

Natalie Halvorson had to get healthy before she could become a successful pitcher for the Kirkwood Eagles this season.

It took a long time.

"It probably took about four months for me to feel better," she said Saturday afternoon.

Halvorson began feeling weak last fall. Climbing two flights of stairs was difficult. She spent a few days in the hospital and missed three or four days of school.

Halvorson was reluctant to reveal the diagnosis, but she did not need an operation. Medication finally solved the problem.

She feels fine now, but it was an ordeal.

"It was physically draining," she said. "It was tough to come back from it, mentally and physically."

Halvorson said she felt normal again in February, just in time for the 2018 college softball

season to begin. Very little has held her back since.

Halvorson tossed a three-hit shutout Saturday as the third-ranked Eagles blanked Ellsworth, 9-0, in the second game of their conference doubleheader at Kirkwood.

The Panthers stunned the Eagles, 2-0, in the first game on a three-hitter by Sydney Kramer.

Ellsworth arrived in town 9-21 overall and 3-11 in the ICCAC, tied for last place in the conference. Kramer, their top pitcher, was 6-12 with a 5.58 ERA, but she tamed one of the top-hitting teams in the country with an assortment of deliveries.



Ellsworth handed DoniRae Mayhew (17-2, 1.75 ERA) only her second loss of the season. That put Halvorson in the circle for Game 2, with Kirkwood looking for the split.

"I knew we would come back," she said, denying she felt extra pressure to produce. "We just struggled in the first game."

Halvorson raised her record to 17-4, matching Mayhew for the fourth-most victories in the country in NJCAA Division II. She lowered her ERA to 2.75 in the process.

Halvorson pitched for Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge for five years at Cedar Rapids Prairie before staying home to play for the Eagles. She's played a major role in Kirkwood's success, but downplayed her part.

"I'm just throwing," she said. "I'm just here, trying to win some games.

"I've been having great fun. I have a great defense behind me. It's been awesome. I love it."

Kirkwood began the day with a .403 team batting average, scoring an average of 10.4 runs per game. Any pitcher would enjoy throwing for a team that normally produces like that.

"I love it," said Halvorson. "It takes a little pressure off me."

Yegge said Halvorson has had to make some adjustments as a college pitcher compared to high school.

"Freshman growing pains," he said. "Mentally, she's probably been her own enemy.

"In the last week-and-a-half, we've changed her approach to the game. She's been throwing really well since then. At the beginning, it was a struggle a little bit.

"I think changing the approach has helped her a lot," he said. "Taking deep breaths and slowing down, where she used to be go-go-go-go-go."

The softball gods did not smile on the Eagles in the first game. Hannah Mausser made a bid to tie the game, 2-2, in the sixth inning, but her rocket to left field hit the wall for a double, leaving runners at second and third with two outs. The next batter struck out.

Kramer began the second game in the circle for Ellsworth again, but this time the Eagles found an answer. Mayhew hit a two-run triple and Mausser followed with a two-run homer, making it 5-0 in the second inning.

Rachel Stewart hit a three-run double off a different pitcher in the third inning as Kirkwood took a 9-0 lead and coasted to victory in a five-inning game.

The split left Kirkwood at 36-6 overall and 13-3 in the conference. The Eagles are scheduled to host Iowa Lakes in a doubleheader Sunday at noon.