

KCC women seeking 8th national title

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood Eagles learned what it takes to win a national title last year when they captured the NJCAA Division II crown in Arkansas.

Now they hope to do it again.

The second-ranked Eagles (31-3) face Gogebic of Ironwood, Mich. (16-12) in the opening round of the women's basketball tournament Tuesday at 3 p.m. at the Pioneer Pavilion in Harrison, Ark.

It took a combination of talent, clutch shooting and a little luck to win the title in 2017. Six of the Eagles who played on last year's team are back for another shot.

This year's sophomores were wide-eyed freshmen a year ago. Now they are battle-tested and ready to tangle.

"After going our freshman year, it's more like a business trip for us sophomores," said Olivia Usher, a Cedar Rapids Prairie grad. "As a freshman you have a ton of emotions, you're extremely excited. You don't know what it's going to be like when you get down there.

"But we know the kind of teams that are going to be down there," she said. "It's going to be

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tough games every single game, every night."

There are only 16 teams at the national tournament, so the Eagles will need four victories this week for Coach Kim Muhl to claim his eighth national title in 29 years at Kirkwood.

Gogebic presents an unusual challenge for the Eagles. They have only seven players on the roster, but two of them are prolific scorers who know how to put the ball in the basket with Lori Wardynski averaging 27.0 points and Bailey Froberg at 22.5 points.

Kirkwood cannot match that kind of individual firepower, but the Eagles have superior depth on their roster. Eight players are averaging between 5 and 11 points per game and several others make valuable contributions off the bench as well.

"It's going to take all of us to come together and get the wins," said point guard Tayana Wilson, who leads Kirkwood in scoring.

Muhl routinely uses 11 or 12 players in a ballgame and likes to use a half-court press, so look for the Eagles to try and get Gogebic tired in a 40-minute ballgame.

If the Eagles prevail Tuesday, they'll face North Arkansas or Bryant & Stratton in the quarterfinals on Wednesday. The semifinals are Friday and the finals Saturday night.

Monroe Community College is the No. 1 seed in the tournament. Highland is the No. 3 seed and Owens is seeded No. 4, but Muhl thinks there are lots of dangerous teams.

"I think it's a hodge-podge down there," he said. "One game at a time. Just play."

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"There's going to be some craziness. There are pretty good lower seeds."

Kirkwood had a close call in the quarterfinals last year in a 65-63 victory over Cincinnati State. The Eagles had to rally in the final minutes and got a clutch 3-point basket by Megan Axcell in the process.

Axcell is one of six sophomores who helped the Eagles capture the 2017 national title, along with Wilson, Usher, Awal Ajak, Christmas Puok and Niaja Taylor. Ajak did not play in the tournament last year due to a knee injury.

Last year's team featured All-American center Simone Goods, who was named the National Player of the Year after averaging 16.2 points and 8.2 rebounds. All-American Deleyah Harris averaged 13.3 points and 6.5 rebounds.