

Semler sparkles as Eagles top Ellsworth

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 03 February 2013 00:16 -

Kasey Semler has been a very good basketball player for a very long time, but Saturday he was spectacular.

Semler raised his game to a new level and helped Kirkwood tame 18th-ranked Ellsworth, 73-57, in an ICCAC conference outing at Johnson Hall.

The 6-foot-1 sophomore from Marion scored 19 points, collected eight assists, committed only one turnover, grabbed four rebounds and provided the spark as the Eagles (13-10, 5-3) handed Ellsworth its first loss in the league.

"He showed another gear. I'm happy for him," said KCC Coach Doug Wagemester. "He's playing with confidence."

Semler made several explosive moves to the basket for hard-driving layups, nailed three 3-pointers (his specialty) and made a series of slick passes for easy buckets as Kirkwood won an important game.

"Honestly, I'm just happy to get another win. We really needed that," he said. "It was fun. We played well."

Semler acknowledged it was probably the best all-around game he's played in his life.

"Probably, yeah," he said modestly. "I just felt free and loose. And I was trying to do whatever was necessary."

Semler made a series of outstanding plays in the second half to help Kirkwood open some daylight.

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He made a quick cut to the basket, got a pass from Jalen Currie, hit a layup with a strong finish, got fouled and completed the three-point play for a 48-40 lead.

A few seconds later, he out-jumped several Ellsworth players and batted a loose ball to Currie for a wide-open dunk and 50-41 edge.

He hit two free throws after an Ellsworth player was called for a technical foul, then drilled a long 3-pointer to give the Eagles a 57-43 bulge and force Ellsworth (13-7, 5-1) to call a timeout.

Semler was all smiles as he returned to the Kirkwood bench during the timeout.

"He's got a huge heart. The kid has a huge heart," said Wagemester.

The margin grew to 20 points at 72-52 when Semler accelerated to the bucket and finished with his left hand.

The victory kept Kirkwood in the chase for the ICCAC title, although the Eagles will be facing an uphill climb in the final weeks of the season. Iowa Lakes leads the league with an 8-1 record, Ellsworth is 5-1 and Kirkwood is 5-3.

There are eight teams in the league and everyone plays 14 regular-season games, so the Eagles must keep winning. A loss Saturday would have dealt their title hopes a severe blow.

"That's right. That's what we talked about," said Wagemester. "If we give this one away at our place, then we have no shot at the conference title."

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"We have to play like the title depends on it. That's how we have to play the rest of the season. We've stepped on our own feet already too many times."

Semler got a lot of help from his buddies Saturday. Kevin Hunter powered in 17 points, Gage Heffernan collected a double-double with 11 points and 13 rebounds, J.C. Fuller hit several clutch jumpers and scored 10 points, Taylor Olson picked up seven assists and Currie played well off the bench.

"If you look at the assists to turnovers, you're happy," said Wagemester. "You look at the rebound game, you're happy. The free throw game, you're happy."

"I'm proud of the guys," he said. "They did a nice job."

The Eagles had 20 assists, compared to 15 turnovers. They crushed the bigger Panthers on the backboards, 40-27. And they hit 21 of 29 free throws for 72.4 percent.

Malcom Canada, a strong and talented 6-foot-3 guard from Texas, poured in 30 points for Ellsworth, but the rest of his teammates added only 27 more.

Ellsworth sophomore David Weathers was ejected with 8:55 left in the game after he was called for a flagrant foul.

ELLSWORTH (57): Canada 10 7-14 30, Weathers 1 0-0 2, A.Moore 1 0-0 3, Fulks 2 3-3 7, Brown 1 0-1 2, Anderson 3 0-0 7, Dep 0 0-0 0, Collier 1 0-0 2, D.Moore 0 0-0 0, Ibarra 1 0-0 2, Haley 0 0-1 0, Lamb 1 0-1 2. Totals 21 10-20 57.

KIRKWOOD (73): Hunter 6 5-9 17, Heffernan 5 1-2 11, Olson 1 2-2 5, Douglas 1 0-0 2, Semler 5 6-7 19, Manego 1 1-1 3, Witt 0 0-0 0, Fuller 3 4-4 10, Currie 2 2-4 6. Totals 24 21-29 73.

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Halftime - Kirkwood 30, Ellsworth 21. 3-point goals - Ellsworth 5 (Canada 3, A.Moore 1, Anderson 1), Kirkwood 4 (Semler 3, Olson 1). Technical fouls - Haley, Weathers (ejected), Fuller.