

Mustangs pay tribute to absent teammate

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 28 October 2014 21:48 -

There will be an empty chair for Mount Mercy men's basketball games this season at the Hennessey Recreation Center in honor of Danny DeBacker, a member of the team who was killed in a car crash by a drunk driver last month.

DeBacker's white home No. 20 jersey will be displayed on the bench in his memory and the team's shooting jerseys say "DD No. 20" on them.

He's gone but certainly not forgotten.

"I still struggle sleeping a little bit at night, because that's when I think about him," Mount Mercy Coach Paul Gavin said Tuesday after practice. "He was a great kid."

It's been a stressful year for Gavin and the Mustangs. He kicked four players off the team during the season last year, contributing to a rare 12-20 overall record and 3-9 finish in the Midwest Collegiate Conference.

"For the first time in my career I had to dismiss players," he said. "All four of them were starters. It was all at the same time. It changed things."

Gavin said the dismissals were the result of unrelated incidents during the course of a month. He said they were not bad people, but made poor choices.

Mount Mercy finished 27-6 in the 2012-13 season and reached the national tournament, then took a step back last year.

"We want to build a winning tradition, and we had that established until last year," said Gavin, who enters his 23th year with a 360-324 record. "So this team's job - and they know - is to change that culture. It started last spring, not this fall."

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Gavin thinks last year's internal problems, followed by DeBacker's tragic death, may have brought the team closer together. He likes the way the team has responded in practices heading into Friday night's opener at Judson College.

Gavin has 25 players on the roster, including six who are being red-shirted for various reasons. It's the most players he's ever had on a team, but he likes the collection of talent.

"We do have a lot of depth," he said. "Our toughest challenge is figuring out who our best-five are. Every night it changes. We're legitimately 12 or 13 deep right now."

Dondre Osborne will be one of the starting guards Friday night. Kennedy grad Ben Struss and Alex Houston will start at forward. The other two spots are up for grabs.

Kennedy grad Jake Misener and Da'Quan Moore are battling in the guard court. Kevin Price-Majors and Ian Matos are battling up front. Five other players are in the mix, including Kennedy grad Kyle Lamaak and Linn-Mar grad Derik Gogg.

Gavin anticipates having a balanced attack with balanced scoring. "Which I like," he said.

The Mustangs took boxing lessons during the off-season to get tougher and improve their footwork. "Our guys actually loved it," said Gavin. "That was kind of fun."

They'll step in the ring for two games this weekend as the 2014-15 campaign begins.

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ACTIVE ROSTER

Ray Goines, 6-2, Chicago

Alex Houston, 6-4, Chicago

Dondre Osborne, 6-0, Zion, Ill.

Ian Matos, 6-5, Rio de Janiero, Brazil

James Boonstoppel, 6-2, Adelaide, Australia

Da'Quan Moore, 5-8, Waterloo

Antwain Strong, 5-10, Cedar Falls

Nick Shelman, 6-4, Solon

Blake Murdock, 5-10, Cedar Rapids Kennedy

Nate Becker, 6-5, Center Point

John Johnson, 6-0, Richfield, Minn.

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Jake Misener, 6-2, Cedar Rapids Kennedy

Ben Struss, 6-6, Cedar Rapids Kennedy

Trey Magnani, 6-1, Mount Pleasant

Kevin Price-Majors, 6-6, Minneapolis

Kyle Lamaak, 6-4, Cedar Rapids Kennedy

Kendall Clark, 6-8 Keokuk

Derik Gogg, 6-8, Linn-Mar

Brian Nachtman, 6-1, North English

Redshirts

Sheawn Bedford Jr., 6-3, Converse, Texas

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Tim Bennett, 6-1, Des Moines

Montrell Billups, 6-6, Chicago

Terrance Brown, 6-2, Iowa City

Ja'Marty Hall, 6-2, Gary, Ind.

Josh Williams, 6-6, Montgomery, Ill.