

Wilson, Eagles soar to nationals

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 09 March 2019 20:47 -



Doug Wilson is a proud man, but he's also a humble man who rarely shows his emotions in public.

That changed Saturday. Dramatically.

First the Kirkwood superstar was named the MVP of the regional tournament and quickly dissolved in tears, only partially obscured by the towel he placed over his face in a failed attempt at privacy.

A few minutes later the 6-foot-7 sophomore from Des Moines was honored as the Outstanding Player for the entire season in Region XI and the tears flowed again.

This all happened after the second-ranked Kirkwood Eagles tamed seventh-ranked NIACC, 84-72, in a slugfest in the regional championship game at Johnson Hall Saturday afternoon.

Wilson poured in 27 points despite missing the final 11 minutes, 22 seconds of the first half with two fouls. He scored 21 of his 27 points in the second half to help the Eagles earn a spot in the NJCAA national tournament.

"He's a special kid," said Kirkwood Coach Bryan Petersen. "He's been big-time for us for two years. He's grown up a ton, as a person, as a player. We're lucky to have him."

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Petersen got a little teary-eyed himself after he saw his star player overcome by emotions during the post-game tributes.

"I'm just glad I get to coach him for another two weeks," he said. "I don't get emotional very often, but that got to me as well."

The national tournament will be held in Danville, Ill., from March 19-23, with Kirkwood seeking its second title in four years.

Petersen gave Wilson a final hug outside the Kirkwood locker room before everyone left the gym, telling the All-American in tender tones, "I love you, man."



Wilson was a good player when he arrived at Kirkwood two years ago from Des Moines Hoover, but he's become an exceptional player during his two seasons in Cedar Rapids. That led to the tears of joy.

"Just to know the work I put in during the offseason and during the season really paid off," Wilson explained. "Coaches being on me every day, my teammates making sure I'm getting better, and me just being a leader.

"Everything paid off," he said. "That's why I was emotional. It all paid off and we made it where we wanted to."

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Devonte Thedford poured in 22 points for the Eagles, including 17 crucial points in the second half. Thedford and Wilson, a year apart in grade level, played together in high school, giving the two Hoover grads a total of 49 points in Saturday's victory.

Thedford made several excellent passes for assists, including a beauty on the run to Wilson for a dunk in the second half.

"Aw, man. That's my guy," Thedford said with a big smile while talking about Wilson's performance. "I love him. He really played well for us."

And the tears?

"That's the first time I've seen Doug really like that," said Thedford, who knows Wilson the best on the team. "It was good to see. It shows how much he cares about the game."

Wilson will be playing NCAA Division I basketball at South Dakota State next season, but first he'll lead the Eagles to the promised land at the national tournament.

Highland Community College of Kansas, which was ranked No. 1 in the country in the latest poll, lost in its regional tournament and did not qualify for nationals. That makes Kirkwood the likely No. 1 seed for the 16-team field in Danville.

"I'm pretty sure teams are going to want to play us because we're No. 1," said Wilson. "But I feel like we earned that No. 1 spot and we're going to show it."

Kirkwood held its own with Wilson on the bench in the first half and trailed by only two points at halftime, 32-30. Kirkwood was clinging to a 60-58 with less than nine minutes left when Wilson and the Eagles went to work and took charge of the nip-and-tuck affair between two of the top junior college teams in the country.

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Wilson took a pass from Thedford and dunked it home. Wilson then made a quick drive to the basket for a layup, and a few seconds later he made a strong post move, got fouled and finished the three-point play.

Wilson's personal seven-point spurt gave the Eagles a 67-58 advantage and they kept motoring from there. Wilson scored again to make it 69-60, then he hit a free throw to make it 70-60 and finish his streak of scoring 10 straight points for his club.

Luke Appel, a sparkplug off the bench again with six points and 11 rebounds, made it 72-60. Jamal Stephenson, sensational in a reserve role with 14 points and seven rebounds, drove for a thunderous dunk to make it 74-60 with 4:58 remaining.

Stephenson hit a tip-in and Thedford cashed two free throws for a 78-62 advantage with 3:24 left and suddenly the Eagles were in the clear, riding an 18-4 spurt with exceptional offense and defense.

NIACC pulled within 12 points at 78-66, but Wilson, Thedford and Stephenson all scored to make it 84-66 with just 65 seconds left.

Kirkwood got into serious foul trouble in the second half with both point guards - Thedford and Allante Pickens - getting their fourth fouls with lots of time remaining. It looked dicey, especially with No. 3 point guard Brady Sartorius unavailable due to concussion protocol, but Petersen switched from a man-to-man defense to a zone and nobody fouled out.

Stephenson played 33 minutes off the bench and gave the Eagles an enormous lift.

"I was just trying to bring whatever I can to help my team be successful," he said. "That's all that was. I just wanted it more."

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"Coach told me this was going to be a big week for me. I was just happy I was a sub off the bench for him."

"In tournament play," said Petersen, "your best players need to play well, but you need some other guys to step up. And obviously Jamal was huge for us in the second half."

The Eagles leaped into each other's arms and danced around the floor when the final horn sounded. Then came the post-game honors, with Thedford and Appel joining Wilson on the all-tournament team.

"This is what I dreamed of," said Thedford, looking toward the national tournament. "It really feels good to win. I'm at a loss for words right now."

Kirkwood was the No. 3 seed when it won the national tournament in 2016. Petersen isn't sure the Eagles will be the No. 1 seed this time, but they'll definitely have a target on their back.

"Now it's a little different, because the expectations are even higher," said Petersen. "We're not going to sneak up on anybody."

"I think this group is ready for it," he said. "We've been getting everybody's best shot all year. It will just be one more week of getting everybody's best shot every time we play."

"We've got a really connected group right now," Petersen continued. "When you have good players and you can get them to do that, you can do a lot of special things. I think that really showed up in the second half when the game was in the balance."

Quentin Hardict scored 15 points to lead NIACC, which finished 25-5 and certainly was good enough to have reached the national tournament themselves after tying Kirkwood for the conference title.

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NIACC (72): Harris 5 0-1 13, Hardrict 6 1-3 15, Roberson 4 0-0 9, Matthews 5 2-4 12, Sampson 4 0-0 10, Hamilton 1 4-4 7, Lang 2 0-0 6. Totals 27 7-12 72.

KIRKWOOD (84): Sims 2 0-0 4, Pickens 0 0-0 0, Thedford 7 8-9 22, Kasperbauer 3 0-0 9, Wilson 11 5-6 27, Stephenson 6 2-2 14, Gosnell 1 0-0 2, Appel 3 0-0 6. Totals 33 15-17 84.

Halftime - NIACC 32, Kirkwood 30. 3-point goals - NIACC 11 (Harris 3, Hardrict 2, Sampson 2, Lang 2, Roberson 1, Hamilton 1), Kirkwood 3 (Kasperbauer 3).