

No. 2 Eagles survive upset bid at tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 22 March 2018 04:40 -



HARRISON, Ark. - The Kirkwood Eagles breathed a big sigh of relief Wednesday night and moved into the semifinals of the NJCAA Division II national tournament.

The second-ranked Eagles squandered most of a 16-point lead but survived an upset bid by seventh-ranked North Arkansas, 65-61, in the quarterfinals of the women's tourney at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood (33-3) will face third-ranked Highland (31-0) in the semifinals Friday night at 6 p.m.

Kirkwood led 45-29 midway through the third quarter, but the Eagles committed a string of turnovers that helped North Arkansas storm back into the ballgame at 45-43 early in the fourth period with a 14-0 run.

The Pioneers, playing before a big crowd on their home floor, had all the momentum in their favor, but the Eagles never got rattled and found a way to win their 23th straight game and hand North Arkansas its only loss at home this season.

"They had a great crowd, a great atmosphere," said Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl, who is seeking his eighth national title. "They hit shots that were tough shots, I thought.

"We survived it," he said. "I thought our kids showed a lot of resilience. Just enough to win."

Christmas Puok hit a pair of big 3-pointers to give Kirkwood a little breathing room at 52-44 with 6:15 left and it was still an eight-point game at 60-52 when Awal Ajak scored for the Eagles with 1:45 remaining.

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North Arkansas, using only seven players in the ballgame, was not done yet and pulled within two points again at 62-60 with 26 seconds left when Maya Hood hit her first 3-pointer of the season.

Olivia Usher got fouled with 14.9 seconds left and swished both free throws to give Kirkwood a 64-60 lead, making it a two-possession game.

Hood got fouled for North Arkansas with 2.8 seconds left with a chance to make it a two-point game again, but she missed her first shot and hit the second to make it 64-61.

Kirkwood called a timeout with those same 2.8 seconds remaining, and by rule the Eagles were allowed to take the ball out-of-bounds in front of their own bench in their offensive end of the floor instead of 94 feet away from the basket.

Tayana Wilson got the in-bounds pass in the backcourt and was fouled with 1.2 seconds left. Kirkwood's point guard missed the first foul shot but made the second to clinch the game at 65-61.

Wilson led Kirkwood with 18 points and six assists. Usher finished with 16 points. Ajak and Puok scored eight points apiece.

Hannah Villines led North Arkansas with 21 points. Hood scored 15 points and grabbed 14 rebounds.

North Arkansas (20-7) dropped into the consolation bracket with a chance to finish fifth in the 16-team tournament.

Kirkwood needs two more victories to defend its 2017 national crown, but it won't be easy. Highland has not lost a game all year and features an international cast of players.

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"I think Highland is a really good team," said Muhl. "From what I've seen of Highland, they probably have five Division I kids on that team. At least.

"If we don't play well, we will get popped."

Top-ranked Monroe will face Illinois Central in the quarterfinals on Thursday, with Owens facing Mesa in the other quarterfinal. Those winners will meet in the semifinals Friday at 8 p.m., after Kirkwood plays Highland.

The championship game is scheduled for Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

NORTH ARKANSAS (61): Villines 8 4-4 21, Hood 5 4-9 15, Coates 2 3-5 7, Roder 3 0-1 8, Kahn 0 0-0 0, Taylor 3 0-0 9, Clemence 0 1-2 1. Totals 21 12-21 61.

KIRKWOOD (65): Wilson 5 7-8 18, Axcell 1 0-0 3, Ajak 4 0-0 8, Puok 3 0-0 8, Usher 6 3-3 16, Jenkins 3 0-0 6, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 0-0 3, Robinson 0 1-2 1, Mensen 0 2-4 2, Wooldridge 0 0-0 0. Totals 23 13-17 65.

Halftime - Kirkwood 31, North Arkansas 22. 3-point goals - North Arkansas 7 (Taylor 3, Roder 2, Villines 1, Hood 1), Kirkwood 6 (Puok 2, Wilson 1, Axcell 1, Usher 1, Taylor 1).