

## NAIA hoops tourney set for C.R. this weekend

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mount Mercy University was delighted when it was admitted into the Heart of America Conference last year, but their basketball teams will not start competing in the league until next season.

That left the Mustangs as a basketball orphan this season. That led to them joining the Association of Independent Institutions, which is an informal conference that's administered by the NAIA for schools that need a league and teams to play.

And that led Mount Mercy to acting as the host for the All men's and women's basketball tournaments that will be held at the U.S. Cellular Center this Friday, Saturday and Sunday in downtown Cedar Rapids.

If you see a lot of tall people walking around Cedar Rapids this weekend, you'll know why.

There are eight teams in both tournaments, which will be held morning, afternoon and night at the Cell Center. Mount Mercy received an automatic spot in the tournament as the host, but the Mustangs earned their way into the tournament anyway with successful campaigns.

The Mount Mercy women (16-13) drew the No. 4 seed in their bracket and will face No. 5 seed Clarke University in the quarterfinals at 5:45 p.m. Friday.

The 17th-ranked Mount Mercy men (22-7) earned the No. 1 seed in their tournament and will play No. 8 Johnson & Wales at 7:30 p.m. Friday, giving the Mustangs back-to-back games in the U.S. Cellular Center.

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Mount Mercy is excited about showcasing its basketball programs on the big stage in downtown Cedar Rapids.

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity," said Mount Mercy athletic director Paul Gavin. "There's some great small college basketball that's going to be played.

"Those folks who don't know much about the NAIA, hopefully they can come out and get a chance to see some of that great basketball."

The ticket prices are \$5 per session for students, \$10 per session for adults or \$20 for an all-tournament pass.

The tournament will begin at 8:30 a.m. Friday with a women's game between Northern New Mexico and Haskell. There will be four games in Session I -- two women's games and two men's games -- and four more games in Session II on Friday.

The tournament will conclude Sunday with the women's championship game at 4 p.m. and the men's championship game at 6 p.m.

The top three teams in each tournament will advance to the NAIA national tournament. There will be third-place consolation games at noon and 2 p.m. Sunday, with the winners advancing to the national tournament along with both teams that play for the All title.

Six of the 16 teams that compete in the tournament this week will earn spots in the national tournament in Missouri next month.

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"It's really nice," Gavin said. "Obviously Mount Mercy wants to win both championships, but if we win the first night and then win one-of-two we're in the national tournament. It's that simple."

"We have some high expectations for our teams and we're shooting for the stars," he said. "I think you're going to see a lot of teams fighting hard because there's ample opportunity for anybody to sneak in there."

Gavin said the Mount Mercy men's basketball team played a game against Coe at the former Five Seasons Center in downtown Cedar Rapids years ago when he was the Mount Mercy head coach, but that's the only other time the Mustangs have been there.

Mount Mercy has been working with the Cedar Rapids Convention & Visitors Bureau to stage the tournament. Kirkwood and Coe are hosting practice sessions, along with Mount Mercy, to help accommodate all the teams.

Additional sponsors are Wells Fargo, Principal Financial, ActionCOACH and Hy-Vee.

"I hope it draws some interest and we get some folks come in to the ballgames," Gavin said. "I'm looking forward to putting on a good show."