

No. 1 Kirkwood men aiming for 2nd title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood men's basketball coach Bryan Petersen is flattered that the Eagles are ranked No. 1 in the country in the preseason poll, but he's glad the national tournament is four months away.

The Eagles are talented, but they have a lot of work to do before they can make a serious bid at winning their second straight NJCAA Division II national title.

Kirkwood begins the new season this weekend with two games at the Indian Hills Classic in Ottumwa, meeting Carl Sandburg College Friday at 4:30 p.m. and facing Indian Hills Saturday at 7 p.m.

"I think we're talented," Petersen said this week, "but it's taken awhile with this group to kind of get things right.

"We do have some good pieces. It's just a matter of trying to get them to fit together a little bit better and just learn how to play a little better."

Kirkwood bumped off top-ranked Triton, 83-76, to win the national crown last season with a remarkable run in the postseason tournament. The Eagles finished with a 31-4 record, but they lost a lot of talent with All-American Hunter Rhodes, Nick Richards, Christen Wilson, Jacob Olson, Josh Bartlett and Josh Meier all gone.

Byron Harp, Da'Rion King, Kaliph Fagan, Elijah Henry, Al'Tavius Jackson and Shakur Triplett return this year after helping Kirkwood win the title and they've been joined by a talented group of newcomers.

With six veterans on the club, Petersen was not surprised when the Eagles were ranked No. 1

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heading into the new campaign. Most coaches have questions and concerns heading into a new season and Petersen is no different.

He hopes the Eagles can justify the lofty ranking, but that remains to be seen.

"I think it's great for the program, to be looked at as one of the best teams in the country," he remarked. "Everybody outside of our camp thinks we're great, and it's not quite the case all the time."

The Eagles have embraced the No. 1 ranking, but they're not dwelling on it as the new year begins.

"It's like the elephant in the room," said Petersen, who was named the National Coach of the Year last season. "We talk about it sometimes. We've embraced our preseason No. 1 ranking and say we have to go out and earn it. We're not trying to run away from it completely."

Harp was Kirkwood's backup point guard last season behind Rhodes, but he excelled in the national tournament and probably should have been named the tournament MVP. He's back to lead the club, better than ever in the coach's eyes.

"Byron is definitely a better player," Petersen said. "He's gotten stronger, he's worked on his game."

"He doesn't have to be like he was at the national tournament. That was obviously extremely good, but he's got to step into the role of being our guy."

King, a powerful 6-foot-6, 240-pound center, gives the Eagles an inside force who can also pass the ball to open shooters. He moved into the starting lineup about six weeks into the season last year and made a big difference.

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Miles Wentzien, a muscular 6-foot-3 guard from Fort Madison who spent a season at Missouri Western, has cracked the starting lineup and should be able to help the Eagles with his versatility on offense and defense.

Petersen said Wentzien has a "college ready" body and is a good all-around player who can shoot.

Fagan, a 6-foot-4 guard who has an ability to attack the rim, is probably going to start against Carl Sandburg. Fagan sparked the Eagles as a reserve last season and could play a bigger role this year.

Petersen was not sure about his fifth starter earlier in the week, but freshman Chris King from Des Moines has been running with the top unit for much of the preseason and could get the nod. King joined the Eagles at mid-season last year after starting his college career at Northwest Missouri State, but he did not play for either team last season.

Henry, a 6-foot-5 front-court player, appears headed for a bigger role this year. "He needs to impact our team this year and I think he can," said Petersen. "Now he just has to show it in games."

Triplett, a 6-foot-6 veteran of last year's club, appears headed for more playing time this season as well.

Petersen thinks freshmen Carlo Marble from West Des Moines Valley and Ethan Meeker from Galesburg, Ill., could help the club on the perimeter. Darias Oliver of Chicago and Kameron Moore of Cincinnati could lend assistance in the front court.

Kirkwood had a deep, talented ballclub last year on its road to the national title. Petersen is not sure if this year's team will be as deep, although it could be.

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"I'd like to say yes, because that was nice to have," he remarked. "I don't know right now. I don't think we'll be quite as deep as we were last year."

Darius Rice of St. Louis, Derrick Howard of Clinton, Shawn Foxbrennen of Miami and Patrick Grabowski of Elmhurst, Ill. are also battling for playing time.