

No.6 Eagles earn trip to JUCO nationals

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood guard Hunter Rhodes was covered in blue body-paint Saturday afternoon and loving every single messy smear on his jersey, arms and hands.

It happened after Kirkwood students, some of whom painted G-O E-A-G-L-E-S on their bare chests, rushed the court after Kirkwood beat Iowa Lakes in the regional finals and hugged as many players as they could.

"I'm bleeding blue now, I guess," Rhodes said happily.

Rhodes was named the MVP of the regional tournament after the sixth-ranked Eagles dumped the 18th-ranked Lakers, 80-64, to win the regional title and earn a spot in the NJCAA Division II national tournament for the first time since 2011.

The national tournament will be held in Danville, Ill., from March 15-19.

The Eagles (27-4) won the regional tournament this year with defense, depth and determination.

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Defense? Kirkwood lost to Iowa Lakes 95-85 here Feb. 6, but held the Lakers to 64 points this time.

Depth? Cristen Wilson made the all-tournament team even though he doesn't start for the Eagles.

Determination? Rhodes was bleeding blue, but backup center Josh Meier shed some good old-fashioned red blood during the game and Wilson's jersey was covered with the stuff at one point.

Wilson, a 6-foot-5 forward from Cleveland, came off the bench to score 19 points and grab eight rebounds in an intense, physical affair that produced some hard feelings on both sides.

"My attitude was kill or be killed," said Wilson. "It's our home field, we have to protect it. And they beat us last time, so it was more of a revenge game."

Rhodes gave Kirkwood a lift at the end of the first half with a gritty three-point play when he drove hard to the basket, got fouled and made the free throw for a 34-30 edge at intermission. He finished with 15 points and the MVP award.

Nick Richards, who played with intensity from start to finish, collected 17 points for the Eagles and joined Rhodes and Wilson on the all-tournament team. Jacob Olson, the pride of Cedar Rapids Jefferson, added 10 points despite playing with a mask to protect a broken nose.

Josh Meier, the backup center, contributed six points and eight rebounds. Shakur Triplett the third-string center, pitched in with six points and four rebounds after Da'Rion King and Meier both got into foul trouble.

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All told, the Kirkwood reserves contributed 33 points and 21 rebounds. By contrast, the Iowa Lakes subs produced 12 points and 15 rebounds.

"We have great players," said Coach Bryan Petersen. "Everybody on our team can play, even the kids who are sitting out (as red-shirts).

"I have confidence in them, and if we have to throw somebody in there who hasn't played a whole lot, I feel like they're going to be able to contribute and do some good things for us.

"Obviously the depth really helped us out tonight," he said. "That's for sure."

Petersen helped cut down the championship net Saturday, just like he did 10 years ago as a player when the Eagles won a regional championship in 2006.

Kirkwood won nine regional titles from 2001 through 2011, but the Eagles fell short the last four years before earning another trip to the national tournament on Saturday.

"This was pretty special," said Petersen. "I talked to the guys after the game on Thursday (against Iowa Central) about wanting to cut some nets down.

"It's where we need to be," he said about heading to nationals. "It's what the program is supposed to do every year. We were able to do it this year and we have a great group of kids who were able to get it done.

"We'll figure out who we're playing and we'll get back to work."

This will be Kirkwood's 13th trip to the national tournament. The Eagles won the national title in 1998.

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Kirkwood was clinging to a 41-38 lead in the second half when Meier and Kyle Bauer of Iowa Lakes banged into other and tumbled dangerously to the floor, their arms and legs twisted together. Tempers flared and the officials rushed in to prevent any real mayhem, although a foul was called on Meier for something that happened during the battle under the basket.



That raised the stakes even higher on both sides, although the Eagles made the strongest response in the minutes that followed.

"It was rough," said Richards. "It came down to toughness at the end of the game, though. It came down to toughness."

Kirkwood rode a 15-6 spurt after the scrum between Meier and Bauer, grabbing a 56-44 lead on a 3-pointer by Rhodes with 11:20 left to play.

Olson hit a 3-pointer for a 59-46 lead, Wilson finished a three-point play for a 62-48 advantage and Byron Harp scored to make it 64-49 with 6:56 left and give the Eagles a 15-point bulge.

Iowa Lakes scored six straight points to make it 64-55, but Meier made a post move and Wilson hit a 3-pointer to make it 69-55 with 5:34 left. Iowa Lakes never got closer than 12 points again.

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"Our kids bought into what we've been talking about the last month, the three things we've been stressing: Our focus, our defensive identity and our toughness," said Petersen, in his third year as head coach. "I think those showed up tonight."

Wilson has had big games for the Kirkwood this season off the bench, but none bigger than Saturday's performance.

"It's what you do when you get in, you know?," he said. "It's not about who starts, it's about who finishes. Coach gave me minutes and I just made the best of them."

"It's a blessing," said Wilson. "My team, they showed up and they pulled for each other. It's a wonderful feeling, man."

Iowa Lakes retired with a 25-8 record. Tywon Bressler led the Lakers with 16 points and Chris Jones had 15.

IOWA LAKES (64): Bauer 1 1-2 4, Wilder 3 3-4 9, Jones 7 1-2 15, Bressler 6 3-7 16, Woodley 3 1-2 8, Moody 0 2-2 2, Cox 1 0-0 2, Tucek 0 0-0 0, Harmon 0 0-0 0, Keller 3 2-2 8, Runkel 0 0-0 0. Totals 24 13-21 64.

KIRKWOOD (80): Bartlett 1 0-0 3, Rhodes 5 5-6 15, Richards 6 4-7 17, Olson 3 2-2 10, King 1 0-0 2, Harp 1 0-0 2, Fagan 0 0-0 0, Meier 3 0-1 6, Wilson 6 6-10 19, Triplett 3 0-0 6. Totals 29 17-26 80.

Halftime - Kirkwood 34, Iowa Lakes 30. 3-point goals - Iowa Lakes 3 (Bauer 1, Bressler 1, Woodley 1), Kirkwood 5 (Olson 2, Bartlett 1, Richards 1, Wilson 1).