

The Kirkwood Eagles captured the ICCAC volleyball title last year with a perfect 8-0 record, but two All-Americans and four other key players graduated and left the cupboard a little bare.

Panic time? Not on your life.

Kirkwood finished another perfect run through the conference this season with a hard-fought 22-25, 25-17, 25-20, 25-22 victory over 20th-ranked Northeast Community College Wednesday night at Johnson Hall to end the ICCAC campaign with another 8-0 mark.

"It's an awesome feeling," said Alexa Whipple, one of only three sophomores on this year's club. "We wanted to prove to ourselves that we could do it again.

"This year we had a fresh team," she said. "It's kind of cool, making a new team and stuff. It was a lot harder than last year, but it's still awesome."

The 13th-ranked Eagles (21-16) will host NIACC in the regional semifinals next Wednesday night.

The three sophomores - Whipple, Margaret Micka and McKenzie Petersen - were honored before the match on Sophomore Night and all three of them played pivotal roles as Kirkwood won the league crown for the fourth time in five years.

Whipple led the Eagles with 13 digs and had a phenomenal save in the fourth set to help win a key point. Micka contributed 14 kills and had 11 digs, while Petersen finished with eight kills.

Ady Wintermote, one of 12 freshmen on the team, rolled up 19 kills and had 10 digs. Lauren Keane dished out 48 assists and had 11 digs. Abbie Tunis had 10 kills and six blocks, and Haley Lyness contributed 10 digs.



Williams liked her team's effort and determination, especially after dropping the first set. And she especially liked finishing as the undefeated league champion again.

"Very cool. It's exciting," she said. "The kids have worked hard all year. We stayed on track.

"We've had a few bumps along the way, and they stayed true to their No. 1 goal, to be undefeated in our league and be the No. 1 seed going into our regional tournament."

Kirkwood finished seventh at the national tournament in 2015 and 2016, and their next goal is winning the regional championship and getting back to nationals.

"It's what we do," said Williams, whose team has faced a rugged schedule this year. "That's why we face everybody we face.

"We have to feel good about it, but we also know the challenge that lies ahead. If we don't bring our 'A' game, it's a tough road."

Kirkwood will compete in the Parkland Invitational in Champaign, Ill., this weekend before hosting NIACC in the regional tournament next Wednesday.

Brianna Eberhardt, who ranks fifth in the conference in digs, missed Wednesday's match with a head injury, but the Eagles compensated for her absence.