

Eagles blitz No.4 Southwestern, 86-55

Written by Mike Condon

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Offense has come pretty easy for the Kirkwood men's basketball team this season.

It's the defense that has been a problem at times for Coach Bryan Petersen's team.

On Saturday, the No. 14 Eagles picked a great time to click on both ends of the court. They scored the first 11 points of the game en route to an 86-55 rout over No. 4 Southwestern, 86-55, in an ICCAC game at Johnson Hall.

The win avenged an earlier 85-75 loss to the Spartans in Creston and pulled the Eagles back to within a game of Southwestern in the league standings.

Needless to say, Petersen didn't expect to hang a 31-point loss on Southwestern.

"Obviously, we got off to a good start," said Petersen, who saw his team move to 21-4 overall, 7-2 in league play. "They're a really good team. There's a reason they are ranked the way they are. We really didn't break it open until the middle of the second half."

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Kirkwood may not have broken it open, but it never seemed like Southwestern ever got comfortable running its offense. The Eagle defense was aggressive from start to finish, forcing 16 turnovers and holding the Spartans to 38 percent shooting from the field for the game.

And when the Spartans (23-4, 8-1), got the lead back to single digits a couple times in the first half, Kirkwood turned to sophomore Jacob Olson to stem the tide with fellow starters Hunter Rhodes and Da'Rion King on the bench with foul trouble.

Wearing a face-mask to protect a broken nose suffered in practice last week, the former Jefferson standout hit a pair of 3-point baskets to rebuild the Kirkwood lead to double digits. He finished with a game-high 24 points.

"That's the good thing about our team," Olson said. "If the starters get in foul trouble, we have guys who can come in and pick up the slack."

Petersen said Olson was a little tentative the first game he wore the face-mask, but he saw none of that in Saturday's game.

"Jacob was great," Petersen said. "The points were good, but he guarded really well. Jacob has been solid for us all year and this was really a breakout game for him.

"He's had that mask on for a couple games now," he continued. "I think he's getting used to it and maybe when he gets better, we'll just have him keep it on if he scores like he did today."

The Eagles led 46-33 at the break and the lead was as large as 36 points in the second half as the defensive pressure continued.

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"Coach was stressing defense," Olson said. "Last time they scored almost 90 on us. We know we can be a good defensive team so we just went out and did our thing."

Petersen was pleased with the improvement on the defensive end.

"That's something that we've been really disappointed in," the Kirkwood coach said. "We've really put a big emphasis on it the last couple weeks and it was really good to see the guys translate it and carry over to the game."

Kirkwood will need help if it wants to tie Southwestern for the regular-season title. The Eagles were upset at home last Saturday by Iowa Lakes.

"We'd like to have that one back," said Olson, "but it is what it is and we just have to keep playing. We still have a lot to play for."

What they could be playing for is a third meeting with the Spartans in the regional tournament with a berth in the national tournament on the line. The highest seeded teams will host games in the regional later this month.

"There's a great chance we'll see them again," Petersen said. "There's some other good teams in our league, but we could see them again, no question."

Cristen Wilson was the only other Eagle in double figures with 10 points. Kirkwood dominated the boards, winning that battle 51-22.

Terrance Smith led Southwestern with 12 points. Jordan Johnson added 11.

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