Haley Mullinnix can chew gum and play basketball at the same time.

She did both very well for the Kirkwood Eagles Saturday afternoon on her 19th birthday.

Mullinnix moved up in the rotation and scored a career-best 15 points as the second-ranked Eagles spanked Southwestern, 82-44, in an ICCAC conference game at Johnson Hall.

Tay Wilson, Kirkwood's top point guard, missed Saturday's contest due to a two-game suspension for violating team rules. That meant Niaja Taylor moved into the starting lineup and Mullinnix became the backup point guard for the first time this season.

She delivered.

Mullinnix, a 5-foot-5 freshman from West Branch, made all six of her shots from the field, including three straight 3-pointers in the first half to steer Kirkwood in the right direction after a slow start.

She also collected two assists, one rebound and one steal during 16 minutes on the floor.

"Sometimes things happen and you get to play," said Kirkwood Coach Kim Muhl. "She obviously figured it out and contributed. A lot."

Mullinnix also chewed gum during the game. A lot. She likes Sugar Mint, and it took four pieces to get her through the afternoon.

The gum helps her relax.

"I used to get down on myself and get caught up in the bad moments," she explained. "I think it kind of keeps me distracted, because I'm trying to keep the gum in my mouth and not worry about anything else."

Mullinnix had scored only 31 points in 17 games this season before tossing in 15 points Saturday. Her 3-pointers hit nothing but net, and she also made a gorgeous drive to the basket where she made a ball-fake and finished with a layup.

"That's my go-to move," she said.

Mullinnix does not show any emotion on the floor, but she was all-smiles when she came out of the game for the final time with about two minutes left in the fourth quarter.

"It felt good to get out there," she said.

Mullinnix learned Friday that Wilson would not play Saturday and that she would be the back-up point guard behind Taylor.

"I was excited for the opportunity, but I was also nervous because that's the most time I've gotten all season," she said.

Mullinnix was a four-year starter at West Branch and averaged 15 points, 3.3 rebounds, 3.1 steals and 2.6 assists as a senior. She popped in 55 3-pointers last season and finished her career with 138 triples.

"The funny thing is, I really didn't like her that much in high school," said Muhl. "She recruited us a little bit."

Mullinnix, a 4.0 student, was going to join the Eagles as a walk-on, but Muhl ended up with an extra scholarship and gave it to her. It paid a big dividend Saturday.

"She's been very patient. She keeps working at it," said Muhl. "She's bouncy. And she wasn't like that in high school."

Mullinnix is a good ball-handler, sees the floor well and makes crisp passes to her teammates. And she showed she's a good shooter by nailing those three 3-pointers in the first half when the Eagles needed a spark.

"I got that first one in and it kind of gave me momentum to go ahead for the rest of the game," she said. "Making the first shot really helps."

Patience helps, too, especially when you're normally the No. 3 point guard on a talented team.

"I think it pushes me to work harder, just because I have a bunch of better players right in front of me, so I have to work to keep up with them and stay at their pace," she explained.

Wilson and Taylor, both sophomores, helped Kirkwood win the national title last season. They'll both graduate this year, which means Mullinnix could become a prominent player next season.

Wilson will not play Wednesday night at Ellsworth as part of her two-game suspension, which means Mullinnix should be in the thick of things again. After that, who knows?

"I just have to get back to work," she said. "I can't focus on this game, because there are lots of games left to go in our season. So I have to keep moving forward and keep pushing to stay at this level."

Muhl is glad to have Mullinnix on his side as the Eagles (19-3, 5-0) push for the conference title and another trip to the national tournament.

"She's a nice player," he said. "The only problem is, she's hard on herself. That's the biggest thing. She gets so mad at herself. She's getting over that.

"She wants to play," Muhl continued, "but that's the way they all should be in this program. You've got to want to play. When you get a chance, you either go in there and play hard or you won't play."

Christmas Puok scored 13 points for the Eagles. Megan Axcell splashed in four 3-pointers and netted 12 points. Leah Robinson snagged 10 rebounds and scored nine points. Olivia Usher had eight rebounds and six assists. Mackenzie Jenkins had nine rebounds and Anasha Hurst had eight boards.

Keaundra Washington made five 3-pointers and scored 17 points for Southwestern (6-12, 0-5).

Kirkwood and DMACC are tied for the conference lead with 5-0 records. Kirkwood hosts DMACC next Saturday.

SOUTHWESTERN (44): Stapleton 1 3-4 6, Aviles 1 0-0 2, Washington 5 2-2 17, van Meter 4 1-2 9, Romo 2 0-0 6, Hayes 0 0-0 0, Trautloff 1 2-2 4, Brice 0 0-0 0. Totals 14 8-10 44.

KIRKWOOD (82): Puok 6 0-0 13, Axcell 4 0-0 12, Ajak 1 0-0 2, Taylor 2 0-0 4, Usher 1 2-2 4, Jenkins 2 1-2 5, Brown 2 2-4 6, Hurst 0 2-2 2, Robinson 4 1-1 9, Mullinnix 6 0-1 15, Mensen 1 0-0 2, Coleman 0 0-0 0, Wooldridge 4 0-0 8. Totals 33 8-12 82.

Halftime - Kirkwood 44, Southwestern 16. 3-point goals - Southwestern 8 (Washington 5, Romo 2, Stapleton 1), Kirkwood 8 (Axcell 4, Mullinix 3, Puok 1).