

No. 2 KCC women trim No. 7 NIACC

Written by Jim Ecker

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Arika Wooldridge joined a championship team when she transferred from Winona State to Kirkwood this season.

She played like a champion at crunch time Wednesday night.

Wooldridge made several key plays in the final minutes to help the second-ranked Eagles trim No. 7 NIACC, 68-59, in an ICCAC conference game at Johnson Hall.

The game was tied, 56-56, with five minutes left, but Kirkwood outscored the visitors 12-3 down the stretch for the nine-point victory.

Wooldridge, a 6-foot-2 center from Center Point, re-entered the contest with 3:35 remaining and played a pivotal role from there.

She hit an eight-footer in the lane to beat the shot clock and give Kirkwood a 62-56 lead, then she scored in the low post to make it 64-59 with about a minute remaining.

She also grabbed three key defensive rebounds during that spurt and helped the Eagles raise their records to 16-3 overall and 2-0 in the league.

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Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl has lots of options at his disposal again this season, including a half-dozen sophomores who helped the Eagles win the NJCAA Division II national title last year, but he had Wooldridge on the floor with the game hanging in the balance.

"It gives me a lot of confidence, that he has confidence in me and that my teammates have confidence in me and give me the ball down there to make shots," she said.

Wooldridge enjoyed helping her new teammates win a big game.

"It felt amazing for me," she said. "Coming back this year and contributing to a team like this felt really good."

Wooldridge spent one year at Winona State, an NCAA Division II school in Minnesota. She suffered a torn PCL ligament in her right knee early in the season and ended up playing sparingly in 19 games, averaging 1.2 points and 1.2 rebounds.

She had arthroscopic surgery, followed by rehab, and decided to leave Winona State after the injury-plagued campaign.

"It just wasn't a good fit for me," she said. "Going through the whole year, I figured out that I needed to come back and come back home."



Wooldridge contacted Muhl, who invited her to join the Eagles. First, he had to convince her to keep playing basketball.

"She was contemplating not playing and I said that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he said. "You need to try and see if you can get happy again and go from there. And she's happy. And we're happy, too. She's been a good addition."

Wooldridge has appeared in all 19 games for Kirkwood. She finished with nine points, six rebounds and two assists against NIACC and is averaging 6.4 points and 3.6 rebounds as the back-up center.

Best of all, she's happy again and enjoying the game.

"I love it here," she said. "The team is great, the coaches are awesome and I just love my teammates."

Wooldridge has become a key member of the team as the Eagles try to win another national title. She keeps improving and moving forward.

"It's just confidence and getting comfortable," said Muhl, "and being happy again and loving basketball again."

"She's so strong in there," he said. "I think people bounce off her."

Kirkwood point guard Tay Wilson hit four straight free throws to snap the 56-56 tie and give the Eagles a 60-56 lead. Wooldridge took over from there, and Olivia Usher sealed the victory with a layup and two free throws.

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Wilson paced Kirkwood with 16 points, eight rebounds and five assists. She was 10-for-10 at the foul line. Usher and Wooldridge finished with nine points.

NIACC (14-4, 1-1) made thirteen 3-pointers, but hit only seven two-point shots in the game.

NIACC (59): Laabs 4 0-2 10, Longs 4 0-0 10, Holloway 1 0-3 2, Willert 1 0-0 3, Pytleski 2 0-0 5, Kieger 5 2-2 16, Homola 3 3-4 12, Prantner 0 0-0 0, Ward 0 1-2 1, Frank 0 0-0 0. Totals 20 6-13 59.

KIRKWOOD (68): Wilson 3 10-10 16, Puok 1 0-0 2, Axccl 1 0-0 2, Ajak 3 0-2 6, Usher 3 2-2 9, Jenkins 2 0-2 5, Hurst 0 3-4 3, Taylor 1 0-0 2, Robinson 4 0-0 8, Mensen 2 1-2 6, Coleman 0 0-0 0, Wooldridge 4 1-1 9. Totals 24 17-23 68.

Halftime - Kirkwood 36, NIACC 31. 3-point shots - NIACC 13 (Kieger 4, Homola 3, Laabs 2, Longs 2, Willert 1, Pytleski 1).