

Big man looms large for Kirkwood

Written by Mike Condon

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Henry Uwadiae is a typical junior college player in many ways.

His goal for this season is to polish his skills on the way to a career at a four-year college.

What makes the Kirkwood Community College red-shirt freshman unique is something that can't be taught.

"You know he is really unique because of his size," said first-year Eagles' Coach Bryan Petersen. "His athleticism (at 6-foot-11) is very unique for our league and junior college basketball in general. That's what he brings to the table for us."

Uwadiae is starting his second season at Kirkwood, but has yet to play for the Eagles. He originally signed to play at Wichita State coming out of Evelyn Mack Academy in Charlotte, N.C. But the Benin City, Nigeria, native did not qualify academically to play in the NCAA and had to go the junior college route.

"(Former Coach Doug Wagemester) had a relationship with the coaches at Wichita State," Petersen said.

Former Kirkwood coach Chris Jans is the associate head coach at Wichita State and former Eagles player Greg Heiar is a Shockers assistant coach.

"Basically, they sent (Uwadiae) our way and that is how he landed with us," Petersen said. "The plan was for him to play one year for us and then move on."

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But that move won't be to Wichita State. Uwadiae has already committed to play for Marshall University and will have three years of eligibility with the Thundering Herd starting next season.

"Actually, I decided that Wichita State was not going to be a good spot for me," Uwadiae said. "So I started looking for other schools. I was really impressed with the Marshall coaches and everything about the school so I decided to go there."

Before Uwadiae takes his talents to the NCAA Division I stage, a season of play is ahead at Kirkwood after sitting out last year. He admits spending 2012-13 on the sidelines was difficult, but was quick to add that he benefited from the red-shirt season.

"It was really, really hard," he said. "I had a lot to learn about college basketball and had to learn to adjust to college life. It did give me a chance to work on my game and get stronger."

Petersen, who was Wagemester's assistant before being elevated to the head coaching position this season, said the increase in Uwadiae's strength has been noticeable. Uwadiae was at 200 pounds when he arrived in Cedar Rapids last year.

"He was really thin when we got him last year," Petersen said. "Now he is up to about 228 pounds and has plenty of room to add more weight to his frame."

Uwadiae is looking forward to getting back on the court in a game that counts. He played this past summer in the Prime Time League, but hasn't played on a school-sponsored team since his senior season in prep school.

"I know I have still a lot of things to work on," Uwadiae said. "The coaches here are great to work with. There isn't a whole lot different this year with Coach P taking over from Coach Wags. We still work on the same things we did last year. I'm looking forward to playing for Coach P."

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Petersen knows Uwadiae gives the Eagles an advantage over most of their opponents.

“He is an athletic big man who is still working on his game, developing skill-wise,” Petersen said. “He can run very well, he can block shots. We are working on his rebounding, but his strengths are definitely around the basket.

“We’re trying to get him to work on his ball skills, his post moves around the basket and his feel for the game,” Petersen added. “His work ethic is incredible and he is willing to learn.”

Uwadiae had been having a solid preseason camp, but now has been derailed by illness. He has been diagnosed with mononucleosis and pneumonia and hasn’t practiced since Sunday.

“It just hit him,” Petersen said. “Hopefully, it won’t keep him out too long, but right now, we just don’t know. This time of the year is really important to him, but the thing we have to do right now is be careful to make sure he is fully recovered.”

Uwadiae said he is feeling better, but isn’t sure when he will return to the court.

“I am really looking forward to this season,” he said. “We have a great group of guys here. I hope I can get back as soon as possible.”