

Let's hit the road with Mustangs, Eagles

Written by Jim Ecker

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I wish I had a deep bank account and the time to travel during the next two weeks.

If I did, I'd follow the Mount Mercy and Kirkwood men's basketball teams to their national tournaments and watch some of the best action this side of March Madness itself.

The 14th-ranked Mustangs (25-7) will be playing in the NAIA Division II national tournament in Point Lookout, Mo., this week. The 32-team tournament begins Wednesday and ends with the championship game March 15 on ESPN3.

The sixth-ranked Kirkwood Eagles (27-4) will be playing in the NJCAA Division II national tournament in Danville, Ill., next week. That 16-team event begins March 15 and ends March 19.

What a glorious trip that would be. Mount Mercy and Kirkwood have exciting, high-scoring teams that could do some serious damage in their national events, although they'll be facing some very serious competition.

If Mount Mercy beats Southern Oregon in the first round Wednesday, they might have to face top-ranked Saint Francis (Ind.) in the second round on Friday. The Mustangs are capable of beating anyone and that game could be a real humdinger.

Kirkwood doesn't know who it will play yet, but rest assured the opponent will be good. You don't make a national tournament by accident, especially when only 16 teams are allowed to play.

It's been a sheer joy to cover the Mustangs and Eagles this season. And both clubs have a lot in common, aside from the ability to win games and entertain fans.

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Mount Mercy averages 88.3 points per game and Kirkwood averages 87.6, but they didn't start to really fly until they learned how to play effective team defense.

Both clubs have deep, talented and balanced clubs. Alex Houston leads the Mustangs in scoring at 15.0 points, but Coach Aaron Jennings normally uses 11 players and keeps the tempo at a high level from start to finish.

Hunter Rhodes leads the Eagles at 13.3 points, but Coach Bryan Petersen normally uses at least 10 players and also keeps the pressure on the opponent for 40 minutes. Kirkwood is so deep that Cristen Wilson, who has not started a game all season, made the all-tournament team when the Eagles won the regional tournament on Saturday.

Houston was the MVP of the Association of Independent Institutions (All) conference tournament. Rhodes was the MVP of the regional tournament, but those were truly team awards in both cases.

Jennings did a terrific job with the Mustangs this season. He was preparing for another year as head coach of the Mount Mercy women's basketball team in October, but he switched to the men's program on the eve of the campaign when Paul Gavin became the school's new athletic director.

Gavin led Mount Mercy to the Sweet 16 of the NAIA national tournament last year and handed Jennings a talented squad, but everybody had to make some adjustments on the fly with a new man in charge of the team. The Mustangs got off to a 10-5 start this season, but they went on an eight-game winning streak and have won 15 of their last 17 games.

Petersen, a former All-American at Kirkwood, has compiled a flashy 73-21 record in three years as head coach. The Eagles used to make regular trips to the national tournament, but this will be their first appearance since 2011 and they have the talent to make some noise.

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You never know how these national tournaments are going to turn out. Mount Mercy and Kirkwood might lose in the first round, or they might make deep runs and actually play for a national title.

In any case, both teams have enjoyed sensational seasons and brought a lot of basketball pride to Cedar Rapids.