

Appel shines as Kirkwood nips NIACC

Written by Jim Ecker

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Luke Appel knew he needed to get stronger and develop better moves around the basket to become a major force for the Kirkwood Eagles this season.

Mission accomplished.

Appel stuffed the stat sheet Wednesday night with 27 points, 17 rebounds and six assists as the 14th-ranked Eagles held off 12th-ranked NIACC, 89-88, in an ICCAC conference thriller at Johnson Hall.

The victory lifted Kirkwood into a three-way for first place in the conference with DMACC and Iowa Lakes with 6-1 records.

Appel, a 6-foot-8 sophomore from Marshalltown, averaged 9.7 points and 6.5 rebounds last season when Kirkwood won the NJCAA Division II national title. Now he's producing 15.5 points and 8.3 rebounds and getting the ball at crunch time.

When the Eagles needed a big bucket Wednesday night, they looked for Appel in the low post, just like they did last year when Doug Wilson was the star of the show.

"I've kind of grown into the role," Appel said. "Doug was my mentor last year and I kind of just learned from him."

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"He's an All-American and he's averaging 20 at a Division I school (South Dakota State), so I learned from him every day. And I tried to get as strong as I could this summer and try to become the best I could be.

"I really didn't lift in high school, but I've learned to love it. I was in there all summer."

Wilson is averaging 17.8 points and 6.5 rebounds at South Dakota State, which has offered Appel a scholarship. Former Kirkwood coach Bryan Petersen, who led the Eagles to the national title last year, is an assistant coach at South Dakota State now.

Illinois State and South Dakota also have offered scholarships to Appel, who said he'll probably decide after the season.

Appel scored 10 big points in the final 5 1/2 minutes in the hotly contested game. There were nine ties and five lead changes, as both teams made clutch plays on offense.

Devonte Thedford, who missed three free throws for Kirkwood in the final 20 seconds that might have iced the victory, made amends on defense when he deflected a shot by NIACC's Quentin Hardrict in the final seconds. If Hardrict had made that shot from about eight feet, the Eagles would have gone down to defeat.

NIACC played a strong game without Deundra Roberson and Trey Sampson, two of their top players who were arrested last week by Mason City police and charged with possession of marijuana, according to the Mason City Globe Gazette. Roberson is averaging 22.5 points and Sampson is averaging 15.9.

Wendell Matthews poured in 29 points with some remarkable shots and Hardrict finished with 22 for NIACC.

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Thedford scored 17 points, DJ Purnell 14 and Jamal Stephenson 11 for Kirkwood.

"It's a good home win," Appel said. "They were down two guys, so we know we have to get better. We can't settle. We all know we have to get better to repeat as national champions."

Kirkwood Coach Tim Sandquist was proud of his players for finding a way to win. And we was really proud of Appel.

"Twenty-seven points, 17 rebounds and six assists: Are you kidding me?," Sandquist remarked. "That's why he's getting the offers he's getting, that's why there were coaches in the gym tonight."

Kirkwood raised its overall record to 16-4. NIACC fell to 17-4 overall and 4-3 in the conference.

NIACC (88): James Harris 5-13 4-5 15, Wendell Matthews 13-19 3-3 29, Quentin Hardict 8-14 6-8 22, Marshaun Carroll 4-7 0-0 10, Jaden Horton 4-8 0-0 10, McKelary Robertson 0-1 2-2 2, Chandler Dean 0-4 0-0 0, Zach Johnson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 34-66 15-18 88.

KIRKWOOD (89): Seybian Sims 3-4 1-2 9, Devonte Thedford 6-12 5-8 17, Luke Appel 10-16 6-7 27, Jamal Stephenson 4-6 0-0 11, DJ Purnell 5-7 4-5 14, Chris Burnell 1-3 0-0 2, Gacoby Jones 0-2 0-0 0, Griff Clark 1-3 0-0 3, Owen Coburn 0-1 0-0 0, Niko Gosnell 2-3 2-2 6. Totals 32-57 18-24 89.

Halftime - Kirkwood 48, NIACC 39. 3-point goals - NIACC 5-16 (Harris 1-5, Carroll 2-4, Horton 2-4, Robertson 0-1, Dean 0-2), Kirkwood 7-15 (Sims 2-3, Thedford 0-1, Appel 1-2, Stephenson 3-5, Jones 0-1, Clark 1-3). Rebounds — NIACC 23 (Matthews 6, Hardict 6), Kirkwood 29 (Appel 17). Assists — NIACC 11 (Hardict 9), Kirkwood 10 (Appel 6). Turnovers — NIACC 11, Kirkwood 17. Fouls — NIACC 19, Kirkwood 18. Fouled out — Dean. Technical fouls - none.