

## Gritty Mustangs knock off Clarke

Written by Jim Ecker

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If you thought the Mount Mercy Mustangs were going to surrender just because two of their best players are out of action, guess again.

There's no quit in these guys.

The Mustangs banded together and dug a little deeper into their bench Wednesday night and held off Clarke, 88-80, in a Heart of America Conference men's basketball game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Mohammed Albagami, who has stepped into the starting lineup the last three games, popped in four 3-pointers and notched 20 points to share team scoring honors with Dennis McKinney.

Antwain Strong almost collected a triple-double with 13 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists. Mike Evans contributed 11 points, five rebounds, five assists, four blocks and three steals. DJ Johnson, who was the ninth man in an eight-man rotation much of the season, played 23 minutes and scored 11 points.

"It's next man up," said Albagami, a senior from Battle Creek, Mich. "We're just trying to keep getting better."

Mychael Brawner-Henley (suspension) and Bailey Basala (sprained ankle) are expected back in

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the next week or two, and in the meantime the Mustangs are trying to keep it all together.

"Once we get everybody back to full strength, we feel like we can beat anybody," said Albagami. "We just have to keep it going."

The Mustangs snapped a three-game skid, a stretch that coincided with Brawner-Henley and Basala taking their 30 points and 3-point shooting to the bench. Albagami has averaged 16.3 points during their absence - twice his norm - and has tossed in 17 3-pointers in those four outings.

Albagami figured he might crack the starting lineup when the season began, but he made valuable contributions off the bench until he moved into the lineup this month.

"I just have to keep getting better each and every day," said Albagami, who began his career at Kellogg Community College in Michigan. "The starting thing is cool, but whatever it takes to win. That's been my mind-set ever since I was a kid.

"Whatever I can do to win. That's all that matters to me."

There were 20 lead changes and seven ties in the tight ballgame. The Mustangs trailed 63-60, but they took off on a 9-0 run that gave them a 69-63 advantage with 8:30 remaining on two baskets by Johnson, a 3-pointer by Albagami and a bucket by Mike Evans on a pretty behind-the-back pass from Strong.



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Clarke (7-11, 5-7) got back within 69-67, but the Mustangs scored seven straight points for a 76-67 edge with 4:31 left. Clarke got within 82-79 when Nick Marshall banked in a 3-pointer from the corner for his only basket of the night, but Albagami, Strong and McKinney both made two free throws in the final 35 seconds to protect the victory.

Evans made two straight baskets coming down the stretch to make it 82-73 after Clarke had pulled within five points.

Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings called it a "huge" victory and praised all his players, with Albagami at the top of the list.

"I thought Mo was awesome," he said. "Mo is an incredible person. He is a worker. He's somebody I trust completely."

Albagami has made 45 3-pointers this season, tied for the team lead with Basala. McKinney has 44 for a club that leads the NAIA in 3-point shooting.

"You can't leave him, because he'll knock it down," Jennings said about Albagami. "He's stepped in and been awesome for us."

Mount Mercy raised its records to 10-8 overall and 5-7 in the Heart of America Conference, tied for sixth place with 12 games left in the league campaign.

Ernest Bolden Jr. scored 24 points for Clarke.

**CLARKE (80):** Meier 4 2-4 10, Walker 4 2-2 10, Lasley 2 1-2 5, Johnson 6 4-6 19, Bolden 11 1-2 24, Marshall 1 1-2 4, Williams 1 0-1 2, Richardson 0 0-0 0, Lake 3 0-0 6, Hendrickson 0 0-0 0. Totals 32 11-19 80.

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**MOUNT MERCY (88):** McKinney 7 5-5 20, Evans 5 0-0 11, Strong 2 9-11 13, Villagrana 2 0-0 5, Albagami 7 2-2 20, Reischauer 2 0-2 6, Johnson 5 0-2 11, Kehinde 1 0-0 2. Totals 32 16-22 88.

Halftime - Clarke 40, Mount Mercy 39. 3-point goals - Clarke 5 (Johnson 3, Bolden 1, Marshall 1), Mount Mercy 10 (Albagami 4, Reischauer 2, McKinney 1, Evans 1, Villagrana 1, Johnson 1).