

No. 13 Eagles chasing ICCAC title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Erin Wenzel ranks second in the nation in kills, Halle Lueck ranks second in assists and they're both terrific leaders on the young Kirkwood Community College volleyball team.

Coach Jill Williams appreciates their good work, but she'll keep pushing her best players until the last day of the season.

"If anybody knows me - and they know me well - I'm still asking for more," Williams said Wednesday night.

Kirkwood has only three sophomores on its 15-player roster - Natalie Demmel is the other - yet the Eagles are ranked 13th in the nation in the NJCAA Division II poll and have a perfect 5-0 record in their conference after cruising by Southeastern, 25-6, 25-13, 25-11, in a 60-minute contest at Johnson Hall.

"When you're 13th in the nation with this many young kids and inexperienced players, if we can stay in the top-20 we're probably doing all right," said Williams. "We've taken a couple of lumps and had a few losses, but that's experience, that's learning.

"I think we're on track," she said. "Our main focus is to get better and we have a full month to still get better."

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The Eagles lead the ICCAC conference with their 5-0 mark, but they still have matches against fourth-ranked DMACC, 14th-ranked Northeast and Southwestern on the league schedule. DMACC and Northeast have only one loss in conference events, so Kirkwood still has some big hurdles to win the title.

"That's always our goal, no matter what," said Wenzel. "We are always striving to win the conference. We know we have the ability to do it. We just have to come out and prove ourselves."

The regular-season champ will get the top seed for the regional tournament later this season.

"To win that No. 1 seed is huge," said Williams. "You have to have your sights set on something. You set your sights on that No. 1 spot."

Kirkwood has a 20-8 overall record this season against tough competition.

Wenzel, from Clinton, entered Wednesday night's match with 362 kills to rank second in NJCAA Division II. Lueck, a Prairie grad, had 1,005 assists to rank No. 2 in that department.

Their leadership of the 12 freshmen has been just as important.

"I like to be in the leadership position with Halle," said Wenzel. "I think it really steps up our game, because we know we have to show them how to play."

"Halle and I really had to step up as leaders and really get the freshmen on board with what we believe in. We know from last year what it takes to be up in the rankings and at a high level."

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"We have to keep them on board with us, so we keep plugging along."

Kirkwood climbed all the way to No. 1 in the nation at one point last season, but suffered a tough loss in the regional finals and did not reach the national tournament.

Southeastern fell to 1-21 overall and 0-4 in the conference with Wednesday's loss. The visitors had only seven players in uniform.