

'Shaq' helps No. 1 Eagles go 21-0

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood sophomore Shaneequah Watkins has a beautiful first name, but she's reluctantly grown to accept a lot of people calling her Shaq.

She's a lanky basketball player at 5-foot-8, but there's absolutely no resemblance in any way, shape or form to former NBA star Shaquille O'Neal, the original Shaq at 7-foot-1 and 300 pounds.

It's a good basketball nickname, but not something Watkins has always embraced.

"At first I was a little bit disgusted, because I'm not this big guy, I'm not a post player and I make my free throws, for the most part," she said Saturday. "After the years it kind of stuck."

Watkins is one of the most versatile players on the top-ranked Kirkwood women's basketball team, which raised its record to a perfect 21-0 Saturday afternoon with an 86-29 cakewalk past Iowa Central in a conference game at Johnson Hall.

Watkins finished with 12 points, four rebounds, three assists and one steal in a typically well-rounded game and she's been stuffing the stat sheet all season for the Eagles.

By now, she's grown accustomed to Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl and a lot of other people calling her Shaq.

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"I got Shaq from my high school coach when I was coming from eighth grade to freshman year and I would play jayvee or varsity in the summer," she explained. "He couldn't pronounce my name and he said Shaquilla or something and so it became Shaq. And that's how I ended up with that."

Watkins spent last season at Odessa Junior College in Texas, but it was not a good fit and she began looking for a school closer to her home in Omaha. Kirkwood has a strong Omaha connection on this year's team with Deleyah Harris, Simone Goods and TiRayah Cotton and Watkins decided to join the parade.

Saturday's victory was the latest in a long string of romps this season for Watkins and the Eagles. Kirkwood has outscored its 21 opponents by 700 points - 1,695 to 995 - and has won its games by an average of 33.3 points.

Muhl has won six national titles with the Eagles, but he's never had a team that went undefeated for the entire regular season. This club has an excellent chance, but it's certainly not the ultimate goal.

The ultimate goal, of course, is claiming another national crown.

"The regular season means nothing if you get beat in the tournament," said Muhl. "Our focus is getting out of Iowa (at the regional tournament) and seeing what happens, because you have to do that first. We've had a lot of good teams that didn't get out of Iowa."

The Eagles are not shy about talking about a national crown, but insist they are taking it "one game at a time."

"I think overall we would love to go undefeated," said Watkins, "but that's not our biggest goal. We're focused on winning the national title."

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"I think all of us know what we're capable of. When we come together and lock in, we're able to beat anybody."

Muhl will criticize his team when he thinks they deserve it, but the Hall of Fame coach liked what he saw Saturday.

"They're starting to play a little bit better together," he remarked. "They're starting to understand stuff.

"They took care of the ball and they shared it well. They shared it extremely well. Can't hardly complain.

"When we're good, we're good," he said.

Kirkwood committed only one turnover in the first half and led 50-20 at intermission. The Eagles then outscored Iowa Central 24-2 in the third quarter to make it 74-22.

Goods led the Eagles with 16 points and eight rebounds. Harris finished with 15 points, five rebounds, five assists and three steals. Tay Wilson scored 10 points as Kirkwood raised its ICCAC conference mark to 5-0.

Iowa Central fell to 10-10 overall and 2-3 in the league.

IOWA CENTRAL (29): Currie 1 1-4 3, Toto 0 1-2 1, Graffunder 2 5-5 9, Woodward 1 0-0 3, Rolling 2 0-0 4, Miller 0 0-0 0, Jensen 1 3-3 5, Turcotte 2 0-0 4. Totals 9 10-14 29.

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KIRKWOOD (86): Harris 7 1-2 15, T.Wilson 4 0-0 10, Watkins 6 0-0 12, Goods 7 2-2 16, Usher 1 2-2 5, Puok 0 0-0 0, Hedges 0 0-0 0, Axccl 2 2-2 7, Ajak 3 0-0 8, Taylor 0 0-0 0, Voss 1 0-0 2, Cotton 2 2-2 7, Achenbach 1 2-4 4. Totals 34 11-14 86.

Halftime - Kirkwood 50, Iowa Central 20. 3-point goals - Iowa Central 1 (Woodward 1), Kirkwood 7 (T.Wilson 2, Ajak 2, Usher 1, Axccl 1, Cotton 1).