

## Mount Mercy baseball team set for action

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 11 February 2016 20:01 - Last Updated Saturday, 13 February 2016 00:19

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It might be a little chilly in Georgia this weekend, but that's okay with the Mount Mercy University baseball team.

The Mustangs are ready to play ball.

Mount Mercy will participate in the Perfect Game College Spring Swing event at the new LakePoint Sporting Community & Town Center in Emerson, Ga., with two games Friday and two more Saturday.

The weather forecast for Friday is for a high temperate of 55 degrees. Saturday's forecast calls for 36 degrees, but it's supposed to be dry and sunny.

"We're ready. We need to play," Mount Mercy coach Jack Dahm said before the Mustangs hopped on a bus Thursday for the 12-hour ride to Georgia.  
"There's only so much you can get done inside.

"We're at that point where we need to play someone else and get outside and see where we're at with things. We've got a long ways to go as a team and a program, but it will be nice to be outside."

The new baseball complex in Emerson currently features eight regulation diamonds, all with synthetic turf for easy maintenance. They are currently building eight more fields on a second campus, with full development expected by 2018.

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Perfect Game USA, which was founded in Cedar Rapids, is a partner in the LakePoint complex and has an office in Emerson. The Perfect Game College Spring Swing will feature more than 70 teams in February and March.

Mount Mercy finished with a 19-25 record last season in Dahm's first year as head coach. He's confident the Mustangs will be a much better team on offense after hitting only .244 with seven home runs last year. He's also confident the Mustangs will be faster, more athletic and better on defense, but they have a few questions with the pitching staff as the season begins.

Alex Hayden, who was making a solid recovery from Tommy John Surgery, suffered a hyper-extended elbow (unrelated to the surgery) and probably will not pitch in a game until late March or early April, although he is slated for action at second base this weekend.

"It was too bad," Dahm said about Hayden's setback on the mound. "He was making great progress."

Hayden starred at Kennedy High School and Iowa Central before moving to Mount Mercy last season.

Andrew Rayner, another starting pitcher, is just returning from a hamstring injury. And Michael Hackett, their closer, has a sprained ankle and did not make the trip.

"We're without three of our top-five pitchers, probably, and we're a little bit thin there anyway," Dahm said. "So that will be a big question mark as we get the season going. If we can survive early on through these injuries, I think our pitching staff has a chance to be pretty solid."

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Cale Henke, a Kirkwood grad, fashioned a 5-6 record and nifty 2.97 ERA last season for the Mustangs and returns at the top of the rotation.

"He's a legitimate No. 1 guy," Dahm said. "He has great feel for his pitches, he throws upper 80's and he'll touch 90. He's got a good feel for his change-up and his breaking ball.

"He's a guy who can beat anybody in the country, in my opinion."

Nick Ledinsky, a transfer from Ellsworth Community College, will start one of the games in Georgia. Cody Bell and Adam Lloyd, a pair of Kennedy grads who played for Mount Mercy last season, also are scheduled to start games this weekend.

Dahm is anxious to put his batting order together in Georgia. Cody Williams, a fleet center fielder who hit .349 last season, is back after missing part of the season with a leg injury. The Mustangs slumped when Williams got hurt last year.

Dahm said catcher Jimmy Lizarraga, another Kennedy grad, has changed his swing from last year and looks like a new hitter after batting .246 last year. Bell led the Mustangs with 21 RBIs and can play first base and the outfield when he's not pitching.

Dahm said shortstop Devin Holmes, who hit .279 last season, has lost 20 pounds and is swinging a lot better. Jefferson grad Christian Knox is back after hitting .233 with two home runs, which tied for the team lead.

Dahm feels he recruited some good hitters from the junior college ranks with Tarran Beasley (Ellsworth), Ian Fitzsimmons (DMACC), Cody Collender

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(Ellsworth), Noah Dostal (Kirkwood) and Reid Bonner (Iowa Western).

Beasley hit 18 home runs at Ellsworth last season. "He's a professional hitter," Dahm said. "He just knows how to it."

Dostal did not play much at Kirkwood, but he's a versatile performer who enjoyed a good career at Cedar Rapids Washington. Bonner was the Class 4A Player of the Year at Iowa City West, but he chose to play football at Iowa Western Community College before returning to baseball this year.

"I think we'll be able to find ways to win some ballgames," Dahm said about his lineup.

Mount Mercy will compete this season as a member of the Association of Independent Institutions (All) before moving into the Heart of America Conference next year. The All will host a postseason tournament for the top eight teams in the All rankings, with the All tourney serving as a qualifier for the NAIA Division II national tournament.

Mount Mercy is scheduled to host Viterbo in a pair of doubleheaders at the University of Iowa on March 19-20. "I think it will be a neat experience for our players," said Dahm, who used to be the head coach at Iowa.

Mount Mercy will continue to play its home games at Xavier High School this season. The Mustangs hope to have their new field ready for 2017.