

KCC men win playoff thriller in OT

Written by Jim Ecker

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Johnson Hall was a place for grown men with steel in their veins Tuesday night.

Men like Joseph Tagarelli, who left the Kirkwood gym with a welt under his left eye. And Jalen Currie, who played the game of his life. And Taylor Olson, whose sore ankle won't get the rest it needs for at least another few days.

The Kirkwood Eagles topped NIACC, 75-71, in an overtime thriller in the opening round of the Region XI junior college basketball tournament.

Kirkwood (21-9) will visit Iowa Lakes (22-8) in the semifinals Thursday night in Estherville. The regional finals are Saturday.

March Madness was in the air at Johnson Hall as Kirkwood and NIACC battled for 45 intense minutes, with the loser knowing its season would be over.

"It's fun to play in a game like that, to be honest," said Tagarelli, a raw-boned 6-foot-5 sophomore from Bayside, Wis. "The atmosphere was great. They threw some punches, we threw some punches.

"It's a good win for us," he said. "But now we have to look past it and keep going on and make it

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to nationals."

JC Fuller swished two free throws to give Kirkwood a 73-70 lead with 7.7 seconds left in overtime, which led to the age-old question in that situation: Do you foul your opponent on purpose or do you play defense and risk them making a 3-point shot to tie the game?

"I definitely want to do it (foul on purpose), but we haven't practiced it a bunch," said Bryan Petersen, Kirkwood's 26-year-old rookie head coach, "so that makes you a little nervous."

Ajay Lawton fouled NIACC's Sam Skogen - on purpose - with 4.8 seconds left. Skogen made the first free throw, pulling NIACC within 73-71, and everyone expected him to fire his second foul shot at the rim and miss on purpose to give his club a chance for an offensive rebound and putback.

Surprisingly, Skogen tried to make his second free throw - but missed anyway. Tagarelli grabbed his 13th and final rebound, got fouled with three seconds left and made both shots to finish the scoring at 75-71.

Kirkwood won the contest despite missing all eight of its 3-point shots in the second half. Olson, who survived the flu and walking pneumonia in recent weeks, hit a 3-pointer on his gimpy ankle at the start of overtime to give the Eagles a 66-63 lead, but it was anyone's game until the hectic final seconds.

Tagarelli finished with 20 points, 13 boards and an 8-for-9 showing at the foul line in clutch situations. Currie, an under-sized center at 6-foot-5 but a terrific athlete, collected 16 points, threw down a pair of thunderous dunks and snared nine rebounds.

"I was locked in from the time I woke up," said Currie, who hails from Milwaukee. "I knew that today was the day. Win or go home, and I'm not ready to go home yet."

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"Everybody was out there to win," he said, "and I like competition like that."

Currie is always active around the basket. This time, he made 8 of 14 shots and gave Kirkwood a big spark.

"He was awesome. Awesome," said Petersen. "Best game of the year, when we needed it. I was really proud of him.

"He guarded, he played with urgency, he set the tone for us. And obviously he was a good offensive weapon for us tonight, too."

March Madness is usually reserved for the big guys who play NCAA Division I basketball, but there was enough to go around at the NJCAA Division II level as well.

"You really feel it," said Tagarelli. "The crowd was intense, the game got intense, the refs were intense. Everything was just loud and crazy. Half the time I couldn't hear the plays we were calling, but we came together and figured it out."

Fuller poured in 17 points in the first half and scored 21 for Kirkwood. Olson, coming off the bench now with his sore ankle, gritted his teeth through 29 minutes and netted 16 points.

David Humphries led NIACC (20-11) with 23 points.

The higher seeds get to host games in the regional tournament, which is why No.3 seed Kirkwood is playing at No.2 seed Iowa Lakes Thursday. Iowa Central (20-12) visits DMACC (26-5) in the other semifinal.

NIACC (71): Davis 4 2-3 10, Humphries 10 2-5 23, Skogen 2 1-2 7, Don 2 2-2 6, Plagge 5 0-0

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10, Jackson 0 2-2 2, Coleman 1 2-2 4, Lowe 0 0-0 0, Lang 3 0-0 9. Totals 27 11-16 71.

KIRKWOOD (75): Lawton 1 0-0 2, Fuller 6 8-9 21, Currie 8 0-0 16, Batie-Gaddy 0 0-00, Tagarelli 6 8-9 20, Lassen 0 0-0 0, Olson 4 4-4 16, Uwadiae 0 0-0 0. Totals 25 20-22 75.

Halftime - Kirkwood 38, NIACC 30. Regulation - Kirkwood 63, NIACC 63. 3-point goals - NIACC 6 (Lang 3, Skogen 2, Humphries 1), Kirkwood 5 (Olson 4, Fuller 1).