

## Mount Mercy sweeps No. 10 Clarke

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mary Kay Van Oort had a master plan on how to build a successful men's volleyball program at Mount Mercy when she was hired in August of 2015, but she might have to revise that blueprint now.

The Mustangs are ahead of schedule.

Mount Mercy continued its surge in Year 3 of the program Thursday night by sweeping 10th-ranked Clarke, 25-23, 25-19, 25-17, in a Heart of America Conference match at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

The Mustangs upset top-ranked Grand View last week and are now 10-4 overall, bidding to enter the rankings themselves.

"My players would be disappointed to hear me say that this is faster than I expected it to go, to get to this level," Van Oort remarked. "I have a couple of players who from Day 1 here expressly thought they should win the national championship. And that helps, to have some of that attitude.

"I'm an optimistic person," she continued, "but I'm also a little bit realistic. I know the competition out there is really good and exciting.

"I'm just thrilled that we're playing with these teams," she said. "Knocking off No. 1 was amazing, but we have to see how we finish the season before I can know how good we've become."

Mount Mercy finished with a 3-25 record in the first year of the program in 2017, but the Mustangs jumped to 16-11 overall and 5-5 in the conference in 2018.

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Now Mount Mercy has won seven straight matches and is 3-0 in the Heart of America after Thursday's victory in straight sets over the 10th-ranked team in the country.

Don't be surprised if the Mustangs are ranked in the Top 10 themselves in the next NAIA poll on Feb. 19.

"I would anticipate it. Yes," said Van Oort. "If I had to bet, I would bet that we get ourselves in there next week."

There are no seniors on the 16-man roster, so the future looks bright for this young program. Two juniors, three sophomores and two freshmen got the bulk of the playing time against Clarke and a member of the national team from St. Lucia will be eligible next season.

"We're going to be even better next year," predicted Evan Gaskill, a Cedar Rapids Prairie grad who had 12 kills Thursday, including a slam to end the match.

Gaskill, a sophomore, joined the Mustangs last season after playing club volleyball and basketball in high school. He's enjoyed seeing all the progress the team has made in a short period of time.

"It's been amazing," he said. "I'm excited for what's to come."

Van Oort is optimistic about the future as well. "It's pretty exciting to think," she said. "There's no stopping us!"

The Mustangs got stronger during the match against Clarke, winning each set by increasingly larger margins.

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Julian Armendano, a freshman from Argentina, led Mount Mercy with 14 kills and had six digs. Andrew Colantone, a sophomore from Plainfield, Ill., handed out 31 assists. Mitchell Wannahwilai, a freshman from Rockford, Ill., had eight digs. Strahil Svilenski, a junior from Bulgaria, blocked four shots at the net.

Van Oort did not think the Mustangs played particularly well in a 3-2 victory over Culver-Stockton on Wednesday, but she liked what she saw 24 hours later.

"I was pleasantly surprised with how we took care of business," she said.

Clarke fell to 4-6 overall and 0-2 in the conference.

Mount Mercy will be hosting two matches on Saturday against Viterbo at 1 p.m. and sixth-ranked Aquinas at 5 p.m.

There are 43 men's volleyball teams in the NAIA this season.