

Kirkwood softball opens in Minnesota

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood softball team is heading north this Friday to escape the cold and snow instead of heading south to begin the 2015 campaign, but there's no reason to question their sanity.

The ninth-ranked Eagles will be playing two games Friday inside a bubble in Rochester, Minn., against NIACC and Rochester Tech.

"The good thing about it is, it will be dry but it probably will be 40 degrees," Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge said Wednesday as the snow fell in Cedar Rapids.

This will be a long one-day excursion for the Eagles. They'll leave for Rochester Friday morning, play their games at 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., then turn around and come home.

Kirkwood returns eight experienced players who helped the Eagles finish 52-8 last season, but three of the top four pitchers are freshmen who are just starting their college careers.

"We understand with freshmen we're going to undergo some growing pains," said Yegge.

The rookie pitchers are Hannah Cole from Manchester, Allie Mengler from Walcott and Nicolette Simpson from Conrad. Sophomore Brooke Prior is also in the mix, but she's normally the starting shortstop.

Chasney Jenkins, a fleet outfielder, and Natalie Clark, a versatile utility player, earned All-American honors last season for Kirkwood as freshmen. Jenkins hit .446 with two homers and 36 RBIs. Clark hit .369 with six homers and 47 RBIs.

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The Eagles should be solid in the infield with Alicia Crivaro at third base (11 homers, 48 RBIs), Prior at shortstop if she's not pitching (.343, 4 homers, 23 RBIs) and Tara Walls at second base (.365, 5 homers, 39 RBIs). Alex Finn returns in the outfield (.387) and Lexi Quandt is back behind the plate (.325 and 38 RBIs). Clark will fill in as needed.

Kirkwood enjoyed a 25-game winning streak last year and rose to No. 4 in the national rankings, but the Eagles lost to DMACC in the regional finals and did not qualify for the 16-team national tournament. In recent years, only one team from the ICCAC conference could make the national tournament. Now two teams can make it under a revised formula that eases some of the pressure.

"Brand new this year," said Yegge. "They finally recognized that we do have a pretty good region."

DMACC is ranked No. 7 in the preseason poll, Kirkwood is No. 9 and Iowa Central is No. 12. Now two of those three ICCAC powers can make the national tournament instead of only one.

Yegge begins his eighth year at Kirkwood with a 328-77 record and five league titles. He plans to use the first few weeks of the season to tinker with different lineups and see how the freshman pitchers perform.

Kirkwood graduated two all-star pitchers in Sam Belz (24-5, 1.54 ERA) and Shy Saladino (25-2, 1.30 ERA).

"I think we need to get outside and get to play a little bit," said Yegge. "We do have eight sophomores who got significant playing time last year. They get it."

"I think they realize why we lost the regional championship last year. I think that's the driving factor."