

Ukah helps No.12 Eagles dunk Lincoln

Written by Jim Ecker

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The public address announcer at Kirkwood basketball games loves calling Chike Ukah's name after the talented big guy from Iowa City West dunks the ball.

Chick-KAAAY UUUUU-kah!, he yells as the crowd eats it up.

There were a lot of Chick-KAAAY UUUUU-kah moments Tuesday night as he helped the 12th-ranked Eagles defeat Lincoln, 82-68, in a non-conference game at Johnson Hall.

With starting center Joe Tagarelli nursing a sore knee, Ukah moved into the starting lineup and played a career-high 32 minutes and finished with 14 points, five rebounds, four blocks, two assists and several crowd-pleasing slams.

"He can provide something different than anybody else on our team with his length," said Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen. "He's a great kid, he's a smart kid, he wants to get better, he's always working hard. It's nice to see him get the benefits in a game."

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Ukah, a 6-foot-6 freshman, helped Iowa City West win Class 4A state titles in 2013 and 2014 before enrolling at Kirkwood. He normally plays about 12 minutes a game as the back-up center behind Tagarelli, but he got most of the minutes Tuesday as Tagarelli took the night off.

"It was nice," said Ukah. "It was kind of hard at first, just catching your breath. But once I got in the swing of things it was pretty easy."

Ukah was 6-for-6 from the field with his high-percentage shots around the basket and thunderous dunks. He got one of his dunks for a 53-47 lead on a nifty feed from Jacob Olson with 13:26 left in the game and got another on a pass from Jordan Ashton for an 81-66 bulge with 1:07 left that got the folks out of their seats again.

Petersen has encouraged Ukah to put his size, jumping ability and long arms to good use around the basket.

"He wants me to dunk everything," said Ukah, "and that's kind of the mentality I didn't have when I first got here. That's what I've been working on and it's coming along."

Petersen thinks Ukah can play at a high level once he's finished at Kirkwood.

"I think if Chike gets stronger and he keeps developing and works on his post moves, he's a Division I player. He can play at that level," said Petersen, who was a point guard at Iowa State.

"That's always the dream," said Ukah. "Everybody at this level, that's what they're trying to do."

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Ukah's older brother, Okey, is a member of the men's basketball team at Iowa.

Kirkwood (13-4) owned a 12-point lead at halftime, but Lincoln (10-6) rallied within 51-47 before Ukah's dunk pointed the Eagles in the right direction again. Ashton hit a 3-pointer for a 56-47 lead with a feed from Olson, then Ajay Lawton hit another triple for a 60-49 advantage.

Kirkwood stayed comfortably ahead from there.

"It was a good win," said Petersen. "It wasn't perfect by any means, but with Tagarelli not playing and coming off a tough one this past weekend up at NIACC, we needed a win and we needed to find a way to get it done.

"It was a good win for the guys and our team morale. We needed that for confidence."

Ashton led Kirkwood with 20 points. Matt Lassen scored 16 points and Hunter Rhodes added 10. Ron Singleton furnished eight points and eight rebounds.

Najeal Young topped Lincoln with 19 points. Kenny Doss scored 18.

Kirkwood hosts Iowa Lakes Saturday at 3 p.m.

LINCOLN (68): Young 9 1-1 19, Bowlby 3 0-0 9, J. Anderson 1 0-0 2, D. Anderson 6 0-1 12, Davidson 2 1-2 5, Callahan 0 0-0 0, Doss 6 4-7 18, Murray 1 1-1 3, Robinson 0 0-0 0, Klitz 0 0-0 0. Totals 28 7-12 68.

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KIRKWOOD (82): Singleton 3 2-2 8, Lassen 4 7-8 16, Rhodes 4 0-1 10, Ashton 5 7-7 20, Ukah 6 2-5 14, Lawton 2 1-2 7, Richards 1 0-0 3, Weeks 2 0-0 4, Olson 0 0-0 0, Martin 0 0-0 0. Totals 27 19-24 82.

Halftime - Kirkwood 48, Lincoln 36. 3-point goals - Lincoln 5 (Bowlby 3, Doss 2), Kirkwood 9 (Ashton 3, Rhodes 2, Lawton 2, Lassen 1, Richards 1).