

## Inspired Mustangs earn trip to NAIA tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 01 March 2015 22:09 -

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A season that began with a horrible tragedy has turned into a year of glory and remembrance for the Mount Mercy University men's basketball team.

Inspired all season by the death of teammate Danny DeBacker in September, the Mustangs pulled together and have accomplished one of the most remarkable seasons in school history.

The 13th-ranked Mustangs overcame serious foul problems Sunday night and dispatched William Penn, 93-76, in the championship game of the Midwest Collegiate Conference tournament at the Hennessey Recreation Center to claim the program's third trip to the NAIA Division II nationals.

Picked to finish last in the league, the Mustangs instead have compiled a 26-4 overall record and captured the MCC regular-season and tournament titles. They have the plaque, the championship banner and the deep feelings to prove it.

"If you would have told us September 1st that this would be happening, I would have called you crazy," said senior Jake Misener. "But September 29th, after Danny passed, I knew for a fact it was going to be something like this.

"It's jut amazing," said Misener. "It's been crazy, some of the stuff that's been happening. And to think he hasn't been at every single game with us is ludicrous. He's been looking. It's awesome. It's amazing. And he's been a part of it every single day."

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DeBaker, 22, a senior from Orion, Ill., was killed by a drunk driver Sept. 28 in Davenport. The Mustangs have draped his No. 20 uniform on a chair behind their bench for every home game this season and worn special shirts in his honor.

As soon as Sunday's game ended in delicious victory, senior Ian Matos lovingly picked up DeBaker's jersey and held it aloft amidst the crowd of jubilant players and fans.

Later, Misener held the jersey as the Mustangs posed for team pictures.

Mount Mercy Coach Paul Gavin said the Mustangs have thought about DeBaker "every day" since the tragedy happened.

"That's why we're here right now, it really is," said Gavin, fighting his emotions and touching his heart. "These kids play every day for him. And we will continue to do so. They may not win in Branson (at the national tournament), but we're going to give them hell, I know that."



The NAIA Division II national tournament will be held March 11-17 at the College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Mo. The pairings for the 32-team tournament will be announced Wednesday.

Even though Mount Mercy won Sunday's game by 17 points, but it was a tense ballgame throughout and a much closer battle than the final score indicates. The Mustangs did not pull away until the final minutes after battling serious foul problems all night.

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Four of Mount Mercy's starters got into foul trouble, but James "The Aussie Assassin" Boonstoppel and Kyle Lamaak came off the bench to pour in 20 points apiece and help fuel the victory. Alex Houston scored 15 points for the Mustangs and Dondre "MVP" Osborne added 14 before the biggest and loudest crowd of the season.

"This is why I came to America," Boonstoppel said after snipping a piece of the championship net. "I spent four years of my life to come and reward myself with the team win."

Boonstoppel, an uncanny shooter from Adelaide, Australia, popped in five 3-pointers against William Penn and greatly enjoyed the on-court party after it was over as they blared "We Are The Champions!" over the loudspeaker. He said he's celebrated titles in Australia before, but nothing like the mayhem that occurred at the Hennessey Rec Center with teammates, fans, students and relatives.

"In America the party is three times as big," the carrot-topped guard remarked. "It's a lot of fun. We couldn't cut the nets in Australia or anything like that, we couldn't dance like you Americans."

Lamaak, a Kennedy grad, played intramural basketball during his two years at the University of Northern Iowa before realizing he missed the real thing. He transferred to Mount Mercy this season and has joined Boonstoppel as the unofficial "Sixth Men of the Year" with their work off the Mustang bench.

"I'm so glad I made the decision to come back to play basketball for Mount Mercy," he said. "I'm just so happy for us."

Lamaak finished with 20 points and 11 rebounds in 27 key minutes.

Osborne, a senior guard from Zion, Ill., has been Mount Mercy's leader all season and fans serenaded him with chants of "MVP! MVP" Sunday night in anticipation of him being named the Most Valuable Player in the Midwest Collegiate Conference. The chant was music to his ears.

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"I love it," he said. "All the hard work, all the long nights in this gym paid off. I love it.

"It's a great feeling right now," he said about winning the tournament. "I'm at a loss for words. I knew we had a good team, but if I said I saw all this coming I would have been lying, sir. But I believe in my team and it's been great."

Osborne also paid tribute to DeBacker, the gone but not forgotten teammate.

"Danny has been with us every day. Every day," he said. "At practice, at games, in the classroom, in the community, Danny is with us every day."

The Mustangs played in the NAIA national tournament in 1996 and again in 2013. Now they are going again.

"What a fun night to end an amazing season," said Misener, a Kennedy grad. "You can't draw it up any better.

"William Penn has had my number for four years. What a storybook way to beat a really good team for the championship to go to nationals.

"What a great night," he said, smiling broadly. "The crowd like I've never seen it before. Electric. A blast."

Alex Schwab made five 3-pointers and poured in 26 points for William Penn (20-12). Oliver Wells scored 16 points and Sam Sykes had 11.

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**WILLIAM PENN (76):** Wells 6 2-4 16, Guenther 2 2-2 8, Bosek 0 0-0 0, Alexander 1 0-0 2, Jeffries 0 0-0 0, Murphy 1 2-3 4, Aldeman 1 2-3 4, Schwab 8 5-6 26, Sykes 4 3-4 11, McGee 1 3-10 5. Totals: 24 19-32 76.

**MOUNT MERCY (93):** Goines 1 1-2 3, Houston 7 0-1 15, Osborne 4 4-6 14, Matos 3 0-0 8, Boonstoppel 5 5-5 20, Murdock 0 0-0 0, Johnson 1 1-1 3, Misener 1 0-0 3, Struss 0 2-2 2, Price-Majors 2 1-3 5, Lamaak 8 4-5 20, Clark 0 0-0 0, Gogg 0 0-0 0. Totals: 32 18-26 93

Halftime: Mount Mercy 49, William Penn 37 3-point goals: William Penn 9 (Wells 2, Guenther 2, Schwab 5). Mount Mercy 11 (Osborne 2, Matos 2, Boonstoppel 5, Johnson 1, Misener 1)