

Matos finds new home at Mount Mercy

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ian Matos sat on a comfortable chair in the University Commons building at Mount Mercy last Wednesday, eating a vanilla ice cream cone and waiting with his teammates for the NAIA Selection Show to begin on television.

He blended in nicely with the rest of the Mount Mercy basketball players and looked entirely at home, but when he was growing up in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil he could not have found Iowa on a map if you had spotted him the "I" and the "A".

"Oh, never," he said with a friendly smile.

Now he's not sure he wants to leave.

Matos, 24, is a member of the Mount Mercy team that will play in the NAIA national tournament in Point Lookout, Mo., beginning this Thursday night. He plans to get his degrees in outdoor conservation and business this fall and is thinking about applying for a work permit so he can stay in the U.S. and get a job.

Matos came to the United States five years ago to play basketball at Western Wyoming Junior College. At the time, he could not have found Wyoming on a map either. He didn't care about geography, he just cared about having a chance to play basketball.

"When I came to America I was 19," he said. "My plan back then was to go pro and try to play on and make basketball my career.

"It's changed now, because I've had some injuries (knee and ankle) and I think I'm getting older, so I decided that the best for me is to focus on school now.

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"What I mean is, when I came here at first, I didn't care about where I was going. Just coming to the country that's No. 1 in the world in basketball, it was a big deal to me."

Matos played on the U16 and U17 national teams in Brazil and traveled to Argentina, Uruguay and Colombia for tournaments. He spent two years at Western Wyoming, then went back to Brazil for a year.

LaDon Singleton, who played at Mount Mercy and was one of Matos' teammates at Western Wyoming, recommended him to Mount Mercy Coach Paul Gavin for a spot with the Mustangs.

Gavin invited Matos to join Mount Mercy last year as a junior, sight unseen. "I watched film and really liked the way he played," said Gavin. "He's tall (6-foot-5), he's versatile."

Matos packed his bags and happily headed to Cedar Rapids, glad to have another chance to play college ball. He averaged 7.2 points and 4.0 rebounds last year, then raised his contributions to 10.1 points and 5.3 rebounds this season.

Matos was named to the Midwest Collegiate Conference all-star team last week and has been a key ingredient for the Mustangs, who won the MCC regular season title and also won the MCC tournament title this season.

Mount Mercy (26-4) will face Cal Maritime (19-9) in the opening round of the NAIA national tournament Thursday at 9:15 p.m. in Point Lookout, Mo.

"I actually feel great right now, not only with my decision with basketball but with school, too," Matos said. "I think I'm going on the right track and I'm thankful to have a good group of people around me every day."

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"I think I was lucky, because I hear a lot of people saying how sports can get really selfish, and I think we have a team that always stays together. And I think that's why we're having such a great year."

Matos grew up speaking Portugese in Brazil, but his mother is an English teacher in Brazil and he began taking English classes when he was little.

He needed to learn some of the idioms and slang expressions when he got to the United States, but has made a smooth transition.

Matos began his junior college career as a point guard and shooting guard, but he's been a forward at Mount Mercy. "Small forward, power forward, whatever the coach wants me to play, I'll play," he said. "Coach Gavin always tells me that he likes that I'm a versatile player."

Matos can beat smaller players inside and can use his ballhandling skills to beat bigger players off the dribble. He's started all 30 games this season and ranks fourth in the conference in steals (52) and 11th in assists (64).

Matos said enrolling at Mount Mercy was a "great decision," and Gavin heartily agrees. "It's been a great fit," the coach said.