

Mustangs bump off No. 16 Statesmen

Written by Jim Ecker

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Inch for inch, Antwain Strong is unquestionably one of the best NAIA basketball players in the country.

He proved it again Wednesday night.

Strong flirted with a triple-double with 12 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds as Mount Mercy whipped 16th-ranked William Penn, 92-84, in a key Heart of America Conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Strong, a 5-foot-11 senior, made some unbelievable jitterbug moves to the basket and had a string of sensational passes as the little Mustangs knocked off the towering Statesmen.

William Penn looked like a Big Ten team when it walked into the gym with talented players who measured 6-foot-11, 6-foot-9, 6-foot-9 and a pair of 6-foot-7 guys. Meanwhile, Mount Mercy's tallest player on the floor was only 6-foot-5.

Somehow, the Mustangs slayed the giants.

"I have a motto my cousin taught me when I was growing up," said Strong. "He always told me 'Heart over Height.' So as long as you have heart, that makes up for a lot of your height. And that's what we live by."

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Strong is averaging 12.9 points, 6.4 assists and 5.2 rebounds. He ranks third in the country in assists and has neared a triple-double before, but Wednesday's performance kept the Mustangs in the hunt for a favorable seed in the Heart of America Conference tournament with two home games left in the regular season.

"This is my first time beating Penn in four years so it feels real good. It feels real good," said Strong.

Mount Mercy raised its records to 15-13 overall and 10-12 in the conference. The Mustangs are tied for seventh place in the Heart of America, but they are only a half-game out of fifth place.

The Mustangs were playing superior basketball in early January before they ran into manpower problems, but they've got a full roster again now and looked good Wednesday.



"I feel like we've got our team back," said Coach Aaron Jennings. "We've felt all year long, when we've got everybody, we're competing. And that's what you want to do."

Strong was the catalyst against William Penn and was disappointed to learn that he finished one rebound away from a coveted triple-double, which has been accomplished only once in school history.

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"Maybe I need to grow a couple of inches," he said, laughing. "That's probably what it is."

When the Mustangs are whipping the ball around and hitting 3-pointers, they are a fun team to watch. They canned 16 triples against the Statesmen and finished with 23 assists on 32 baskets. Strong had 10 of those assists, compared to only one turnover in 36 minutes.

Mohammed Albagami and Bailey Basala both hit six 3-pointers. Albagami led five Mustangs into double figures with 19 points, Basala had 18 points, Dennis McKinney 16, Mike Evans 13 and Strong 12.

It was a clutch victory against a formidable opponent.

"It feels awesome," said Jennings. "They are one of the top programs in the country at the NAIA level. They've been to the Elite 8, they're going to the Final 4's. And they do it every year."

And this time, the Mustangs were the better team.

"We feel good when we're at full power," said Strong. "We can match up with anybody with the way we play."

Abrian Edwards, a talented 6-foot-5 guard for William Penn, nearly collected a triple-double of his own with 16 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds before fouling out.

Darius Wheeler made six 3-pointers and scored 20 points for the Statesmen (20-7, 14-7). Marlon Alcindor had five triples and also scored 20.

WILLIAM PENN (84): Sherman 4 0-0 8, Edwards 6 4-5 16, Bailey-DeCoteau 6 1-3 13, Alcindor 6 3-4 20, Wheeler 7 0-0 20, Fullard 0 2-4 2, Thomas 2 0-0 5, Daley 0 0-0 0. Totals 31 10-16 84.

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MOUNT MERCY (92): McKinney 5 5-7 16, Evans 5 3-4 13, Basala 6 0-0 18, Strong 5 2-2 12, Albagami 6 1-2 19, Villagrana 0 0-0 0, Brawner-Henley 3 1-2 9, Reischauer 2 0-0 5, Johnson 0 0-0 0, Kehinde 0 0-0 0. Totals 32 12-17 92.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 47, William Penn 41. 3-point goals - William Penn 12 (Wheeler 6, Alcindor 5, Thomas 1), Mount Mercy 16 (Basala 6, Albagami 6, Brawner-Henley 2, McKinney 1, Reischauer 1).