

King me! Kirkwood escapes NIACC

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 08 March 2017 05:53 -



The defending national champions were in trouble Tuesday night in the opening round of the regional tournament when Da'Rion King came to the rescue for the Kirkwood Eagles.

King muscled in 12 points during a key six-minute stretch late in the game to help the 15th-ranked Eagles escape NIACC, 78-71, in a tense ballgame at Johnson Hall.

Kirkwood (24-6) will host 19th-ranked Iowa Lakes (22-8) in the NJCAA Division II regional semifinals Thursday at 7:30 p.m.

King, a 6-foot-6 sophomore from Racine, Wis., finished with 23 points and 11 rebounds for the Eagles, doubling his season-long averages of 11.1 points and 5.6 boards.

The Eagles constructed a 15-point lead in the first half, but NIACC stormed back in the second half with a 16-0 run and grabbed a 50-45 lead with 11:20 left in the ballgame.

All of a sudden, Kirkwood's shot at winning another national title was in severe jeopardy.

Chris King scored for Kirkwood to make it 50-47 and Shakur Triplett completed a three-point play to pull the Eagles into a 50-50 tie with 10:35 remaining, helping to stem the tide.

That's when Da'Rion King took over.

King furnished a three-point play to give the Eagles a 53-50 lead, then he converted another three-point play with a layup and free throw to make it 56-52 for the home team.

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King then tipped in a shot and then scored with an assist from Chris King to give the Eagles a 60-54 advantage, giving him 10 straight points for Kirkwood. He scored again shortly after, making it 64-59 with about four minutes left.

It was a dominating stretch by King and helped save the team.

"Our intensity went down and they got up five points," he said. "I was just thinking, 'I've got to bring energy and bring my team right along with me.'"

"I had to get the crowd into it, get my teammates into it and just turn it to something good."

NIACC pulled within three points at 64-61, 67-64 and 70-67 with 1:33 remaining, but got no closer.

Miles Wentzien made a tough drive to the bucket, got fouled and completed the three-point play for Kirkwood for a 73-67 edge with 1:09 left.

Carlo Marble made one free throw with 37.8 seconds to go for a 74-69 lead, then NIACC missed a pair of 3-pointers on the same possession.

Wentzien made two free throws with 12.3 seconds left to give the Eagles a 76-69 lead and shut the door. He added two more foul shots with 5.2 seconds left after NIACC had pulled within 76-71.

Da'Rion King was a key member of the team last year when Kirkwood captured the NJCAA Division II national title. Now as a sophomore, he's coming down the stretch of his junior college career and does not want to see it end too soon.

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"It's been like that the last couple of weeks," he said. "I've been thinking, 'This is my last few games.' This could have been the last game.

"I just want to go out with a bang. I can't go out sad," said King. "That's what my teammates talk about all the time. We cannot go out sad."

It could have been a sad ending Tuesday, but King helped save the day.

"He was great," said Coach Bryan Petersen. "We were struggling to score the basketball. He was huge for us tonight."

Two other Eagles had double-doubles. Wentzien finished with 19 points and 12 rebounds, while Triplett had 10 points and 12 rebounds. Chris King scored 13 points.

Kirkwood owned the backboards, 45-30, but the Eagles hurt themselves with 17 turnovers.

The five starters for NIACC scored only 27 points, but the visitors got 44 points from three reserves. Ben Moss scored 23 for NIACC (16-15).

Kirkwood and Iowa Lakes split their season series this year, each winning at home. The Eagles drubbed the Lakers by 31 points Feb. 4, but the Lakers returned the favor with a 28-point drubbing this past Saturday in the final game of the regular season. Now they meet again, with the winner advancing to the regional finals Saturday.

NIACC (71): Baker 1 0-0 3, Wurm 1 0-0 3, Rathjen 1 0-0 2, Trousell 1 8-9 10, Gumm 4 1-6 9, Moss 9 3-3 23, Burnside 4 3-5 11, Taylor-Breck 3 1-2 10. Totals 24 16-25 71.

KIRKWOOD (78): Triplett 4 2-3 10, Harp 3 0-2 8, Wentzien 4 10-12 19, C.King 5 2-2 13,

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D.King 9 5-6 23, Jackson 0 0-0 0, Meeker 0 0-0 0, Fagan 2 0-0 4, Marble 0 1-2 1, Henry 0 0-0 0. Totals 27 20-27 78.

Halftime - Kirkwood 40, NIACC 26. 3-point goals - NIACC 7 (Taylor-Breck 3, Moss 2, Baker 1, Wurm 1), Kirkwood 4 (Harp 2, Wentzien 1, C.King 1).