

Jennings relishes title with Mustangs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Aaron Jennings, a 6-foot-11 mountain of a man with a teddy-bear heart, dissolved in tears Sunday night as he talked about coaching the Mount Mercy men's basketball team this season under unusual circumstances and winning the conference title.

Jennings, who hails from Atkins and Benton Community High School, enjoyed a modest college basketball career at Northwestern, but the Wildcats never played in any NCAA or NIT tournaments during his four years in the Big Ten.

He's done much better as a coach.

Jennings led the Mount Mercy women's basketball team to the Elite 8 of the NAIA national tournament in 2012 and now he's taking the men's team to the NAIA nationals after winning the Association of Independent Institutions title with a 74-61 victory over York (Neb.) at the U.S. Cellular Center.

"I've always said, I hope I'm a better coach than I was a basketball player," he said with a big smile after the Mustangs won three games in three days with some exciting basketball in downtown Cedar Rapids.

"I understand what losing is," he said, starting to get emotional. "I always want to prepare my team the best way I know how.

"I want players that will run through a brick wall for me, because I'm going to run through a brick wall for them."

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By the time Jennings finished the sentence, he was crying.

Jennings, 35, averaged 7.1 points during his Big Ten career at Northwestern from 1999 through 2003, capped by an 11.3 mark as a senior. He was a two-time captain for the Wildcats, but they had only winning season during his four years.

That's what he meant when he said he understood what losing is. Now he understands what winning is with one of the top men's basketball programs in the NAIA.

The 17th-ranked Mustangs (25-7) will play in the NAIA Division II national tournament in Point Lookout, Mo., starting March 10. The pairings will be announced Wednesday.



Jennings became the head coach of the Mount Mercy men's team just a few days before the 2015-16 season began, succeeding Paul Gavin as head coach when Gavin became the school's athletic director. Jennings had coached the Mount Mercy women's team for seven years before abruptly switching to the men.

"There were some bumps and bruises along the way early in the season," said Alex Houston, who was named the MVP of the All tournament after averaging a monster double-double at 20.7 points and 12 rebounds in the three victories. "It took hard work. No matter what, it's all about character. Guys knew we were in good hands."

The Mustangs had a 10-5 record after the first 15 games of the season, but they've poured it on since then by winning 15 of 17. The Mustangs did not exactly struggle during the first half of the campaign, but it took awhile for Jennings to get to know the players and for the players to get to know him.

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"It was tough at first," said Kennedy grad Ben Struss, who came off the bench Sunday to hit three 3-pointers and score 11 points. "Gavin was our guy and it changed real quick on us. We didn't see it coming."

Mount Mercy clinched a spot in the NAIA national tournament by beating Central Christian in the semifinals Saturday, because the top three teams in the tournament were guaranteed berths in nationals. But the Mustangs made it clear they wanted the All title as a springboard to the national meet, where they'll be making their second straight appearance and fourth in school history.

Mount Mercy bolted to a 32-11 lead in the first half and never let York get closer than 10 points the rest of the game, although the visitors from Nebraska made the Mustangs sweat a little in the second half. The Mustangs thought winning three games in three days would help them prepare for the nationals after reaching the Sweet 16 last year.

"Last year we thought we could have won it," said Houston, a rock-solid 6-foot-5 senior from Chicago. "This year we have the same mindset and it starts today."

Houston finished with 15 points and 15 rebounds Sunday. He scored three straight baskets in the second half after York had pulled within 11 points at 46-35, pushing the margin to 17 points at 52-35 with 12 minutes left.

Struss and Chris Ford finished with 11 points apiece and Kyle Lamaak came off the bench to score 10.

Marcus Price led York (23-9) with 17 points and 10 rebounds. Johnny Cooksey scored 14.

York qualified for the national tournament as the All runner-up and Washington Adventist advanced as the third-place squad. The College of the Ozarks team lost in the first round of the All meet here, but they'll also get a bid

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to the national tournament because they'll be hosting nationals.

Jennings is looking forward to the national tournament after his club proved its mettle against strong competition.

"Hopefully we've prepared our guys to play the right way," he remarked. "We can score from all angles, we can defend at every position, and when we're playing together we're fun to watch and man, we're fun to coach.

"We have extremely high expectations," said Jennings. "The guys have high expectations and the coaching staff has high expectations. This got us ready for that style of play (at nationals) back-to-back-to-back. And we're built for it."

Mount Mercy killed York in bench points, 35-8. Ford, Tre Wagner and CJ Parker joined Houston on the all-tournament team.

Haskell defeated the College of the Ozarks, 80-75, in the women's championship game Sunday. Both teams will advance to their national tournament in Sioux City, along with Clarke University.

YORK (61): Lenear 1 4-5 6, Cooksey 5 1-2 14, Smith 4 0-0 8, Price 6 5-5 17, Coleman 1 6-8 8, Cole 0 0-0 0, Johnson 3 0-1 6, Bates 0 0-0 0, Karbhari 0 0-0 0, Tolliver 0 0-0 0, Beene 0 0-0 0, Jackson 1 0-0 2. Totals 21 16-21 61.

MOUNT MERCY (74): Houston 6 3-9 15, Wagner 2 4-4 8, Ford 3 4-4 11, Parker 0 0-0 0 Bedford 2 0-0 5, Strong 1 0-0 2, Brawner-Henley 2 2-2 8, Lamaak 5 0-0 10, Struss 3 2-2 11, Gogg 2 0-0 4. Totals 26 15-21 74.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 38, York 25. 3-point goals - York 3 (Cooksey 3), Mount Mercy 7 (Struss 3, Brawner-Henley 2, Ford 1, Bedford 1).

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