

Hansen helps No. 4 Eagles clinch ICCAC title

Written by Jim Ecker
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Maddie Hansen is getting a lot of good pitches to hit this season as a freshman at Kirkwood, a refreshing change from last year when opponents regularly pitched around her at Cedar Rapids Jefferson.

Hansen has jumped on the opportunity and is hitting .453 with 13 home runs and 66 RBIs for the fourth-ranked Eagles, who have one of the top offenses in the country.

Kirkwood swept a conference doubleheader Saturday from Northeast, 14-0 and 12-0, to clinch at least a tie for the ICCAC title and give Coach Joe Yegge the 500th victory of his career.

Hansen went 2-for-3 in the opener with a double, an RBI and two runs scored. She did not get any hits in the second game, but contributed to the victory with more stellar defense behind the plate.

Hansen had 34 walks in 44 games at Jefferson last season, the third-most walks in the state. She still managed to hit .492 with 11 homers and 46 RBIs for the J-Hawks, but her numbers would have been even higher if not for the free passes.

This year, opponents are pitching to Hansen and she's producing.

"I really like it compared to my senior year," she said Saturday. "There were a few games that were a little frustrating last year, but it's good to see some good pitches and get the job done."

Ironically, Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge was one of those high school coaches who regularly gave Hansen an intentional walk in his role as the head coach at Cedar Rapids Prairie.

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"I think I intentionally walked her seven times last year," he said.

If anyone wants to walk Hansen in the No. 3 spot in the order this year, they have to deal with Prairie grad Gabi Carter in the cleanup spot. Carter is hitting a robust .491 for the Eagles with 19 home runs and 75 RBIs.

Kirkwood has a strong offensive machine that starts in the leadoff spot with Taylor Nearad, who is hitting .622 with 23 home runs and 103 RBIs and is bidding for the NJCAA Division II Triple Crown.

Hansen loves hitting in such a powerful lineup.

"It's so awesome, because you know everyone can get the job done," she said. "If one person slips, the next person has them."

Nearad, a freshman from Solon, has already set school records for most hits (122) and RBIs (103) in a single season and probably will finish with the highest batting average in school history as well.

The Eagles raised their records to 25-1 in the conference and 47-4 overall with Saturday's victories. They need one victory in Sunday's doubleheader against Iowa Central to claim an outright crown.

This is Yegge's seventh conference title in nine years at Kirkwood.

"That was obviously one of our goals the whole season," said Hansen. "It's good to solidify that, but we're looking for two more wins tomorrow to get it outright."

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Yegge has dominated the ICCAC conference since arriving at Kirkwood. He's compiled a 420-91 record with the Eagles and is now 501-221 in 14 years as a head coach in the junior college ranks, including five years at NIACC.

Yegge collected his 400th win at Kirkwood earlier this season and notched his 500th career victory in the first game Saturday.

"It's cool," he said. "It means I've had good players. I've been doing this awhile and I've had good assistants. It's pretty neat. And being able to do it (get No. 500) here at Kirkwood is pretty cool too."

Hansen, an all-state catcher at Jefferson, has been a rock behind the plate for Kirkwood. She's been the starting catcher in all 51 games and has caught nearly every inning.

"I think one game when we were up big he gave me a break and had someone else catch the last inning," she said, smiling. "It's a grind, but a lot of ice baths save me. I've learned to appreciate them."

Yegge thought Hansen was the top catcher in the senior class last year in Iowa and was thrilled to sign her, thinking she got overlooked by some of the four-year schools in the state.

"She's been great," he said. "She's got some back issues, and catching every game is tough. To be able to come here every day and sit behind the plate every pitch and get beat up and get worn out and still be able to produce like she's doing, it's awesome."

"She's had a great attitude, she's been willing to do everything. I'm going to hate to see her leave this year."

Hansen has signed with Ball State, an NCAA Division I school in Muncie, Ind., that competes in the Mid-American Conference, so she'll be "one and done" at Kirkwood after this season.

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Yegge connected Hansen with Ball State, even though he knew it could mean losing her a year early.

"I went out and visited and I liked it and had an opportunity from them," she said. "It's all thanks to Coach Yegge."

Kirkwood has won 23 straight games heading into Sunday's twin-bill with Iowa Central at noon in the final games of the conference race.

Nearad went 4-for-4 in the first game Saturday with a home and six RBIs. Teagan Toft was 2-for-3 with two RBIs and three runs scored. Mallory Neubauer had a two-run pinch-hit single. Nicky Simpson (23-2) pitched a three-hit shutout with seven strikeouts.

Carter went 3-for-3 with two doubles, a home run and three RBIs in the second game. Lexi Ferrari, Payton Mercer and Katelyn Holub had two hits. Neubauer delivered again with a two-run pinch-hit double. Allie Mengler (4-0) tossed a two-hit shutout with nine strikeouts.

Both games ended after 4 1/2 innings due to the mercy rule.

Northeast fell to 9-44 overall and 4-22 in the conference.