

Mustangs aiming for NAIA tourney again

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 31 October 2018 03:48 -



The Mount Mercy men's basketball team played in the NAIA national tournament in 2016 and 2017, but the Mustangs failed to qualify for the tournament last season and finished with a 15-16 record.

That stunk.

"They've tasted success. So last year is supposed to stink," said Coach Aaron Jennings. "You're supposed to say, 'That's not the way things are supposed to be done here. Let's put in the work and let's get this turned around.'"

"I'm coaching this year with the expectation that's happening," he said. "I'm excited to get going."

Mount Mercy has plenty of experience on the club and there's a strong senior class that's been bolstered by talented newcomers, giving Jennings lots of options heading into the season opener Thursday night at Viterbo.

"We're going to play fast, we're going to create tempo," he said, anxious to begin the season.

The Mustangs averaged 81.7 points last season but allowed 81.5, which led to their so-so campaign. This year Jennings would like to average 87 or 88 per game, but allow only 77 for a healthy 10-point advantage.

"If we're doing that, we're going to be good," he remarked.

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Jennings believes a modest improvement in 3-point shooting, free throw accuracy and defensive rebounding will translate into the numbers he's looking for this season.

Mychael Brawner-Henley, a 6-foot-4 forward, averaged 13.6 points last season. Antwain Strong, a 5-11 guard, averaged 12.8 points and finished sixth in the nation in assists, giving the Mustangs two proven scorers in the Heart of America Conference.

The ball will be in Strong's hands much of the time. "I think he has a legitimate shot to lead the country in assists, because of the way we're going to play," said Jennings.

Mike Evans (9.3 ppg), Mohammed Albagami (7.5), Davion Watson (5.6), Dennis McKinney (5.3) and Emilio Villagrana (4.3) combined to average 32 points last season, adding to the firepower.

Bailey Basala, a 6-foot-5 transfer from Lewis University, is considered an excellent 3-point shooter who can stretch an opponent's defense.

"He can fill it up," said Jennings. "We're really excited about him. He's going to be an excellent piece for our team."

Julian Hehmann, a powerful 6-8, 235-pound forward from Germany, practiced with the Mustangs last winter when he enrolled in school and could be another piece of the puzzle.

"He loves contact, he loves to screen," said Jennings. "He doesn't get pushed around much, because he's physically strong."

Mount Mercy finished with a 9-and-10 record in the Heart of America Conference last season, with a string of tough defeats. The Mustangs had an 0-and-8 record against the four Heart teams that made the NAIA national tournament, but the Mustangs had a 10-point lead in all

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eight of those games before falling short in the second half against tough foes.

"This conference is just crazy. Crazy good," said Jennings, who played in the Big Ten at Northwestern and knows good basketball when he sees it. "Everybody is good, 1 through 13.

"There's not going to be a night where you can't show up. There are just so many dangerous players and excellent coaches."

Jennings welcomes the competition and thinks his club is ready to climb toward the top of the league. "I think we're a top-4, top-5 team," he remarked. "And we're going to compete with everybody."

The home opener is Saturday against Maranatha Baptist at the Hennessey Recreation Center at 3 p.m.

Jennings begins his fourth year as Mount Mercy's head coach with a 62-36 record. He compiled a 138-90 record as the women's basketball coach at Mount Mercy for seven years, giving him exactly 200 victories with the Mustangs all told.

Mount Mercy has 31 players in the program and plays an active junior varsity schedule. Justin Storey, a 6-4 transfer from Kirkwood, will miss the season with a knee injury.

MOUNT MERCY ROSTER

Seniors

Umut Akkepenek, 6-5, Istanbul, Turkey; Mohammed Albagami, 6-3, Battle Creek, Mich.; Mychael Brawner-Henley, 6-4, Evanston, Ill.; Mike Evans, 6-5, Davenport; Joseph Kehinde, 6-3, London, England; Antwain Strong, 5-11, Akron, Ohio; Emilio Villagrana, 5-11, Solon; Davion Watson, 6-5, Champaign, Ill.

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Juniors

Jacob Ehlen, 5-11, Belle Plaine; Landis Farmer, 5-10, Peoria, Ill.; Brandon Jackson, 6-0, Memphis, Tenn.; Devin Laird, 6-3, Detroit; Davarea Loggins, 5-8, Davenport; Christian Reischauer, 6-2, Colo-Nesco; Brady Stoeffler, 6-0, Colo-Nesco; Justin Storey, 6-4, Raleigh, N.C.

Sophomores

Bailey Basala, 6-5, Moline, Ill.; Barry Doe, 5-9, Des Moines Lincoln; DJ Johnson, 6-0, San Antonio; Dennis McKinney, 6-4, Chicago; Jacob Perks, 5-10, Des Moines Lincoln; Dexter Spencer, 6-1, Bolingbrook, Ill.

Freshmen

Brayden Blick, 6-1, Longmont, Colo.; Philip Bower, 5-10, Colo-Nesco; Kenny Clay, 5-7, Davenport West; Ayoub Deng, 5-10, Des Moines Lincoln; Julian Hehmann, 6-8, Hanover, Germany; Tyler Kelley, 6-4, West Delaware; Balene Mitchell, 5-11, Davenport West; Nolan Ruff, 5-11, Linn-Mar; Dariyus Wooten, 6-0, Cincinnati.