CLINTON, Miss. - Taylor Nearad made a big first impression at the NJCAA Division II national softball tournament Wednesday.

Nearad went 4-for-4 with two doubles, two home runs and five RBIs as the Kirkwood Eagles trimmed Illinois Valley, 8-7, in the opening round of the tournament in Clinton, Miss.

Nearad, a freshman from Solon, also made two outstanding catches in center field, gunned down a runner at third base and had a stolen base.

"She was great," said Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge. "Her second home run went about 270-275 feet. It was a monster home run."

Nearad's two homers gave her 29 for the season, snapping the school record of 28. She is hitting .622 with 126 RBIs as she bids for the NJCAA Division II Triple Crown.

Kirkwood had to scramble to defeat Illinois Valley, despite Nearad's heroics. The Eagles are seeded No. 2 in the 16-team tournament and Illinois Valley is seeded No. 15, but the game was tied 7-7 heading into the bottom of the seventh inning before the Eagles pulled it out.

Gabi Carter, a freshman from Cedar Rapids Prairie, doubled in the bottom of the seventh and scored the game-winning run on a base hit by Morgan Frost. Read more...

Allie Mengler (5-0) got the victory in relief for Kirkwood. She also belted a two-run homer, her

sixth of the season.

Kirkwood raised its record to 57-4 with its 33rd victory in a row, but Yegge said the Eagles were not sharp after being idle for 12 straight days
after winning the district crown on May 6.

"It was not a good game," he said. "You could tell, it was hard."

Kirkwood will face Highland Community College of Kansas (43-10) in the quarterfinals Friday afternoon. Highland, the No. 7 seed, blanked Lansing
Community College 4-0 Thursday.