

McKinney is new man for Mustangs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Dennis McKinney has undergone an incredible transformation for the Mount Mercy Mustangs this season.

Last year as a red-shirt freshman, he averaged 5.3 points as a reserve and attempted only one 3-pointer all season. "He shot one," cracked Coach Aaron Jennings, "and it was a mistake."

This year, McKinney is averaging a healthy 18.3 points as a key member of the starting lineup and has hit 29 triples in 12 games for the most prolific 3-point shooting team in NAIA basketball.

In high school in Chicago, he was a 6-foot-4 center who played with his back to the basket and was known for his offensive rebounds and tendency to commit too many fouls.

In college in Cedar Rapids, he roams all over the court and is capable of scoring from every spot on the floor, with strong moves near the basket and a soft touch on the perimeter.

McKinney scored 21 points and hit a key 3-pointer Monday to help the Mustangs hold off Waldorf, 82-76, in a non-conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

"He has put in a tremendous amount of work. He loves the game of basketball," said Jennings, who has enjoyed watching McKinney become one of the top players in the Heart of America Conference.

Mount Mercy has a shooting machine called "The Gun," which feeds players a steady stream of passes so they can work on their game whenever they want without a rebounder.

"It's thrown as many passes to him, probably, as anybody in the country," said Jennings. "He's

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in here on Sundays, he's in here late, he's in here early. And he loves to work. He decided he didn't want to be just a back-to-the-basket '5' man.

"It's exciting to see as a coach," said Jennings. "And it's fun."

McKinney is still technically a '5' man as the starting center, but he's also a 1, 2, 3 or 4 at times as the Mustangs stretch the defense. "It gives us a different presence," said Jennings, whose club is averaging 88 points and 14 3-pointers per game.

McKinney was red-shirted at Mount Mercy as a true freshman. He averaged 12.4 minutes as a key reserve last season and has more than doubled his playing time to 28 minutes this year.

He's more than doubled his rebounding numbers, from 2.4 per outing to a healthy 5.7, and is a better player in all respects.

McKinney said he constantly talks to Jennings about ways he can improve and follows those instructions.

"It just all came together and I'm trying to get as many workouts with him as I can, because I know he can make me the best player I can be," said McKinney. "It's a day-by-day grind, because I knew what I needed to do to help this program."

Jennings, who played at Northwestern, also gave McKinney advice on the mental aspects of college basketball.

"Just play with confidence," McKinney related, "because sometimes I can get in my own head. I have my teammates and coaches to keep me humble, not to stay too high and not to get too low on myself."

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"They push me on a daily basis just to get better, on the court, off the court, and to just stay level-headed."

McKinney is obviously happy with the progress he's made this season. "Honestly," he said, "I didn't expect myself to play like this."

The Mustangs (7-5) have a lot of players who can hit a 3-pointer and make a tough shot. That includes McKinney.

"He's not afraid to take a big shot. And you love that mentality," said Jennings. "But it has to be backed by work, and as a coach I know that it has."

Antwain Strong matched McKinney with 21 points Monday. Strong went 13-for-13 at the foul line and also contributed seven rebounds and five assists.

Christian Reischauer scored 12 points for the Mustangs. Bailey Basala popped in three 3-pointers and scored 11 points.

Mount Mercy opened a 12-point lead at 71-59 with 4:43 remaining, but the Mustangs committed a series of careless turnovers that helped Waldorf pull within four points at 75-71, 77-73 and 80-76 coming down the stretch.

Strong ended the suspense with 9.5 seconds left with a pair of free throws for the final 82-76 margin. For awhile, it looked like the Mustangs were trying to find ways to give the victory away.

"That's what it really felt like, didn't it?," said Jennings, who credited Waldorf for dictating a slower pace.

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"It wasn't our pace, it wasn't our style," he said. "We found a way to win, which is good. Obviously an ugly win is a win. Tonight everything was a little bit off."

Brian Smith scored 17 points for Waldorf (4-8). Gabriel Munoz, a 7-foot-3 center from Spain, was 10 inches taller than the tallest Mustang on the floor and scored 13 points before fouling out.

Mount Mercy hosts Viterbo Tuesday at 6 p.m.

WALDORF (76): D.Martin 1 9-14 11, Motter 2 0-0 5, Smith 8 0-0 17, M.Martin 5 2-3 13, Munoz 4 5-6 13, Kuchinka 4 2-2 11, Minor 0 0-0 0, O'Large 3 0-2 6. Totals 27 18-27 76.

MOUNT MERCY (82): McKinney 9 2-2 21, Brawner-Henley 3 0-2 7, Evans 1 0-0 2, Strong 4 13-13 21, Villagrana 2 0-0 5, Albagami 1 0-0 3, Reischauer 5 0-1 12, Johnson 0 0-0 0, Basala 4 0-1 11. Totals 29 15-19 82.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 40, Waldorf 36. 3-point goals - Waldorf 4 (Motter 1, Smith 1, M.Martin 1, Kuchinka 1), Mount Mercy 9 (Basala 3, Reischauer 2, McKinney 1, Brawner-Henley 1, Villagrana 1, Albagami 1).