

Usher helps Kirkwood reach national finals

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 24 March 2017 23:22 -



HARRISON, Ark. - Kirkwood's quest for the national title and a perfect season is one step away.

Olivia Usher and Deleyah Harris popped in 17 points apiece Friday night as the top-ranked Eagles punished fourth-ranked Kankakee, 76-49, in the semifinals of the NJCAA Division II national tournament at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood (36-0) will face third-ranked Johnson County (33-2) in the championship game Saturday night at 7:30.

The Eagles survived a big scare in the quarterfinals Thursday against Cincinnati State, needing a late rally to escape with a 65-63 victory, but there was little suspense Friday.

Usher, a freshman from Cedar Rapids Prairie who averages 6.3 points, scored 12 points in the first half to help Kirkwood grab a commanding 40-21 lead at intermission and the Eagles took it home from there.

It took Usher only five seconds to score her first basket after Kirkwood controlled the opening tip. She finished with three 3-pointers in the game and had three assists.

The Eagles were sitting on a slim 19-17 lead early in the second quarter when they took control with a 16-0 run for a 35-17 bulge. Niaja Taylor got the spurt started with a follow shot, then Usher tallied inside and hit a 3-pointer to make it 26-17.

Harris and Simone Goods followed with layups to make it 30-17, then Harris nailed a 3-pointer and Usher scored again to finish the 16-0 run and make it 35-17.

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Kankakee, which was averaging 86.5 points, never got closer than 15 points in the second half as the Eagles stayed comfortably ahead. The biggest lead was 29 points at 76-47 late in the game on a three-point play by Kelsey Achenbach.

Shaneequah Watkins scored all nine of her points for Kirkwood in the second half. Goods finished with eight points. Harris grabbed eight rebounds. Tay Tay Wilson contributed five points, four assists and four steals.

Mercedes Jackson scored 14 points for Kankakee (30-3). Kirkwood hit 50 percent of its shots, while Kankakee shot 30.9 percent and was 2-for-15 on 3-pointers.

Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl has won six national titles during his 28 years with the Eagles. If Kirkwood wins the championship Saturday night, the Eagles will match the school record with 37 victories.

Kirkwood has never enjoyed an undefeated season, but the Eagles are now just one victory away from perfection.

Johnson County trimmed sixth-ranked Monroe Community College, 70-66, in the other semifinal Friday.

KANKAKEE (49): Sherrill 1 1-2 3, Albert 2 1-5 5, Hawkins 1 1-2 3, Thaxton 3 4-5 10, Jackson 6 1-2 14, Finnin 1 1-2 3, Pfister 3 1-1 8, Moses 0 3-6 3, Bernal 0 0-0 0, Massey 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 13-25 49.

KIRKWOOD (76): Harris 6 3-4 17, T.Wilson 2 0-0 5, Watkins 4 0-0 9, Goods 4 0-0 8, Usher 6 2-2 17, Puok 0 2-2 2, Hedges 0 0-0 0, Axccl 2 0-0 5, Taylor 1 0-0 2, Voss 1 2-2 4, Cotton 1 0-0 2, C.Wilson 0 0-0 0, Achenbach 2 1-1 5. Totals 29 10-11 76.

Halftime - Kirkwood 40, Kankakee 21. 3-point goals - Kankakee 2 (Jackson 1, Pfister 1),

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Kirkwood 8 (Usher 3, Harris 2, T.Wilson 1, Watkins 1, Axcell 1).