The look on Kim Muhl's face told the story.

He never said it directly, but the veteran Kirkwood women's basketball coach gave off the vibe that his team let one slip away Wednesday night.

In a battle of two nationally-ranked teams, No. 4 North Iowa Area Community College got a late fourth-quarter run and held off numerous challenges in the final two minutes to upset the top-ranked Eagles, 63-60, in an ICCAC game before an enthusiastic crowd at Johnson Hall.

"I thought we didn't do a very good job doing some things," Muhl said. "You gotta make free throws, 15-for-29 is pretty poor. That's on them. They have to make their shots."

Free throws weren't the only area of struggle for the Eagles (20-2, 7-1). They only connected on one 3-point basket in 15 attempts, compared to 9-for-32 for the visitors. NIACC (21-1, 9-0) elected to put heavy pressure on the Kirkwood guards, allowing the Eagle posts to work against single coverage.

"We didn't guard well in transition a couple of times," Muhl said. "We lost them and they hit a couple of 3's. That was our fault. They are too good to let them have open shots like that."

Despite their offensive struggles, the Eagles had their chances. NIACC's biggest lead of the

night was a pair of six-point margins early in both halves. The Eagles never led by more than two points the entire night.

Kirkwood's final lead came at 53-52 on a pair of Ju Gaston free throws with 5:04 remaining. NIACC's final trey of the game was key. Autam Mendez, who led the visitors with 22 points, connected from deep with 4:19 remaining to put her team up 57-53. The Eagles drew within a point at 58-57 on a Kemara Watson lay-in with 2:33 remaining. They then had four possessions with a chance to take the lead and were unable to convert.

Missed free throws also hurt in the final minute. The Eagles actually had the ball under the basket with 2.3 seconds remaining and a chance to tie. Kortney Drake got off a contested 3-point shot that banged off the rim before the final buzzer sounded.

Sophomore Paige Bradford had a solid performance for Kirkwood. The sophomore from Davenport led the offense with 22 points and was eventually given the defensive assignment of trying to slow down Mendez.

"She's a hard guard for anybody," Muhl said of Bradford. "The thing is tonight, she had to do a little bit too much for us. She had to guard Mendez on one end, then get down in the post and try and score against a good defensive team."

Gaston was the only other Eagle in double figures, finishing with 12. Muhl lamented the lack of any offense from the outside.

"Our perimeter (players) have to give us something," he said. "They gave us nothing and they

got a little rattled with pressure. NIACC does a great job of pressuring but we have to handle it and be strong with the ball.

"We played hard," Muhl added. "The effort was there, but if you don't make shots, it is hard to win."

Wednesday loss makes the road to the Division II national tournament that much tougher as only the ICCAC tournament champion qualifies. Last year, NIACC had home court for the regional final and took out the Eagles, 77-70. It is a scenario that could play out again.

Under the current format, there are no wild-card entries to the nationals. NJCAA Division I does extend at-large bids, but not Division II.

"We gotta go on the road and play them up there (on Feb. 22)," Muhl said. "If we don't win that, we'd have to play them again at their place in the regional final. It's just tougher to play on the road."

Sierra Lynch added 16 points for NIACC, which has now won its last three games against the Eagles.

NIACC (63): Sierra Lynch 2-14 8-12 16, Kelcie Hale 1-9 1-2 6, Autam Mendez 6-13 6-8 22, Sierra Morrow 2-6 2-2 7, Sanna Smith 2-4 2-6 6, Brooke Heisler 0-0 1-2 1, Myiah Walker 0-1 0-0 0, Allie Negen 0-1 0-0 0, Andrea Gray 0-0 0-0 0, Shinaana Secody 0-1 0-0 0, Abby Leach 2-3 0-0 6, Sydney Wetlaufer 0-3 2-2 2. Totals 16-55 22-34 63.

KIRKWOOD (60): Paige Bradford 9-20 4-8 22, Tatiana Hodges-Johnson 2-4 1-4 5, Ju Gaston 3-8 6-6 12, Amara Lipsey 0-6 1-3 1, Marissa Metz 1-4 0-0 2, Delani Harris 0-0 0-0 0, Jheda Kennedy 1-3 2-2 4, Kortney Drake 3-6 0-2 7, Addison Rath 0-0 0-2 0, Natalie Tomaszewski 0-5 0-0 0, Kemara Watson 3-7 1-2 7. Totals 22-63 15-29 60.

Halftime - NIACC 28, Kirkwood 28. 3-point goals - NIACC 9-32 (Lynch 2-6, Smith 0-2, Hale 0-6, Mendez 4-7, Morrow 1-3, Walker 0-1, Negen 0-1, Leach 2-3 Wetlaufer 0-3), Kirkwood 1-15 (Bradford 0-1, Gaston 0-1. Lipsey 0-5, Metz 0-2, Drake 1-4, Tomaszewski 0-2). Rebounds - NIACC 31 (Morrow 9), Kirkwood 45 (Bradford 8). Assists - NIACC 10 (Hale 5), Kirkwood 5 (Bradford, Lipsey, Metz, Drake, Tomaszewski, 1 each). Turnovers - NIACC 9, Kirkwood 15. Total fouls - NIACC 23, Kirkwood 23. Fouled out - Morrow. Technical fouls - none.