

Kirkwood's 'Fab 9' top NIACC in OT

Written by Jim Ecker

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Their roster keeps shrinking, but the Kirkwood men's basketball team keeps battling and plugging away.

The Eagles did it in grand style Wednesday night.

Kirkwood outlasted NIACC in overtime, 89-83, in the opening round of the Region XI tournament at Johnson Hall with Kasey Semler sitting on the bench with a torn ACL.

Semler is Kirkwood's leading scorer and top 3-point artist, but the Eagles found a way to outslug NIACC without him in a highly entertaining ballgame.

Kirkwood (19-12) will host Ellsworth (17-12) in the semifinals Friday at 7 p.m.

The Eagles began the season with 13 players, but Coach Doug Wagemester kicked three players off the team during the regular season. That left 10 guys, then Semler got hurt last Saturday after scoring 27 points in a victory at DMACC.

All nine remaining guys contributed to the victory.

"This team has been punched in the gut so many times, and we're still here," Wagemester said proudly.

Kirkwood led 75-72 with the clock about to expire in regulation, but Sam Skogen banked in a lucky 3-pointer for NIACC with a half-second remaining to tie the game at 75-75 and force overtime.

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"I was like, 'Geez, man,'" said Kirkwood forward Gage Heffernan. "I couldn't believe it."

The Eagles collected their thoughts and outscored the Trojans, 14-8, in overtime. Shaun Manego made only two field goals for Kirkwood in the ballgame, but had perfect timing.

His driving layup beat the 35-second shot clock and gave the Eagles an 81-79 edge, then he nailed a 3-pointer for an 84-79 lead with 1:25 remaining.

NIACC pulled within 84-82 and 86-83, but never pulled even again. J.C. Fuller got open behind NIACC's pressing defense for a dunk and 88-83 advantage and Taylor Olson hit a free throw with 7.3 seconds left to finish the contest.

Kirkwood had lots of heroes, but the "Blue Collar Award" went to Heffernan for his hard work at both ends of the floor. He finished with 15 points, 15 rebounds and eight assists and did yeoman's work on defense.

"Un-believable," praised Wagemester. "He wanted that ball. Huge heart."

Fuller led the Eagles with 21 points. Kevin Hunter scored 20 points with strong work around the basket. Olson finished with nine points, six rebounds and six assists. Devan Douglas and Jalen Currie scored eight points apiece.

"I was really proud of the guys," said Heffernan. "I've never been more proud. Everybody put a lot of effort into it."

Heffernan said the Eagles plan to fight to the finish with their nine guys.

"It's a small group, so we're closer," he said. "We know everything about each other. We've got

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all the scratches out of the way and we're just focused on the goal."

Kirkwood entered the tournament as the No.2 seed and NIACC was the No.7 seed, but they split two games during the regular season and there wasn't much to tell them apart Wednesday.

"They are very good. And explosive," said Wagemester. "And they showed that."

David Humphries, a talented 6-foot-4 freshman from Australia, poured in 24 points and grabbed 10 rebounds for NIACC. Skogen finished with 20 points and Chris Davis had 19.

NIACC tossed in thirteen 3-pointers, compared to only two for Kirkwood, but the Eagles compensated by crushing NIACC on the boards 51-37.

Kirkwood missed all five of its free throws in the first half, but hit 25 of 29 in the second half and overtime.

NIACC (83): Wagner 1 4-4 7, Humphries 7 6-6 24, Skogen 7 2-5 20, Don 1 2-4 4, Davis 4 8-8 19, Lee 0 1-2 1, Hafoka 0 0-0 0, Williams 0 0-0 0, Mohamed 2 3-4 8. Totals 22 26-33 83.

KIRKWOOD (89): Hunter 8 4-6 20, Heffernan 5 5-6 15, Fuller 6 8-8 21, Olson 1 7-8 9, Douglas 4 0-4 8, Manego 2 1-2 6, Witt 0 0-0 0, Currie 4 0-0 8, Lang 1 0-0 2. Totals 31 25-34 89.

Halftime - Kirkwood 36, NIACC 28. Regulation - Kirkwood 75, NIACC 75. 3-point goals - NIACC 13 (Humphries 4, Skogen 4, Davis 3, Wagner 1, Mohamed 1), Kirkwood 2 (Fuller 1, Manego 1). Fouled out - Don, Hunter.