

Kirkwood whips No. 1 Triton for national title

Written by Metro Sports Report

Saturday, 19 March 2016 22:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 20 March 2016 13:59



DANVILLE, Ill. - The Kirkwood Eagles nearly gave their coach and fans a heart attack Saturday night by missing a bunch of free throws in the final minutes of the NJCAA championship game, but they survived the ordeal and left the gym at Danville Community College with huge smiles and the biggest prize in junior college men's basketball.

The sixth-ranked Eagles whipped top-ranked Triton College, 83-76, in the finals of the NJCAA Division II tournament to claim the second national title in school history.

Kirkwood missed 11 free throws in the final four minutes and two seconds, but managed to hang onto the lead and cut down the championship nets.

"All right!," Coach Bryan Petersen exclaimed as he snipped the final strand and displayed the net to the Kirkwood players and fans.

Petersen, 28, was a junior college All-American at Kirkwood in 2007 before becoming a two-year starter at Iowa State. Now he's led the Eagles to the national championship in just his third year as head coach.

"It still hasn't quite set in yet on what we just did, but I couldn't be more happy for our kids and what they did with the special run this week and all year," he said. "Pretty cool stuff."

Kirkwood also won the national title in 1998, but the Eagles had not played in the national tournament since 2011 before making their magical run this season. They began the tournament with an 86-61 victory over Frederick and then bumped off ninth-ranked Louisburg in overtime (89-83) and third-ranked Essex County (77-66) before upending the No. 1 team in the country.

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The Eagles nearly cost themselves the national title by missing 11 free throws in the final 4:02.

"Oh my god," said Petersen. "I was about to lose it.

"At the end of the day, hopefully I won't remember that too much because we got the win, but we definitely made it interesting. That's not how you draw it up, that's for sure."

Nick Richards, Byron Harp and Cristen Wilson made the all-tournament team for Kirkwood. All of the players received yellow championship T-shirts and gray championship caps, although freshman Kaliph Fagan had trouble getting his cap to fit on top of the wild hairstyle he calls the "Kaliph 'Fro."

Kirkwood won four games in five days at the national tournament, capped by three straight wins over top-10 opponents. The Eagles won the national title with their talent, depth and versatility.

"And I think the determination and the toughness of our kids," said Petersen. "We have some high-character kids.

"We have some good players, no question, but when you get talented players with high character and a will to win, you can do special things. That's what I told the group: When you can get that combination, you're going to be able to do special things."

Richards gave Kirkwood a 13-point lead at 61-48 with 9:35 left with a three-point play, but the game was far from over at that point. Wilson gave the Eagles a 70-60 lead with 5:02 left with a dunk, but there were many anxious moments to come.

Triton pulled within 70-62 with 4 1/2 minutes remaining and Kirkwood's problems at the foul line began shortly after that. The Eagles went 11 of 22 at the foul line in the final 4:02, giving the

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Trojans a chance to rally.

Triton drew within 72-68 with 2:05 left, but Harp hit a floater and nailed two free throws to make it 76-68 with 1:25 remaining.

Triton pulled within 77-73 on a 3-pointer with 62 seconds left, putting the outcome in serious doubt again. Kirkwood missed three free throws in the next 10 seconds and Triton got within 79-76 with another 3-pointer with 27.1 seconds to go, making it a one-possession game.

Richards muffed two more foul shots with 24.3 seconds left, giving Triton a chance to tie with a 3-pointer. The Trojans missed a 3-pointer, but they got the offensive rebound and called a timeout with 11.6 seconds left, still needing a 3-pointer to tie.

The Trojans launched a wild 3-pointer, Richards grabbed the rebound and was fouled with 6.8 seconds left. Richards had missed his last four free throws in a row, but this time he hit both shots to make it 81-76.

Triton missed another 3-pointer and Olson was fouled with 1.2 seconds left. Olson made both free throws for the 83-76 final score.

Kirkwood fans rushed the floor and celebrated with the players, then the Eagles shook hands with the Triton players and accepted their post-game awards.

Kirkwood finished the season with a 31-4 record. Triton, from River Grove, Ill., finished 34-3.

Richards averaged 17.8 points in the national tournament. Harp averaged 15.5 points per game. Wilson contributed 7.7 points and a team-best 9.0 rebounds to join them on the all-tournament team. Olson averaged 10 points in Danville.

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Harp was averaging 4.4 points when the tournament began as a reserve guard, but the Eagles would not have won the championship without him.

"What he did at the national tournament was pretty special," said Petersen, "to step up at big moments and be able to deliver as a freshman was pretty cool to see."

Richards led Kirkwood in the championship game with 21 points. Harp scored 15. Josh Bartlett nailed four 3-pointers and scored 12 points. Olson scored nine points. Da'Rion King and Wilson scored eight apiece.

Eddie Miles tossed in 26 points for Triton.

KIRKWOOD (83): Bartlett 4 0-1 12, Rhodes 0 4-4 4, Richards 7 7-14 21, Olson 3 3-3 9, King 4 0-2 8, Jackson 1 0-2 2, Harp 4 6-7 15, Fagan 0 2-2 2, Meier 0 0-0 0, Wilson 3 2-4 8, Henry 0 0-0 0, Triplett 1 0-0 2. Totals: 27 24-39 83.

TRITON (76): Gillespie 3 1-1 9, Washington 4 2-2 10, Norton 1 0-1 2, Doss 1 2-2 4, Miles 9 8-9 26, Tolbert 0 0-0 0 Carter 3 4-4 10, Joyce 2 0-0 6, Thorpe 3 1-2 9, Rose 0 0-0 0, Todd 0 0-0 0. Totals: 26 18-21 76.

Halftime - Kirkwood 37, Triton 36. 3-point goals - Kirkwood 5 (Bartlett 4, Harp 1), Triton 6 (Gillespie 2, Joyce 2, Thorpe 2).