

Murdock's dunk caps Mustangs victory

Written by Jim Ecker

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Blake Murdock established two new career highs for himself Monday night when the Mount Mercy Mustangs drubbed Lincoln Christian, 101-71, at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Murdock reached a career high with 18 points, based on 6-for-10 shooting and a pair of 3-pointers. And the Kennedy grad set another career high for the most dunks he's ever had in a single game.

One.

The milestone happened when he stole a pass near mid-court, drove to the bucket and raised himself above the rim for a slam that brought his teammates out of their chairs in celebration.

He'd never dunked in a game before. Ever. Anywhere.

"That would be the first one, actually," he said, smiling. "I've had plenty in practice, but it feels really good to finally get one in a game and get one down."

Mount Mercy lists Murdock at 6-feet tall, but that's a slight exaggeration.

"Probably about 5-11, on a good day," he confessed.

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Murdock took everyone by surprise when he stole the ball, broke ahead of the pack and slammed it down to give the Mustangs a 98-69 lead with about 3:40 left in the lopsided affair.

He got the idea about dunking when he reached the 3-point line, so instead of a simple layup he went for the one and only dunk of his collegiate career.

"I looked back and I saw I had enough room, so I thought I might as well try it," he said.

Murdock never dunked the ball during his days at Kennedy. Not even close.

"Definitely zero," he said. "I was plenty below the rim at Kennedy. I couldn't even dunk before I came here my freshman year."

And he certainly never dunked during his years at Harding Middle School. "I don't even know if I could touch the net back then," he remarked.

Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings was not totally shocked by the dunk, but was certainly happy for the junior guard.

"Obviously I know he can dunk, because I've seen him in practice and stuff, but an in-game dunk, that's impressive," said Jennings.

Murdock, averaging 4.2 points, was happy to have a good game and get himself untracked a little bit.

"I've been struggling a little bit, so I'm just hoping it helps me break out a little bit and get some confidence in myself and I'm hoping we can go from here and keep collecting W's along the way."

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Mychael Brawner-Henley led the Mustangs (13-5) with 23 points, seven rebounds, five assists and two steals. CJ Parker contributed 14 points, 12 rebounds, six steals and five assists. Jake Anderson scored 11 points and Tre Wagner added 10 points.

Mount Mercy is playing an independent schedule this year before competing in the Heart of America Conference next season. That means the Mustangs have 29 individual regular-season games, with no conference opponents and no conference title on the line, but they will host the Association of Independent Institutions post-season tournament Feb. 26-28 at the U.S. Cellular Center.

Eight teams will compete in the AAI tournament, with the top three teams from the AAI tournament advancing to the NAIA Division II national tournament in Branson, Mo. The eight teams in the AAI tournament will be seeded 1 through 8, and although Mount Mercy is guaranteed an automatic spot in the tournament as the host school, the Mustangs want to be seeded as high as possible.

That makes all 29 games important as they head toward the postseason.

"Honestly, I've treated it like the Independent League is our conference," said Jennings. "There's 15 independent teams, and even though we're not playing a true conference schedule, we're all paying attention to how we do.

"All these games we're playing now have a lot to do toward seedings."

Mount Mercy earned an automatic berth to the NAIA national tournament last season by winning the Midwest Collegiate Conference tournament, but the MCC folded after the 2014-15 season and the Heart of America is still a year away.

"It's a lot different from last year," said Murdock. "We still have the same goal: We just want to get back down to Branson again. That's our main goal right now."

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Ramon Suero scored 20 points for Lincoln Christian (2-11).

LINCOLN CHRISTIAN (71): Gifford 3 2-4 9, Fisher 2 2-3 7, Street 1 1-3 3, Thompson 6 1-1 14, Suero 6 8-11 20, Coomer 0 0-0 0, Mileur 0 0-0 0, Bray 1 0-0 2, Hopkins 1 0-0 3, Paul 0 0-0 0, Minnett 2 2-4 6, Tefft 2 2-2 7. Totals 24 18-28 71.

MOUNT MERCY (101): Anderson 4 3-5 11, Wagner 3 2-5 10, Ford 3 0-1 7, Parker 6 0-0 14, Brawner-Henley 8 5-11 23, Murdock 6 4-4 18, Villagrana 1 0-0 2, Julien 1 0-0 2, Frazier 0 0-0 0, Mallett 0 0-0 0, Koeppel 2 0-0 5, Blohm 4 1-1 9, Allen 0 0-0 0. Totals 38 15-27 101.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 49, Lincoln Christian 33. 3-point goals - Lincoln Christian 5 (Gifford 1, Fisher 1, Thompson 1, Hopkins 1, Tefft 1), Mount Mercy 10 (Wagner 2, Parker 2, Brawner-Henley 2, Murdock 2, Ford 1, Koeppel 1).