

Eagles, Mustangs ready for new season

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tim Sandquist inherited a deep and talented team when he became the new men's basketball coach at Kirkwood Community College this summer.

Now he's made the 2019 national champions even deeper.

D.J. Purnell, who averaged 8.5 points and 4.9 rebounds last season, has transferred to Kirkwood from Midland College in Texas. And Owen Coburn, a 6-foot-10 center who originally committed to South Dakota State, has enrolled with the Eagles instead.

Purnell and Coburn signed with Kirkwood after Sandquist became the head coach. They join a half-dozen returning players who helped Kirkwood win the NJCAA Division II national title last March year, giving Sandquist lots of options as the Eagles prepare for their season opener Friday night against Illinois Central at the SCC Classic in West Burlington.

Kirkwood begins the 2019-20 campaign as the top-ranked team in the country, and Sandquist welcomes the assignment of trying to repeat as national champs.

"I'm excited to coach a group of guys who are winners and care about winning," said Sandquist. "I think they're excited about pursuing that challenge again this year. I like our depth."

The Kirkwood women's basketball team, which is ranked No. 2 in the country, also begins the

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season Friday night against Butler Community College at the State Fair Classic in Sedalia, Mo.

The Mount Mercy men's basketball team opens against Viterbo Thursday night and will host Maranatha Baptist Saturday at 2 p.m. at the Hennessey Recreation Center. The Mount Mercy women's basketball team begins Friday against Viterbo in La Crosse, Wis.

Sandquist led Rock Valley College to the NJCAA Division III national championship game last season and finished second in the country in his only year at the school. Shortly after, he succeeded Bryan Petersen as Kirkwood's head coach after Peterson left to become an assistant coach at South Dakota State.

Petersen won two national titles in the past four years at Kirkwood, leaving Sandquist with big shoes to fill.

"I knew Coach Petersen prior to this. We were friends," said Sandquist. "I followed him in his career here, so I was familiar with what he accomplished."

Sandquist began his coaching career as an assistant at Southwestern Community College, which competes in the same league as Kirkwood, so he's been familiar with Kirkwood's program for a number of years. He jumped at the chance to become the new head coach here.

"Kirkwood is a name that's known among coaches for having a rich tradition and a great program," he said. "The tradition of excellence and the culture they have were two things that were really enticing."

Doug Wilson, who led Kirkwood to the 2019 national title and was named the National Player of the Year, is now playing at South Dakota State, united with Petersen again. And Allante Pickens, a starting guard last season, also is playing at a four-year school.

All of the other key ingredients from Kirkwood's run to the national title are back with Devonte

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Thedford, Luke Appel, Connor Kasperbauer, Seybian Sims, Brady Sartorius, Jamal Stephenson and Niko Gosnell. Kasperbauer originally planned to play at Truman State this season, but elected to stick with the Eagles.

Some new coaches face rebuilding jobs at their new school, but Sandquist inherited a club that has the potential to compete for the title again.

"I didn't feel too much pressure about that when I took the job," he said. "I knew how many returnees they had and what the expectations were going to be this season.

"I was more excited to coach a good group of guys. That's what was exciting about it."

Kirkwood women's basketball coach Kim Muhl begins his 31st year with the Eagles with 890 victories and seven national titles, putting him just 10 victories away from 900 in his Hall of Fame career.

The Eagles finished 27-7 last season and fell short of another trip to the national tournament, but the club looks strong again this season with Ashley Tull, Paige Bradford, Ju Gaston, Amara Lipsey, Natalie Tomaszewski and Jheda Kennedy leading the veterans along with five promising freshmen.

The Mount Mercy men's basketball team finished 16-15 overall and 11-13 in the Heart of America Conference last season, fighting a string of injuries along the way. The Mustangs graduated Antwain Strong, Mychael Brawner-Henley, Mike Evans and Mohammed Albagami, but Dennis McKinney, Bailey Basala, Christian Reischauer and DJ Johnson are back as a strong nucleus.

Coach Aaron Jennings, entering his fifth year as head coach, added a pair of talented junior college players into the mix with RoyShawn Webb from Iowa Central and LJ Harris from Ellsworth.

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The Mount Mercy women's basketball team struggled last season at 5-25 overall and 1-23 in the conference, but Coach Micha Mims has added some talented newcomers to the team and is looking for better things this year.