

No. 2 Eagles clinch tie for title

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood women's basketball team has five sophomores in the starting lineup who helped the Eagles win the national title last year.

Their next five players are darn good, too.

The second-ranked Eagles got another big boost from their reserves Wednesday night and dumped Southeastern, 82-57, to clinch at least a tie for the ICCAC conference title.

Kirkwood has a three-game lead over NIACC with three games left in the regular season. The Eagles swept the season series from NIACC, so even if the race ends in a tie - which it won't - the Eagles have already clinched the No. 1 seed for the regional.

Coach Kim Muhl has a deep and talented roster, from top to bottom. Not only did the Kirkwood reserves smoke the SCC subs 49-7 in bench points Wednesday, they also outscored their own starters 49-33.

It would be interesting to see what would happen if Kirkwood's starting lineup played the No. 2 unit in practice, especially if they took it seriously for 40 minutes.

"I think the next-5 would beat the top-5," said freshman Mackenzie Jenkins, who's part of that No. 2 group.

Jenkins, who made that remark with a smile, said they scrimmage against each other on a regular basis and the No. 2 group more than holds its own in practice.

"It would be pretty close," Muhl said diplomatically.

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Jenkins and Arika Wooldridge both popped off the bench against Southeastern and shared team-scoring honors with 15 points. Leah Robinson, another member of the bench brigade, scored 12 points for the Eagles.

Tayana Wilson and Megan Axcell, a pair of starters, both netted 11 points in the 25-point victory.

Jenkins, a 5-foot-11 forward from Peoria, Ill., was a four-year starter in high school at Peoria Central, but she's had to adjust to being a substitute at Kirkwood.

"At the beginning of the season it was kind of frustrating," she said, "but I was a freshman and I guess I had to wait for my spot.

"I don't like to sit on the bench," she added. "It's nerve-wracking to sit on the bench. I'd rather be out there playing than watching."

Muhl likes that attitude among his reserves and rewards them for good work in practices and games. Jenkins played 18 minutes Wednesday and hit 7 of 10 shots from the field.

"She's kind of coming into her own a little bit," he said.

"We're trying to develop that talent and develop depth, and I think we've done a pretty good job of that over the years."

Wilson and back-up point guard Niaja Taylor had six assists Wednesday. Robinson grabbed six rebounds.

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Kirkwood raised its records to 25-3 overall and 11-0 in the conference with its 15th straight victory. There was no big celebration for clinching the conference title, but the Eagles know the score.

"I'm excited," said Jenkins. "This is all new for me, because in high school we didn't win much at all."

Kirkwood's first goal this season was to win the conference title. The next goal is to win the regional and make a deep run in the national tournament, perhaps to another title.

Next season is looking good as well, with lots of talent returning from this year's club.

"I'm excited for next year," said Jenkins. "We have a lot of us coming back and I've heard we have a lot of new good people coming in."

Nadirah Oakman scored 19 points for Southeastern (19-8, 6-5).

SOUTHEASTERN (57): Waller 3 0-0 6, Pezley 4 0-0 11, Oakman 6 6-6 19, Shelby 3 0-0 9, Walker 1 3-3 5, Morpurgo 1 1-2 3, Flowers 1 0-0 2, Robinson 1 0-0 2. Totals 20 10-11 57.

KIRKWOOD (82): Wilson 5 0-0 11, Puok 1 0-0 2, Axccl 4 0-0 11, Ajak 1 0-0 2, Usher 3 0-0 7, Jenkins 7 0-0 15, Brown 0 0-0 0, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 0-0 2, Robinson 4 4-5 12, Mullinnix 1 1-1 3, Mensen 1 0-0 2, Wooldridge 6 3-3 15. Totals 34 8-9 82.

Halftime - Kirkwood 37, Southeastern 26. 3-point goals - Southeastern 7 (Pezley 3, Shelby 3, Oakman 1), Kirkwood 6 (Axccl 3, Wilson 1, Jenkins 1, Usher 1).