

Kirkwood women seek 7th national title

Written by Jim Ecker

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The numbers are phenomenal and have cemented Kim Muhl's spot as one of the most successful women's basketball coaches of all time.

Six national titles. Sixteen trips to the national tournament. A career record of 762-140. A winning percentage of 84.5 over 26 campaigns. An incredible streak of 106 straight wins in conference games.

Muhl is such a humble guy that you'd never know any of these things if you casually bumped into him at Kirkwood Community College, but the man is a walking Hall of Famer.

Muhl and the Eagles are back in the NJCAA Division II national tournament this week in Overland Park, Kan. The sixth-ranked Eagles (28-5) play North Arkansas (20-9) in the opening round Wednesday at 11 a.m.

Kirkwood is not favored to win the title, but the Eagles are seeded No. 4 in the 16-team event and are definitely talented enough to make a long run. Parkland is seeded No. 1 and ranked No. 1, so everyone is chasing them.

The Eagles won their first national title in 1997 and claimed their second in 2002. They spent the next four years finishing 4th, 3rd, 4th and 2nd before capturing four straight crowns in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 with an unprecedented four-peat.

The gravy train ended in 2010, in terms of being a prominent player at the national event. Kirkwood did not qualify for the national tournament in 2011, 2013 or 2014 and finished sixth in

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2012, despite having strong clubs.

"It's gotten harder," said Muhl. "The women's game has gotten better in our league, the teams have gotten better.

"It's just harder," he said. "It's the progression of the sport."

Muhl is not obsessed with winning games, although he'd certainly love to win another national title. He says he'll quit coaching the minute he wins

the lottery, but it will seem odd some day to see somebody else roaming the sidelines at Johnson Hall, exhorting his players to "Move! Rebound! Pass The Ball!"

Muhl took NIACC completely by surprise in the championship game of the regional tournament when he played an aggressive box-and-one against NIACC's star player, completely disrupting her performance and leading to another Kirkwood victory. NIACC had not seen a box-and-one all season and it threw the fifth-ranked team in the country off-balance.

It's not unusual now to see other strong teams in the ICCAC conference these days. NIACC was awfully good this year and Iowa Central had a strong team last year. Kirkwood has good competition these days, which makes it harder to win regional titles and harder to reach the national tournament, because there are no at-large bids.

If you don't win the regional tournament, you don't go to the national tournament.

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The Eagles are back at nationals this week, however, with a balanced club that has no true stars. Ariel Sneed, an All-American last year as a freshman, suffered a knee injury in a junior college all-star game last summer and hurt her other knee during the season, limiting her production to 6.6 points per game and knocking her out of the starting lineup.

Incredibly, Kirkwood has reached the national tournament without a single player averaging in double figures. Kirsten Larson, a 3-point specialist and zone buster, leads the Eagles at 9.9 points per game. Cassidy Clark averages 8.7 points and Anna Martensen, who replaced Sneed in the starting lineup, averages 8.3 points.

Tyra Polite, Kirkwood's top all-around player, averaged 8.7 points this season but is sidelined with a broken bone in her ankle.

The Eagles have no stars, but that's the beauty of the team. Sneed got hurt and Martensen stepped in and did a superb job. Polite got hurt and freshman Cyerra Hutchins moved into the starting lineup and played the game of her life in the regional finals against NIACC, both offensively and defensively.

Taylor Silva is a hard-nosed point guard with a high basketball IQ who can run the club and hit a big shot when needed. Freshmen Aliyah Isaac and A.J. Downs have made great strides during the season and are now important parts of the puzzle.

Peyton Bockholt, slowed by a knee injury last year, is a valuable player off the bench. Freshman Casey Miles also has made great strides as a regular member of the crew.

Muhl spends little time crying about injuries. He simply puts somebody else on the floor and expects them to play well.

"It's like a football thing: Next man up," he said. "That's what we always talk about. You can't stop the season. You have to keep playing."

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The tournament begins Tuesday with six opening-round games at Johnson County Community College, with two more openers (including Kirkwood's) on Wednesday. The championship game is scheduled for Saturday night at 7:30, but there also will be consolation games that lead to 3rd place, 5th place and 7th place.

Kirkwood and Illinois Central are tied for the most NJCAA Division II titles with six apiece. A seventh title would put the Eagles all alone at the top.