

Rima excited about Kirkwood baseball team

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 24 February 2017 20:41 -



Kirkwood baseball coach Todd Rima plans to have three catchers and three shortstops in his starting line Saturday when the Eagles begin the season against Johnson County, but don't be alarmed.

It's a sign of strength, not insanity.

Kirkwood is blessed with an abundance of talented catchers and shortstops who are capable of playing other positions, so this is a way to strength the overall lineup.

"It allows us to put our nine best offensive guys on the field," Rima said this week, "and we can do that and still be good on defense.

"We had to move some guys just to make sure we could get all their bats in the lineup."

Toran Shadidi, who missed last season with an injury after hitting .342 in 2015, has earned the starting job behind the plate.

Spencer Wiskus, who was a star catcher at Iowa City West, has moved to first base. And Tyler Bordner, a part-time catcher for Kirkwood last year and a .354 hitter, has moved to right field.

"I think Shahidi is as good as any catcher in our league," said Rima. "And Wiskus and Bordner are really good.

"I think that's one position where our depth is as good as it will ever be."

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Corbin Day, a Cedar Rapids Prairie grad, is the backup catcher and will spell Shahidi at times, giving the Eagles four quality backstops.

Kirkwood has a similar situation with its shortstops, with three players who excelled at the position in high school.

Cal Clark, who helped Prairie win the Class 4A state title last summer, has shifted to second base. Lorenzo Elion, a freshman from Chicago who has already committed to the Iowa Hawkeyes, has moved to third base. And Korry Howell, another freshman from Chicago, is staying at shortstop.

That gives the Eagles three guys who can really "pick it" in the infield.

"We're very young in the infield, but we're very athletic in the infield," said Rima. "I love our athleticism, I love our versatility."

Clark played for Rima at Prairie and has made a smooth transition to the other side of the infield.

"He's done a good job," said Rima. "He's made a good transition there. He makes the routine plays and he's learned to turn the double play from there. I think that's his natural position."

The Eagles will have four freshmen in the infield with Clark, Elion, Howell and Wiskus. In addition, the top four starting pitchers on the club are all freshmen.

"We're extremely young. And very, very young on the mound," said Rima. "We're going to throw all freshmen, basically, this weekend."

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Rima lists Austin Miller of Iowa City, Peyton Long of Des Moines, Hunter Lee of Des Moines and Ross Kramer of Urbandale as his starting pitchers against Johnson County.

Miller has been clocked in the low 90's and Long, Lee and Kramer are all touching 90 mph as well, giving the Eagles four live arms at the top of the staff.

"We like our pitching depth," said Rima. "We feel like our front-line guys are as good as they've ever been for us.

"We're going to have more velocity than we've had in the past," he said. "Now it's just command and being able to get people out with that stuff."

The Eagles have young players all over the place, with 25 freshmen and nine sophomores on the active roster. Three of those sophomores are scheduled to start in the outfield with Colin Kreiter (.299) in left field, General McArthur (.338) in center field and Bordner (.354) in right field.

McArthur, who stolen 32 bases last season, has moved from second base to center field to take advantage of his speed.

Joey Verstegen, another sophomore who saw limited duty last season, gets first crack at being the designated hitter.

Rima said another half-dozen players are pushing for playing time, giving him the depth to bring players off the bench if needed.

Drew Yanecek, a pitcher from Prairie, has a "minor" shoulder issue and will be red-shirted this season. Jared Eivins, a freshman third baseman from Jefferson, also could be red-shirted.

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Other local products on the club include Nic Mougin of Prairie, a relief pitcher and first baseman, and Brody Alberts of Prairie, another relief pitcher.

Kirkwood was scheduled to play doubleheaders at Johnson County on Friday and Saturday in Overland Park, Kan., but that was changed to Saturday and Sunday due to weather conditions.

Johnson County has a strong program and Rima is anxious to test his club against a quality opponent.

"I like it. I like opening that way," he said. "I'd rather see where we're at and not play somebody that we should beat pretty easily. This is why our guys came to Kirkwood, to play against people like Johnson County.

"We're going to get tested right away."

Rima has compiled a 127-77 overall record and 63-41 mark in conference games in four years at Kirkwood. The Eagles have improved every season and last year they were in contention for the league title heading into the final weekend of the regular season, finishing 35-20 overall and 20-8 in the league.

Rima is confident the Eagles can take another step this season, with a conference title and regional crown within reach.

"I feel this team can," he said. "We think this is the best group that we've had.

"We know there might be some growing pains early, just because of our youth, and especially because of our youth on the mound."