

Mustangs' season ended by Graceland

Written by Metro Sports Report
Tuesday, 05 March 2019 22:56 -



They may not be as talented as last year's NAIA national champions, but the Graceland Yellowjackets showed some championship-caliber play on Tuesday night.

Unfortunately for the Mount Mercy men's basketball team, that meant an end to their season.

Senior Mo Jackson scored 25 points to lead six players in double figures, including a key 4-point play to stymie a Mustang rally with 5:13 remaining, as Graceland avenged two regular-season losses with a 94-84 win in the opening round of the Heart of America Conference Tournament at the Hennessey Rec Center.

No. 9 seed Graceland (16-14) advances to the quarterfinals on Thursday night against No. 1 seed and top-ranked Benedictine (28-2). Mount Mercy, the eighth seed, closes its season at 16-15.

The visitors led 45-42 at halftime as both teams played spirited basketball in the first 20 minutes. Mount Mercy came out aggressively to start the second half, grabbing several offensive rebounds but were unable to finish.

"I thought we got to the basket," said Mustang Coach Aaron Jennings. "We drew up a couple plays. We executed, guys created, got some good looks but nothing dropped. I think we missed our first three or four layups and our first couple free throws and they took advantage."

Graceland opened the second half on an 11-1 run, forcing the Mustangs to extend their defense and take some chances.

"Playing catch-up against the defending national champions is a tall order," Jennings said. "They have that championship pedigree and they know how to play and how to execute."

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It didn't help that Mustang players were dropping left and right. Mohammed Albagami caught an unintentional shot to the face in the first half and lost some teeth. Then Antwain Strong and Dennis McKinney both went down with cramping issues. Strong was in and out of the line-up in the second half. He finished with 21 points, but only four after halftime as he limped his way through much of the game.

"We've had some cramping issues this year," Jennings said. "We talked about how hot the gym gets and our guys have to play a lot of minutes. It just hit at the wrong time. Mohammed gets some teeth knocked out, but he got back out there and played hard."

Still, the Mustangs got back in the game, getting as close as four at 67-63 on one of Mychael Brawner-Henley's seven 3-point baskets with 6:13 remaining.

Then Jackson made the play of the game. With the shot clock running down, he hit a 3-point basket and was fouled. He completed the 4-point play and Mount Mercy never got closer than six the rest of the way.

"Jackson is an awesome player," Jennings said. "He makes those tough shots. We had a game plan against him but sometimes good players step up and make plays. He did that tonight."

Jackson also had six assists and seven rebounds. Ramon Franklin chipped in 12 points for Graceland. Will Nelson added 11 while Nick Coleman, Garrett Schweighauser and Alec Pena had 10 each.

Brawner-Henley closed his Mustang career with a game-high 32 points. Mike Evans, also playing his final game at Mount Mercy, had 10 rebounds. It was also the final game for Strong, Albagami and reserves Emilio Villagrana and Joseph Kehinde.

"Those guys are just class acts," Jennings said of his seniors. "They have been a pleasure to coach. I can't say enough good things about them. Those are guys who have worked hard for

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me and I'll always be in their corner until the end of time.

"They are Mustangs through and through and I'm very proud of that."

GRACELAND (94): Jackson 7 6-7 25, Nelson 4 2-4 11, Pena 4 1-1 10, Harley 3 1-2 8, Franklin 2 7-8 12, Meier 2 1-2 7, Coleman 3 2-3 10, Schweighauser 5 0-0 10, Butler 0 0-0 0, Leedom 0 1-2 1. Totals: 30 21-29 94.

MOUNT MERCY (84): McKinney 1 1-1 3, Brawner-Henley 10 5-7 32, Evans 1 1-4 3, Strong 7 4-8 21, Albagami 1 0-0 2, Villagrana 1 2-2 4, Basala 3 0-0 9, Reischauer 2 0-0 5, Johnson 2 1-3 5, Loggins 0 0-0 0, Doe 0 0-0 0, Stoeffler 0 0-0 0, Kehinde 0 0-0 0. Totals: 28 14-25 84.

Halftime - Graceland 45, Mount Mercy 42. 3-point goals: Graceland 13 (Harley 1, Nelson 1, Coleman 2, Jackson 5, Franklin 1, Meier 2, Pena 1). Mount Mercy 14 (Brawner-Henley 7, Strong 3, Basala 3, Reischauer 1).