

## Kirkwood women earn trip to nationals

Written by Jim Ecker

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Taylor Silva was so incredibly happy Saturday that she cried for several minutes after the Kirkwood Eagles beat NIACC for the regional title and earned a spot in the junior college national tournament.

Silva had just about composed herself when they announced she had been named the Most Valuable Player of the Region XI tournament. That brought more tears and more smiles for the 5-foot-5 sophomore from Bellevue, Neb.

"I wasn't expecting it, nor did I think it would happen," Silva said after collecting her MVP award. "It was pretty exciting. I was expecting somebody else to win it."

The seventh-ranked Eagles had plenty of heroes in their 78-67 victory over sixth-ranked NIACC, but Silva was in the thick of things all day with 13 points, five rebounds, five assists, four steals, two key 3-pointers and even a blocked shot.

It was a tight game all the way until Kirkwood pulled away at the end. And when the final horn sounded, the tears began to flow for Silva and her teammates as the Eagles (28-5) earned a spot in the NJCAA Division II national tournament that will be held in Overland Park (Kan.) from March 17-21.

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"It was a long time coming," said Silva, red-eyed and happy after wiping away the teardrops. "We put a lot of hard work and dedication into this. It was finally worth it. It all paid off."

Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl will be taking the Eagles to the national tournament for the 16th time in his 26 years as head coach. He's won six national titles during his legendary career, but regional titles never get old.

"It's pretty special. It really is," he said, calling this club a "good group" of people. "They like each other. That's half the fun with them."

Muhl reached into his bag of tricks and threw a box-and-one defense at Sierra Ford-Washington, NIACC's star guard who torched Kirkwood for 35 points, nine rebounds, seven assists and six steals when NIACC defeated the Eagles here during the regular season, 84-71.

"We've got to do something different, because this sure as hell isn't working," Muhl remembered thinking after that game. "I'm not real smart, but I knew that wasn't good."

Muhl gave the initial assignment of guarding Ford-Washington to Cyerra Hutchins, a freshman from Cedar Rapids Prairie. Hutchins gave it a great effort and then yielded to fellow rookie Casey Miles, who also did a terrific job.

Four Kirkwood players played a zone defense while Hutchins and then Miles followed Ford-Washington all over the court. The tactic worked

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perfectly and Ford-Washington finished with only 12 points and did minimal damage.

"At first I was a little nervous," said Hutchins, "but then I thought, 'You know what? I've never been to state before, I've never been to nationals, so this is my time to step up.'"

Ford-Washington did not score in the first 13 minutes of the game, shot 2-for-11 from the floor, committed seven turnovers and got frustrated as the game wore on. At one point, she was called for an offensive foul when she elbowed Hutchins away.



The strategy was simple, but brilliant.

"Just to wear her down a little bit, and hopefully it did," said Muhl. "When it got late, she couldn't make a play as well. We wore her down."

The box-and-one took NIACC by surprise.

"That's the first time we saw it," said NIACC Coach Todd Ciochetto, "but they left our shooters wide open and we didn't move the basketball to the open shooters. When we did, we scored."

Hutchins has not been a big scorer for Kirkwood this season, but her brilliant defense fueled her

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best offensive spurt of the year with the season hanging in the balance. There are no at-large bids to the national tournament, so the Eagles had to win to advance.

Her big stretch on offense began quietly with a free throw for a 56-53 lead with 7:42 left in the game, but then she really heated up. Hutchins scored inside for a 60-59 lead with 5:42 left on an assist from Silva, then hit a driving layup for a 62-59 edge with 5:02 remaining.

Her two free throws gave Kirkwood a 64-62 lead with 4:40 left and her 3-pointer gave the Eagles the lead for good at 67-65 with four minutes remaining. She poured in 10 points in 3 minutes, 42 seconds and gave her team the lead on three different occasions.

"Coach said defense wins games, and that if you play good defense your offense will come," Hutchins remarked. "At Prairie I wasn't really a shooting guard, but Coach told me, 'Get in the gym, Get in the gym,' so I got in the gym."

Aliyah Isaac hit a big 3-pointer from the top of the key to give Kirkwood a 70-65 margin, then Silva - all 5-foot-5 of her - blocked a 3-point shot by 5-foot-10 NIACC guard Trudy Peterson. "That's my first blocked of the entire season," Silva said proudly. "Yes, first block, so pretty good."

Isaac made two free throws with 1:40 left for a 72-65 spread and the Eagles were starting to breathe a little easier.

Cassidy Clark made two foul shots for a 74-65 lead with 47.9 seconds to go and Silva made one free throw for a 75-65 bulge with 36.7 seconds left and the home team was home free.

Silva and Clark shared scoring honors for Kirkwood with 13 points. Peyton Bockholt provided 12

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points, Isaac finished with 11 points and Hutchins also finished with 11 points. Isaac, a 5-foot-8 guard, also grabbed 11 rebounds.

Logan Anderson scored 16 points for NIACC (25-6). Savannah Lentz had 14 points and Ford-Washington finished with 12.

Kirkwood will be making its first appearance in the national tournament since 2012, when the Eagles finished sixth.

Silva cannot wait to get there.

"I'm so excited," she said. "It's something we've been working for since the very first day we came to Kirkwood. It's exciting to have it finally happen."

Bockholt and Clark joined Silva on the all-tournament team.

Kirkwood began the season with a 4-4 record, but has won 24 of its last 25 games.

NIACC (67): Anderson 5 2-4 16, Ford-Washington 2 8-10 12, Onaca 2 1-1 5, Eckert 2 0-0 4, Miller 1 0-0 2, Boyd-Lockett 1 0-0 3, Lentz 5 0-0 14, Adamich 1 0-1 2, Peterson 3 0-0 9. Totals 22 11-16 67.

KIRKWOOD (78): Silva 4 3-4 13, Larson 0 2-2 2, Hutchins 3 4-7 11, Martensen 0 1-2 1, Clark 4 5-6 13, Sneed 2 0-1 4, Miles 0 4-4 4, Downs 3 1-2 7, Isaac 2 5-6 11, Sudduth 0 0-0 0, Bockholt 5 2-2 12. Totals 23 27-36 78.

Halftime - Kirkwood 36, NIACC 36. 3-point goals - NIACC 12 (Anderson 4, Lentz 4, Peterson 3,

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Boyd-Lockett 1), Kirkwood 5 (Silva 2, Isaac 2, Hutchins 1).