

Gosnell ignites No. 16 Eagles past Lakers

Written by Jim Ecker

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Niko Gosnell has been a terrific athlete for a long time, but now he's becoming an accomplished college basketball player for the Kirkwood Eagles.

The evidence was obvious Saturday.

Gosnell scored a season-high 15 points and ignited the 16th-ranked Eagles with his defense in a 91-84 victory over 20th-ranked Iowa Lakes in an ICCAC conference game at Johnson Hall.

Gosnell was a key ingredient in the second half when Kirkwood exploded for a 24-6 run, turning an eight-point deficit into a 10-point lead. He scored seven points and blocked three shots during that surge as the Eagles grabbed a 61-51 lead with 9:26 left in the game.

Just a few minutes earlier, they were staring at a 45-37 deficit.

Gosnell began the explosion with a dunk. Then he blocked a shot, leading to a layup by Seybian Sims at the other end. Gosnell blocked another shot and Gacoby Jones scored, then the Eagles got another stop and Devonte Thedford scored to tie the game.

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A little later Gosnell scored with a put-back, made a free throw, dunked with a lob from Sims, blocked another shot and Sims hit two free throws during that 24-6 spurt.

Gosnell, a 6-foot-8 sophomore from Lone Tree, was the leader of the pack as the Eagles turned a precarious situation into a 10-point advantage.

"I had a little second gear kick in, trying to hype up the team. Energy," he said.

Gosnell averaged 17.8 points, 9.5 rebounds and three blocks as a senior at Lone Tree during the 2016-17 campaign. He was redshirted as a true freshman at Kirkwood, then averaged 3.4 points and 2.9 rebounds as a redshirt freshman last season when Kirkwood won the NJCAA Division II national title.

Now he's averaging 6.7 points, 3.4 rebounds and 2.5 blocks while shooting a healthy 60.8 percent from the field. He's started five of 11 games and has become an important player for the Eagles.

"Niko is as good as Niko wants to be," said Kirkwood Coach Tim Sandquist. "He is a special player. He's our most athletic guy on the team. He's probably the most athletic guy in the conference. And when he plays like that, he's a problem. He was big for us."

Gosnell was a premier high jumper in high school, placing second at the state meet as a senior and finishing third as a junior, with a best leap of 6-foot-8 (matching his own height). He's a terrific leaper on the basketball floor and has developed his skills a great deal at Kirkwood.

"You just have to trust the process and do all the little things," he said. "Even in the summer when you're working out on your own, you have to keep going at it. And when it's your turn - Show Time."

Eight different Eagles scored during the 24-6 surge that turned the game around in the second

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half, reflective of the team's overall balance Saturday. Luke Appel topped the charts with 21 points and nine rebounds despite battling a bloody nose and Gosnell was next with 15 markers.

Thedford scored 14 points, Sims finished with 13 and Jones netted 11 as all five starters reached double figures. Griffen Clark hit two clutch 3-pointers off the bench in the second half, Owen Coburn contributed six points in 11 minutes, and Chris Burnell provided five points and six rebounds.

The victory lifted Kirkwood to 8-3 overall and 2-0 in the league. Justin Brookens poured in 29 points for Iowa Lakes, which fell to 9-3 overall and 1-1 in the league.

IOWA LAKES (84): Malcolm Clayton 3-12 1-2 7, Justin Brookens 11-22 2-2 29, Boston Grimes 0-3 0-0 0, Keshawn Pegues 6-11 3-7 15, Kevin Cook 4-9 1-2 9, Dillon Carlson 4-5 0-0 12, Alan Kikwaki 2-7 2-2 7, Josh English 2-3 0-0 4, Xavier Evans 0-4 1-4 1. Totals 32-76 10-19 84.

KIRKWOOD (91): Seybian Sims 4-6 4-6 13, Devonte Thedford 4-6 6-6 14, Luke Appel 7-11 6-10 21, Gacoby Jones 4-7 1-7 11, Niko Gosnell 7-10 1-3 15, Chris Burnell 2-6 0-1 5, Griffen Clark 2-5 0-0 6, Jamal Stephenson 0-1 0-0 0, Owen Coburn 2-3 2-2 6. Totals 32-55 20-35 91.

Halftime - Iowa Lakes 38, Kirkwood 35. 3-point goals - Iowa Lakes 10-24 (Brookens 5-7, Carlson 4-5, Kikwaki 1-3, English 0-1, Pegues 0-1, Clayton 0-2, Evans 0-2, Grimes 0-3), Kirkwood 7-21 (Jones 2-4, Clark 2-5, Burnell 1-2, Sims 1-3, Appel 1-4, Gosnell 0-1, Stephenson 0-1, Coburn 0-1).