

Strong has dream job with Mustangs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Antwain Strong appears to be the happiest guy on the floor for the Mount Mercy men's basketball team, always smiling and laughing and occasionally talking to fans in the stands.

He's got a lot to be happy about.

Strong is an extremely talented point guard who is surrounded by terrific 3-point shooters. In fact, the Mustangs lead the nation in 3-point shooting and Strong ranks fifth in the NAIA in assists.

They did nothing to hurt those numbers Tuesday night.

Mount Mercy popped in 20 pointers - the second-most in school history - and posted a 102-85 victory over Viterbo in a non-conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

The Mustangs set the school record for most 3-pointers in a single game when they tossed in 22 triples in a 107-84 victory at Viterbo in the season opener on Nov. 1.

No wonder Strong is always smiling. He loves being the point guard on a team with great marksmen.

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"Aw, man, it makes my job real easy," he said, flashing an easy smile. "These guys live in the gym and I just get them the ball in the right spot. They handle all the rest."



It's not quite as simple as that, of course. Strong's explanation does not count all of his behind-the-back passes, all the no-look passes and all the other feeds that get to the right guy at the right time in the right spot for an open shot.

And when those 3-pointers are popping - the Mustangs drilled 20 of 36 on Tuesday - Strong is smiling even more.

"I love assists, but more I love to see my teammates do good," he remarked. "When they do good, I like it more than when I do good."

Bailey Basala was red-hot for the Mustangs from 3-point range, drilling 7 out of 10 and finishing with 31 points. Strong was 4-for-8 on 3-pointers himself and finished with 16 points, six assists and four rebounds.

Dennis McKinney, Mike Evans, Emilio Villagrana and Christian Reischauer all had two 3-pointers and Mychael Brawner-Henley hit one.

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Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings loved all that 3-point shooting, but he seemed the happiest with 29 assists on 37 baskets. All five starters had four, five or six assists.

"When the ball is moving and hopping, we're tough to play," he said. "We try to put five guys on the court that can put the ball in the basket. And when you do that, you get dangerous."

Strong, a 5-foot-11 southpaw, finished fifth in the nation in assists last season in NAIA basketball. He's fifth again this year, averaging 6.5 per game.

"I kind of hang my hat on assists," he said. "A lot of guys can score, but not a lot of guys can pass like me. I'm going for No. 1 (in the nation). With 3-point shooters like this, it makes it easy for me."

That's the goal: Lead the nation in assists.

"I think it's realistic," said Jennings, "with the type of player he is and the way we play. We we expect a lot out of him."

Strong grew up in Akron, Ohio and played at St. Mary's High School as a freshman, attending the same school that produced LeBron James. Strong moved to Iowa after his freshman year to join his father and enrolled at Hudson High School, where he became a three-year star and averaged 20 points and 6.4 assists as a senior.

He's averaging 13.2 points as a fifth-year senior at Mount Mercy and running one of the best shows in NAIA college basketball. The Mustangs are averaging 14.5 triples per game, shooting 41.6 percent on 3-pointers and averaging 89 points.

Basala leads the team with 38 3-pointers. McKinney and Brawner-Henley have made 31. Mohammed Albagami has 25, Villagrana 21, Reischauer 17, Strong 12 and Evans seven among the regulars.

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"We don't live and die by the 3," said Strong, "but we do shoot a lot of them"

Just ask Viterbo, which has seen the Mustangs pour in 42 3-pointers against them in 80 minutes of basketball this season.

Brawner-Henley collected 16 points, seven rebounds and six assists Tuesday. Villagrana contributed 12 points and five assists. Evans had 10 points, five rebounds and five assists.

The Mustangs (8-5) will be idle for two weeks and host Missouri Valley on Jan. 2.

Jake Schroeckenthaler scored 21 points for Viterbo (8-5). Cade Anderson had 17 and former Linn-Mar player Jason Tichy had 16 for the visitors.

VITERBO (85): Anderson 8 1-4 17, Tichy 5 2-2 16, Young 4 0-0 9, Burton 3 0-0 8, Cunitz 2 0-0 6, Fredrickson 1 0-0 2, Polk 0 0-0 0, Brown 0 0-0 0, Clement 2 0-0 6, Schroeckenthaler 9 3-4 21. Totals 34 6-10 85.

MOUNT MERCY (102): McKinney 2 0-0 6, Brawner-Henley 6 3-6 16, Evans 4 0-0 10, Strong 5 2-4 16, Villagrana 5 0-0 12, Loggins 1 0-0 2, Doe 0 0-2 0, Albagami 0 1-2 1, Reischauer 3 0-0 8, Johnson 0 0-0 0, Stoeffler 0 0-0 0, Kehinde 0 0-0 0, Basala 11 2-2 31. Totals 37 8-16 102.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 46, Viterbo 35. 3-point goals - Viterbo 11 (Tichy 4, Burton 2, Cunitz 2, Clement 2, Young 1), Mount Mercy 20 (Basala 7, Strong 4, McKinney 2, Evans 2, Villagrana 2, Reischauer 2, Brawner-Henley 1).