

Harris paces No. 1 Kirkwood women

Written by Jim Ecker

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When Deleyah Harris was a freshman in high school, her AAU basketball team played in a boys summer league to test their skills and see how they stacked up.

"We lost every game," she said Wednesday night with a smile.

It paid off, however.

"It made you want to compete a lot more," said Harris. "Everybody always says boys are faster and stronger, so it made you try to show a lot more and try to compete. It helped me out a lot."

That experience against the guys in Omaha made her better and made her tougher, and now she's one of the top players for the No. 1 junior college team in America.

Harris stuffed the stat sheet Wednesday with 20 points, seven steals, five rebounds and four assists as the top-ranked Kirkwood Eagles strolled to an 84-43 victory over John Wood Community College at Johnson Hall.

Kirkwood, which climbed into the No. 1 spot in the NJCAA Division II rankings this week, raised its record to a perfect 10-0.

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"We all feel really good about it, but like Coach (Kim Muhl) tell us, everybody is out to beat us," said Harris, "so we practice two times as hard now what we are No. 1."

Harris, a 5-foot-9 sophomore, has assumed a bigger role for the Eagles this season on a club that features 11 freshmen and only four sophs.

"Last year I had a lot of people to look up to, but being one of only two returners, there's a lot on my plate," she said. "I need to step up and lead by example."

"I've been playing a lot better. Coach has encouraged me to relax and not be so hard on myself, so I guess it's coming easier."

Muhl loves the way Harris is playing.

"She's matured as a kid, both on and off the floor," he said. "She's bought in, and she knows what her role is and she does a great job with it."

"She's got energy," he said. "And she's an extremely strong kid and obviously very athletic. She brings a different personality to the game, let's put it that way, because she's a tough kid."

In addition to playing in that summer league against the guys, Harris also went one-on-one against her father.

"I guess I've always been mentally tough," she said. "He never took it easy on me."

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Kirkwood defeated a string of ranked teams earlier in the season and has outscored its 10 opponents by about 22 points per game on its way to the No. 1 ranking in the land.

"I'd rather be ranked No. 1 at the end, but it's good for the kids," said Muhl. "They deserve it. They work pretty hard.

"It helps in recruiting. It helps in seeding at the end of the year if you make it to the national tournament. That's the way I look at it."

Muhl likes the sheer talent on this year's squad, but he also likes their attitude and chemistry.

"They want to win and they don't care how we do it," he said. "They buy in. And we're going to get better. That's the good thing."

Muhl won his 800th game at Kirkwood last week and now has 802 in 28 years. He doesn't know if he'll coach long enough to reach 1,000 victories, but has not ruled it out and has no plans to retire.

"Everybody asks, 'Are you done now?'," he said. "No, I'm not done. What would I do? I'd go crazy."

Muhl has won six national titles at Kirkwood and has a chance to claim No. 7 this season.

"This is a special group," he remarked. "They're good kids. It makes it a heck of a lot more fun to coach."

Simone Goods, Megan Axcell and Rylee Voss scored 11 points apiece for Kirkwood Wednesday.

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JOHN WOOD (43): Gronewold 3 1-1 7, Voigt 4 2-2 10, Patrick 3 0-0 6, Hyer 1 1-2 3, Connell 1 2-4 4, Fox 1 0-0 2, Augspurg 1 0-0 3, Jett 3 0-0 8, Plumer 0 0-0 0, Schoenekase 0 0-0 0, Wellman 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 6-9 43.

KIRKWOOD (84): Harris 9 1-1 20, Ajak 2 0-0 4, Watkins 3 0-0 6, Goods 5 1-1 11, Usher 3 0-0 6, T. Wilson 0 0-0 0, Puok 4 0-0 8, Hedges 0 0-0 0, Axcell 4 2-2 11, Schmidt 0 0-0 0, Taylor 0 0-0 0, Voss 2 7-7 11, Cotton 3 0-0 7, C. Wilson 0 0-0 0, Achenbach 0 0-0 0. Totals 35 11-11 84.

Halftime - Kirkwood 48, John Wood 25. 3-point goals - John Wood 3 (Jett 2, Augspurg 1), Kirkwood 3 (Harris 1, Axcell 1, Cotton 1).