

Perfection! Kirkwood claims 7th national title

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 25 March 2017 23:48 - Last Updated Saturday, 25 March 2017 23:57



HARRISON, Ark. - It took Kim Muhl seven years to claim his seventh national title at Kirkwood after winning his sixth crown in 2010, but it was worth the wait.

The top-ranked Eagles put an exclamation point on their perfect season Saturday night with a 61-46 victory over third-ranked Johnson County in the championship game of the NJCAA Division II tournament at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood finished the season with a 37-0 record and became the first women's basketball team in school history to roll through an entire campaign without losing a single contest.

The Eagles won their 37 games by an average margin of 30.5 points with a deep and talented club that refused to lose.

Muhl has pocketed national titles in 1997, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and now 2017, adding to his status as one of the most successful coaches in junior college history.

Simone Goods, a 6-foot-2 sophomore who transferred to Kirkwood this season after spending one year at Western Kentucky, collected 19 points and 17 rebounds in the championship game and was named the MVP of the tournament.

Deleyah Harris and Tay Tay Wilson joined Goods on the all-tournament team and Muhl was named the Coach of the Year.

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Goods won the trifecta this season as the conference MVP, regional MVP and national tournament MVP and has an excellent shot at being named a first team All-American.

This was her only year at Kirkwood and she made the most of her opportunity as a powerful force near the basket, along with her ability to rebound, block shots and handle the ball.

Kirkwood led by 15 points, 36-21, early in the third quarter, but Johnson County (33-3) went on a 15-3 run to pull within three points at 39-36 late in the stanza.

Kirkwood responded and steadily pulled away again. Wilson hit a free throw to make it 40-36, then Niaja Taylor nailed a big 3-pointer to make it 43-36 heading into the fourth period and give the Eagles a little room to breathe.

TiRayah Cotton, a spark off the bench in the entire tournament, scored the first basket of the fourth period to give the Eagles a nine-point cushion at 45-36.

Wilson made a 3-pointer with an assist from Goods to make it 52-40 with 4:55 left in the game. Shaneequah Watkins hit one free throw for a 53-40 lead, then Harris drilled a 3-pointer to make it 56-40 with 3:30 remaining and the Eagles could smell the title.

Johnson County never got closer than 13 points again. Austin Richardson led Johnson County with 10 points.

Kirkwood tied a school record with 37 victories, matching the total set by the national champions in 2009-2010.

Kirkwood had only four sophomores on the team this season with Goods, Harris, Watkins and Rylee Voss. There were 10 freshmen on the club, giving Muhl a strong nucleus for next season with Tay Tay Wilson, Olivia Usher, Cotton, Taylor, Awal Ajak, Megan Axcell, Nyachristmas Puok, Ashley Hedges, Candace Wilson and Kelsey Achenbach.

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Ajak suffered a torn ACL in February and missed the rest of the season, but she traveled with the team to the national tournament and did a little dance on her one good leg when she received her championship medal.

The Kirkwood men won the NJCAA Division II title last year, giving the school back-to-back national crowns.

Goods averaged 14.5 points and 8.8 rebounds in four games at the national tournament. Harris averaged 11.8 points and Tay Tay Wilson finished at 10.5 points.

Kirkwood began the tournament with a 78-43 victory over Dakota College, but the Eagles had to rally from an eight-point deficit in the last four minutes to escape Cincinnati State, 65-63, in the quarterfinals on a 3-pointer by Axcell with 34 seconds left.

The Eagles returned to form with a 76-49 verdict over Kankakee in the semifinals before topping Johnson County in the finals.

Kirkwood finished with a 15-0 record at home, a 14-0 record in away games and an 8-0 mark on neutral floors for its perfect 37-0 campaign.

Muhl has compiled an 829-174 record in 28 years at Kirkwood. Jen Francescon is in her ninth year as one of Kirkwood's assistant coaches and Natalie White is in her first year.

There were 143 teams in NJCAA Division II women's basketball this season and the Eagles finished ahead of them all.

JOHNSON COUNTY (46): Richardson 4 2-2 10, Collins 3 2-4 8, Jackson 3 0-0 9, Giger 2 1-2 6, Isaiah 2 0-0 4, Reeves 0 0-0 0, Unis 0 0-0 0, Pieschl 0 0-0 0, Williams 1 0-0 3, Jamison 2 0-0 0.

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Totals 17 5-8 46.

KIRKWOOD (61): Goods 6 7-8 19, Usher 2 0-0 4, Harris 2 3-5 8, T. Wilson 2 4-6 10, Watkins 1 2-4 5, Puok 0 2-2 2, Axccl 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 0-0 3, Voss 1 1-2 3, Cotton 3 0-0 7. Totals 18 19-27 61.

Halftime - Kirkwood 33, Johnson County 21. 3-point goals - Johnson County 7 (Jackson 3, Jamison 2, Giger 1, Williams 1), Kirkwood 6 (T. Wilson 2, Harris 1, Watkins 1, Taylor 1, Cotton 1).