

KCC men fall short in region final

Written by Larry Peterson

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CRESTON — Falling into a 7-0 hole in the opening two minutes left 15th-ranked Kirkwood playing from behind the entire afternoon Saturday at top-ranked Southwestern for the Region XI men's basketball championship.

The Eagles battled back twice within two points in the first half and closed it to a single point (70-69) with 8:25 to play, but the Spartans hung on for a 98-90 victory.

The defending national champion Eagles ended their season at 25-7. Southwestern (32-1) advances to the NJCAA Division II national tournament March 21-25 in Danville, Ill. The Spartans' only loss of the season was a 78-75 setback at Kirkwood on Jan. 11.

Southwestern stretched its early lead to 20-8 before the Eagles went on an 8-0 run to close it to 20-16. Kirkwood coach Bryan Petersen said the slow start made it too much of an uphill battle.

"Our kids battled back to get within striking distance several times, but we just didn't have enough to get over the top," Petersen said. A highlight for the Eagles offensively was sophomore Byron Harp of Ankeny. He was 9-of-10 at the free throw line in the first half and finished 19-of-20 at the line while scoring a career-best 35 points.

The final possession of the first half was a crippling blow to the Eagles' attempt to capture momentum going into halftime. Southwestern's KeShawn Wilson drained a step-back 3-pointer and was fouled on the play. The resulting free throw with :00.2 left in the half gave the Spartans a 50-40 cushion at the break.

"That four-point play was huge," Petersen said.

Trailing 85-83 with just over three minutes to play, Kirkwood missed from 3-point range and Southwestern sophomore guard Calvin Chambers answered with one of his many effective drives to the basket to make it 87-83. The game never got any closer and Chambers finished with a team-high 25 points.

"They made us guard for long possessions down the stretch and took really good shots, and we'd come down and not get a clean look," Petersen said. "We talk all the time about how you have to value every single possession in tournament play. Give (Chambers) credit, but we just did not have any type of rim protection today and that really hurt us on the defensive end. We knew they were a great 3-point shooting team, but you can't give up

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both."

Harp and Miles Wentzien represented Kirkwood on the all-tournament team. After scoring 29 points in Thursday's semifinal win over Iowa Lakes, Wentzien finished with 19 points in Saturday's loss.

"Southwestern is ranked number one for a reason," Petersen said. "They have that chemistry and ability to play together that you see in championship-level teams. Hopefully they can represent our region well at the national tournament."

SOUTHWESTERN (98): A. Thomas 2 4-4 8, B. Thomas 8 0-0 19, Hightower 3 5-8 12, Maddred 4 0-0 10, Johnson 1 2-3 4, Chambers 9 6-8 25, Edwards 2 2-2 7, Wilson 3 6-7 13. Totals 32 25-32 98.

KIRKWOOD (90): Triplett 1 0-1 2, Harp 7 19-20 35, Jackson 4 0-0 9, Wentzien 8 2-2 19, Meeker 1 0-0 2, C. King 5 2-2 16, Marble 1 3-3 5, D. King 1 0-0 2. Totals 28 26-28 90.

Halftime - Southwestern 50, Kirkwood 40. 3-point goals - Southwestern 9 (B. Thomas 3, Maddred 2, Hightower 1, Chambers 1, Edwards 1, Wilson 1). Kirkwood 8 (C. King 4, Harp 2, Jackson 1, Wentzien 1).