

Mustangs have new coach, same goals

Written by Jim Ecker

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Aaron Jennings switched jobs at Mount Mercy University last week, becoming the head coach of the men's basketball team after leading the women's program for the past seven years.

Comically, he noticed the change right away. His new players are a lot taller than his former players.

"At the very first practice, that was one of the things I noticed the most," he said, laughing. "All right, bring it in guys -- And they're all just right there at eye level."

That's saying a lot, because Jennings stands 6-foot-8 and used to tower over his players on the women's basketball team.

Other than the height differential between the two teams, Jennings indicated that basketball is still basketball with many of the same fundamentals, techniques and strategy. The players on his new team can dunk the ball and run faster, but many of the challenges are the same.

Mount Mercy made three major changes last week. Paul Gavin was named the school's new athletic director, Jennings succeeded Gavin as the new men's basketball coach, and Bob Kintzel was promoted to interim women's basketball coach.

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Jennings enjoyed his work with the Mount Mercy women, but welcomed the new assignment. The Mustangs open the season Tuesday at Saint Ambrose, giving him about 10 days to get ready with a new team.

"I've got to keep learning and be ready to catch up, because it's obviously not going to slow down," he said. "The first game is in a few days."

Gavin was the head coach for 23 years and recruited all the players on this year's club. All of a sudden, the Mustangs had somebody else in charge after approximately three weeks of practice.

"It's definitely different having a new coach, but I think Coach Jennings is very capable," said senior Kyle Lamaak. "He obviously has experience at the college level as a head coach. It's probably one of the most seamless transitions we could have had."

Jennings has relied heavily on assistant coaches Carlos Nelson and Martez Creighton during the transition. He's also had meetings with Gavin, but he was already familiar with the system from his previous stint as one of Gavin's assistants.

The big thing for everyone is building a new player-coach relationship.

"When I got the job I said, 'Guys, you have been working hard and trying to impress Coach Gavin. And so now you have to do the same thing here,'" Jennings remarked. "If you want to get on the court, you impress me, you impress the coaching staff."

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Jennings watched many of the men's basketball games last season when the Mustangs went 27-5 and reached the second round of the NAIA Division II national tournament. In addition, he played pick-up games with the Mustangs at the Hennessey Recreation Center before becoming their head coach.

"In the off-season, I'd play open gym with the guys," said Jennings, who played at Northwestern University. "Not a lot, but I've always stepped in and played open gyms, because I still like to get up and down a little bit.

"So I've played against a number of them. That teaches you something as well, getting on the court, seeing how guys play, seeing how they communicate, how they move, how they talk. All those kind of things."

There's already a comfort level between the new coach and the players.

"It's been probably the easiest transition we can have, because Coach Jennings has seen us play over and over again," said Sheawn Bedford, a junior from Texas who was red-shirted last season.

The Mustangs are ranked No. 15 in the country heading into the new season. They expect to have another good year, even with a new coach.

"We still have high expectations," said Lamaak. "We made a pretty good run last year. We have a good group of core guys back. I think we should be able to be almost as good or even better as last year."

Mount Mercy lost several key players in All-American Dondre Osborne, sharpshooter James Boonstoppel, versatile center Ian Matos and point guard Jake Misener, but Jennings likes the players on this year's club. "We have a lot of talent, we have a lot of versatility," he said.

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Lamaak, Alex Houston and Ben Struss played key roles on last year's team and are back as team leaders. Lamaak averaged 10.6 points and 4.8 rebounds as a super sub, Houston provided 9.8 points and 4.5 rebounds, and Struss averaged 9.3 points and 6.2 rebounds. Lamaak and Struss are Kennedy graduates.

Jennings plans to incorporate some of the "Princeton Offense" he learned while playing at Northwestern, but does not play to make any radical changes in a short period of time.

"I did not want to come in and change a lot," he said. "I'm going to learn the strengths of this team and put in things I think fit this group of guys."

Bedford, a 6-foot-3 guard, has been elected one of the captains by his teammates despite not playing last year after transferring from Black Hawk Community College.

"It's humbling," he said. "I appreciate them. I'm not the most vocal guy, but I think I can lead with my heart."

Mount Mercy collected three talented players from AIB this year with Chris Ford, Mychael Brawner-Henley and DeMarco Mallett after AIB dropped all of its sports programs after the 2014-15 season. The Mustangs have other new transfers with CJ Parker, Jeremy Blohm, Chris Brown, Jon Anderson, Jake Anderson and Josh Williams, along with four freshmen.

Da'Quan Moore, a talented point guard, had knee surgery after the season and is currently on the disabled list.

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ROSTER

Seniors

Alex Houston, 6-5, Chicago

Tre Wagner, 6-1, Rockford, Ill.

Kyle Lamaak, 6-5, CR Kennedy

Da'Quan Moore, 5-8, Waterloo

Josh Williams, 6-6, Montgomery, Ill.

Juniors

Chris Ford, 6-0, Bronx, N.Y.

Blake Murdock, 6-0, CR Kennedy

CJ Parker, 6-5, Charlotte, N.C.

Sheawn Bedford, Jr. Converse, Texas

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DeMarco Mallett, 6-2, Waterloo

Jeremy Blohm, 6-1, Matteson, Ill.

Ben Struss, 6-6, CR Kennedy

Jon Anderson, 6-6, Mexico, Mo.

Jake Anderson, 6-6, Mexico, Mo.

Derik Gogg, 6-9, Linn-Mar

Kendall Clark, 6-8, Keokuk

Sophomores

Jacobe Julien, 6-2, Rock Island, Ill.

Mychael Brawner-Henley, 6-3, Evanston, Ill.

Chris Brown, 6-5, Madison, Ga.

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Brian Nachtman, 6-1, North English

Freshmen

Antwain Strong, 6-0, Akron, Ohio

Emilio Villagrana, 5-11, Solon

Nick Shelman, 6-4, Solon

Josh Koeppel, 6-3, Williamsburg