

Mensen breaks loose for No. 1 Eagles

Written by Jim Ecker

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Brianna Mensen could be playing basketball for a strong Iowa Conference school like Wartburg right now, but she'd like to play for an NCAA Division I team some day.

That's why she came to Kirkwood Community College, to work on her skills and try to help the top-ranked Eagles win another NJCAA national title.

It looks like she's headed in the right direction.

Mensen came off the bench Friday night and poured in 19 points to help Kirkwood whack McCook, 94-36, in the opening round of the Kirkwood Classic at Johnson Hall.

Mensen, a 5-foot-11 freshman from Maquoketa Valley, scored only 15 points in Kirkwood's first five games for a modest average of 3.0 points per game, but she showed plenty of potential Friday.

"She has a chance to go Division, I think, after another year," said Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl. "She can play three positions. And she's going to get better."

"She's in the gym every day," he said. "What you see is what you get. And she's the neatest darn kid you'd want to be around. A straight-A student."

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Muhl looked up and saw Mensen talking to her parents on the other side of the gym after the game.

"I'm going to talk to her parents and tell them their daughter is starting to figure it out," he remarked.

Mensen hit 7 of 11 shots from the field, including a 3-pointer, and was 4 for 4 at the foul line. She scored more than a point per minute off the bench and was a good spark for the Eagles.



"It was different tonight than other nights," she said. "Other people were hitting shots and it was easier for me to make my own shots.

"I think my role is to add energy," she said. "When I come off the bench I want to make sure I'm putting in as much energy as I can."

Mensen would have been a great catch for an NCAA Division III school in the Iowa Conference with her ability to play guard or forward, but she found what she was looking for at Kirkwood.

"I got to see a couple of games last year and I was impressed by the way they played," she said. "And I like the coaches. The coaches do a great job. And when they recruited me, they were so nice. The atmosphere here is awesome."

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Mensen scored 1,172 points during her four-year career at Maquoketa Valley and was named to the Class 2A all-state team last season after averaging 19.3 points, 7.5 rebounds, 3.8 steals, 3.7 assists and 1.2 blocks per game. That was then, but this is now.

"People are a lot bigger. Bigger, faster, stronger," she said. "People are a lot faster. That's been the biggest adjustment for me so far."

Kirkwood finished with a perfect 37-0 record last year when it captured the NJCAA Division II national title, but the Eagles have already lost two games this season to ranked opponents. Losing twice in November to quality opponents is no disgrace, but the Eagles don't like it.

"It definitely doesn't feel good. Everybody feels it," said Mensen. "And the next day (after a loss), it's like 'Let's get back, let's get better.'"

Muhl liked what he saw Friday as the Eagles (4-2) dominated McCook (0-5) from start to finish.

"I liked our level of intensity and just the way we played and played together," said Muhl. "I thought we shared the ball well and really started to guard people."

"We still have a long ways to go with this group, but good things can happen. When they're engaged, they're pretty good. When they don't show up, they're pretty average."

Muhl has talked to his players about losing twice this season after going undefeated a year ago.

"The thing is, it's a new year," he said. "I think some of the sophomores are like, 'Well, we didn't get beat last year.' Well, you got beat this year. Last year is gone. All those kids are gone. You've got to change your role and how you play."

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The Eagles will face tougher opponents as the season moves along, but they looked good against the visitors from Nebraska Friday.

"It was a lot of fun to play that way," said Mensen. "We talked about it before -- coming ready to go, coming energized. Everybody on the court, everybody on the bench. You could feel it. It made it a lot of fun."

Tay Wilson, Awal Ajak and Leah Robinson scored 11 points apiece for Kirkwood Friday and Mackenzie Jenkins added 10.

Kirkwood faces Triton College Saturday at 3 p.m.

MCCOOK (36): Rosado 2 0-0 4, Foote 1 3-4 6, Jamison 1 0-0 2, Wellman 0 0-0 0, Enloe 1 0-0 2, Sanjuan 0 2-4 2, Sanford 1 0-0 2, Jones 2 1-2 5, Mata 0 0-0 0, Hinkle 2 0-0 6, Green 0 1-2 1, Cox 2 1-4 6. Totals 12 8-16 36.

KIRKWOOD (94): Wilson 3 4-5 11, Puok 4 0-1 8, Axccl 1 0-1 2, Ajak 3 4-4 11, Usher 2 1-1 5, Jenkins 5 0-0 10, Brown 0 0-0 0, Hurst 2 1-2 7, Taylor 1 0-0 2, Robinson 4 3-3 11, Mullinnix 1 0-0 3, Mensen 7 4-4 19, Coleman 0 0-0 0, Wooldridge 1 3-5 5. Totals 34 20-26 94.

Halftime - Kirkwood 51, McCook 19. 3-point goals - McCook 4 (Hinkle 2, Foote 1, Cox 1), Kirkwood 6 (Hurst 2, Wilson 1, Ajak 1, Mullinnix 1, Mensen 1).