

Wilson leads No. 1 Eagles to tough victory

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 03 December 2017 00:29 -



Tayana Wilson is usually the smallest player on the floor at 5-feet-4 and 118 pounds, but don't let her size fool you.

The sophomore from Country Club Hills, Ill., is a tough customer for the Kirkwood Eagles.

Wilson was clobbered by Iowa Western defenders on a pair of drives during the first five minutes of their game Saturday, but she bounced up both times and never said a word.

Instead, she got her revenge by playing a hard-nosed game in a 56-53 victory over the Reivers at Johnson Hall.

"Honestly, it makes me mad," Wilson said about being knocked around by Iowa Western. "It makes me want to push it down their throats even more.

"Yeah, they did kind of ding me up a little bit. It really made me mad."

The officials declined to call intentional fouls on either play, but it was pretty rough stuff.

Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl talked to one of the officials about it, but he did not make a big fuss. After the second foul, Muhl took Wilson out of the game for a few minutes to recuperate.

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"She took a couple of really good shots, I thought," said Muhl. "She's a tough little player. She's really a tough kid."

Kirkwood and Iowa Western have already met twice this season. The Reivers won the first contest, 55-52, in the opening game of the year at a tournament in Missouri, and now the Eagles have evened the score with a three-point victory of their own.



They've played 80 minutes and the score is tied, 108-108.

Wilson finished with 12 points, five rebounds, two assists and two steals Saturday and made several clutch plays in the tight affair. Iowa Western led by six points, 34-28, with four minutes left in the third quarter before the Eagles fought back.

Megan Axcell gave Kirkwood a 43-42 lead when she scored and completed a three-point play with a free throw with 7:21 left in the game. The teams traded the lead from there until Awal Ajak gave the Eagles the lead for good at 47-46 with a strong layup.

Ajak made it 52-48 with a 3-pointer, but Iowa Western countered with a 3-pointer of its own to make it 52-51 with two minutes left.

Ajak hit two free throws for a 54-51 lead with 1:40 remaining, then Olivia Usher gave the

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Eagles a 55-51 edge with one free throw with 65 seconds left to play.

The Reivers pulled within 55-53 with 53.2 seconds left with a pair of foul shots, and it stayed that way as both teams missed opportunities on the next few possessions.

Iowa Western missed a shot to tie the game in the final seconds. Usher grabbed the rebound and the Reivers fouled Axcell, who made one free throw with 2.8 seconds left to make it 56-53.

Iowa Western misfired on a halfcourt shot at the buzzer and the Eagles had their hard-fought victory.

Kirkwood is ranked No. 1 in the NJCAA Division II poll and Iowa Western is No. 18 in the Division I poll, but the Eagles were able to turn a three-point loss in the first meeting into a three-point victory in the rematch.

"I think overall we came together as a team and put it together to get the lead and hold the lead, but it was kind of a rocky back-and-forth," said Wilson. "We finally just took it over and won it together.

"What made the difference were the practices prior to the game," she said. "Our practices all week were good, so I thought that really helped us pull through and win it.

"Our defense was good. We prepared for every play, because our coach mapped out every play and told us what's coming and what we need to do to get through it.

"I feel it was a good game and it was a tough win for us," said Wilson. "This time it feels good to win by a couple of points and get revenge."

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Ajak finished with 10 points for Kirkwood, which raised its record to 7-2. Usher contributed seven points and six rebounds. Mackenzie Jenkins collected six points and five rebounds off the bench, and Arika Wooldridge had five points and five rebounds in reserve.

"I liked our level of energy and intensity," said Muhl. "We hadn't played in 10 days. I knew we'd be a little stale, but the defense stayed pretty consistent."

Muhl liked his team's toughness, led by his tough 5-foot-4 point guard from Illinois. "You have to step up in games like that or you're going to get beat," he said.

Jazza Johns scored 14 points for Iowa Western (7-4).

IOWA WESTERN (53): Jackson 3 2-2 11, Williams 2 1-2 5, Ania-Gaja 1 0-0 2, Johnson 6 2-4 14, Dallmann 4 3-5 11, Alnatas 2 0-0 5, Floyd 1 1-2 3, Nyauchi 1 0-0 2, Bull 0 0-0 0. Totals 20 9-15 53.

KIRKWOOD (56): Wilson 3 6-8 12, Puok 2 0-0 4, Axccl 3 2-3 8, Ajak 3 2-2 10, Usher 1 5-6 7, Jenkins 3 0-2 6, Hurst 0 0-0 0, Taylor 1 0-1 2, Robinson 1 0-0 2, Mensen 0 0-0 0, Coleman 0 0-0 0, Wooldridge 1 3-4 5. Totals 18 18-26 56.

Halftime - Kirkwood 22, Iowa Western 21. 3-point goals - Iowa Western 4 (Jackson 3, Alnatas 1), Kirkwood 2 (Ajak 2).