

Kirkwood men sink Iowa Lakes

Written by Mike Condon

Friday, 10 March 2017 06:00 - Last Updated Friday, 10 March 2017 06:08



Mental toughness was a key ingredient in Kirkwood's national championship run last March.

That same vibe was evident Thursday night for the Kirkwood men in the Region XI semifinal against Iowa Lakes.

The teams went back and forth for the first 32 minutes as neither led by more than seven points during that span.

However, the final eight minutes belonged to Kirkwood. Paced by a monster night from sophomore Miles Wentzien, the Eagles gradually pulled away for a 97-84 victory at Johnson Hall.

No. 15 Kirkwood (25-6) now faces a monumental challenge in Saturday's 3 p.m. regional final. The Eagles hit the road to meet No. 1 Southwestern (31-1) in Creston.

The Spartans' only loss was a 78-75 setback against Kirkwood on Jan. 11 in Cedar Rapids. They advanced with an easy 94-62 win on Thursday over Ellsworth.

The Eagles had a little payback on their mind Thursday after dropping a 101-73 decision to Iowa Lakes last Saturday in Mason City.

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Wentzien, who finished with 29 points, six rebounds, six assists and five steals, said Kirkwood had a different mindset this time.

"We came out with a much better effort, but I think the biggest overall thing was our gutsy attitude," he said. "We realized that we have a lot of good individuals, but if you don't play together it doesn't matter. We really played well together tonight."

Kirkwood played without sophomore Kaliph Fagan. Coach Bryan Petersen said Fagan was suspended for a violation of team rules. Fagan's absence left the Eagles with only nine players dressed.

A turning point in the game came with 4:30 remaining. Iowa Lakes Coach Troy Larson was hit with a technical foul for voicing his displeasure to the officials. Kirkwood's lead was just 73-70 at that point.

Wentzien hit both technical free throws and on the ensuing possession Byron Harp nailed a 3-point basket, pushing the lead 78-70. After a stop on defense, freshman Carlo Marble converted a short jumper and the lead was 80-70 with 3:08 remaining.

"We were on a little bit of a run there," Petersen said. "I know Coach Larson's intentions were to fight for his team, but the technical might have helped us. We hit the free throws and then the 3.

"I thought the guys did an outstanding job the entire second half, just playing for each other, playing together."

Kirkwood put the game away from the foul line, converting 14-of-15 from the stripe over the final three minutes.

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Both teams saw all five starters hit double figures. Harp finished with 18, Chris King 14, Shakur Triplett 12 and Da'Rion King 10 for Kirkwood.

Kyle Beisch and Mitch Keller led No. 19 Iowa Lakes, which closes at 22-9, with 17 points apiece.

Petersen knows the atmosphere Saturday in Creston will be electric.

"They are going to have a great crowd being the No. 1 team in the country," he said. "They have only one loss this year. They are a great team, very talented. We both have a lot to play for and I think it is going to be a great game."



The regional champion advances to the national tournament.

IOWA LAKES (84): Bressler 5 2-4 12, McIlravy 3 8-8 15, Beisch 6 0-0 17, Keller 4 5-6 13, Tapplar 6 5-6 17, Rogers 0 0-0 0, Binyoti 2 1-2 5, Joiner 2 0-1 5. Totals 28 21-27 84.

KIRKWOOD (97): Triplett 4 4-4 12, Harp 4 7-8 18, Wentzien 7 11-13 29, C. King 3 6-7 14, D. King 5 0-5 10, Meeker 2 0-0 5, Marble 3 0-0 8, Henry 0 1-2 1. Totals 28 29-39 97.

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Halftime - Iowa Lakes 43, Kirkwood 41. 3-point goals - Iowa Lakes 7 (Beisch 5, McIlravy 1, Joiner 1). Kirkwood 12 (Wentzien 4, Harp 3, C. King 2, Marble 2, Meeker 1).