

## Gritty Mustangs fall short in OT

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 06 January 2019 06:14 -

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Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings does not deal in excuses, but it's hard to beat the 17th-ranked team in the country with two of your star players on the bench.

That was the story on Saturday, despite a terrific rally that nearly snatched victory from defeat.

The short-handed Mustangs erased a 17-point deficit in the last six minutes of the second half Saturday with a furious comeback, but they ended up falling in overtime.

Peru State prevailed, 88-80, in a dramatic Heart of America Conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Mychael Brawner-Henley, who averages 13.6 points, will be sidelined for several more weeks after failing to meet school requirements. Bailey Basala, one of the top 3-point shooters in the country, twisted his ankle with 5 minutes left in the first half and did not play again after making five straight 3-pointers in less than eight minutes.

On top of that, star point guard Antwain Strong missed a key stretch in overtime after suffering a painful cramp in his leg.

"That makes a difference," said Jennings. "When three good players are not in the game, that absolutely makes a difference."

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Mount Mercy (9-6, 4-5) trailed by 17 points, 75-58, with 6 minutes left in regulation, but the Mustangs used a full-court press and a half-court trap to disrupt Peru State and surge back into contention.

Mohammed Albagami hit a pair of 3-pointers to pull Mount Mercy within 77-73 with 79 seconds left and suddenly anything was possible. Strong hit two free throws with 52.7 seconds remaining to make it 77-75, then Strong tied the game at 77-77 with a layup after the Bobcats committed a lane violation at the foul line.

Peru State had the final shot at victory in the last seconds of the half, but the Bobcats missed a shot near the basket and also failed on a tip-in to create overtime.



Mount Mercy outscored Peru State, 19-2, in those final six minutes of the second half.

Dennis McKinney nailed a 3-pointer to give Mount Mercy an 80-77 lead on its first possession in overtime, but the Bobcats scored the next 11 points and the Mustangs did not score again.

It was a great rally and an inspired effort by a team that was missing two of its key guys.

"That's how our team is. We never give up," said Strong, who finished with 25 points, nine rebounds, five assists and two steals. "We fought back and played hard like we always do. We

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never give up until time goes out."

Strong, a 5-foot-11 senior, became the 20th member of the 1,000 point club at Mount Mercy and sits in 19th place now in career scoring with 1,019. He played for 43 minutes and 10 seconds, missing only that short stretch in overtime.

"He's awesome. He's just special," Jennings said about his premier lefty. "He's a leader. It's his fifth year here. He just gets it. He loves assists and he'll tell you that, but when he has to score he has that ability.

"He's obviously never afraid of the moment," said Jennings. "He loves these big games. And he's fun to coach."

Strong was red-shirted as a true freshman during the 2014-15 campaign. That was the same season that Danny DeBacker, a popular senior on the team, was killed in a car crash on Sept. 28, 2014.

Mount Mercy honored DeBacker and his family at Saturday's game.

"It was an honor to have him as a teammate," said Strong. "He talked to me a lot about playing hard. It was an honor to get my 1,000th point on his night.

"He worked harder than anybody in the gym. That stuck with me my whole four years."

Strong and his buddies fell a little short Saturday against the No. 17 team in the country, but they plan to keep battling.

"I like our chances against anyone in the nation if we're at full strength," said Strong. "We have

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to get those guys back. Other guys have to step up until they get back."

McKinney finished with 17 points for Mount Mercy. Basala finished with 15 points on his five straight 3-pointers to start the game.

Albagami scored 12 points for the Mustangs. DJ Johnson did not score for Mount Mercy, but he helped fuel his team's comeback with excellent work on defense.

Deonte McReynolds scored 19 points for Peru State (12-3, 7-2). Nicholas Wurm also scored 19 for the Bobcats. Lyle Hexom finished with 18 points and 17 rebounds. Brandon Jones, who averages 17.3 points, did not play for Peru State.

Peru State hurt Mount Mercy on the backboards, 49-30. Both teams made 14 3-pointers.

**PERU STATE (88):** Hexom 7 0-1 18, Wardy 0 1-2 1, Wurm 7 1-1 19, Wilson 5 0-0 11, Moore 3 0-0 6, Maddred 5 0-0 12, McReynolds 6 4-4 19, Simpson 1 0-0 2. Totals 34 6-8 88.

**MOUNT MERCY (80):** McKinney 6 1-2 17, Evans 2 2-3 6, Basala 5 0-0 15, Strong 7 10-13 25, Villagrana 0 0-0 0, Albagami 4 0-0 12, Reischauer 2 1-2 5, Johnson 0 0-0 0. Totals 26 14-20 80.

Halftime - Peru State 43, Mount Mercy 41. Regulation - Peru State 77, Mount Mercy 77. 3-point goals - Peru State 14 (Hexom 4, Wurm 4, McReynolds 3, Maddred 2, Wilson 1), Mount Mercy 14 (Basala 5, McKinney 4, Albagami 4, Strong 1).