

No. 2 Eagles win thriller in semis

Written by Jim Ecker

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HARRISON, Ark. - Kim Muhl has enjoyed a long list of tremendous victories during his 29 years as Kirkwood's head coach, but Friday night's triumph over Highland has to rank near the top.

The second-ranked Eagles stormed back from a nine-point deficit in the second half and trimmed the third-ranked Scotties, 77-74, in the semifinals of the NJCAA Division II national tournament at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood (34-3) will face top-ranked Monroe (28-2) in the championship game Saturday night at 7:30, with Muhl seeking his eighth national crown with the Eagles and second in a row.

Highland had won all 34 of its games this season and was averaging 99.3 points per game, by far the highest mark in the country with outbursts of 138, 137 and 134 points, but the Eagles kept them under wraps for the most part with an effective zone defense that yielded to a man-to-man in the fourth quarter.

Highland launched a long 3-pointer in the final seconds in an effort to tie the game and force overtime, but the shot missed the basket by several feet and Kirkwood got the ball out-of-bounds with just six-tenths of a second remaining.

A moment later, the jubilant Eagles were jumping for joy and ready to defend the national title they won here a year ago.

"That was a crazy one, wasn't it?," said Muhl. "That's a big win. They were very good. They're an unbelievable team."

Highland led 62-53 late in the third quarter and owned a 65-58 advantage early in the fourth stanza, but Kirkwood stormed back with a 12-0 run to grab a 70-65 lead midway through the

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final period on a three-point play by Olivia Usher.

Leah Robinson gave the Eagles another five-point margin at 75-70 with a little more than a minute remaining, but Highland hit its 13th and final 3-pointer to make it 75-73.

It got crazy from there with both teams scrambling for victory. There were three straight TV replays in the final 53 seconds to determine who legitimately had possession after the ball went out-of-bounds on three straight plays, and each time the referees gave the ball to Highland.

Highland eventually missed a 3-pointer that would have given them the lead at 76-75. Usher grabbed the defensive rebound and nearly threw the ball away, but Arika Wooldridge recovered for the Eagles and Muhl called a timeout with 24.4 seconds left in the game and 15 seconds on the shot clock.

The in-bounds pass was stolen by Highland with the Eagles still clinging to their 75-73 lead. A Highland player missed a shot to tie the game and Wooldridge snared the rebound for dear life.

Wooldridge was fouled with 14.7 seconds left and had a chance to give Kirkwood a four-point lead with two free throws, but she went 1-for-2 to make it 76-73 for the Eagles.

Usher fouled a Highland player on purpose with 11.8 seconds left to prevent them from launching a 3-pointer that could have tied the game. The Scotties also went 1-for-2 at the line to make it 76-74, then Usher was fouled with 10.9 seconds remaining.

Usher also went 1-for-2 at the foul line, making it 77-74 with those same 10.9 seconds remaining.

Kirkwood used a tight man-to-man defense on Highland's final possession and Highland was forced to launch a 3-point shot from about 28 feet with time running out. The shot was an air-ball and the clock expired as the ball bounced out of bounds, but the officials put

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six-tenths of a second back on the clock with Kirkwood in possession.

Muhl called a timeout and the Eagles were able (by rule) to take the ball out-of-bounds in front of their own bench at their offensive end of the floor, making it nearly impossible for Highland to steal the ball and throw in a long 3-pointer to tie.

Megan Axcell passed the ball to Wooldridge, who clutched it tightly as time expired and the celebration began.

Kirkwood stayed in a zone defense for the first three quarters, forcing Highland to shoot from the perimeter. Muhl did not want to use a man-to-man defense against Highland in a high-tempo game, fearing some of the matchups.

"I don't think we could have guarded them (man-to-man) for the whole game, with the way the pressure is," he said. "It would have been too much energy."

The Eagles seemed to disrupt Highland's rhythm with the man-to-man in the fourth quarter. Muhl was willing to let Highland hit some 3-pointers over the zone in order to stay competitive, then spring his trap.

"I thought we'd be OK once we went to man-to-man," he remarked. "I just wanted to keep it under 10. If we kept it under 10, we had a chance. That's what we did and it worked out."

Highland has won its 34 games by an average margin of 49 1/2 points per game and featured an international roster with three players from Brazil, one from the Ukraine and one from Mozambique, but Kirkwood kept its poise despite all that talent and firepower.

Kirkwood attempted only 47 shots compared to 81 by Highland, but the Eagles made 26 of them for 55.3 percent compared to 33.3 percent for the Scotties.

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Awal Ajak led a balanced attack for Kirkwood with 14 points. Usher finished with 13 points and Tayana Wilson had 12. The Eagles got 44 points from their starters and 33 points from their reserves in the latest example of their depth.

The bench brigade included nine points by Leah Robinson, eight by Wooldridge, seven by Mackenzie Jenkins, five by Niaja Taylor and four by Brianna Mensen. Axccl scored five points with the starters.

"Our bench gave us a little juice," said Muhl. "That was the big thing. We had to have other people step up tonight because of the pace of the game. It was all good."

Berniezha Tidwell led Highland with 17 points. Blaize Burgess scored 15 and Mariane De Carvalho had 14 points before fouling out.

Now the second-ranked Eagles will face top-ranked Monroe in a classic battle of the No. 2 team in the country against the No. 1 team for the national title.

"Monroe is unbelievable," said Muhl. "They shoot the stuffing out of the basketball. They have a monster inside, 6-foot-3 and about 245. They're really hard to defend with their size and athleticism.

"Hopefully we'll get it done."

HIGHLAND (74): Burgess 5 1-2 15, Ramalho 3 0-0 9, De Carvalho 5 0-0 14, White 0 0-0 0, Brinlee 1 0-1 2, Tidwell 7 3-4 17, Lemon 3 1-2 9, Victor 3 0-3 6, Chiziane 0 2-2 2, Alcantara 0 0-0 0. Totals 27 7-14 74.

KIRKWOOD (77): Wilson 4 3-4 12, Axccl 2 0-0 5, Ajak 5 2-2 14, Puok 0 0-0 0, Usher 4 4-5 13,

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Jenkins 2 2-2 7, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 3-3 5, Robinson 4 1-2 9, Mensen 2 0-0 4, Wooldridge 2 4-7 8. Totals 26 19-25 77.

Halftime - Highland 41, Kirkwood 39. 3-point goals - Highland 13 (Burgess 4, De Carvalho 4, Ramalho 3, Lemon 2), Kirkwood 6 (Ajak 2, Wilson 1, Axccl 1, Usher 1, Jenkins 1).