

Kirkwood wraps up top seed with win

Written by Mike Condon

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Bryan Petersen admitted he had some concerns as February started.

His Kirkwood men's basketball team had given up 95 points in a Feb. 6 loss to Iowa Lakes, on the heels of a January loss at Southwestern where the hosts scored 85.

What a difference a few weeks, and some attention to detail, can make.

Since the loss to Iowa Lakes, the No. 6 Eagles have won six straight, holding four of their six opponents under 60 points.

The latest victim of Kirkwood's renewed defense was NIACC. The Trojans shot just 31 percent from the field Saturday at Johnson Hall and went back to Mason City with a 74-57 defeat.

The victory gave the Eagles (25-4, 10-2) a share of the ICCAC regular-season title with both Southwestern and Iowa Lakes. Kirkwood gained the No. 1 seed for the upcoming regional tournament by having the best strength of schedule. Southwestern will be the No. 2 seed, followed by Iowa Lakes.

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Kirkwood drew a bye in the opening round of the regional tournament and will host a semifinal game Thursday night against an opponent to be determined.

"Our defense has been really good the last three weeks," Petersen said.

"Since we got owned at home by Iowa Lakes, our guys have really bought in defensively and it starts with our sophomores, the kids we honored today."

Sophomores Josh Bartlett, Hunter Rhodes, Nick Richards, Jacob Olson, Josh Meier and Cristen Wilson were honored before the game. They all started out slow on offense, but were all over the Trojans on the defensive end.

"We already know we have a great offense," said Richards, who led the way 16 points. "We've made major improvements on defense after taking a couple of steps back. The better our defense is, the better we are as a team because we know our offense will come."

The offense, led by Richards, came alive late in the first half as the Eagles grabbed a 42-25 lead at the break.

"We were able to grow a small lead because we were able to get stops," Petersen said. "That's a credit to the sophomores because they set the tone today from the beginning."

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~~Kirkwood's victory over the top seed in the first round of the tournament was a significant win for the team. The game was a closely contested affair, with both teams showing great skill and determination. Kirkwood's players were able to outpace their opponents in the final minutes, securing the win. The victory was a testament to the team's hard work and dedication throughout the season.~~