

The Mount Mercy Mustangs will be piling on a bus at 10 o'clock Friday morning for a long ride to Kansas, but they'll climb aboard with big smiles and a ton of confidence.

The Mustangs whipped the 2018 NAIA national champions Thursday night with an 85-77 victory over Graceland in a Heart of America Conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Last year, the Mustangs found a way to lose close games against quality opponents. This time, they found a way to prevail with some cold-blooded 3-pointers in the final minutes.

"It means everything," said Michael Brawner-Henley, who hit a triple with 48 seconds left for an 81-75 advantage. "This Mount Mercy team is under-rated. We come in as underdogs every season, so we just come in here and fight 24/7 in practice.

"We came in here tonight with a chip on shoulders."

Mount Mercy took a 70-59 lead with 7:25 remaining on a pair of free throws by Bailey Basala, but Graceland pulled within 72-71 with three minutes left with a 12-2 spurt.

Last year, the Mustangs might have folded. This year, with a senior-laden ballclub, they responded like champs.

Dennis McKinney drilled a 3-pointer for the Mustangs to give them a 75-71. Graceland scored, but Emilio Villagrana responded with another 3-pointer for Mount Mercy to make it 78-73.



Graceland countered again to make it 78-75, but Brawner-Henley delivered with 3-point dagger for the 81-75 advantage and the Mustangs could see the finish line.

Graceland committed a turnover and Brawner-Henley hit two free throws for an 83-75 lead with 22 seconds remaining. Graceland missed a shot and Antwain Strong made a pair of foul shots for an 85-75 bulge with nine seconds left and that was the ballgame.

The Mustangs executed perfectly in the final minutes for their biggest victory of the year.

"That's something we expect," said Coach Aaron Jennings. "We've got seniors out there, but it's still awesome to see and awesome to coach."

McKinney topped Mount Mercy with 20 points and seven rebounds. Brawner-Henley scored 19 points, Basala contributed 13 points off the bench and Mike Evans had 12. Strong collected 10 assists with a series of terrific passes.

"We just have something to prove this season," said Brawner-Henley, one of the seniors. "This is a great start for us."

The Mustangs played in the NAIA national tournament in 2016 and 2017, but missed a year ago.

"For the seniors, we want to go out on a high note, because we started on a high note," said Brawner-Henley. "We want to go out on top. We're trying to get back there."

Mount Mercy raised its records to 4-3 overall and 2-2 in the conference. Graceland fell to 6-3 overall and 2-2 in the league.

The Mustangs play at Baker University in Kansas on Saturday for their third game this week.

"This gives us confidence," said Jennings. "We talk about buying in. We talk about, 'Earn it. Earn it together.'

"To get a win like this, to get a win where we're sharing the basketball, to play some defense - which we don't always do - it's exciting moving forward."

Ramon Franklin led Graceland with 18 points.

Mount Mercy made 40 percent of its 3-pointers, canned 11 of 13 free throws and pestered Graceland with zone defenses all night.

**GRACELAND (77):** Harley 5 1-3 12, Butler 1 0-0 2, Bellaphant 1 0-0 2, Jackson 5 0-0 12, Franklin 7 1-1 18, Coleman 0 0-1 0, Meier 2 2-2 8, Nelson 6 1-2 15, Schweighauser 0 0-0 0, Pena 4 0-0 8. Totals 31 5-9 77.

**MOUNT MERCY (85):** McKinney 8 2-3 20, Brawner-Henley 7 2-2 19, Evans 5 2-2 12, Strong 2 2-2 7, Villagrana 2 0-1 6, Albagami 2 0-0 6, Reischauer 1 0-0 2, Kehinde 0 0-0 0, Basala 4 3-3

13. Totals 31 11-13 85.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 35, Graceland 28. 3-point goals - Graceland 10 (Franklin 3, Jackson 2, Meier 2, Nelson 2, Harley 1), Mount Mercy 12 (Brawner-Henley 3, McKinney 2, Villagrana 2, Albagami 2, Basala 2, Strong 1).