

Eagles beat No. 1 Spartans on Meeker's 3

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood Eagles delivered a bold statement at Johnson Hall Saturday afternoon.

Ethan Meeker provided the exclamation point.

Meeker hit a 3-pointer from deep in the corner with two seconds left to snap a 75-75 tie and give Kirkwood a 78-75 victory over top-ranked Southwestern before a festive crowd at home.

The 12th-ranked Eagles handed Southwestern its first loss of the season and moved into a tie with the Spartans for first place in the ICCAC conference with 6-1 records.

The Eagles announced to the world that they are fully capable of winning the national title again this year. And Meeker proved that's fully capable of delivering in the clutch.

"I knew I had to get it off quick," said Meeker, a freshman from Galesburg, Ill. "I knew I didn't have time for a dribble or anything.

"It looked pretty good, but I was holding my breath until it dropped. It was pretty nuts."

There was a terrific atmosphere at Johnson Hall for the showdown between two of the premier junior college teams in the country and the Eagles celebrated with their fans when it was over.

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Southwestern (23-1) tied the game, 75-75, with about 12 seconds left on a three-point sequence that included a successful free throw, a missed free throw, an offensive rebound and a putback.

Kirkwood (19-4) had one timeout remaining, but Coach Bryan Petersen elected to keep playing and let Byron Harp make a play to win the game, just like Harp did in the national tournament last March.

"Byron Harp has been in a lot bigger games than this game," said Petersen. "We're going to get the ball in his hands and trust him to make the right play."



"Byron made a great decision and Ethan stepped up and was ready."

Harp made a move toward the basket, saw Meeker in the corner and fired a pass on the money. With the pass still in the air, Meeker stepped back from his defender to create a little extra space and was ready to fire with a defender's hand in his face.

"That's something we do in practice all the time," he said. "Just kick to the corner, and I happened to be the guy right there."

Meeker scored only four points during the first 39 1/2 minutes, but he hit two clutch free throws

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with 23.3 seconds left for a 75-72 lead and then hit the triple to win the game.

"Ethan's a tough kid," said Petersen. "We recruited him because we knew he was a tough kid and obviously knew how to play. He's been a winner all his career playing basketball.

"He wasn't playing great offensively, but that speaks a lot about his character and how tough of a kid he is."

Meeker spread credit to all his teammates and had special praise for Harp, and not just for the game-winning pass.

Harp also excelled on defense, holding Southwestern star Jordan Johnson to just seven points. Johnson poured in 30 points when the Spartans beat the Eagles last month, 94-83, and the Eagles knew they had to do a much better job against him this time.

Harp complied.

"The player of the game, hands down, was Byron Harp," said Meeker. "If he hadn't done that we wouldn't have even been in that position to win the game."

If Southwestern had beaten Kirkwood Saturday, the conference race would have been practically over. Now the two teams are tied with five games left in the regular season.

If the Spartans and Eagles finish in a tie for first place, the Spartans will get the No. 1 seed based on their overall record and strength of schedule. That means Southwestern would host Kirkwood in the regional finals if both teams get that far.

The regional champion will advance to the national tournament, but the second-place team will

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be done for the year. Southwestern and Kirkwood are undoubtedly two of the top teams in the country, but only one of them will make the 16-team national tournament.

"It's frustrating as a coach," said Southwestern boss Todd Lorensen. "I know how good Kirkwood is, but I also know how good we are. One of us is going to be left out."

Kirkwood opened a 15-point lead in the first half, but Southwestern pulled within four points at halftime. The Eagles opened an 11-point lead in the second half, but the Spartans rallied and tied at 75-75.

Just when it looked like the game was headed for overtime, Harp and Meeker made the winning play.

"They're the No.1 team in the country. They're not going to go away," said Meeker. "We tried to stay mentally tough.

"This team has put in a ton of work all the way back to September," he said. "We've been through a lot. It feels good to see it paying off."

Now it's a fight to the finish.

"There's hope now," said Petersen. "We just have to handle what we can control."

Harp led Kirkwood with 19 points. Miles Wentzien finished with 18 points and Chris King scored 11. The Eagles helped themselves immensely by cashing 19 of 21 free throws.

Brodrick Thomas, Jamil Maddred and KeShawn Wilson scored 12 points apiece for Southwestern.

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SOUTHWESTERN (75): B.Thomas 5 1-1 1, Maddred 5 1-3 12, Johnson 3 1-3 7, Chambers 1 4-4 6, Wilson 6 0-0 12, A.Thomas 4 0-0 9, Hightower 2 2-3 6, Edwards 1 3-4 5, Canada 2 2-3 6, Curtis 0 0-0 0. Totals 29 14-21 75.

KIRKWOOD (78): Triplett 3 0-1 6, Harp 6 4-4 19, Wentzien 5 7-7 18, Meeker 3 2-2 9, C.King 3 3-3 11, Jackson 0 0-0 0, Fagan 3 1-2 7, Henry 0 2-2 2, D.King 3 0-0 6. Totals 26 19-21.

Halftime - Kirkwood 45, Southwestern 41. 3-point goals - Southwestern 3 (B.Thomas 1, Maddred 1, A.Thomas 1), Kirkwood 7 (Harp 3, C.King 2, Wentzien 1, Meeker 1).