

NAIA hoops tourney coming to town

Written by Jim Ecker

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It looks like Mount Mercy University might learn to enjoy its status as an independent basketball school during the 2015-16 campaign while it waits for full membership in the Heart of America Conference.

The Association of Independent Institutions has decided to hold the 2016 A.I.I. Division II men's and women's basketball tournaments at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids from Feb. 26-28.

Mount Mercy will serve as the host school and will receive automatic bids to the tournament for both of its teams.

There will be eight men's teams and eight women's teams in both tournaments, which will run simultaneously. The top three teams in each tournament will receive automatic berths to the NAIA Division II national tournament.

There will be wall-to-wall basketball at the U.S Cellular Center on Friday, Feb. 26 with all eight quarterfinal games -- four men's games and four women's games -- from early in the morning until late at night. The four semifinals will be staged on Saturday, Feb. 27, with the championship games and third-place games on Sunday, Feb. 28.

Mount Mercy University has been a member of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but the MCC disbanded following the 2014-15 school year. The Mustangs have been accepted for membership in the Heart of America Conference, but they will not compete in basketball in their new league until the 2016-17 season.

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Mount Mercy wanted a way to qualify for the NAIA national tournament during the 2015-16 season and has found a path with the Association of Independent Institutions. Ted Breidenthal, the commissioner of the A.I.I., announced in an email that his organization decided Monday to award the 2016 tournament to Cedar Rapids and Mount Mercy.

"It's exciting," said Paul Gavin, the men's basketball coach at Mount Mercy. "It will require some extra work, but it will be good for Mount Mercy."

Aaron Jennings, the women's coach at Mount Mercy, echoed Gavin's remarks Tuesday. "We're looking forward to it," he said. "It should be fun."

The Association of Independent Institutions will include 15 schools during the 2015-16 school year. They are Ashford, Central Christian, Clarke, Fisher, Haskell, Indiana Northwest, Johnson & Wales, Kentucky Christian, Lincoln Christian, Mount Mercy, Northern New Mexico, Ozarks, Rochester, Wilberforce and York.

Mount Mercy will get automatic bids to the A.I.I. tournament as the host school. The other seven teams in both tournaments will be determined by a ratings system, based on regular-season results.

Mount Mercy is putting independent schedules together for both of its basketball teams for the 2015-16 campaign.