

Ajak hurt as No. 1 Eagles reach 24-0

Written by Jim Ecker

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The top-ranked Kirkwood Eagles raised their record to 24-0 Saturday with a 93-71 victory over Southwestern, but there was no big celebration or high-fives after the game.

The Eagles were too worried about freshman Awal Ajak to relish the latest triumph in their perfect season.

Ajak, a talented 6-foot freshman from Des Moines, hurt her left knee in the third quarter and left the gym on crutches. The extent of the injury will be determined in the next few days, but Coach Kim Muhl thinks it could be significant.

"I'm not optimistic," he said. "It's not good, I don't think. We'll see."

Ajak got hurt when she hustled back on defense following an errant pass by the Eagles. She crumpled under the basket and spent several minutes on the floor while being examined by the Kirkwood trainer before being helped to the locker room.

"It starts with a bad pass," said Muhl. "You throw it away, you've got to run it down and bad stuff happens."

Ajak has been a key reserve for Kirkwood, averaging 8.1 points and 3.7 rebounds in 16.3 minutes per game. The Eagles have a deep squad, but her absence would be significant.

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Southwestern (12-10, 3-5) gave Kirkwood a good game in the first half. The visitors drained nine 3-pointers in the opening 20 minutes and trailed by only four points at intermission, 46-42.

The Eagles (24-0, 8-0) took control by outscoring the Spartans 24-12 in the third quarter to open a 70-54 advantage, with the highlight being a rare five-point play by Megan Axcell.

Axcell hit a 3-pointer and one of the referees ruled that she was fouled after the shot. Southwestern had already committed too many fouls in the period, so Axcell was sent to the foul line for two free throws.

She canned both shots, finishing the five-point play and making it 66-54 at the time.

Muhl thought sophomore Rylee Voss was fouled on the play - not Axcell - and that the refs got mixed up and sent the wrong Eagle to the foul line. Voss confirmed that account, saying a Southwestern player pushed her into Axcell.

"I didn't even know what happened, honestly," said Axcell. "I just shot the ball and afterward they told me I had to shoot free throws. I've never had that happen before."

Kirkwood took a 20-point lead at 83-63 on a basket by Simone Goods with 4:30 left in the game and cruised home from there. The biggest lead was 24 points at 91-67.

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