

## Kirkwood men clinch tie for title

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 18 February 2018 06:14 -

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Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen was worried about his team's mental toughness back in December when the Eagles stumbled into the Christmas break with an 8-4 record.

The surging Eagles have not lost a game since then and Petersen is not worried anymore.

The sixth-ranked Eagles rallied for an exciting 80-77 victory over Iowa Lakes Saturday at Johnson Hall to clinch at least a tie for the ICCAC title with their 12th straight win.

Kirkwood has a three-game lead over Iowa Lakes and Southwestern with three games left in the regular season. Everyone else has been eliminated from the race.

There's no question about Kirkwood's mental toughness now after the Eagles rallied from an 11-point deficit.

"I feel like we've really grown up in the last month," said Petersen. "When adversity has hit, we're still staying together and focused on the next possession."

Iowa Lakes socked the Eagles with a 21-2 burst in the first half to grab a 38-27 lead, but Kirkwood responded with a 17-4 burst of its own to take a 44-42 edge at intermission.

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There was more of the same in the second, although on a smaller scale. Kirkwood took an eight-point lead at 62-54, but Iowa Lakes responded and took a 71-68 edge with three minutes left.

It was anyone's game at that point, but the Eagles decided the game belonged to them.

Ethan Meeker hit a 3-pointer from the corner to tie at 71-71. Chris King, on his way to 28 points, followed with another 3-pointer to give Kirkwood a 74-71 lead. Iowa Lakes made a free throw, but Bailey Kale drilled another 3-pointer to make it 77-72 with 1:35 left.

The Eagles never trailed again, but it came down to the final seconds. Iowa Lakes launched a 3-pointer to tie at the buzzer, but the ball hit the rim and bounced away.

Both teams gave great effort for 40 minutes.

"We knew that this was a big game, because if we got this one we could clinch the conference," said King, who netted 21 of his 28 points in the first half to keep the Eagles alive. "We knew they would make their runs. We had to try and just battle back."

The Eagles have not lost a game in two months and need only one more victory to clinch the No. 1 seed for the regional tournament, which means they would host all of their postseason games.

"We're just learning to trust each other more and more each game," said King, a sophomore from Des Moines. "We just have each other's back, even if we're down 20, even if we're down 10. It doesn't matter."

Doug Wilson, an acrobatic 6-foot-7 freshman, collected 18 points, 10 rebounds and four blocked shots for Kirkwood. Kale finished with 12 points.

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Iowa Lakes scored to pull within 77-76 with 10 seconds left. The Lakers fouled LJ Stansbury with 6.7 seconds remaining and Stansbury cashed both shots for a 79-76 lead.

Kale fouled Christian Kyles on purpose with 2.5 seconds left before Kyles could get in position for a 3-pointer that could have tied the game. Kyles hit his first free throw to make it 79-77 and missed the second on purpose, hoping his team could grab an offensive rebound and tie the game, but Meeker snared the loose ball for Kirkwood and was fouled with 0.9 seconds remaining.

Meeker missed the first foul shot but swished the second, making it 80-77. Nick Wagner, who had already made four 3-pointers for Iowa Lakes, caught a long in-bounds pass and launched a 40-footer at the buzzer that almost went in the basket.

"That was a really good game," said Petersen. "Iowa Lakes is a good team and they have a lot of good offensive players."

Petersen likes his team's spot in the conference standings, but knows the race is not over yet.

"It feels good, but we know we're getting everybody's best shot," he said. "We have to continue to play good basketball. It's a really good league."

Kirkwood raised its records to 20-4 overall and 9-0 in the conference. Iowa Lakes fell to 18-8 overall and 6-3 in the league.

Wagner led the Lakers with 19 points.

**IOWA LAKES (77):** Kyles 2 5-6 9, Joiner 1 0-0 2, Beisch 5 0-1 13, Clayton 3 4-6 10, Rau 6 4-6 16, Rogers 0 0-0 0, Guyton 3 0-2 6, McIlravy 1 0-0 2, Girardi 0 0-0 0, Wagner 6 3-3 19. Totals

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27 16-24 77.

**KIRKWOOD (80):** Kale 5 0-0 12, Meeker 3 1-2 9, King 9 6-7 28, Wilson 5 8-14 18, Arrington 2 1-2 5, Stansbury 0 5-6 5, Small 1 0-0 3, Ross 0 0-0 0, Marble 0 0-0 0, Johnson 0 0-0 0, Storey 0 0-0 0. Totals 25 21-31 80.

Halftime - Kirkwood 44, Iowa Lakes 42. 3-point goals - Iowa Lakes 7 (Wagner 4, Beisch 3), Kirkwood 9 (King 4, Kale 2, Meeker 2, Small 1).