

No. 5 Eagles stunned by Iowa Central

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood Eagles never imagined their season would end in bitter disappointment in the regional semifinals against a team they defeated twice during the regular season, but that's exactly what happened at Johnson Hall Thursday night.

Iowa Central stunned the fifth-ranked Eagles, 75-74, on a shot by Tray Croft with five seconds left to end Kirkwood's season a lot earlier than anyone expected.

Kirkwood won the conference title this season and finished six games ahead of Iowa Central in the league standings, but the Tritons will be playing for the regional title Saturday while the Eagles rue their misfortune. Iowa Central finished 5-7 in the league this year compared to an 11-1 mark by Kirkwood, but that does not matter now.

"It's just disappointing," said Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen, who led the Eagles to the 2016 national title and was hoping for another shot this season. "I feel bad for our group, because we had a really good year and obviously that's not the way we want to go out."

Kirkwood finished with a 24-6 record. There are no at-large bids to the national tournament, so the Eagles are done.

Croft, a sensational 6-foot-1 guard from Alabama, torched the Eagles for 31 points, including the game-winner from just inside the foul line over Kirkwood soph Ethan Meeker.

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Croft played all 40 minutes and shot 13 for 26 from the field, with four 3-pointers. He also snared a game-best nine rebounds and had three assists.

"He's pretty good, isn't he?," said Iowa Central Coach Dennis Pilcher, who's already in the NJCAA Hall of Fame. "I've been in this league for 39 years and I think he's the best scorer I've ever seen in this league. And there's been some scorers, OK?"

"He's just a tough kid. He's a competitor and he just wants to win. And he's talented. He's talented. He's a great shooter."

Croft is averaging 27.5 points, the best mark in NJCAA Division II basketball in the country. The southpaw is extremely quick and can score from any point on the floor.

"He's the Player of the Year in our league. There's a reason why," said Petersen. "He made a lot of tough shots and made the one that counted. He's obviously a really, really good player."

Kirkwood knew Croft would have the ball with the game on the line, but the Eagles could not stop him. "Just get to my shot and shoot," he said simply.



"Coach told us there was no pressure on us because they were No. 1," Croft added. "A lot of pressure was on them, so we just came out and executed the game plan."

The Tritons executed the Eagles in the process.

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Chris King, who poured in 28 points in Kirkwood's victory in the regional quarterfinals Tuesday night, struggled against Iowa Central and did not play in the final 2 minutes, 20 seconds.

King scored to give the Eagles a 72-69 lead with 2:30 left, but he departed 10 seconds later after committing his second foul and never returned. He shot 2-for-12 from the field and finished with five points.

King has been a clutch player for the Eagles during his two-year career and it seemed odd to see him sitting on the bench with the season hanging in the balance.

"Just a coaching decision," said Petersen. "At the end of the day, Chris has done a lot of good things for us, so I don't want this to go down as the last thing he's done for us.

"He's a hell of a player, he's going to have a good career when he moves on from here. It's just at that moment, that's what we decided to do."

Iowa Central, an extremely quick team, bolted to a 28-19 lead in the first half, but Chris Wilson and Carlo Marble got hot for the Eagles and lifted Kirkwood to a 45-35 lead at halftime.

Meeker hit a 3-pointer to begin the second half to give Kirkwood a 48-35 advantage, and the margin reached 14 points with 12 minutes left at 64-50 on a three-point play by LJ Stansbury.

Iowa Central never blinked. The Tritons went on a 15-4 spurt to pull within 68-65 and it was anyone's game. It got even closer at 70-69 and 72-71, with the Eagles keeping their nose above water.

Bailey gave Kirkwood a 74-71 lead with an 8-footer with 2:05 remaining, but Collin Shannon scored for Iowa Central to make it 74-73.

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Marble tried to feed Wilson, but the pass was intercepted. Iowa Central committed a turnover, so Kirkwood still had that 74-73 edge with 43.7 seconds left.

Meeker committed a traveling violation for the Eagles with 22.6 seconds remaining. Croft got the ball for Iowa Central and let the clock tick down to about 10 seconds before making his move against Meeker and hitting from about 14 feet.

Kirkwood called a timeout with 4.4 seconds left, then Iowa Central called a timeout after seeing how the Eagles were going to line up for their final play.

King stood off to the side of the Kirkwood huddle during both timeouts, his shirt untucked and looking glum that he wasn't in the game.

Stansbury, standing 94 feet away from his basket, made the in-bounds pass to Kale, who was under heavy pressure. Kale dribbled into the frontcourt and shot from about 25 feet with time about to expire.

The ball spent a long time in the air before bouncing off the back of the rim as the game ended.

Wilson, who was unstoppable most the night, scored 25 points on 11-for-13 shooting from the field, but the Eagles had trouble feeding him the ball in the final minutes.

Marble came off the bench to pour in 18 points, including four 3-pointers and shot 7-for-9 all told. Meeker scored 11 points and Stansbury pitched in with nine.

"We just weren't at our best and obviously they went on some runs and we struggled down the stretch," said Petersen. "They just out-played us a little bit, especially in the second half."

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Iowa Central outscored Kirkwood, 40-29, in the second half.

Royshawn Webb, a Cedar Rapids Jefferson grad, had a big game for Iowa Central with 16 points and three 3-pointers. Shannon finished with 18 markers for the Tritons. Croft, Webb and Shannon played all 40 minutes and combined for 65 points.

Iowa Central (21-11) will face 15th-ranked Southwestern (25-7) the regional finals Saturday, with the winner advancing to the national tournament. Pilcher, in his 49th year overall in coaching, led the Tritons to the national tournament in 1990 and 2012.

Pilcher savored Thursday's victory.

"We beat a very good basketball team," he said. "They shot the ball well. And of course that Wilson kid, he's a ton in there. It was tough stopping him.

"But I thought it was a heck of an effort on our part the second half. I think those guys dug in on defense and did a heck of a job."

IOWA CENTRAL (75): Croft 13 1-2 31, Webb 6 1-2 16, Bailey 1 2-2 5, Shannon 7 0-0 18, Akamarmoi 0 0-0 0, Kramer 0 0-0 0, Jenkins 0 2-2 2, Jegede 1 1-1 3. Totals 28 7-9 75.

KIRKWOOD (74): Kale 2 0-0 4, Meeker 4 0-0 11, King 2 1-2 5, Wilson 11 3-4 25, Arrington 1 0-0 2, Stansbury 3 3-5 9, Small 0 0-0 0, Ross 0 0-0 0, Marble 7 0-0 18, Johnson 0 0-0 0. Totals 30 7-11 74.

Halftime - Kirkwood 45, Iowa Central 35. 3-point goals - Iowa Central 12 (Croft 4, Shannon 4, Webb 3, Bailey 1), Kirkwood 7 (Marble 4, Meeker 3).