point scorer last season.

"The last two years we always had her as our No. 1 option and also as our safety," said Jennings. "Whenever the team got into trouble we were looking for Amanda and got her the ball. We've got to figure out how to play without that dominating presence inside."

Jennings does not think he'll have a dominant scorer this season, but he believes the Mustangs will have a balanced attack with lots of players capable of reaching double figures on a regular basis.

The Mustangs have a long list of players who contributed last year, topped by Cedar Rapids Washington grad Abby Herb at 10.2 points. Christa Oldham averaged 8.8 points, Makenzie Zeitler 8.4, Paige Last 8.0, Callan Timms 7.8, Cedar Rapids Prairie grad Alisa Weiland 5.0 and Danielle Herdliska 4.1.

"I think it's really going to be by committee," said Jennings. "We're not going to have that dominating presence like Amanda was."

Mount Mercy runs the "Princeton Offense," which Jennings learned all about during his playing career for Bill Carmody at Northwestern. He's tweaked things a little to fit his personnel, but the concepts are the same with a lot of back-door cuts and high-post passes.

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The Mustangs will open the season this weekend at the Grand View Classic in Des Moines. They play Mid-American Nazarene on Friday and face Central Christian on Saturday.

Herdlika and Liz Thompson are currently playing for the Mount Mercy soccer team and Tracy Kilburg is playing for the volleyball squad. They will join the basketball team once their fall sports are done.

ROSTER

Abby Herb, 6-0, Cedar Rapids Washington
Danielle Herdlika, 5-7, Solon
Christa Oldham, 5-7, Davenport
Madison Blietz, 5-8, Cedar Rapids Jefferson
Liz Thompson, 5-3, St. George, Utah
Alisa Weiland, 5-4, Cedar Rapids Prairie
Callan Timms, 5-8 Cherry Valley, Ill.
Tracy Kilburg, 5-6, Springville
McKenna Sexton, 5-7, West Branch
Paige Last, 5-8, Rock Falls, Ill.
Makenzie Zeitler, 5-8, Douds
Lindsay Schaffer, 5-7, Danville
Ashley Dolan, 5-11, Dubuque
Maija Jantti, 6-1, Finland