

KCC women heading back to nationals

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Awal Ajak had to sit and watch her Kirkwood teammates win the national title last year after suffering a torn ACL late in the season, but now she's got a chance to finish her junior college career in style.

Arika Wooldridge nearly quit basketball last year after one unhappy season at Winona State, but now she has a chance to help Kirkwood climb to top of the junior colleges again.

So do all the happy Eagles, who are extremely excited about their opportunity to win back-to-back titles.

The second-ranked Eagles rallied for a 65-52 victory over 12th-ranked NIACC in the regional finals Sunday at Johnson Hall to earn a trip to the NJCAA Division II national tournament March 20-24 in Harrison, Ark.

"I'm extremely happy right now," said Ajak, a sophomore from Des Moines who contributed 10 points Sunday. "Even though I didn't make it last year, I was still happy to be on a team that wanted to make it happen and wanted to win the national title.

"I'm extremely overwhelmed with emotion right now. It was a lot of pain, but it paid off."

Wooldridge, who attended high school at Center Point-Urbana, got hurt near the beginning of the season at Winona State last year and did not like being so far away from home in Minnesota. She thought seriously about quitting the game, but Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl convinced her to give it another shot and play closer to home and family.

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"This is one of the best moments and feelings I've ever had, even in high school," said Wooldridge, who made key shots and grabbed big rebounds Sunday and earned a spot on the all-tourney squad. "Going to a national tournament in college is something everyone dreams of. It doesn't matter what division it is, it's awesome to be part of this."



Kirkwood trailed 36-29 late in the first half and needed a 3-pointer by tournament MVP Tayana Wilson to pull within 36-32 at intermission, but Muhl gave his Eagles some great advice at halftime.

"He was upset with us getting beat back-door and they were making a lot of layups in the first half, and that's what we wanted to reduce in the second half," said Olivia Usher, a Prairie grad who made the all-tournament team. "But basically he told us to calm down and run our offense."

"We wanted to control the tempo in the second half and I think we did that."

The Eagles returned to the court for the second half with fire in their eyes. They outscored NIACC 21-4 in the third quarter to grab control of the game at 53-40 with 10 minutes remaining.

The visitors made only one field goal in the third stanza and never fully recovered. "I just thought we were going too fast in the first half, because they're too good to do that with," said Muhl, who was named the Regional Coach of the Year.

NIACC pulled within eight points on two occasions in the fourth quarter, but Kirkwood had the answer every time. The final seconds ticked away and the party began after a strong display of offense, defense and discipline in the second half.

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NIACC averaged 93.5 points in 33 games this season, but the Trojans scored only 16 points in the second half against the Eagles. The visitors lived with 3-pointers this season and hit 19 against Iowa Central in the semifinals, but they shot a miserable 4-for-35 from long range Sunday and were 0-for-15 in the second half.

Wilson, a talented point guard from the Chicago suburbs, led the Eagles with 17 points, four steals and four rebounds. She missed the final 1:55 of the game with a painful cramp in her left calf, but the Eagles were leading 61-52 and not in serious danger.

Wilson is looking forward to another trip to Arkansas and the national tournament after coming home with the gold last year.

"It's going to take all of us coming together to get the wins," she said. "Obviously this was a fun game for all of us. Everybody has a smile on their face, everybody brought it when they were supposed to bring it. We came out ready to play.

"I feel great," she said. "I can't wait (for nationals). I'm so excited. It feels good to be on a roll to win it all again."

Kirkwood finished with a perfect 37-0 record last season on its title run. This year, the Eagles will be taking a 31-3 mark to Arkansas as they seek to defend their national crown.

All five starters on this year's team were on the squad last year. So was backup point guard Niaja Taylor, and they were joined by a talented cast of new players this season.

The sophomores who have been at Kirkwood for two years have compiled a glossy 68-3 record and have not lost a game this season since Dec. 16, nearly three months ago.

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Imagine that: The Eagles have won 68 of their last 71 games.

"It's crazy to think about that," said Usher. "Coming in, I was excited to win games here at Kirkwood. I kind of expected it. I didn't know it was going to be like this.

"It's been so much fun," she said. "I'm surrounded by the best teammates. They make it fun for us. Coach is obviously an amazing coach. These past two years have been more than I expected."

Muhl has compiled an 860-150 record in 29 years at Kirkwood with seven national titles. He'd love to get an eighth.

"It would be cool, but one game at a time," he warned.

Usher finished with nine points and five rebounds despite running into foul problems in the first half. An excellent free throw shooter, she made a pair of key shots when Kirkwood made its big push in the third quarter.

Wooldridge scored to give the Eagles a 39-38 edge and NIACC Coach Todd Ciochetto was called for a technical foul shortly after that. Usher hit both free throws on the technical, then Wilson drove for a layup and 43-38 advantage midway through the third stanza.

Wooldridge scored again, Wilson nailed a 3-pointer, Wooldridge hit another layup and Brianna Mensen drilled a 3-pointer at the buzzer to make it 53-40 entering the fourth quarter.

Mikayla Homola scored 21 points for NIACC, which finished 26-7 with three losses to Kirkwood.

NIACC (52): Homola 7 7-8 21, Laabs 0 2-2 2, Longs 3 1-4 8, Holloway 1 0-0 2, Frank 1 0-0 2,

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Kieger 2 0-0 5, Stewart 0 0-0 0, Ward 1 0-0 2, Willert 2 2-4 7, Pytleski 1 0-0 3. Totals 18 12-18 52.

KIRKWOOD (65): Wilson 6 3-4 17, Puok 0 0-0 0, Axccl 1 3-4 5, Ajak 3 4-4 10, Usher 2 5-5 9, Jenkins 1 0-0 2, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 1-2 3, Robinson 3 1-1 8, Mensen 1 0-0 3, Wooldridge 3 2-2 8. Totals 21 19-22 65.

Halftime - NIACC 36, Kirkwood 32. 3-point goals - NIACC 4 (Longs 1, Kieger 1, Willert 1, Pytleski 1), Kirkwood 4 (Wilson 2, Robinson 1, Mensen 1).