

Luke Appel and Niko Gosnell, a pair of big men with big goals this season, sat on a bench in the hallway outside the Kirkwood locker room Thursday night and cried after an excruciating loss ended their season.

Gosnell put his hand on Appel's shoulder, trying to console his buddy, and they finally got up and disappeared inside, no doubt to shed a few more tears.

Kirkwood's goal of winning back-to-back national titles ended in the regional semifinals at Johnson Hall, but not for lack of effort or emotion.

Deundra Roberson hit a shot near the basket as time expired to snap a 74-74 tie and give 12th-ranked NIACC a devastating 76-74 victory over No. 9 Kirkwood in a tense battle marred by 45 fouls in 40 minutes of basketball.

NIACC (25-6) will face fifth-ranked DMACC (28-4) in the regional finals Saturday for a spot in the NJCAA Division II national tournament. That's where Kirkwood desperately wanted to be, but the Eagles had to settle for a 24-6 final mark.

The tears flowed in abundance.

"Those are my brothers for life," Appel said after emerging from the locker room. "I love every single guy in that locker room to death. I'll do anything for them the rest of my life."

Kirkwood trailed by 11 points, 62-51, with 8:54 remaining, but the Eagles staged a furious rally and took the lead, 74-72, on a bucket by Seybian Sims with 46 seconds remaining.

NIACC tied the game, 74-74, on a basket by Quentin Hardrict with 34 seconds left, leaving a four-second difference between the game clock and shot clock.

DJ Purnell drove to the basket for Kirkwood and appeared to be bumped on the play, but the refs did not blow the whistle and Purnell missed the shot.

The Trojans got the final chance and Roberson made it count, getting a pass in the lane near the basket and putting the ball softly in the net from about eight feet. There was no time for Kirkwood to retaliate and the NIACC players danced on the vanquished team's home court.

Tim Sandquist, who succeeded Bryan Petersen as Kirkwood's head coach this season after Petersen won two NJCAA titles here, was red-eyed himself when he met reporters after the game, trying to control his own emotions.

"I'm just proud of them," he remarked. "One loss does not define their careers here. This group accomplished so much for Kirkwood. They probably don't even realize it at the moment.

"I told them, at my age when you get older, the wins and losses kind of fade, and the memories that you have with your teammates, the funny stories, that's the stuff that lasts. That's the stuff that you remember and you take with you.

"I'm proud of them," he continued. "Proud of their resiliency. Proud of the way they fought back."

Kirkwood got into early foul trouble, with Appel and Purnell sitting on the bench for long stretches in the first half as NIACC spurted to a 38-29 lead at intermission. NIACC got into foul trouble themselves in the second half and suffered a tough blow when Trey Sampson fouled

out with 5:49 remaining with 16 points and 15 rebounds.

The Trojans, blessed with great quickness and tenacity, found a way to win anyway by making big shots and working extremely hard on defense.

Sims led Kirkwood with 12 points. Appel finished with 11 points after going scoreless in the first half. Devonte Thedford, Purnell and Niko Gosnell all finished with 10 points for the Eagles.

Hardrict led NIACC with 19 points. Wendell Matthews scored 18.

NIACC (76): James Harris 3-8 2-2 10, Deundra Roberson 5-10 2-4 12, Wendell Matthews 8-12 2-4 18, Quentin Hardrict 6-12 6-10 19, Trey Sampson 6-8 4-6 16, McKelary Robertson 0-0 0-0 0, Marshaun Carroll 0-1 1-2 1, Chandler Dean 0-3 0-0 0. Totals 28-54 17-28 76.

KIRKWOOD (74): Seybian Sims 6-9 0-1 12, Devonte Thedford 3-9 3-3 10, Luke Appel 3-7 4-4 11, Jamal Stephenson 2-6 4-6 9, DJ Purnell 5-11 0-0 10, Griff Clark 2-6 1-2 6, Brady Sartorius 1-3 0-1 2, Gacoby Jones 2-6 0-0 4, Chris Burnell 0 0-0 0, Niko Gosnell 4-6 2-3 10. Totals 28-63 14-20 74.

Halftime - NIACC 38, Kirkwood 29. 3-point goals - NIACC 3-7 (Harris 2-3, Hardict 1-2, Carroll 0-1, Dean 0-1), Kirkwood 4-17 (Sims 0-3, Thedford 1-1, Appel 1-2, Stephenson 1-4, Sartorius 0-2, Clark 1-5). Rebounds - NIACC 32 (Sampson 15), Kirkwood 33 (Purnell 9). Assists - NIACC 11 (Hardict 7), Kirkwood 13 (Appel 4). Turnovers - NIACC 10, Kirkwood 9. Total fouls - NIACC 21, Kirkwood 24. Fouled out - Sampson. Technical fouls - none.