

No. 9 Eagles rally by Southwestern

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 21 February 2015 18:50 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 February 2015 17:04



The Kirkwood Eagles struggled for much of their game Saturday and trailed Southwestern 39-33 with 14 minutes left at Johnson Hall.

At that point, few Kirkwood fans would have bet the ninth-ranked Eagles would win by 17 points.

"I wouldn't either," said Coach Bryan Petersen.

They found a way, however.

Ajay Lawton popped in all 15 of his points in the second half and Ron Singleton set the tone on defense as Kirkwood rallied for a 70-53 victory in an ICCAC conference game.

Kirkwood used a 12-0 run to grab a 45-39 lead on a 3-pointer by Lawson and the Eagles kept motoring from there, belting the visitors from Creston by a 37-14 margin in the final 14 minutes.

"We came out sluggish and slow in the first half and Coach ripped us a little bit about it," said Lawton, who nailed four clutch 3-pointers. "He came in and told us what we had to do. We fixed things at half."

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Kirkwood stars Joe Tagarelli and Jordan Ashton got into early foul trouble and sat for long stretches, throwing the Eagles out of rhythm for the first 20 minutes. On top of that, the Eagles shot poorly in the first half (2 for 15 on 3-pointers) and had trouble guarding Mataika Koyamainavure, a strong 6-foot-8 center from Fiji.

It didn't look good for Kirkwood when Tagarelli was whistled for his third foul early in the second half, but Singleton stepped into the breach and did a yeoman's job on defense and the backboards. All of a sudden, Koyamainavure had trouble getting the ball where he wanted and the Eagles began to click.

"I thought Ron Singleton did a great job of setting the tone for us, how he was guarding 20 (Koyamainavure). I think that energized everybody else," said Petersen.

"Ron made him work for every touch and just out-worked him. He moved his feet and really made it hard for him."

Singleton, a muscular 6-foot-6 sophomore from Chicago, welcomed the challenge of guarding Koyamainavure and 6-foot-8 Simon Joseph.

Koyamainavure finished with 15 points, but he did not score in the last 14 minutes of the game.

"It was pretty tough," said Singleton. "They're big guys. They're pretty big and wide. I had to keep moving."

Kirkwood got a big lift from its substitutes and outscored Southwestern in bench points, 28-6. Fifteen of those points belonged to Lawton, who was a starter earlier in the year until being slowed by a sore ankle (he's fine now).

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Freshman Jacob Olson from Cedar Rapids Jefferson contributed six points, six rebounds and two assists off the bench. Kareem Martin Jr. did a good job with five points and four rebounds, and Chike Ukah also helped the bench brigade.

Kirkwood shot 6-for-9 on 3-pointers in the second half, with Lawton hitting 4-of-5. Southwestern consistently double-teamed Kirkwood's post players whenever they touched the ball, daring the Eagles to shoot from outside. Kirkwood missed in the first half, but connected in the second half when it counted.

"I came out shooting it," said Lawton. "Shooters are going to shoot it, so I'm going to shoot it. They were testing us a little bit."

Matt Lassen pitched in 14 points for Kirkwood (22-5, 8-2). Hunter Rhodes scored nine points and helped spark the Eagles with hard drives to the basket.

Singleton finished with eight points and eight rebounds, but those numbers do not reflect his work on defense. Tagarelli finished with eight points and six rebounds, despite playing only 16 minutes.

Kirkwood stayed one game behind DMACC in the conference standings with two games left in the regular season. The Eagles play at DMACC Wednesday night.

Southwestern fell to 20-9 overall and 4-6 in the league.

SOUTHWESTERN (53): Newsome 4 2-2 10, Smith 3 2-2 8, Koyamainavure 6 3-5 15, Kut 3 0-3 6, Bower 3 0-0 8, Tolbert 0 0-0 0, Mason 1 0-0 3, Kirk 1 0-0 3, Joseph 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 8-14 53.

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KIRKWOOD (70): Singleton 4 0-1 8, Lassen 5 2-2 14, Rhodes 2 5-9 9, Ashton 1 0-0 3, Tagarelli 3 2-4 8, Lawton 5 1-2 15, Olson 3 0-0 6, Martin 2 0-0 5, Ukah 1 0-0 2. Totals 26 10-18 70.

Halftime - Southwestern 29, Kirkwood 23. 3-point goals - Southwestern 3 (Bower 2, Mason 1), Kirkwood 8 (Lawton 4, Lassen 2, Ashton 1, Martin 1).