

No. 2 Eagles reach regional finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood Eagles have a strong candidate for National Player of the Year with Doug Wilson, but they proved they can win a big game without him playing a big role Thursday night.

The second-ranked Eagles knocked off DMAACC, 87-77, in the regional semifinals with Wilson saddled with foul problems for a long stretch of the second half with the game in doubt.

Kirkwood (26-4) will host seventh-ranked NIACC (25-4) in the NJCAA Division II regional finals Saturday at 3 p.m., with a trip to the national tournament to the victor.

Wilson, a 6-foot-7 All-American from Des Moines, picked up his third foul with 16:57 left in the game and headed to the bench with the Eagles clinging to a six-point lead at 42-36.

As it turned out, they had nothing to worry about.

By the time Wilson returned nearly 10 minutes later, Kirkwood was sitting on a comfortable 17-point advantage at 71-54 with 7:08 left to play. The Eagles outscored the Bears by 11 points, 29-18, with their best player reduced to being a cheerleader.

"That was huge," noted Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen. "Hopefully that will be a huge confidence booster for our team. Being able to build the lead with him on the bench, hopefully we can build on that. That hasn't happened too often this year with him sitting out."

Luke Appel, who struggled in recent weeks and lost his spot in the starting lineup, scored nine points during that 29-18 surge with some strong moves to the basket and a big 3-pointer.

Connor Kasperbauer, in a shooting slump the last few weeks, knocked in a pair of clutch

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3-pointers during the surge. Devonte Thedford, who has grabbed a starring role the past month, scored seven points during the run. Jamal Stephenson popped in a pair of clutch 3-pointers and Niko Gosnell also had a big bucket during the stretch.

"I just didn't want to let my team down," said Appel, who finished with 14 points, seven rebounds and three assists. "It could have been our last game of the season, so I came out with a little more offensive urgency.

"I made a few shots and I got myself going and got back in rhythm. I knew I could score against these guys. I did the first time we played them."

Kasperbauer finished with 15 points with five 3-pointers, five rebounds and two assists. He shot 5-for-6 from distance.

"Shooters shoot. I've said it before," he remarked. "I was in a slump during the month of February. My coaches and teammates have confidence in me and I have confidence in myself. Perfect timing, right? The timing is impeccable."

The Eagles looked good with Wilson on the bench, although they'd much rather have the All-American on the floor.

"Doug carried us a whole lot during the season," said Kasperbauer. "We had to pick him up. I told him, 'Go take a break, we've got this.' You don't have anything to worry about and get ready for Saturday."

Wilson picked up his fourth foul with 6:24 remaining and sat down again. This time DMACC took advantage. The Bears, who once trailed by 19 points, pulled all the way within eight points at 83-75 with one minute left, but Thedford hit four straight free throws in the final 33.9 seconds to clinch the victory.

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Thedford, who scored only four points in the first half, finished with a game-high 23 points, five assists and three rebounds. He went 8-for-8 at the foul line. Wilson finished with 10 points and nine rebounds.

Kirkwood committed 12 turnovers and allowed seven offensive rebounds in the first half, but Petersen said he made those two categories "A huge point of emphasis" during the intermission. The Eagles committed only six turnovers and allowed only three offensive rebounds in the second half.

Kirkwood shot very well during the game, hitting 28 of 53 shots overall (52.8 percent), 13 of 22 shots from 3-point range (59.1 percent) and 18 of 20 on free throws (90 percent). NIACC attempted 18 more shots than the Eagles, but was 28 of 71 from the field.

Tray Buchanan scored 21 points and DeShawn Davidson had 19 points for DMACC 22-10).

NIACC topped Iowa Lakes in the other regional semifinal Thursday night. Kirkwood and NIACC split two games during the regular season, with Kirkwood winning 83-65 at home and losing 95-81 in Mason City. Now they'll meet again for a spot in the national tournament.

"It will be incredible," said Kasperbauer. "The atmosphere will be insane in here. It will be an incredible game. It will be fun, it will be a battle, so I'm excited for it."

Kirkwood guard Brady Sartorius did not play Thursday due to concussion protocol and will not play Saturday, according to Petersen.

DMACC (77): Davidson 6 7-11 19, Buchanan 7 4-5 21, Prince 4 0-0 9, Robinson 1 0-0 2, Swaby 2 0-0 4, Tarello 3 0-0 9, Miller 3 1-1 7, Taylor 2 1-2 6, Lester 0 0-0 0. Totals 28 13-19 77.

KIKRWOOD (87): Sims 2 0-0 5, Pickens 3 0-0 9, Thedford 7 8-8 23, Kasperbauer 5 0-0 15,

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Wilson 2 6-6 10, Stephenson 2 2-2 8, Gosnell 1 1-2 3, Appel 6 1-2 14. Totals 28 18-20 87.

Halftime - Kirkwood 40, DMACC 32. 3-point goals - DMACC 8 (Buchanan 3, Tarello 3, Prince 1, Taylor 1), Kirkwood 13 (Kasperbauer 5, Pickens 3, Stephenson 2, Sims 1, Thedford 1, Appel 1).