

Stewart playing like All-American for Eagles

Written by Jim Ecker

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Rachel Stewart had two big adjustments to make when she joined the Kirkwood softball team this season.

Stewart was a stalwart at second base for Davenport West during her last three years in high school, but Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge asked her to move to shortstop due to an injury to another player.

In addition, Stewart hit in the No. 3 spot in high school last season and Yegge wanted her to succeed National Player of the Year Taylor Nearad in the leadoff slot for the Eagles.

She has handled both adjustments in stellar fashion.

"She's been great," Yegge said Sunday after Stewart enjoyed another big day. "She's putting up All-American numbers.

"She didn't want to play shortstop, and when we asked her to do it she was a little hesitant. But she's got a good glove, she's confident now in her arm. She's doing a great job."

The third-ranked Eagles swept Iowa Lakes, 17-7 and 10-1, in their conference doubleheader at Kirkwood.



Stewart went 6-for-9 in the twinbill with two doubles, a sacrifice fly, four RBIs and six runs. She also made three outstanding plays in the field at shortstop.

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Stewart is hitting .487 with 13 homers, 56 RBIs, 77 hits and 77 runs in 44 games. She leads all NJCAA Division II players in runs scored, ranks third in hits and is tied for sixth with teammate Lauren Kuch in RBIs.

Nearad was the two-time National Player of the Year at Kirkwood before moving to Iowa State. Stewart is a completely different player, but her production in the leadoff spot has been a key ingredient for the Eagles.

"Coming in here I knew that Taylor Nearad was an incredible player, but I knew that I was my own player," she said. "To do what I needed to do to fill that spot was going to be difficult, but I've done the best I can to live up to it."

Stewart said she takes more pitches and works the count a little more as a leadoff hitter, as opposed to batting in the No. 3 spot in the order like she did at Davenport West. And she's been the spark-plug for a team that has a .400 composite batting mark and averages 10 runs per game.

"At one point in the fall we (the coaches) were sitting down and talking and we go, 'She might be our best player overall, when it comes to everything she does,'" said Yegge. "That's why she's the leadoff hitter. She's a tough out."

Stewart was a shortstop in high school earlier in her career before moving primarily to second base as a sophomore, so she knew the basics of the position when Yegge asked her to switch back.

Stewart has made only seven errors all season at the most demanding position in the field.

"Second base is definitely where I feel most comfortable, but now that I've had more experience at shortstop it's going pretty well," she said. "The errors that I do have usually come from throwing. At shortstop you have to have enough power to get it there, without overthrowing."

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Yegge said Stewart is being heavily recruited by four-year schools as a freshman, so he's not sure if she'll be back next season. He plans to enjoy her talents while he can.

Stewart had plenty of company in the fireworks department Sunday. Monika Bevans had a double, home run and six RBIs in the 17-7 victory in the first game, and Hannah Mausser was 4-for-4 with two doubles in the 10-1 victory in the second game.

DoniRae Mayhew went 4-for-7 in the twinbill with a double, home run and three RBIs. She leads the nation with 23 homers and 68 RBIs.

Kuch went 4-for-8 with a home run and three RBIs. Skylar Ryan was 3-for-5 and Audra Bridenstine drove in three runs.

Natalie Halvorson picked up both victories in the doubleheader. She pitched 2 2/3 innings in relief in the first game, then tossed a complete game in the nightcap.

All told, Halvorson allowed one run on five hits in 9 2/3 innings, with eight strikeouts and three walks. Halvorson (19-4, 2.58 ERA) ranks fourth in the country in victories.

Kirkwood raised its records to 38-6 overall and 15-3 in the conference. Iowa Lakes fell to 14-22 and 5-11.