

Tough schedule fuels Kirkwood volleyball

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood women's volleyball team has a simple philosophy when it comes to playing the toughest opponents they can find in weekend tournaments.

Bring 'em on!

The Eagles have compiled a 7-4 record against teams that have been ranked in the national polls this season, including the top-ranked junior college team in Division II (Parkland) and the second-ranked team in Division I (Iowa Western).

Kirkwood whipped four straight ranked teams during a two-day swing in the Kirkwood tournament last month and the Eagles also have faced stiff competition in tournaments at the Wisconsin Dells, Norfolk (Neb.), Champaign (Ill.) and Overland Park (Kan.).

"Just jumping into it 12 years ago when I came here, I learned that if you want to hang with the Joneses you have to go do what the Joneses are doing," Kirkwood Coach Jill Williams said Wednesday night. "That's what the top teams are doing.

"It gives us a good perspective of where we're at."

Kirkwood finished seventh at the national Division II tournament last year and is currently ranked No. 9 in the country.

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The Eagles stepped away from tournament competition Wednesday night and swept Southwestern Community College, 25-12, 25-12, 25-19, in a conference match at Johnson Hall to remain undefeated in the league.

Kirkwood raised its records to 21-6 overall and 6-0 in the league.

The Eagles normally play a conference match on Wednesday, then enter the toughest tournaments they can find on Fridays and Saturdays for a busy week.

"We use the tournaments on the weekends to see really tough competition and improve and prepare ourselves for the conference matches," said Morgan Grimm, a 5-foot-11 sophomore from Osage. "They just give us different looks.



"They're stronger hitters, faster, they run different things. They really pick up the pace of the game and give us something different than what we usually see.

"I for sure would rather play the tougher competition, because it prepares us for the future. And some of the tougher competition is who we would see at nationals in the future."

Southwestern is struggling this season at 3-17 overall and 1-4 in the league, but they upset the Eagles last season and have some very capable players. The visitors from Creston stayed with

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the Eagles during the early stages of all three games before the home team pulled away.

"We allowed them to hang around when we should have jumped out to an early lead and just ran with it," said Williams, who said there were some "inconsistencies" in her team's performance.

Kirkwood was sitting on a 13-9 lead in the first set when Grimm held serve for seven straight points, helping the Eagles take command at 20-9. She collected four aces during that 7-0 run with a hard topspin serve that was hard to return.

Grimm stands flat-footed on the court and belts the ball on a sinking line drive over the net.

"I've had it since I was young with topspin," she said. "I've naturally used the topspin and had success with it, so I just keep working at it."

Grimm has been playing all season with a hairline fracture in the hamate bone in her left (non-hitting) wrist, but she merely tapes it up and keeps playing. She'll see the doctor again next week for a check-up.

"It's OK," she said. "It's all good."

Madsy Richards and Erica Armstrong led Kirkwood with seven kills. Alex Miner and Riley Longden had five kills. Caiti Peterson contributed 21 assists and three aces. Jenna Laxton had 11 digs. Miner finished with seven blocks and Armstrong had six blocks.

Kirkwood has breezed through the conference so far, but the Eagles still have two tough matches on the road at 19th-ranked DMACC and 14th-ranked Northeast (Neb.) before they can claim the league title.