

Gavin grateful for his life with Mustangs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Paul Gavin was a young assistant basketball coach at Mount Mercy in 1992 when the head coach left and the Mustangs needed a new man to run the show.

After a few weeks of not knowing what would happen next, he requested a meeting with Dr. Tom Feld, the college president, to see if he might be allowed to apply for the job.

"I sat down and said, 'I'm young, I'm green, but I love this place, I'd love an opportunity to at least get an interview,'" Gavin said Wednesday night, "and he assured me I'd get an interview.

"The next day I got to work and I still remember this: I had a message from the president and I thought, 'Oh, boy,'" Gavin related, a tinge of trepidation in his voice. "He invited me down and he actually gave me the job."

Gavin, now 48, was 25 years old at the time.

"He saw something in me," said Gavin, "and I'm forever grateful for that opportunity."

This is Gavin's 23rd year as the head coach at Mount Mercy. He's compiled a 386-328 record and Wednesday was named the Midwest Collegiate Conference Coach of the Year for the fifth time.

The Mustangs won the MCC regular-season title and postseason tournament and will take a

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sparkling 26-4 record to the 2015 NAIA Division II national tournament in Branson, Mo., next week.

The Mustangs are seeded No. 9 in the 32-team field and will face Cal Maritime (19-9) in the opening round on Thursday, March 12 at 9:15 p.m.

This will be Gavin's third trip to the national tournament. The Mustangs went 1-1 in the 1996 tourney and lost in the first round in 2013. He's been there before, but this might be the most gratifying trip of all.

Mount Mercy struggled through a 12-20 campaign last year and Gavin had to dismiss several players during the season due to disciplinary reasons.

Then this past September, beloved Mount Mercy senior Danny DeBacker was killed by a drunk driver and their world was turned upside down.

The Mustangs dedicated their season to DeBacker and now are headed to the national tournament, where they have a chance to succeed.

"It's been a wonderful, wonderful year," said Gavin. "The best part is watching the excitement these kids have. Not only that, but our campus community and the outpouring of love from alumni and friends and family ... It's overwhelming.

"As a coach you spend long days and nights, you wonder why you do it, is it worth it. And this makes it all worth it."

Gavin grew up near Swisher and attended Cedar Rapids Prairie High School. He starred in basketball and golf at Mount Mercy, spent one year as an assistant coach at Prairie under former Prairie head coach Denny Thiessen, then returned to Mount Mercy as an assistant for three years before boldly asking the

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college president for some time.

The young head coach went 6-25 in his first year.

"I could have easily said the heck with it," he remarked. "And those thoughts crossed my mind.

"But when you're a fighter, and you've been told all your life you weren't good enough to play college basketball ... And I had a golf coach who told me, 'You'll never be a good golfer with that golf swing.' Things like that. You keep pushing it."

Gavin became an accomplished golfer, a two-time City Amateur golf champion who also coaches the Mount Mercy men's team.

Gavin's wife, Traci, is a Mount Mercy graduate. So is their daughter. In addition, Gavin's father was involved with the university, so the family has deep roots there. He loves the school on the hill.

"I really think this level is pure," he said about coaching the Mustangs. "People do it for the right reasons - not that they don't at that (higher) level. But it's true and pure.

"This is where I want to be."

Gavin hopes the Mustangs make a long run in the national tournament, but knows only one team will finish on top. He's not looking forward to saying good-bye to this group of players.

"Hopefully we don't lose," he said, "but if we do it's going to be an awfully tough locker room to be in and express my feelings to the guys."

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