

Clarke denies Mustangs in MCC final

Written by Mike Condon

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It was a typical "ugly" match-up between the Clarke and Mount Mercy women's basketball teams.

The usual result when the two teams meet in Cedar Rapids has been a Mustang victory. With a berth in the NAIA Division II national tournament on the line, the visiting Crusaders picked an opportune time to turn the ugly game into a thing of beauty.

Senior Amanda Hamilton hit 4-of-5 free throws in the final minute as Clarke held off the Mustangs, 56-52, to win the final MCC Tournament title on Monday night before a good crowd at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

"Every time we have played them the last two years, the game has been in the 50s," Adams said. "We don't play the prettiest games with Mount Mercy, but this is the first time we have ever won on this court."

Clarke (20-13), the fourth-seed, used stingy defense and timely offense to earn a berth in the national tournament beginning on March 11 at the Tyson Events Center in Sioux City.

The teams split their regular-season meetings. Monday's game was loaded with defense on both sides.

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"I have the utmost respect for (Clarke)," said Mount Mercy Coach Aaron Jennings. "They came out and made a couple more shots than we did and they made the plays necessary to win."

Mount Mercy (19-14) struggled from the floor, hitting just 37.3 percent of its shots compared to 45 percent for the Crusaders. Adams put a subtle wrinkle in Clarke's offense during practice on Sunday and it paid big dividends during a key stretch in the second half.

The Mustangs took their final lead of the game, 33-32, on an Abby Herb jumper with 14:53 remaining. At that point, Adams broke out his new wrinkle, stepping his posts Anna Hahn and Katelyn Hoppman out to the short corner for jumpers.



"It's a version of an offense we run," Adams said. "We played them twice this year and we saw how they played Grand View. We knew they were going to sag off."

"I was trying to attack the seams coming off the ball screens," he added. "We've got players who are very good shooting the short corner. We brought it out in the second half and it worked well."

Jennings said the execution by Clarke was excellent in the second half.

"It was a wrinkle they put in," he said. "It was something we hadn't seen from them but it was similar to what another team in our conference does."

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"They came out and executed that wrinkle and made the shots," Jennings added. "Credit to them. They got the lead and we were never quite able to come back and get ahead."

Mount Mercy turned to sophomore guard Alisa Weiland in an effort to respond. She answered with three straight baskets to keep the Mustangs close and when Herb hit a jumper at the 8:19 mark, the Clarke lead was just 44-43.

Clarke responded with six straight points from Kelsey Ernst to push the margin to 50-43 with 3:46 remaining.

Mount Mercy fought back once more, getting within one at 50-49 on a conventional 3-point play from Makenzie Zeitler with 2:03 remaining.

"We had our chances," Jennings said. "We just didn't make enough plays to get a win."

Weiland hit one last 3-pointer with 8 seconds remaining to pull the Mustangs withing two, but Hamilton, who was held scoreless until the final 20 seconds, hit a pair of free throws with six seconds left to seal it for Clarke.

"Our program has come such a long way," Adams said. "This is a great accomplishment for this team."

Weiland was brilliant in defeat for the Mustangs. The former Prairie prep standout finished with a game-high 24 points on 9-of-14 shooting from the floor.

"There was a reason I wanted to have her in the program," Jennings said. "In the second half of the year she has really stepped up and has been coming on."

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Hahn led Clarke with 14 points.

Monday's game was the final appearance in a Mount Mercy uniform for seniors Danielle Herdliska, Christa Oldham and Page Last.

"I'm so proud of our girls and how hard they played," Jennings said. "This was two excellent basketball teams battling for a chance to go to the national tournament and tonight, Clarke won that battle."

CLARKE (56): Whittington 1 0-1 2, Prochaska 3 2-2 11, Ernst 4 1-4 10, Shepler 1 1-2 4, Hahn 5 4-4 14, Hamilton 0 4-5 4, Needham 0 0-1 0, Hoppman 3 1-2 7, Kleppin 1 0-0 2, Aasen 0 1-2 1. Totals: 18 16-24 56.

MOUNT MERCY (52): Herb 2 0-0 4, Herdliska 0 0-0 0, Oldham 1 4-4 6, Weiland 9 2-2 24, Zeitler 3 1-1 8, Timms 1 0-0 3, Sexton 0 0-0 0, Last 1 0-0 3, Dolan 1 0-0 2. Totals: 19 7-7 52.

Halftime - Clarke 27, Mount Mercy 26. 3-point goals - Clarke 4 (Prochoska 3, Shepler), Mount Mercy 7 (Weiland 4, Timms, Zeitler, Last).