

No. 1 Eagles push Indian Hills to limit

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood guard Byron Harp bent over and put his hands on his knees with two minutes left in Tuesday night's game against Indian Hills at Johnson Hall to grab a quick 10-second breather after a whistle had stopped the frenetic action.

It was just about the only breather the slender point guard got all night.

Harp played all 40 minutes against one of the most talented junior college teams in the Midwest, but his efforts were not quite good enough as the Eagles lost to Indian Hills 67-63 in an entertaining game.

"I feel fine. I can play that much," Harp said after collecting 17 points and seven assists. "I don't actually want to, necessarily, but I had to.

"Coach trusted me, so I appreciate that, but I feel fine," he said. "We've got a nice three-day break coming, so I'll be fine."

Chris King normally shares the load with Harp at point guard, but Coach Bryan Petersen elected not to use King in the ballgame so Harp played from the opening tip to the final horn.

"Asking him to play 40 minutes against Indian Hills, that's a lot," said Petersen. "We were trying to find different times to get him out of the game, but he's playing well and he's the guy we trust out there as our point guard.

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"He played pretty well out there, and I was happy with the way he competed. Hopefully he'll keep getting better from this."

Kirkwood won the NJCAA Division II national title last season and is ranked No. 1 in the country right now. Indian Hills has more scholarship money than Kirkwood and competes at the NJCAA Division I level, where the Warriors are currently ranked No. 17 in the country.



Indian Hills punished the Eagles, 91-68, when they met Nov. 5 at Indian Hills, but the Eagles gave the Warriors a much stiffer game in the rematch and nearly pulled it out. Kirkwood trailed by 11 points in the first half, but the Eagles kept battling back with some clutch plays and defensive tenacity.

Harp gave the Eagles a 49-48 lead with 9:34 remaining with a 3-pointer and he gave them a 51-50 edge with a jumper in the lane about 30 seconds later, but it turned out to be their last lead of the night.

Indian Hills spurted to a pair of six-point margins, but Kirkwood kept battling. Al'Tavius Jackson pulled the Eagles within 65-63 with a long 3-pointer with 5.5 seconds left, but Chris McNeal hit two free throws with 4.9 seconds left for Indian Hills to make it 67-63 and seal the deal.

Indian Hills features a roster filled with NCAA Division I transfers like Brady Ernst, a 6-foot-10 center who began his college career at Iowa State. They also have transfers from Western Kentucky, Siena, Tennessee Tech and LaSalle. They also have Brandon Hutton, a 6-foot-5

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forward who began his career at Iowa, but Hutton did not get into the game.

In addition to all that D-I talent, the Warriors have international players from Canada, the Ivory Coast and two from Spain.

"I like how hard we competed and we never gave up," said Harp. "We know how good they are, but at the end of the day we think we can beat anyone. It's a tough loss, but we come into every game thinking we're going to win."

The Eagles get that attitude from their coach.

"It was better than the last time we played them, I guess," said Petersen, "but it's disappointing to lose at home - or any game. I told the guys in there, I don't care who we're playing, whether it's Indian Hills or the No. 1 team in the country or whatever level it is, we expect to win here.

"That's obviously what we're about, so losing is very disappointing," he said. "It was a better effort than last time, so I guess that's a positive, but it's pretty disappointing to come up with a loss on our home court."

Harp was the backup point guard for the Eagles behind All-American Hunter Rhodes last season, but he played extremely well in the 2016 national tournament and probably should have been named the MVP after Kirkwood won the title. He's picked up where he left off last season as a premier junior college player.

Harp said he worked on his shot, his ballhandling and his strength during the off-season.

"It might not look like it, but I've been pushing myself hard in the weight room," he said. "I feel physically pretty strong on the court."

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"It might not look like I'm super-strong, but I'm basketball strong and I feel like I'm strong out there on the court."

Kaliph Fagan hit some big shots for Kirkwood and finished with a game-high 18 points with four 3-pointers. Miles Wentzien nailed three triples and scored 13 points for the Eagles (5-2). Da'Rion King scored eight points and Jackson finished with seven, but they were the only five Eagles who scored in the game.

Ernst began the game with two straight dunks and led Indian Hills (6-1) with 14 points, six rebounds and four blocked shots.

Indian Hills outscored Kirkwood at the foul line, 20-5.

INDIAN HILLS (67): McNeal 2 2-2 7, Maitre 1 3-5 6, Hansbrough 2 2-2 6, Aurrecoechea 3 2-4 8, Ernst 4 6-9 14, Wormley 3 0-0 8, Williams 4 3-4 12, Ukaegbu 1 1-2 3, Malone 0 0-0 0, Allen 1 1-2 3. Totals 21 20-30 67.

KIRKWOOD (63): Harp 6 3-4 17, Wentzien 4 2-2 13, Fagan 7 0-0 18, Marble 0 0-0 0, D.King 4 0-0 8, Triplett 0 0-0 0, Jackson 3 0-0 7, Meeker 0 0-0 0, Moore 0 0-0 0. Totals 24 5-6 63.

Halftime - Indian Hills 36, Kirkwood 31. 3-point goals - Indian Hills 5 (Hansbrough 2, McNeal 1, Maitre 1, Williams 1), Kirkwood 10 (Fagan 4, Wentzien 3, Harp 2, Jackson 1).