

Fantastic rally lifts Eagles into NJCAA finals

Written by Metro Sports Report
Friday, 18 March 2016 21:23 -



DANVILLE, Ill. - It looked like the Kirkwood Eagles had run out of steam at the NJCAA Division II national basketball tournament Friday night when they trailed by 23 points early in the second half, but that just was a mirage.

As it turns out, they were just getting started.

The sixth-ranked Eagles staged a phenomenal rally and stunned third-ranked Essex County of New Jersey, 77-66, in the semifinals of the national tourney in Danville, Ill.

Kirkwood (30-4) will face top-ranked Triton (34-2), an 82-77 winner over second-ranked South Suburban on Friday, in the NJCAA finals Saturday night at 7:30. The Eagles won the national title in 1998 and are seeking the second crown in school history.

Kirkwood fell behind by 24 points in the first half and trailed by 23 points at 53-30 in the second half when they began their magnificent surge to victory. Incredibly, the Eagles outscored Essex 45-7 from that point to turn a 23-point deficit into a 15-point lead at 75-60 with 20.4 seconds left in the game.

"It was an unbelievable game," said Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen. "We got off to probably the worst start we could have had. We dug ourselves a hole right away.

"In the second half, the kids kept battling. We were able to get on a little bit of a run. It was unbelievable. I've never experienced anything like that, to be honest."

Now the Eagles will be playing for the title.

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"I feel great," said Petersen. "This is one of our last goals. We felt we were one of the best teams in the country and we're going to have a chance to prove it tomorrow."

"It's a little surreal right now, but at the same time it's something we've been thinking about as a team. I think our guys are pretty focused to finish off the job tomorrow."

Petersen used a 1-2-2 zone press and a drop-back zone to cool off the team from New Jersey, which scored the first nine points of the game and owned the first half.

"I think it really screwed up their rhythm," he said.

And for the second straight game, Byron Harp came off the bench to spark the Eagles with his ballhandling and scoring, just as he did in the overtime victory against Louisburg in the quarterfinals Wednesday night. Harp, a 6-foot-2 freshman, has played his two best games of the year in consecutive outings at the national tournament.

Harp poured in a career-best 22 points, including a 13-for-14 showing at the free throw line. He also contributed six rebounds, three assists and two steals in a strong all-around performance.

"That kid took over," said Petersen. "He's a heck of a player."

"He's really taken advantage of the moment that he's had out here. We really needed him and he stepped up big-time for us."

Harp drilled a 3-pointer with 5:03 left to tie the game at 58-58, wiping out the final vestiges of the huge deficit, but the Eagles were far from done as they took control from there.

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Cristen Wilson hit a 3-pointer to make it 61-58 and Nick Richards cashed two free throws to make it 63-58. Essex pulled within 63-60, but the Eagles quickly went back to work.

Jacob Olson, the pride of Cedar Rapids Jefferson, nailed a 3-pointer to make it 66-60. Harp hit two free throws to make it 68-60 with 51.2 seconds left, then Olson cashed two foul shots to make it 70-60 with 42.6 seconds remaining.

Wilson made one free throw for a 71-60 lead, then Harp made four straight free throws with 20.4 seconds left after he was fouled and the Essex County coach was called for a technical foul. That made it 75-60 and the celebration was about to begin.

Richards finished with 15 points and eight rebounds for Kirkwood. Wilson came off the bench to provide a double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds. Olson hit three triples and scored 13 points. Wilson also made three 3-pointers.

Kirkwood committed 23 turnovers, but the Eagles compensated for all those lost possessions by murdering Essex County on the backboards 43-24.

Kirkwood finished 9-for-18 on 3-pointers and actually won the game at the foul line. The Eagles hit 26-of-34 free throws for 76.5 percent, compared to just 3-of-6 foul shots for Essex County.

The Eagles have won three straight games at the national tournament, including two victories over top-10 teams, but Petersen said they have not played a full 40-minute game so far.

"No, I don't think we're even close to that," he remarked. "That's what I told the guys in the locker room afterward. Nobody here has seen Kirkwood at its best for 40 minutes.

"We'll have to find a way to do it, because either team we'll play tomorrow night is really good."

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TreVante Morris led Essex County (28-5) with 12 points. Elijah Bush and Stanley Perrin scored 11 points apiece.

ESSEX COUNTY (66): Morris 4 2-2 12, Bush 5 0-0 11, Perrin 5 0-0 11, Dixon 3 0-0 8, Calloway 2 0-0 6, Rokins 0 0-2 0, Thomas 0 1-2 1, Udezeh 2 0-0 6, Brown 1 0-0 2, Baez 1 0-0 2, Gellineau 0 0-0 0, Stewart 3 0-0 7. Totals 26 3-6 66.

KIRKWOOD (77): Bartlett 0 0-0 0, Rhodes 1 0-0 3, Richards 5 4-6 15, Olson 3 4-4 13, King 1 0-0 2, Jackson 1 1-2 3, Harp 4 13-14 22, Fagan 0 0-0 0, Meier 1 3-5 5, Wilson 4 1-2 12, Triplett 1 0-1 2. Totals 21 26-34 77.

Halftime - Essex County 40, Kirkwood 23. 3-point goals - Essex County 11 (Morris 2, Dixon 2, Calloway 2, Udezeh 2, Bush 1, Perrin 1, Stewart 1), Kirkwood 9 (Olson 3, Wilson 3, Rhodes 1, Richards 1, Harp 1).