

Eagles edged in finals by No. 1 team

Written by Jim Ecker
Sunday, 25 March 2018 06:05 -



HARRISON, Ark. - The Kirkwood Eagles made another remarkable run at the national tournament this year, but this time they landed a few points short against the No. 1 team in the country.

The second-ranked Eagles made a spirited comeback Saturday night but lost to top-ranked Monroe Community College of New York, 62-56, in the championship game of the NJCAA Division II women's basketball tournament at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood was aiming for back-to-back national crowns, but the Eagles had to settle for second place after seeing their 24-game winning streak finally come to an end with their first loss in three months.

Kirkwood finished the season with a 34-4 mark, giving the Eagles an incredible two-year record of 71-4 with one national title and one second-place showing.

Coach Kim Muhl saluted his team after the game, especially the six sophomores who played the past two seasons.

"They're a special group of kids. There's no question about it," said Muhl. "My gosh, you play 75 games and win 71 of them, you must have done something well.

"They don't feel good about themselves right now, but once time passes that will fade a little bit. They'll see how much they did accomplish in two years."



The Eagles faced a formidable challenge at the national tournament. First they beat a team in the Sweet 16 that featured the top individual scorer in the country, then they beat a team in the

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Elite 8 that was hosting the tournament and playing on its home floor, then they beat a team in the semifinals that was undefeated and averaging 99 points per game.

Kirkwood finally met its match in Monroe, which captured the fifth national title in school history.

The Eagles fell behind by 12 points in the third quarter at 39-27, but true to form they never panicked and pulled within four points at 45-41 entering the final stanza.

Awal Ajak pulled the Eagles within two points at 50-48 with a 3-pointer, then Mackenzie Jenkins hoisted the Eagles within two points again at 53-51 with a triple of her own.

A little later, Megan Axcell got the Eagles within two points at 56-54 with 3:45 left, but no matter how hard they tried they could not get over the hump.

Olivia Usher missed a 17-footer that would have tied the game at 56-56, then a little later she missed a 3-pointer from the top of the key that would have given the Eagles a one-point edge with 2 1/2 minutes left. Usher enjoyed a strong performance at the national tournament and was named to the all-tourney team, but the Cedar Rapids Prairie grad ran into some tough luck on both shots.

"Good looks," said Muhl.

Monroe spurted to a 61-54 lead with 1:35 left on a 3-pointer and made it 62-54 with a free throw with 18.5 seconds to go. Arika Wooldridge got the Eagles within 62-56 with a putback in the closing seconds and the Eagles came up with a steal, but time ran out on the 2017 national champs.

Kirkwood shot only 35.1 percent from the field and was 9 for 30 on 3-pointers, not good enough to topple the top-ranked team in the country. Monroe was slightly better, shooting 41.2 percent overall and 9 for 28 on 3-pointers.

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"You have to make shots. We didn't make shots," said Muhl. "Defensively we were really good. I thought we guarded them very well, but in the end you have to hit a couple of shots. They hit a couple more is all.

"In that type of game, opportunity closes real fast. But our kids were pretty resilient, I thought."

Axcell led the Eagles with 13 points. Jenkins contributed 11 points off the bench. Tayana Wilson and Ajak finished with eight points. Usher and Wooldridge scored six points apiece. Wilson joined Usher on the all-tournament team.

Shalix Hines scored 18 points for Monroe, which finished with a 33-2 record. Sierra Green scored 14 points and Torrie Cash had 10 points. Jaynelle Robinson of Monroe was named the tournament MVP, but she had only seven points and eight rebounds against Kirkwood.

Usher led the Eagles with a 12.0 scoring average in the four-game tournament. Ajak averaged 11.8, Wilson 10.8 and Jenkins 10.5 in a typically balanced attack. Usher, Ajak, Wilson, Axcell, Christmas Puok and Niaja Taylor are the six sophomores who helped the Eagles go 71-4 the last two seasons.

"You've got to move forward," said Muhl. "That's what I told them.

"Somebody has to win and somebody has to lose. We were there (in the national finals) twice. That's pretty darn special."

KIRKWOOD (56): Wilson 2 3-3 8, Axcell 5 0-0 13, Ajak 3 0-0 8, Puok 1 0-0 3, Usher 3 0-0 6, Jenkins 3 3-5 11, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 0 1-2 1, Robinson 0 0-0 0, Mensen 0 0-0 0, Wooldridge 3 0-0 6. Totals 20 7-10 56.

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MONROE (62): Rodney 3 0-0 8, Cash 3 2-3 10, Hines 5 7-8 18, Abitante 0 0-0 0, Sarr 0 0-0 0, Green 5 0-0 14, Brisco 0 0-0 0 Henderson 2 1-1 5, Robinson 3 1-2 7. Totals 21 11-14 62.

Halftime - Monroe 29, Kirkwood 27. 3-point goals - Kirkwood 9 (Axccl 3, Ajak 2, Jenkins 2, Wilson 1, Puok 1), Monroe 9 (Green 4, Rodney 2, Cash 2, Hines 1).