

Phew! Mustangs survive 99-94 in OT

Written by Jim Ecker

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If you don't think they play fantastic college basketball at the NAIA level, stop by the U.S. Cellular Center on Saturday and Sunday for the final two rounds of the conference tournament they're holding right here in downtown Cedar Rapids.

You might become a convert for life.

Alex Houston muscled in a career-high 31 points and snared 12 rebounds as Mount Mercy barely survived its first-round date with Johnson & Wales, 99-94, in overtime Friday night in a terrific ballgame in the Association of Independent Institutions event.

The Mustangs are seeded No. 1 in the All tournament and the visitors from Colorado are seeded No. 8, but the seeds had little meaning during a mad-cap day of basketball. Washington Adventist, the No. 7 seed, upset No. 2 seed Rochester (Minn.) in the opening round and Johnson & Wales nearly bumped Mount Mercy out of the tournament.

Mount Mercy (23-7) will face Central Christian (18-10) in the semifinals at 4 p.m. Saturday.

The Mustangs had an 85-80 lead with 33.9 seconds left in the second half, but they threw away two straight in-bounds passes and Johnson & Wales ended up tying the game 85-85 on a 3-pointer by Jontrell Herman.

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Mount Mercy managed to recover, scored the first basket in overtime and never trailed in the extra five-minute session, but it was hairy until Houston blocked a 3-pointer and swished two free throws with two seconds left to clinch the victory.

"You can't take anyone for granted," said Houston, a 6-foot-5 senior from Chicago. "They're an 8 seed, but we knew coming in they wanted to take out the No. 1 seed."

It was 45 minutes of mayhem and terrific ball.

"It was wild," said Tre Wagner, an ultra-quick point guard who had a big game for the Mustangs with 17 points, eight rebounds and seven assists. "I didn't want it to be my last game, so we had to fight today. Crazy. I've never been in a game like that."

Mount Mercy was clinging to a 95-94 lead when Wagner drove to the basket and fed Ben Struss for a layup, making it 97-94 with 24.3 seconds left in overtime.

Herman missed a 3-pointer for Johnson & Wales that would have tied the game, but there was a jump ball on the rebound and Johnson & Wales got another chance with 4.9 seconds left. Aaron Stone tried to launch a 3-pointer from in front of his own bench, but Houston timed his jump perfectly, blocked the shot, grabbed the ball and got fouled with two seconds remaining.

Houston cashed them both to finally end the suspense and finish the biggest game of his life.

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"That's what seniors, that's what captains, that's what leaders are supposed to do," said Mount Mercy coach Aaron Jennings. "He's a monster.

He finishes around the basket. He's got guys hanging on him and he finishes.

"He's just a monster. He had a monster game."



Mount Mount took an 81-68 lead with 4:37 left in regulation on two free throws by Kyle Lamaak, but Johnson & Wales stormed back with nine straight points to pull within 81-77 with 2:05 remaining and it was anyone's game.

The Mustangs blew a five-point lead in the last 33.9 seconds of regulation, but shook it off and found a way to win.

"We have a mentally strong-minded team," Houston said. "Me being a senior, I've been through the wars, I know what it takes. You've got to stick together."

That was the key: Sticking together.

"When we came into overtime the coaches kept us together and just let us know, 'It's still our game,'" Wagner said. "We're confident. We are the No. 1 seed, so we were confident we were going to pull it out. We stayed together and kept playing as a team."

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The Mustangs made a few mistakes in the final seconds of regulation, but Johnson & Wales (15-16) also made some tremendous plays in the final minutes to give themselves a chance, including a pair of contested shots in the final seconds of regulation that could have won the game.

"They're a heck of a team. They kept coming at it," Jennings said. "They turned a switch and they hit big shots and they made big stops. We didn't give them anything, they earned it.

"That was an incredible basketball game," he said.

Chris Ford scored 12 points for Mount Mercy and Sheawn Bedford added 11. Houston and Ford suffered from leg cramps late in the game and needed medical attention, but they returned to duty and finished the victory.

Andrew Romero III led Johnson & Wales with 23 points. Herman finished with 19 points, Stone 17, Andrew Bonner 16 and Damon Bates 11.

JOHNSON & WALES (94): Bates 3 3-4 11, Lee 2 2-2 6, Herman 6 6-7 19, Bonner 8 0-0 16, Stone 5 7-8 17, Stephens 0 0-0 0, Romero 9 3-4 23, Sharpley 1 0-0 2, Peterson 0 0-0 0. Totals 34 21-25 94.

MOUNT MERCY (99): Houston 11 9-10 31, Wagner 7 3-4 17, Ford 5 2-3 12, Parker 2 1-2 5, Bedford 5 0-1 11, Strong 0 0-0 0, Brawner 2 0-0 5, Lamaak 0 4-4 4, Struss 3 0-0 6, Gogg 2 4-4 8. Totals 37 23-28 99.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 43, Johnson & Wales 41. Regulation - Mount Mercy 85, Johnson & Wales 85. 3-point goals - Johnson & Wales 5 (Bates 2, Romero 2, Herman 1), Mount Mercy 2 (Bedford 1, Brawner 1).