

Kirkwood edged in premier JUCO battle

Written by Jim Ecker

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They played a basketball game for grown men at Kirkwood Community College Wednesday night between two of the premier junior college teams in Iowa.

Based on what transpired at Johnson Hall, don't be surprised if both clubs end up playing in national tournaments this year.

The Reivers from Iowa Western nipped the Kirkwood Eagles, 76-74, in a highly entertaining contest that came down to the final shot of the game when Kirkwood guard Hunter Rhodes barely missed a 3-pointer from 35 feet.

Iowa Western is ranked No. 10 in the nation at the Division I level of junior college basketball and Kirkwood is ranked No. 2 in Division II, with the biggest difference in the divisions having to do with the amount of scholarship money available at each school.

When it came to the actual players on the floor, there was barely a dime's worth of difference.

Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen was mostly happy with the way his team played, but they don't award consolation prizes in college basketball.

"I thought we played pretty hard, definitely in spurts," said Petersen, "but as I keep telling the guys, you either get it done or you don't and we didn't get it done tonight."

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The outcome left Iowa Western with a 15-1 record. Kirkwood fell to 11-2, with both of its losses to the Reivers.

Iowa Western took a 73-68 lead with 27 seconds left, but Kaliph Fagan hit a tough 3-pointer to pull Kirkwood within 73-71 with 19 seconds remaining. The Reivers made two free throws for a 75-71 advantage with 18 seconds left, but Fagan hit a remarkable 3-pointer when he grabbed an offensive rebound, dribbled behind the arc and launched an off-balance shot that made it 75-74 with just 4.7 seconds to go.

Andre Wallace of Iowa Western made his first free throw and missed his second, making it 76-74 with 3.5 seconds remaining. Rhodes raced up the floor, glanced at the clock and let fly, but the ball hit the backboard and bounced off the rim as time expired.

Fagan had a simple mindset when he launched his 3-pointers in the final seconds.

"Get the best shot possible," he said. "With time running down, get the best shot possible and get a look at the rim."

Fagan led Kirkwood with 17 points off the bench and hit four 3-pointers.

The Eagles got a big lift from Da'Rion King, a powerful 6-foot-6, 240-pound freshman from Racine, Wis., who had appeared in only five games prior to Wednesday. King played 27 minutes and sparked the Eagles with 13 points and seven rebounds with strong work off the boards. He also did a good job on defense and boxed out taller opponents.

"Yesterday the coaches said I was going to get the opportunity to play a little bit more tonight and show what I can do and just bring what I could to the table," he remarked. "We have a lot of great players. You just have to wait your turn."

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King hit 5 of 8 shots and was a force for the Eagles near the basket.

"He was great tonight," said Petersen. "We've always known DK is a good player. It's just a matter of he's a freshman and there were a few bumps on the road.

"He brings a different element. He's our most physical guy, by far."

Kirkwood took a 26-18 lead with 5:09 left in the first half, but Iowa Western finished the half with an 18-2 spurt to grab a 36-28 advantage at intermission.

The Eagles battled back, however, and the second half featured a series of uppercuts and jabs as the teams battled for whatever slight edge they could get.

Kirkwood took three-point leads at 62-59 and 64-61 on buckets by King, but Iowa Western scored eight straight points for a 69-64 advantage with 1:55 left and never completely let go.

The Reivers hit 7 of 8 free throws in the final 37 seconds to keep the Eagles at bay.

Jacob Olson and Josh Bartlett scored 11 points apiece for Kirkwood. Cristen Wilson grabbed 10 rebounds and Rhodes had nine assists.

Wallace led Iowa Western with 17 points. Donovan Jackson scored 16 and Marquel Beasley had 15. Thik Bol blocked six shots.

IOWA WESTERN (76): Jackson 5 4-4 16, Walton 1 2-2 4, Beasley 6 3-4 15, Wallace 6 4-9 17, Bol 2 4-5 8, Walker 0 0-0 0, Harris 1 0-2 2, Peacock 3 3-3 10, bell 1 0-0 2, Lake 1 0-0 2. Totals 26 17-23 76.

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KIRKWOOD (74): Bartlett 4 0-0 11, Rhodes 3 1-1 7, Richards 2 0-1 4, Olson 3 2-4 11, Meier 1 0-0 2, Woods 1 0-0 2, Harp 0 0-0 0, Fagan 5 3-5 17, Wilson 3 1-2 7, Triplett 0 0-0 0, King 5 3-6 13. Totals 27 10-19 74.

Halftime - Iowa Western 36, Kirkwood 28. 3-point goals - Iowa Western 7 (Wallace 4, Jackson 2, Peacock 1), Kirkwood 10 (Fagan 4, Bartlett 3, Olson 3).