

New class gives Kirkwood chance to repeat

Written by Jim Ecker

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Bryan Petersen is not satisfied with winning just one national title with the Kirkwood men's basketball program. He wants another title this coming season and perhaps more championships after that.

It's not that Petersen is greedy. And he certainly understands how tough it will be to repeat as the NJCAA Division II national champs after hoisting the trophy in March.

It's simply a statement of fact at Kirkwood: All their teams want to compete at the highest levels and winning titles.

"That's what we're here for and that's what I talk about," Petersen said Wednesday in his office at Johnson Hall. "I think there's going to be a good amount of pressure on this team and on me, and that's fine, because we accomplished something great last year."

The Eagles return six players from their championship team and a seventh (Chris King) who joined the club at mid-year and was red-shirted. Now Petersen has signed eight new players for the 2016-17 campaign and probably will have a ninth newcomer in the fold in the next few days.

As it turned out, winning the national title was a two-edged sword on the recruiting trail this spring and summer. Lots of talented players wanted to join the Eagles, but Petersen had only a limited number of spots with seven guys returning.

"This was probably the hardest recruiting year, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense since we just won the national championship," he said. "I probably had to tell kids "no" more than ever, which is not a fun part of this job, because they really wanted to be at Kirkwood."

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"It was because we didn't have as many spots and we were trying to be picky. And I think we should be at this school and this program."

Al'Tavius Jackson, Byron Harp, Kaliph Fagan, Elijah Henry, Shakur Triplett and Da'Rion King will return after helping Kirkwood win the 2016 crown. King, a Des Moines Hoover grad, joined the club at mid-season and was red-shirted after transferring from Northwest Missouri State.

Miles Wentzien, a 6-foot-3 guard from Fort Madison, is part of the new recruiting class and will be joining the Eagles after playing at Missouri Western, where he averaged seven points and 3.4 rebounds.

The other seven newcomers are coming to Kirkwood from high school:

- + Carlo Marble, 6-5, West Des Moines Valley
- + Ethan Meeker, 6-1, Galesburg, Ill.
- + Derrick Howard, 6-3, Clinton
- + Darius Rice, 6-0, Jennings HS (Mo.)
- + Darias Oliver, 6-5, Chicago St. Leo
- + Kameron Moore, 6-6, Purcell Marian HS (Ohio)
- + Pat Grabowski, 6-5, York HS (Ill.)

Marble is the son of former University of Iowa star Roy Marble. He averaged 12 points, five rebounds and two assists last season and helped West Des Moines Valley win the Class 4A state title.

Meeker averaged 22 points and four assists in Galesburg and was named all-state in Illinois.

Howard averaged 19 points and seven rebounds at Clinton High School and was named the Clinton Herald Player of the Year.

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Rice averaged 16 points, five assists and two steals at Jennings High School in St. Louis and was named first team all-state.

Oliver averaged 17 points and 7.1 rebounds at Chicago St. Leo and helped his team finish second at the state tournament.

Moore averaged 14 points and seven rebounds at his high school in Cincinnati and was named all-conference.

Grabowski averaged 12 points and seven rebounds at York High School in Illinois and was named all-conference.

"I think it's got pretty good balance," Petersen said about the new class of players.

Kirkwood's national title last season was built on talent, leadership, depth and versatility. Every team is different, but Peterson thinks the coaching staff has done a good job of following the formula for success.

"Every year at this level it's going to be different types of kids," he said. "But we were trying to find similar types of kids and players that fit the blueprint we had last year."

The Eagles need to replace Josh Bartlett, Hunter Rhodes, Nick Richards, Jacob Olson, Josh Meier and Cristen Wilson from last year's club. All of them played key roles in the drive to the national title.

Four of those players plan to continue their careers at four-year colleges with Rhodes at Northern Iowa, Richards at Wilmington University, Wilson at Lewis University and Meier at William Penn. Bartlett and Olson have ended their college basketball careers, according to Petersen. Bartlett plans to attend college in Colorado and Olson plans to attend Northern Iowa.

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Lewrenzo Byers, Josh Carter and Earnest Cowser had more eligibility at Kirkwood, but are not returning to the Eagles.