

Muhl begins 30th year with 7 titles

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kim Muhl originally wanted to be the men's basketball coach at Kirkwood Community College back in 1988, but the Eagles hired Ted Oglesby for the job instead.

Shortly later, Kirkwood wondered if Muhl was interested in being their women's basketball coach -- he was the girls basketball coach at Norway High School at the time - so they arranged a meeting for him to meet with Kirkwood president Norm Nielsen at 7:30 one morning.

"He offered me the job before I walked out the door," said Muhl, who remembered he was dressed casually in coaching togs for that pivotal meeting with the former school president.

That was 30 years, 863 victories and seven national titles ago.

Muhl would have laughed at anyone who would have predicted that level of success for the Hall of Fame coach. "I would have said they'd been drinking," he remarked, smiling at the absurdity of the notion.

Muhl, 63, begins his 30th year at Kirkwood this weekend with two games at the State Fair Classic in Sedalia, Mo., facing Butler Community College on Friday and Dodge City Community College on Saturday.

His first national title came in 1997 and the seventh came 20 years later in 2017, when the Eagles sailed through the season with a perfect 37-0 record. Kirkwood was the national runner-up last and finished 34-4, which means they've won 71 of their last 75 games.

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Muhl sports an overall mark of 863-151, with NJCAA Division II national titles in 1997, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2017. His record at Johnson Hall on the Kirkwood campus is 362-32 and his teams have won at least 20 games every year.

"I never would have guessed that," he said, thinking back to the start of his incredible career. "But you get in the right situation with the right kids. You get lucky. We've just had some really good kids come through."

Muhl apparently has some more "really good kids" for the 2018-19 campaign, but as usual he's a little grumpy about their work ethic on the eve of the new season.

"I am not happy with how they approach the game on a daily basis," he said, echoing his comments from previous years. "They have to mature. We're fighting that every day."

Kirkwood lost nine players to graduation from last year's club. There are five letterwinners this season, but they collectively they averaged only 22.4 points per game, so there are numerous holes to fill.

There are nine new players, including eight freshmen and Johanna Myers, a Burlington Notre Dame grad who played college basketball at Wisconsin-Parkside last season.

Muhl has blended some of his "old" players with some of the "new" people in the tentative starting lineup. Mackenzie Jenkins, Anasha Hurst and Haley Mullinnix helped the Eagles last year and are listed as starters, while Amara Lipsey from Ames and Ashley Tull from North Linn have joined the squad this year and apparently will be in the opening lineup.

Leah Robinson and Brianna Mensen, two key players from last season, will be coming off the bench in Muhl's system, which typically employs 10 or 11 players in a fast-paced attack.

Kirkwood featured a balanced attack last year with nobody averaging more than 11 points per

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game. That makes it harder for opponents to scout the Eagles and keeps everyone involved.

"I think it's going to be very similar, once they figure it out," Muhl said about his roster. "Right now we're an average basketball team trying to get better. It depends on how hard they play. I'm searching for the right combination."

Success does not come automatically, he warned, even for players who were highly successful in high school.

"They have to go back to work," said Muhl. "It's not something in the water we drink here at Kirkwood."

But make no mistake, Muhl thinks this team has the potential to challenge for another national crown.

"That's a big word: Potential," he said. "It really is, in athletics. We've got pieces if they fit together the way they should."

Muhl expects to face stiff competition at the State Fair Classic in Missouri this weekend, along with other tough games during the non-conference slate in November and December. The home opener is Friday, Nov. 16 against McCook Community College in the Kirkwood Classic.

"I'd rather go and see what we're made of right away," he said. "Make them grow up."

Muhl brought in two new point guards with Ju Gaston, 5-foot-4 from Minneapolis, and Jheda Kennedy, 5-5 from Overland Park, Kan. "They're nice players," he said. "They're going to be pretty good down the road. They create a whole different dimension with their speed."

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Gaston missed three weeks of practice with a concussion, but has been cleared to resume playing.

The other new players are Paige Bradford from Davenport North, Jayla Johnson from Cedar Rapids Washington, Addison Rath from Wellman Mid-Prairie and Natalie Tomaszewski from Shorewood, Wis.

Kirkwood is ranked No. 2 in the NJCAA Division II preseason poll. Monroe Community College of New York, which defeated Kirkwood in the national championship game last season, is ranked No. 1.

KIRKWOOD ROSTER

Sophomores

Mackenzie Jenkins, 5-11, Peoria, Ill.; Johanna Myers, 5-11, Burlington; Anasha Hurst, 5-8, St. Louis; Leah Robinson, 6-1, Evanston, Ill.; Haley Mullinnix, 5-5, West Branch; Brianna Mensen, 5-11, Maquoketa Valley.

Freshmen

Paige Bradford, 6-0, Davenport; Ju Gaston, 5-4, Minneapolis; Amara Lipsey, 5-8, Ames; Jheda Kennedy, 5-5, Overland Park, Kan.; Jayla Johnson, 5-9, Cedar Rapids; Addison Rath, 5-9, Wellman Mid-Prairie; Natalie Tomaszewski, 6-3, Shorewood, Wis.; Ashley Tull, 5-11, North Linn.