

No. 1 Eagles claw past Niagara County

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 21 March 2019 04:55 -



DANVILLE, Ill. - Winning a national championship is never easy, no matter how good you are.

The Kirkwood Eagles learned that lesson Wednesday night but lived to play another day.

The top-ranked Eagles clawed past Niagara County of New York, 80-65, in the quarterfinals of the NJCAA Division II tournament and will play in the semifinals Friday night.

Kirkwood (29-4) will face Erie (N.Y.) or Milwaukee Area Tech in the next round. Erie, the No. 4 seed, and Milwaukee Tech, the No. 5 seed, meet in the quarterfinals Thursday night.

Devonte Thedford, Kirkwood's top point guard, was called for two charging fouls in the first 3 1/2 minutes of the game and watched the rest of the first half from the bench, but the Eagles rallied for a 35-31 edge at intermission after trailing by eight points.

Thedford scored seven straight points to start the second half and the Eagles appeared on their way, but he was called for his third foul with 15:25 remaining and headed to the bench again for the next six minutes.

Fortunately for Kirkwood, Thedford did not collect another foul and wound up with 21 points in just 16 minutes, 28 seconds of action. He killed Niagara County at the foul line, hitting 15 of 17 free throws.

Kirkwood All-American Doug Wilson played a steady game with 22 points and eight rebounds. Wilson and Thedford, a pair of Des Moines Hoover grads, combined for 43 of Kirkwood's 80 points.

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Niagara County jumped to an eight-point lead in the first half with tight defense and good work on the backboards. Niagara snared 18 offensive rebounds in the ballgame and hurt the Eagles with follow shots.

Niagara also got more than its fair share of loose balls during the contest, but despite all that the Eagles found a way to get the victory despite shooting only 3 for 17 on 3-pointers.

"We didn't play our best, especially offensively, but I thought we really defended well again, especially in the second half," said KCC Coach Bryan Petersen. "The start of the game they kind of out-toughed us a little bit.

"They threw the first punch, I guess you could say, to start the game and put us on our heels. But we really responded the second half and did some good things."

Luke Appel did good work off the bench and provided 14 points and eight rebounds for Kirkwood. Jamal Stephenson hit two 3-pointers and furnished eight big points. Allante Pickens scored seven points. Seybian Sims had six points and six rebounds.

Sincere Ramsahai scored 18 points for Niagara County, the No. 9 seed that fell into the consolation bracket at 27-9. Niagara County was called for two technical fouls, including one technical when William Kondrat kicked Sims in the back after Sims had fallen to the court.

Thedford scored the first seven points of the second half and Wilson added a basket for a 9-0 run, giving the Eagles a 44-31 advantage. Kirkwood took a 56-43 lead on a five-point possession that included the technical foul on Kondrat, but Niagara pulled within 56-49 with seven minutes left and refused to fold.

That's when Kirkwood took control for good.

Thedford hit two free throws, Appel scored inside, Wilson made one free throw and Thedford

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added another foul shot to make it a 13-point game at 62-49 with 5:01 left.

Niagara hit a 3-pointer to pull within 62-52, but Thedford made two free throws and Sims cashed two more to make it 66-52. Niagara County got within 10 points again, but could get no closer.

Thedford gave the Eagles a 15-point bulge at 71-56 with two free throws, Appel made it a 17-point game at 75-58 with two foul shots and Wilson gave Kirkwood its biggest lead at 18 points at 76-58 with one free throw with 2:06 remaining.

Kirkwood hit 25 of 30 free throws, sparked by Thedford's 15 for 17 showing at the charity stripe. Petersen was proud of the way Thedford kept his cool despite the foul trouble and produced when it really counted.

"He never really gets too high or gets too low," said Petersen. "I think in that situation his calmness and his maturity level really showed. His mental toughness was definitely on display in the second half."

Petersen thinks having a tough game in the quarterfinals might be a good thing for the Eagles as they try to win four games in five days. Kirkwood won the national title in 2016 and is seeking its second crown in four years.

"This is a game you need to have in a tournament like this," he said. "At some point, you're not going to play your best basketball and you have to figure out a way to win. We were able to do that tonight. Hopefully our guys can build off that."

NIAGARA COUNTY (65): Ramsahai 7 1-1 18, Scott 1 0-0 3, Mixson 0 1-2 1, Camara 5 4-4 14, Luke 1 0-1 2, Scantlebury 0 3-4 3, Kondrat 4 0-0 8, Anderson 0 0-0 0, Luckman 0 0-0 0, Watson 3 0-0 8, Petit-Homme 0 0-0 0, Nodine 3 1-2 8. Totals 24 10-14 65.

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KIRKWOOD (80): Sims 2 2-2 6, Pickens 3 0-0 7, Thedford 3 15-17 21, Kasperbauer 0 0-0 0, Wilson 8 6-9 22, Sartorius 0 0-0 0, Stephenson 3 0-0 8, Gosnell 1 0-0 2, Appel 6 2-2 14. Totals 26 25-30 80.

Halftime - Kirkwood 35, Niagara County 31. 3-point goals - Niagara County 7 (Ramsahai 3, Watson 2, Scott 1, Nodine 1), Kirkwood 3 (Stephenson 2, Pickens 1).