

Jennings signs 19 for Mount Mercy women

Written by Jim Ecker
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Some college basketball coaches grow tired of recruiting and think it's simply a necessary evil, but Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings enjoys hitting the road and finding new players.

That's good, because Mount Mercy is adding a junior varsity program for the 2015-16 season and Jennings needed to sign a big class to have enough players for the varsity and JV squads.

He's signed 19 new players for this season, including six junior college transfers and 13 high school seniors.

"Recruiting is kind of exciting," he said this week. "It's just like a game. It's challenging, and just like you have competition in a game, you have competition in recruiting.

"You're selling your program and yourself and your school to the kids, and you're competing with all the other excellent programs in the area and in the state and sometimes out of state."

Jennings was not merely looking for enough warm bodies to fill the varsity and junior varsity teams. The Mustangs have only six returning players from this year's squad, so he needed a big recruiting class anyway. In addition, he knows the Mustangs will need more good players when they begin competing in the Heart of America Conference in the 2016-17 campaign.

"I want more competition, we want to get greater depth," he remarked. "We wanted to get more athletic, we wanted to get longer."

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Mount Mercy competed at the NAIA Division II level in the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but they'll be an NAIA Division I program in the Heart of America. Jennings feels that will require more good athletes to be successful.

Jennings said all 25 players on the roster - the 19 new people and the six returning players - will have an equal shot at making the varsity.

"Every single player that we brought in is somebody that I think can help us, or eventually help us if they're not ready yet," he said. "I saw skills that I liked. We didn't bring anybody in just because they're a JV player.

"I'm going to put the players on the court that are able to play the way we want to," he said. "Players that want to win and understand that winning isn't easy, and you have to work for those things."

Mount Mercy finished with a 19-14 record this past season.

Jennings said he would not have signed any of the junior college transfers if he didn't think they were ready to help the varsity. "They're all going to be pushing for a lot of playing time, because they have that ability," he said.

Latasha Harman, a transfer from DMACC, is a versatile 5-foot-8 player who can guard a variety of opponents, according to Jennings. She averaged 11 points and seven rebounds this past season. "She's going to come in right away and help us," the coach said.

Sobrina West, from Iowa Lakes Community College, and Alivia Zubrod, from Ellsworth Community College, missed playing this season due to foot and

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ankle injuries, but Jennings expects them to be healthy and contribute to the squad.

Jordyn Lehman, also from Ellsworth, brings toughness and rebounding skills, according to Jennings. Tiana "T.T." Thompson, from DMAAC, will be a candidate for playing time at point guard. Andrea Valadez, from Fort Scott Community College in Kansas, also figures to help the Mustangs.

Eight of the incoming freshmen are from Iowa, including Kandis O'Donnell from Cedar Rapids Washington. Jennings also signed the Blowers twins - Sara and Sam - from Iowa City High. The other Iowans are Kasey Palmer from West Delaware, Kiley Seelman from Clear Creek-Amana, Hannah Mouglin from Clear Creek-Amana, Karli Oltmanns of Anamosa and Chelsea Lampe of Highland.

Jennings also signed Cheyenne Pearce of Wahoo, Neb.; Quenna Keating of Quincy Notre Dame, Ill.; Jakaila Jordan of Martin Luther High School in Wisconsin; Lakin Goodman from Morrison, Ill.; and Raeshonda Chandler from Kewanee, Ill.

Jennings said he's looking forward to the start of practice.

"I love player development, I love being on the court," he said. "So getting more players into your system, I get to do that more."

Mount Mercy will play an independent schedule during the 2015-16 school year while it waits for full membership in the Heart of America Conference. Jennings said he's almost finished with the schedule, which will include a home game in December with Alcorn State, an NCAA Division I team that was looking for an additional game on its trip to Iowa to face Iowa State.

"To host a team like that is going to be amazing," said Jennings. "It's going to be a neat thing."

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