

'New' Eagles begin year ranked No. 5

Written by Jim Ecker

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Bryan Petersen thought he'd have lots of experienced guards on the Kirkwood men's basketball team this season, but then the exodus began.

Bailey Kale left the team a year early to pursue a music career. Tajen Ross quit to pursue a modeling career. Jay Small transferred to a school closer to home so he could play basketball AND golf at the collegiate level. LJ Stansbury and Semaj Raj left for schools closer to their homes as well.

That stripped the Eagles of five guards and 29.1 points and left them with no experience in the backcourt, unless you count Traivon Washington, who got into three games last season before red-shirting.

Petersen is entering his sixth year at Kirkwood with a 126-34 record and one national title, but it's the first time he's starting a new year with a brand-new backcourt.

"That's been unique," he said. "To be honest, I'm a little bit more concerned because of that."

Petersen and his assistant coaches did not sit still in the midst of the exodus, of course. They intensified their recruiting and have nine new guards on the roster, although Gacoby Jones of Milwaukee will miss the entire season with a ruptured patella tendon.

Petersen likes his team, but knows there could be growing pains in the early part of the campaign.

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"I do like our team's attitude," he said. "We have a lot of kids who really want to work hard and be good teammates, so I feel really good that we're going to get better.

"But," he cautioned, "this month will be interesting."

The fifth-ranked Eagles begin the season at The Broadway Classic in West Burlington this weekend, with games against Illinois Central on Friday and Southeastern Community College on Saturday.

Injuries have slowed the Eagles during preseason drills. Kyle Arrington, a 6-foot-10 center, missed about four weeks in September and early October following meniscus surgery, but is expected to play this weekend. Jalen Taylor has been sidelined with a torn meniscus in his knee as well and returned to practice this week.

Brady Sartorius, a freshman guard from Mount Pleasant, missed time due to an injury, and Connor Kasperbauer, a transfer from Truman State and Ankeny Centennial, was sidelined with a concussion.

"Probably more injuries than we've ever had in the fall for us," said Petersen. "There was one week where we had only 11 or 12 players out of 17."

Kirkwood is approaching full health again - except for Jones - but all those ailments disrupted the team's development.

Doug Wilson, a second team All-American last season, returns to the starting lineup after averaging 14.1 points, 6.6 rebounds and 1.9 blocks, in addition to the leading the nation in shooting at 69.2 percent around the basket.

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There could be four newcomers in the starting lineup with Seybian Sims, a 6-7 freshman from Iowa City West; Luke Appel, a 6-7 freshman from Marshalltown; Devonte Thedford, a 6-2 guard from Des Moines Hoover; and Allante Pickens, a 5-8 transfer from Missouri Science & Technology.

Arrington, Kasperbauer, Sartorius, Washington, freshman Griff Clark from Cedar Rapids Prairie and freshman Jamal Stephenson from Skokie, Ill., also figure into the rotation, with several other players also pressing for court time.

"There are a few spots up for grabs," Petersen said Monday morning.

The Eagles could start a frontcourt of 6-7, 6-7 and 6-7, with Arrington coming off the bench at 6-10.

"We're really big," said Petersen. "We're probably going to be one of the bigger teams in our league and probably in this part of the country in the frontcourt."

Wilson is primarily a post player, but Petersen said Sims and Appel are good outside shooters who can stretch a defense and put the ball on the floor.

Kirkwood finished 24-6 last season, but did not reach the national tournament after winning the conference title. Petersen's lofty goals have not changed: Win the conference title AND compete for the NJCAA Division II national crown.

"If we keep getting better, I think we'll be right there in the mix. We should be," he said. "Obviously that's our goal, but I do think it's going to take some time. Hopefully not too long.

"We have a good amount of kids that want to get better every day, and I think that goes a long ways."

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Wilson has committed to play at South Dakota State and Arrington has committed to Western Illinois, giving the Eagles two NCAA Division I players on their roster.

Kirkwood lost four prominent sophomores from last season. Chris King is playing at Lindenwood, Ethan Meeker is at Knox College, Justin Storey joined Mount Mercy and Carlo Marble is hoping to play at Arkansas Little-Rock. Storey has a knee injury and will miss the season at Mount Mercy.

Kirkwood's home opener is Tuesday, Nov. 6 against the Mount Mercy junior varsity.

KIRKWOOD ROSTER

Freshmen

Seybian Sims, 6-7, Iowa City West; Traivon Washington, 6-3, Milwaukee; Devonte Thedford, 6-2, Des Moines Hoover; Brady Sartorius, 6-0, Mount Pleasant; Bailey Dee, 5-10, Champaign, Ill.; Gacoby Jones, 6-0, Milwaukee; Griffen Clark, 5-10, Cedar Rapids Prairie; Jamal Stephenson, 6-3, Skokie, Ill.; Connor Kasperbauer, 6-4, Ankeny Centennial; Niko Gosnell, 6-8, Lone Tree.

Sophomores

Allante Pickens, 5-8, Chicago; Sean Biernacki, 6-0, Australia; Jalen Taylor, 6-5, Kansas City, Kan.; Taejuan Johnson, 6-5, Mequon, Wis.; Doug Wilson, 6-7, Des Moines Hoover; Kyle Arrington, 6-10, Council Bluffs Lewis Central.