

Kirkwood's Tatge smashing record book

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Kirkwood softball player Kayla Tatge says it's just a coincidence that her uniform bears the number 1.

"There were only a few numbers available when I was a freshman, and I just picked it," she remembers.

But you have to wonder if she had an inkling.

This past week the sweet-swinging sophomore moved into first place on Kirkwood's career home run list when she smacked the 37th long ball of her Eagle career.

Tatge, who leads all NJCAA Division II players in home runs, hit her 17th round-tripper of the season in the first game of Monday's doubleheader sweep of the Mount Mercy junior varsity. In the process, she broke the career home run record set last year by Nicole Fisher, currently crunching runs for the University of Northern Iowa.

Tatge hit two more home runs this weekend and now has 19 this season and 39 in her career.

"If Kayla continues on the pace she's doing, she may set a record that will never be broken," says her coach, Joe Yegge. "But she's not concerned about it. We're not concerned about it."

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A year ago, Yegge admits, he didn't see it coming. "When Kayla came here, I never expected 37 home runs in a year and a half," he said prior to the weekend.

Tatge is a quiet, dutiful kid who never balks at any request or any position she's asked to play, he says, but he couldn't quite read her.



"I remember last year at this time she had a really bad weekend. She went 0 for 15, and afterwards she came in my office and bawled her eyes out. She felt she had let me down and let the team down. She was batting .415 at the time, so I wasn't worried about her hitting – but I knew then that she had really bought into what we were doing."

Tatge went on to hit 20 round-trippers as a freshman and was named First Team NFCA All American and Second Team NJCAA All American DH.

"After last year, I didn't think anybody would pitch to her," says Yegge. "But with so many good hitters on our team, they can't afford to pitch around her."

Tatge, who leads her 32-3 team with 50 RBIs, bats third in the order, followed by sophomore slugger Haylee Krack, who is second on the team with 12 homers and a career total of 29. The sixth-ranked Eagles are hitting .369 as a team.

"We're all good hitters," says Tatge, who hit 11 home runs her senior year in high school but has blossomed into a long ball titan at Kirkwood.

A native of Milan, Ill., a few miles from the Quad Cities, Tatge started her athletic career in a very different place – as a gymnast.

“My dad encouraged me to do sports that he could watch when I got in school,” she recalls with a smile. She obliged, taking up softball and basketball, and took to them both.

She added volleyball in junior high and competed in all three sports through her high school career. She misses volleyball, Tatge says, but softball is her “longest and favorite” sport.

“I know the game and I like the challenge part of it,” she says. “I remember hearing someone say that softball is a game of failure. You only get three chances to hit the ball.”

Tatge credits her success as a home run hitter to a combination of experience and self-assurance. “It’s about practicing all my life, working on my mechanics, and most important having confidence at the plate. The more I play, the better I do. I have the mindset that I will get a hit every time.”

She has also benefited greatly from Kirkwood’s strength training regimen.

“Our weight training and our hitting program make a big difference,” says Yegge, who notes that some of his players are reluctant to embrace it at first, fearing they’ll bulk up.

“But it’s not about that. Our players are lean, but strong. When they see that we’ve hit 250 home runs in two and a half years, they buy into it.

“We teach the right way, and we do it every day. We’ve also had good pitching the last three or four years,” he says, “so they’re used to seeing good pitching.”

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The 5 foot-8 Tatge has gotten stronger and is swinging a bigger bat this year. After playing a variety of mostly infield positions last year, she has settled in this year as the Eagles' right fielder, a position that has grown on her.

"She's a prototype outfielder," says Yegge. "She gets a good read, she's a power hitter, and she has a good arm."

Yegge adds that his unassuming career home run leader hardly fits the slugger stereotype.

"She's a unique individual. She's a real girlie-girl with the eye make-up and everything. If you looked at her on the street you would think she's a volleyball or a basketball player, not someone who gets dirt under her fingernails. People don't realize she's a big power hitter."

Big enough, in fact, that she has hit three home runs in a game three times this year. Last year, she hit four home runs in four straight at-bats in a single game.

Last week's record-setting round-tripper was "just a normal hit, just normal everything," she says. "I didn't know I had broken the record, but after the game Coach brought it up. We got the W, and that's the most important thing."

Tatge's parents, Jay and Korrie, who make it to almost every home game, were there to congratulate her, but individual achievements are not her focus.

"We play as a team and everybody has a certain role," she emphasizes. "We learn that everyone is important and we should always be ready."

"She's a great player, loyal to her friends and loyal to her team," adds her coach. "She's becoming more outgoing and a great leader."

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A Dean's List student majoring in biology, Tatge plans to take her big swing to St. Ambrose University next year and pursue a career in the health care field.

In the meantime, her goals include "winning the conference championship and going on to nationals." That would be a decided turnabout for her team after an in-between year that saw the Eagles finish second in the conference and go nowhere in the postseason.

The sophomore slugger who speaks softly but wields a big stick will doubtless play a major role in making sure the wins keep coming this time around.

The Eagles will look to continue their 25-game win streak when they take on eighth-ranked DMACC in a rain-postponed doubleheader at home Monday at 3 p.m.