

One stunning upset of Kirkwood in the regional tournament last week was tough to digest when the men's basketball team fell by the wayside, but two upsets would have been a complete disaster.

Fortunately for Kirkwood, their women's team found a way to survive and advance Saturday at Johnson Hall.

The second-ranked Eagles escaped a major upset bid by Southeastern, 59-52, in the regional semifinals with their 20th straight win to keep their national title hopes alive.

Kirkwood (30-3) faces 12th-ranked NIACC (26-6) in the regional finals Sunday at 1 p.m. at Johnson Hall.

Kirkwood whipped Southeastern by 21 and 25 points during the regular season, but it was a five-point game at 55-50 with 3:45 left with the outcome seriously in doubt Saturday.

"I felt like we struggled a lot because we weren't ready to play," said sophomore point guard Tayana Wilson. "We thought because we beat them 20-plus points the first two times we played them that we would walk in and just do the same thing.

"Everybody was thinking about the championship game, but they need to realize that we have to make it there first and take one game at a time. I just think there was a lot of nervousness

building up inside with a lot of our players."

Wilson helped save the day for the Eagles with 15 points, six assists, four steals and three rebounds, including a strong layup with 36.5 seconds left for a 59-51 lead.



"Tayana was really good," said Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl. "She doesn't want to lose. Some of the other kids have to figure that out, instead of pouting and moaning."

Mackenzie Jenkins gave the Eagles a big boost off the bench in the fourth quarter with a string of three field goals that made it 51-41, 53-46 and 55-46.

Southeastern played what Muhl called "an ameoba zone" that gave the Eagles lots of trouble. And as the game wore on, the visitors gained more and more confidence and the hosts looked a little jittery and confused.

Muhl was not able to pinpoint the problem, other than missing some open shots.

"Who knows? You're dealing with 18- to 20-year-old kids. The mental part, who knows?," he remarked. "Some of them just need to get their head right. You have to play to win, not play not to lose."

Muhl did not think his players were looking ahead to Sunday's championship game.

"I don't think so," he said. "If they couldn't figure that out when our men played, that was a tough loss for the men. If you don't figure it out from that, maybe you shouldn't be playing college basketball."

The Kirkwood men's basketball team, ranked No. 5 in the country, was upset by Iowa Central in the regional semifinals Thursday night.

"This game is way too humbling," said Muhl. "If you can't figure that out, you will really quick. It will humble you."

Awal Ajak popped in three 3-pointers and scored 14 points for Kirkwood. Jenkins and Arika Wooldridge contributed nine points apiece.

"Tomorrow we need to come ready to play," said Wilson. "Everybody needs a good night's sleep and come in in the morning for breakfast and come ready to play."

Nadirah Oakman hit a pair of 3-pointers for Southeastern in the opening moments of the game to give the Blackhawks a 6-0 lead. Kirkwood responded with 20 straight points for a 20-6 advantage early in the second quarter, but the Eagles were never able to take command and needed a 3-pointer by Ajak at the buzzer for a 29-23 lead at halftime.

Oakman finished with 20 points for Southeastern (22-10).

SOUTHEASTERN (52): Waller 4 0-2 10, Pezley 2 1-2 7, Oakman 6 5-6 20, Shelby 3 0-0 6, Walker 2 2-2 7, Ewing 0 0-0 0, Morpurgo 1 0-0 2, Flowers 0 0-0 0. Totals 18 8-12 52.

KIRKWOOD (59): Wilson 6 3-4 15, Puok 0 0-0 0, Axcell 1 0-0 3, Ajak 5 1-1 14, Usher 2 0-0 4, Jenkins 4 1-2 9, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Talor 0 0-0 0, Robinson 1 0-0 3, Mullinnix 0 0-0 0, Mensen 1 0-0 2, Wooldridge 4 1-4 9. Totals 24 6-11 59.

Halftime - Kirkwood 29, Southeastern 23. 3-point goals - Southeastern 8 (Oakman 3, Waller 2, Pezley 2, Walker 1), Kirkwood 5 (Ajak 3, Axcell 1, Robinson 1).