

Howell leads KCC baseball into new year

Written by Jim Ecker
Friday, 23 February 2018 06:39 -



When Korry Howell was selected in the 19th round of the Major League draft last June as a freshman, it looked like the Kirkwood baseball team would need a new shortstop for the 2018 campaign.

Fortunately for the Eagles, Howell had a different idea and Kirkwood Coach Todd Rima has never stopped smiling.

Howell declined to sign with the Kansas City Royals and will be starting for Kirkwood when it opens the season with a four-game series at Johnson County Community College this weekend.

The opener is set for Friday at 2 p.m., with a doubleheader Saturday and a single game Sunday.

"I think Korry wants to continue to develop and feels that college is important to him, his education is important to him," Rima said before leaving for the road trip to Kansas. "I think he also believes that he's a guy that with another year of development could go a lot higher in the draft. Now he's got an unbelievable option."

Howell can sign a pro contract after he's drafted again this June, or he could honor his commitment to the Iowa Hawkeyes and go play for Rick Heller in Iowa City next year as a junior.

Either way it should be a win-win for Howell, who hit .394 with six home runs, 33 RBIs and 43 stolen bases last season while playing shortstop with grace and skill.

"There's a lot to like about Korry," said Rima. "His athleticism is just different. The way he plays shortstop makes it look really easy."

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"He is a high-level professional base-runner, the way he can steal bases and the reads that he gets. And then for his size, he has more power than what you would think.

"Korry is going to play professional baseball," said Rima. "Korry's drive and work ethic will dictate how far he goes. There is a skill set there to play at the highest level.

"We're very fortunate to have him in our program for another year."

Rima plans to put the Chicago product in the No. 1 spot in the batting order again this year.

Howell is just one of the many reasons Rima is excited about his team this season. Kirkwood made a serious run for the ICCAC conference title in 2017 and tied for second place, just one game behind the co-champions. NIACC and Iowa Central shared the title at 16-8, with Kirkwood and Southeastern next at 15-9 in an incredibly tight race.

The Eagles have 19 sophomores on their 33-man roster, including six starters from last year and four college transfers. It's an experienced and talented group.

Rima was encouraged by last year's results, but also a little frustrated to fall a game short.

"You learn how important every single game is," he remarked. "That's what the hardest part of it was. You look back and you feel like you were a couple of games away.

"But it's also exciting," he added. "We know we're that close. We were an inning away, a pitch away, one game away from being in a position to win the conference championship and that's what we're aiming to do."

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The Eagles have a few injury problems as the new year begins. Spencer Wiskus, scheduled to start at first base after hitting .279 with four homers last season, will miss about six weeks with a broken hand after being hit with a pitch in practice Sunday.

Freshman Lecari Elion, whose older brother Lorenzo starred for Kirkwood last year before joining the Hawkeyes this season, has a broken pinkie and will miss three or four more weeks. In addition, several pitchers are still rounding into shape following a variety of ailments that have stretched the staff as the year begins.

Nonetheless, Rima is confident the Eagles have enough healthy arms with 19 pitchers on the roster (some of them two-way players). "Pitching has a chance to be the strength of our team," he said.

The list of experienced pitchers includes Peyton Long (7-2, 3.14), Hunter Lee (4-3, 3.38), Porter Hummel (4-0, 4.04) and closer Kaden Wadle (3-2, 2.82, four saves). Rima is also counting on sophomores Ross Kramer, Nate Barnes, Adam Ketelsen and Cal Stalzer along with some promising freshmen.

Cameron Leff, a sophomore who spent last year at Ranger College, has impressed the coaching staff in preseason drills and has been tabbed the starting pitcher for the opener Friday.

Howell returns at shortstop and Cal Clark (.291) is back at second base, leaving the double-play combination on the field. Chili Moseley (.275) also played second base last year and saw time in the outfield, making him a valuable utility player for the Eagles.

Wiskus should be back at first base when he gets healthy. Kramer (.363, five homers) and Ellison Hanna (.275, five homers) are back as corner outfielders.

Max McCay, a transfer from Marshalltown Community College, is scheduled to start at catcher in the opener. Freshmen Izaya Fullard and Kal Youngquist are battling at third base, with Fullard and freshman Brennan Brister in the picture at first base.

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Freshman Taylor Jackson is the top center fielder. Sophomore Brandon Sanchez, a transfer from Triton College, is the starting designated hitter and also will play in the outfield. Manny Olutunde, a Cedar Rapids Jefferson grad who played at Ellsworth last year, also should see time in the outfield.

"There's a lot of excitement inside our locker room right now," Rima said. "Our guys are excited to play and we feel good about the team that we can put on the field."

Rima said the weather forecast this weekend should be favorable for playing ball, even if it's a little on the chilly side.

"We just want to go out and play," he said. "We don't really worry about the weather right now."

Johnson County is ranked No. 17 in the NJCAA Division I preseason poll and should be a formidable opponent. Kirkwood is not ranked in Division II.

Six of the Eagles have already signed with NCAA Division I schools for next season. Clark has signed with Houston Baptist, Wiskus and Hanna have signed with Indiana State, Wadle is heading to Western Illinois, Leff plans to attend Murray State and Howell has signed with Iowa.

Rima begins his sixth season with a 161-75 overall record, including a 34-20 mark last year.

ROSTER

FRESHMEN (14)

Taylor Jackson, OF, Chicago

Alex Lindstrom, OF/C, Apple Valley, Minn.

Will Rodruck, OF/P, West Des Moines Valley

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Izaya Fullard, 3B/1B, Iowa City West
Austin Marchesani, P Cedar Falls
Brennan Frister, 3B/1B, Burleson, Texas
Kal Youngquist, 1B, Monmouth, Ill.
Cameron Cowan, P, Ankeny Centennial
Ian Delleman, P, LaGrange, Ill.
Luke Loecher, P, Cedar Falls
Kirby Kerr, OF/P, Linn-Mar
Joel Thompson, C, Council Bluffs Lewis Central
Lecari Elion, OF/P, Chicago
Henry Walters, P, Waterloo Columbus

SOPHOMORES (19)

Ellison Hanna, OF, Nassau, Bahamas
Cal Clark, 2B, Cedar Rapids Prairie
Korry Howell, SS, Chicago
Chili Moseley, 2B/U, North Scott
Peyton Long, P, West Des Moines Valley
Nate Barnes, P, Iowa City West
Porter Hummel, P, West Sioux
Kaden Wadle, P, Mason City Newman
Cal Stalzer, P, West Des Moines Valley
Adam Ketelsen, P, Mount Vernon
Max McCay, C, Carlisle
Spencer Wiskus, 1B/C, Iowa City West
Ross Kramer, OF/P, Urbandale
Jake McLaughlin, P, Frankfort, Ill.
Cameron Leff, P, Wichita, Kan.
Hunter Lee, P, Des Moines Lincoln
Trey Cowley, P/3B, Urbandale
Manny Olutunde, OF, Cedar Rapids Jefferson
Brandon Sanchez, OF, Chicago