

Eagles ride 41-game streak into playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker
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Some college softball teams have powerful hitters. Some have dominant pitchers. Others play air-tight defense.

The third-ranked Kirkwood Eagles have it all, which is why they've enjoyed a terrific regular season and are looking forward to the playoffs and a possible trip to the national tournament.

Kirkwood (48-3) will ride a 41-game winning streak into the NJCAA Division II Region XI tournament that is scheduled to begin Sunday in Fort Dodge.

The Eagles won the ICCAC title with a spotless 28-0 mark and are ready for the next part of the campaign.

Kirkwood will face Iowa Central in the opening round of the regional tournament Sunday at 1 p.m.

"It's been a pretty neat ride," Coach Joe Yegge said Wednesday. "I don't know if anybody's ever had an undefeated season in the conference before."

Kirkwood has walloped 83 home runs in 51 games and has a lusty .371 team batting average. Kayla Tatge leads all NJCAA Division II players with 22 home runs. Haylee Krack ranks third with 18 homers and they're tied for fourth in the country with 65 RBIs.

Amber Logemann (20-3) leads the nation with a 0.44 ERA and is second in the country with 265 strikeouts in 128.1 innings. Sam Belz (19-0) ranks fifth in the country with a 0.86 ERA.

The defense has been terrific at all spots and is especially strong up the middle with catcher Krysta Tutsch, shortstop Leah Duffe, second baseman Kristen Winter and center fielder Shelby Crist.

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Yegge said it's rare to have all three ingredients with hitting, pitching and defense.

"Not in junior college; you don't get that," he said. "Normally you're good at one, not good at the other. Maybe two of the three. But it's pretty special to see that you've got the whole thing."

The Eagles have outscored their opponents, 466-52. Four members of the starting lineup are hitting better than .400 with Winter (.419), Duffe (.417), Tatge (.408) and Krack (.403). Three other starters are hitting more than .350 with Kadarena Sales (.380), Tutsch (.357) and Crist (.352).

Ten different players have swatted home runs with Tatge (22), Krack (18), Tutsch (13), Winter (9), Duffe (7), Kelsie Campbell (4), Lauren Weber (4), Lauren Smith (3), Hannah McInerney (2) and Jaden Compton (1).

Shy Saladino, the No.3 pitcher, has a 9-0 record and 1.89 ERA.

It's been a season to remember.

"I'm very excited," said Winter, a sophomore from Xavier High School. "Hard works pays off. That's what we kept telling each other every day.

"I couldn't be happier. I couldn't be prouder of my teammates. We're having a lot of fun this year."

All teams in Iowa had to battle bad weather this season with numerous postponements and rescheduled games. Yegge is proud of the way his squad kept its eyes on the prize, despite frigid and wet conditions.

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"It's been an interesting ride, because it's been grinding weather," he said. "For the girls to be able to actually handle that and cope with it and adjust day-to-day never knowing what's going on, it shows the character and their focus in what they've been doing this year."

Kirkwood compiled a 42-13 record last year. Yegge expected to have another successful season with talented freshmen joining the team, but he did not expect all of this.

"The 41-game winning streak? I would have said that would never happen," he remarked.

"Conference champs? I would have thought we had a good shot at it, but 28 and 0? I would not have thought that. I would have thought somebody would have knocked us off in there."

Nobody did.

"Honestly I didn't know what to expect, just because at the junior college level you're going to face new competition every year," said Winter, one of the captains. "We had a lot of freshmen on the team, and our whole pitching staff was freshmen."

"It doesn't surprise me," she said, "because they're very talented."

The Region XI tournament at the Harlan Rogers Sports Complex in Fort Dodge will feature all eight teams from the Iowa Community College Athletic Conference (ICCAC). It's scheduled to run Sunday through Tuesday as a double-elimination tournament, but could be modified due to weather conditions.

DMACC, which finished six games behind Kirkwood in the ICCAC standings, is the No.2 seed.

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The Region XI champion will host the Nebraska champion next week for a spot in the national tournament in Mississippi.

"Obviously there is pressure on us, but I don't really feel pressure that much," said Winter. "It's just another good opportunity. It's definitely something we're not taking lightly, because in the tournament anything can happen.

"We're all every excited," she said. "We're going into it loose, but confident at the same time."