

No. 2 Eagles roll in regional opener

Written by Jim Ecker

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The ultimate goal for the Kirkwood men's basketball team is to win seven straight playoff games this month and claim their second national title in seven years.

It's serious business, but it helps to laugh along the way.

The second-ranked Eagles had a chance to relax and enjoy themselves in the regional opener Wednesday night with an easy 106-52 victory over Southwestern at Johnson Hall.

Kirkwood (25-4) will host DMACC (22-9) in the regional semifinals Thursday at 7 p.m.

The Eagles had a lot of fun in the final minutes Wednesday night, especially when Griffen Clark hit a 3-pointer to put them over the century mark and then when he intentionally passed the ball off the backboard to Niko Gosnell for a dunk that brought everyone to their feet.

"There's no question it helps to have a game like that and everybody gets to contribute and everybody gets to share some fun on the court," said Coach Bryan Petersen. "I think it goes a long way with team chemistry and team morale."

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The Eagles took control with a 20-0 surge late in the first half on their way to a 51-25 bulge at halftime. Devonte Thedford, installed as the starting point guard several weeks ago, scored 12 points during that 20-0 run and poured in 18 points in the first half alone.

Petersen has given Thedford the keys to the kingdom and the freshman from Des Moines has been delivering.

"I feel pretty good. Coach 'P' is trusting me," said Thedford, who finished with 19 points, four assists and two steals in 21 minutes. "He told me what he wants to see out of me. I'm just trying to play with confidence and play my game.

"As a starter, your rope is much longer," he said. "You get to play a little more freely."

It looked like Kirkwood would have to settle for the No. 2 seed in the regional heading into the last week of the regular season last week, but NIACC was knocked off and the Eagles grabbed the No. 1 seed and the home-court advantage for as long as they stay alive in the regional.

"It means a lot, especially because we get home-court advantage all the way through," said Thedford. "We just have to take advantage of it and play each game like it's our last."

Kirkwood had the No. 1 seed for the regional last year as well, but the Eagles were upset in the semifinals by Iowa Central. Petersen knows there are no guarantees in the playoffs.

"We just can't relax," he said. "DMACC is really talented and they've been playing pretty well as late. It's not a typical '4' seed. It will be a really tough matchup for us."

Kirkwood swept the season series from DMACC, winning each game by 16 points.

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NIACC (24-4) and Iowa Lakes (22-9) will meet in the other semifinal Thursday night, with the regional final set for Saturday.

Doug Wilson scored 15 points against Southwestern. Seybian Sims collected a double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds. Connor Kasperbauer also scored 12 points. Clark finished with 11 points in 10 minutes.

Gatdoar Kueth scored 14 points for Southwestern (3-27).

SOUTHWESTERN (52): R. Warren 4 2-2 11, W. Warren 3 0-2 8, Persich 0 0-0 0, Moran 1 2-2 4, Kueth 5 2-4 14, Diggs 3 0-0 8, Doss 1 2-5 4, Gafeney 1 1-2 3. Totals 18 9-17 52.

KIRKWOOD (106): Sims 4 3-3 12, Pickens 2 0-0 6, Thedford 5 8-9 19, Kasperbauer 4 1-1 12, Wilson 7 1-2 15, Dee 2 0-1 5, Clark 4 0-1 11, Stephenson 3 2-2 8, Biernacki 2 1-3 5, Gosnell 3 1-2 7, Arrington 3 0-0 6, Appel 0 0-0 0. Totals 39 17-24 106.

Halftime - Kirkwood 51, Southwestern 25. 3-point goals - Southwestern 7 (W.Warren 2, Kueth 2, Diggs 2, R.Warren 1), Kirkwood 11 (Kasperbauer 3, Clark 3, Pickens 2, Sims 1, Dee 1, Thedford 1).