

## Mustangs earn trip to NAIA nationals

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Mount Mercy men's basketball team clinched a spot in the NAIA national tournament Saturday afternoon by winning a tough game in the semifinals of their conference tournament, but the Mustangs say they are not done yet.

The 17th-ranked Mustangs want to capture the All conference title Sunday night before they head to Missouri for the national tournament in 10 days.

Mount Mercy trimmed Central Christian, 74-68, in the semifinals of the Association of Independent Institutions tourney Saturday with a late surge at the U.S. Cellular Center.

The Mustangs trailed 65-61 with about three minutes remaining, but they scored 13 straight points to win their second tight game in the All meet in less than 24 hours.

Mount Mercy (24-7) will face York (23-8) in the conference finals Sunday at 6 p.m.

The top three finishers in the eight-team tournament are guaranteed a spot in the national event, but the Mustangs don't want to settle for second-best in their own home town.

"We've come too far to just throw it away just because we know we're going to nationals," said Chris Ford, one of the heroes for Mount Mercy Saturday. "We're here now and we're going to

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take it. And I feel like this team is definitely capable of taking it."

Mount Mercy reached the second round of the NAIA national tournament last year under Paul Gavin. Now they'll be making two straight trips to the national tournament for the first time in school history, this time under Aaron Jennings, who succeeded Gavin as head coach on the eve of the campaign when Gavin became the athletic director.

"I'm so excited," said Jennings, who stands above the crowd at 6-foot-8.

"I'm so excited for this team.

"I told them - and I'm kind of emotional - but I told them before the game and during every single timeout, 'We have to earn it, nothing is given.'

And so that's what they did.

"They fought and they fought and they played together. Guys made big plays. And when we did something right, everybody was celebrating. And when we did something wrong, people were there to pick each other up. And that's what a team does."

The Mustangs did just about everything right in the final three minutes to erase their 65-61 deficit and surge to victory.

CJ Parker, who had some rough moments Friday night when Mount Mercy beat Johnson & Wales in overtime, got the rally started by nailing a 3-pointer from the corner to make it 65-64 and turn the game around.

Parker made two bad passes in the final 30 seconds of overtime Friday night that nearly cost the Mustangs the game, but he made amends Saturday afternoon.

"I had to prove to my team that last night was something that had never happened to me before," he remarked. "I was just too excited, coming so close to winning and throwing the ball

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away, turnover after turnover. It felt like today I had to redeem myself."

Tre Wagner gave the Mustangs a 66-65 lead with a quick drive to the basket, then Parker stole the ball from Central Christian to give the Mustangs another possession. Chris Ford made a strong move to the bucket, banked in a shot, got fouled and completed the three-point play to make it 69-65 with 70 seconds left to play.

That four-point lead matched Mount Mercy's biggest advantage at that point.

"Oh, man," said Ford, smiling as he recounted his big play. "My teammates trust me. They trust me when I get to the basket and they put their faith in me and I felt like I had to finish. And with the grace of God I finished the play and helped us seal the deal."

Central Christian missed a 3-pointer, Mount Mercy grabbed the rebound and Ford hit two free throws for a 71-65 lead with 37.8 seconds left.

Central Christian missed another 3-pointer, Mount Mercy grabbed another rebound and Ford went 1-for-2 at the foul line to make it 72-65 with 19 seconds left.

Central Christian missed again and Parker fed Mychael Brawner-Henley for a breakaway dunk with 4.5 seconds left to put an exclamation point on the 13-point surge and the victory.

Central Christian hit a 3-pointer at the buzzer to make it 74-68.

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