

The Mount Mercy Mustangs are healthy, hungry and headed in the right direction again.

The Mustangs dumped Evangel, 106-81, in a Heart of America Conference game at the Hennessey Recreation Center Saturday as they chase a favorable seed in the league tournament.

Mount Mercy climbed within a half-game of fourth place in the conference standings with five games left in the regular season, sitting at 14-11 overall and 9-10 in the league.

The Mustangs are deeper and stronger than they've been all season, especially with Mychael Brawner-Henley back after missing nine games due to a school suspension.

Mount Mercy struggled with a 3-and-6 record without Brawner-Henley for four weeks, but the Mustangs have won both of their games since he returned this week.

Brawner-Henley, who averages 13.5 points, scored 17 points in 13 minutes off the bench Saturday. Dennis McKinney led the way with 25 points, Bailey Basala had 18 and DJ Johnson pitched in 16.

Brawner-Henley, a fifth-year senior, had to take care of some work in the classroom before he was allowed to play again.

"It's been a long stretch," he said Saturday. "Man, it was very tough. I have to own up to what happened and I owe it to my team to be back out here and push us the playoffs."

There are 13 teams in the Heart of America Conference, but only 10 of them will make the league tournament. The top six teams in the standings will receive an opening-round bye, and the team that claims the No. 4 will be assured of hosting the quarterfinals.

The Mustangs want that No. 4 seed.

"I write it on the board every time: Win out," said Brawner-Henley. "That's our goal. We have five more games and I expect to win every one of them. I expect to finish fourth or better."

The Mustangs are 3 1/2 games out of third place with time running out, but the No. 4 seed is certainly within reach.

Culver-Stockton (10-10) and Graceland (9-9) are tied for fourth place, with Mount Mercy (9-10) and Grand View (9-10) breathing down their necks. Central Methodist (8-10) and Clarke (8-10) are tied for eighth place as they scramble for position.

Johnson, a sophomore from San Antonio, hit three 3-pointers Saturday. He was not part of the regular rotation in November and December, but he gained a lot of experience and a lot of confidence with Brawner-Henley (suspension), Basala (ankle) and Mohammed Albagami (concussion protocol) all sidelined at different times.

Coach Aaron Jennings now has nine players in his rotation and they all play key roles. That makes the Mustangs a dangerous team.

"Yes, very dangerous," said Brawner-Henley. "I think we're going to be very dangerous."

"That's the plan," agreed Jennings. "I feel great about our team and our depth."

All nine players in the rotation can put the ball in the basket and most of them are good 3-point shooters. The Mustangs lead the nation in 3-point shooting with 13.75 per game, although they were only 9 for 35 from distance Saturday.

Mount Mercy got off to a slow start and trailed by seven points at the 16:40 mark of the first half, but they outscored Evangel 57-29 in the last 16 minutes of the stanza to lead 63-42 at intermission.

"Those 16 minutes were about as good as we've looked," said Jennings. "Just playing fast and playing together."

The Mustangs hit a lull in the second half and Evangel drew within seven points at 69-62 and 71-64, but that's as close as it got and the home team drew away again.

Brawner-Henley is one of the leaders on the team and knows he let his teammates down during his nine-game absence.

"I think they all knew what was going on with me and they knew how much I love this game and love this team," he said. "They just stayed with me. They stayed positive. And they knew what I was going to do for them on the court."

Jennings is glad to have him back and said Brawner-Henley handled things well during the suspension.

"He was here every day, putting in work," said Jennings. "He was here every day at practice. He gives us another element."

Clark Brewington scored 20 points for Evangel (5-18, 4-14).

EVANGEL (81): Brewington 7 3-4 20, Egwu 1 2-2 4, Coffman 1 6-6 8, Martinborough 2 3-4 7, Stocks 7 3-7 17, Wilson 0 0-0 0, Green 0 0-0 0, Call 1 0-0 3, Williams 2 0-0 4, Stamps 0 0-0 0, Antonov 3 2-2 8, Janson 0 0-0 0, Smith 3 4-4 10. Totals 27 23-29 81.

MOUNT MERCY (106): McKinney 8 7-9 25, Evans 3 0-2 6, Basala 6 5-7 18, Strong 1 3-4 5, Reischauer 1 0-0 2, Kelley 1 0-0 3, Villagrana 3 2-2 8, Loggins 0 0-0 0, Doe 1 0-0 2, Brawner-Henley 5 5-6 17, Hehmann 0 0-0 0, Albagami 0 2-2 2, Johnson 5 3-4 16, Stoeffler 0 2-2 2, Kehinde 0 0-0 0. Totals 34 29-38 106.

Halftime - Mount Mercy 63, Evangel 42. 3-point goals - Evangel 4 (Brewington 3, Call 1), Mount Mercy 9 (Johnson 3, McKinney 2, Brawner-Henley 2, Basala 1, Kelley 1).