

Kirkwood looks to take next step

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 30 October 2015 19:01 - Last Updated Friday, 30 October 2015 19:06



Bryan Petersen has done a good job as the men's basketball coach at Kirkwood Community College the past two years.

Now he wants more.

Petersen led the Eagles to a 21-10 record during the 2013-14 season as their rookie head coach, then followed with a 25-7 mark last season.

"We want to take the next step," Petersen said Thursday after practice at Johnson Hall. "We've knocked on the door a little bit, but it's time. We have to find a way to get Kirkwood back to conference champs and going to the national tournament.

"This team has the potential to do that," he said. "I think we're a long ways away from it, but it's something we're thinking about on a daily basis."

The Eagles open the 2015-16 at 3 p.m. Saturday with a home game against William Penn.

Petersen was an All-American during his playing days at Kirkwood before becoming a two-year starter at Iowa State. He returned to Kirkwood three years ago as an assistant coach and succeeded Doug Wagemester as head coach two years ago when Wagemester became Kirkwood's full-time athletic director.

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Petersen knows what it takes to succeed at the highest levels of junior college basketball and he's geared his recruiting efforts to improving Kirkwood's overall speed, quickness and athletic ability. He believes he's succeeded with 12 new players, along with five returning sophomores, but said it will take time to mold everyone together.

"We have basically a whole new team," he noted. "I think this team has a chance to be pretty good, but it's just taking awhile."

With all those new players, Petersen is glad to have a pair of experienced point guards with Hunter Rhodes and Jacob Olson. They both played significant roles with the Eagles last season and can help steer the new players in the right direction.

Rhodes is the top returning scorer at 8.0 points. He averaged 3.8 assists last year, which led the club.

"That helps," Petersen said. "If we didn't have a guy like Hunter back, it would make this is a whole lot tougher."

"Every day he comes to practice with the right mind-set. He comes ready to work. He's a great teammate and he just knows how to play. He competes."

"I think all the guys respect him, because he works on his game and he comes ready to work every day."

Olson, from Cedar Rapids Jefferson, averaged 3.9 points last year. Earnest Cowser, Josh Bartlett and Nick Richards got a taste of varsity competition and appear to be in line for larger roles this season.

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Petersen brought in three transfers and nine true freshmen, adding athletic ability but also adding questions and concerns. "We're trying to play faster, but the biggest thing is finding a way to put the ball in the basket," he said.

Josh Meier, a 6-foot-7 transfer from Chicago State, has been one of Kirkwood's most consistent players in practices and scrimmages, according to Petersen. Cristen Wilson, 6-5, transferred to Kirkwood from Lakeland Community College in Ohio and Shakur Triplett, 6-6, moved here from Ashford University.

The nine true freshmen are Deantae Woods, Al'Tavius Jackson, Lewrenzo Byers, Byron Harp, Kaliph Fagan, Josh Carter, Gary Bonds, Elijah Henry and Da'Rion King. Carter helped Dubuque Wahlert win two state titles and Harp played at Ankeny.

Petersen was still tinkering with his starting lineup after practice Thursday. He prefers a nine-man rotation, but could go deeper into his bench in the early part of the season.

"I'm not a huge fan of it, but I could see us playing 10 or 11 guys every game, just because I think there's not enough separation between certain guys," he said. "We'll probably try to play more guys and play faster."

Petersen thinks the Eagles could be a good "transition" team that runs and attacks the rim, but they'll need to play good defense and rebound for that to be successful. "When we get stops and turnovers, we've been pretty good in transition," he said.

Petersen paused when asked to list additional strengths of this year's club. "I'm still trying to find other ones," he said.

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Petersen said practices have been fun, but also frustrating at times. "A little bit of both," he said. "I think it's challenging, because it's a totally different team. At this level, you're going to have that."

Petersen said he's not sure if Kirkwood will have a big scorer this year. Rather, the Eagles might have five or six players average about 10 points per game.

Kirkwood graduated some big scorers in Jordan Ashton (16.4), Joe Tagarelli (12.6), Matt Lassen (11.6) and Ajay Lawton (9.9).

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Sophomores

Josh Bartlett, 6-6, Houston

Hunter Rhodes, 6-0, Canton, Ill.

Nick Richards, 6-3, New Castle, Del.

Jacob Olson, 6-0, CR Jefferson

Earnest Cowser, 6-1, Waukesha, Wis.

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Josh Meier, 6-7, Chicago

Cristen Wilson, 6-5, Cleveland

Freshmen

Deantae Woods, 6-1, Racine, Wis.

Al'Tavius Jackson, 6-1, Saukville, Wis.

Lewrenzo Byers, 6-0, Milwaukee

Byron Harp, 6-2, Ankeny

Kaliph Fagan, 6-4, South Holland, Ill.

Josh Carter, 6-5, Dubuque Wahlert

Gary Bonds, 6-7, Indianapolis

Elijah Henry, 6-5, Evanston, Ill.

Shakur Triplett, 6-6, Bolingbrook, Ill.

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Da'Rion King, 6-6, Racine, Wis.