

World-wide Mustangs battle to draw

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nikola Petrovic speaks Serbian, English and Portuguese and is working on his French, which makes him a perfect guy to play for the Mount Mercy University men's soccer team.

Coach Amir Hadzic, a native of Bosnia, has players from 13 different countries on his international roster this season, just like he has during many of his 24 years at Mount Mercy.

Petrovic, who is from Serbia, fits right in with his teammates from Germany, Portugal, Jamaica, The Netherlands, England, Senegal, Austria, Brazil, Mali, Australia, South Africa and the United States.

"It's pretty interesting and fun, of course, meeting a lot of cultures and getting to know a lot of languages as well," he said Tuesday night. "I live with a Brazilian guy, and I'm learning Brazilian and he's learning Serbian. It's pretty fun."

Petrovic scored the only goal for Mount Mercy Tuesday as the Mustangs battled Grand View to a 1-1 draw in double-overtime in an intense Heart of America contest at the Plaster Athletic Complex.

Souleymane Diallo, who is from Senegal, got the assist as Mount Mercy took a 1-0 lead late in the first half. Grand View scored in the 73rd minute and both clubs missed opportunities after that.

"I'd be happier with a win, but a tie is a tie," said Hadzic. "You still get one point and move on in

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the conference."

Hadzic collected his 200th victory at Mount Mercy earlier this season and is recognized as one of the top soccer coaches in the country. He has deep ties in international soccer and is well-known throughout Europe.

"Everybody knows Amir," Petrovic said with a smile.

Petrovic spent two years at Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo and lived with a host family that is deeply immersed in soccer. Then he moved to Cedar Rapids to play at Mount Mercy, where he's working on a degree in sports management.

There are three other players from Serbia on the team and Petrovic knew quite a bit about Mount Mercy before he arrived.

"I heard about Iowa, because a lot of my friends come here, too," he said. "So I was familiar with Mount Mercy and everything."

Hadzic has featured a World Cup roster for many years, but he intensified his recruiting efforts after Mount Mercy left the Midwest Collegiate Conference and ultimately landed in the Heart of America Conference a few years ago. He needed even better players than he had in order to survive.

"This is a different animal," he said. "Soccer-wise and many other sports, this is probably the strongest NAIA conference in the United States.

"If you want to compete in this conference, you really need to step up your recruiting and bring that next level of kids to the team."

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Six teams from the Heart of America Conference were ranked in the NAIA Top 25 soccer poll last season. Four conference teams are ranked right now in the demanding sport.

Hadzic said the new Plaster Athletic Complex soccer facility has been a tremendous help in recruiting the players he wants. The Mustangs are not currently ranked themselves, but they are still undefeated this season with four victories and three ties in seven matches.



Tuesday's match against Grand View was the conference opener. There will be games against No. 2 Baker, No. 6 Missouri Valley, No. 11 Central Methodist, No. 16 MidAmerica Nazarene and all the others along the way.

"Our conference is really a grinder," said Hadzic. "There's really no bad matchup. There's no week where you can rest some guys or something like that."

That was certainly true against Grand View, when several Mustangs played in the 110-minute contest despite battling the flu.

The match could have gone in either direction, with both teams competing hard from start to finish. Hadzic described Grand View as a traditional powerhouse.

The Vikings, similar to Mount Mercy, have players from 11 different countries on the roster.

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"They are a tough opponent and a tough out for anybody who plays against them," Hadzic remarked.

"It was a hard match," said Petrovic, who injured his right hand during the contest and had to fight off a leg cramp. "We played a good team. I think we stuck together as a team, we fought together.

"We were unlucky on a couple of chances. They scored a good goal. I think we played good. We can always play better."