

Kirkwood softball begins year at No. 7

Written by Jim Ecker
Friday, 16 February 2018 06:40 -



Their two-time National Player of the Year is now patrolling the outfield at Iowa State. Their All-American pitcher, an All-American catcher, an All-American left fielder and two other all-Region selections are gone from last year's club as well.

Despite losing all that talent, Kirkwood softball coach Joe Yegge does not think the Eagles are rebuilding as they enter the 2018 campaign. Reloading is more like it.

"I hate to use the word rebuilding," he said, "because we think we have enough tradition here that we're never rebuilding."

It's hard to argue.

Yegge has compiled a formidable mark of 488-99 in 10 years at Kirkwood. That includes eight ICCAC conference titles, five regional titles, five district titles and five trips to the NJCAA Division II World Series.

The Eagles have 13 freshmen on the team and only six sophomores, so it's a young ballclub. And there are definitely are big shoes to fill.

"We're going to take some lumps this year, just because of our youth," said Yegge. "But I still don't see why we shouldn't compete for the top two spots in the conference."

Kirkwood is ranked No. 7 in the nation as the new year begins, starting with five games at the Winter Dome Tournament in Davenport this Saturday and Sunday. DMACC is ranked No. 4 and it looks they could battle for the league title again this season after sharing the crown in 2017.

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The Eagles lost six key members of last year's club that finished 55-6 and reached the World Series. That list includes Taylor Nearad, the two-time National Player of the Year; Lexi Kinnaird, an All-American pitcher; Maddie Hansen, an All-American catcher; Morgan Frost, an All-American left fielder; Angie McBean, an all-region pitcher and hitter; and Lexi Ferrari, an all-region second baseman.

Nearad is at Iowa State, Kinnaird at Wisconsin-Green Bay, Hansen at North Dakota State, Frost at Missouri Western and Ferrari at Missouri Southern. McBean is not playing softball this year.

It was easy for Yegge to make out his lineup last year. He knew it by heart, and in his sleep. Not so this year, at least not yet.

There are stiff battles at several spots and the flu bug has hampered preseason drills. "It's a grind," said Yegge. "It seems like we're always sick."

"This year we'll probably have a different lineup just about every game."

Doni Rae Mayhew will be in the middle of the lineup on a daily basis, whether she's the pitcher, first baseman, designated player or possibly even at shortstop. She hit .440 last year with 18 homers and 83 RBIs and was the No. 3 pitcher with a 5-0 mark and 2.19 ERA.

Monika Bevans, who played third base last season, has moved behind the plate to replace Hansen. She hit .365 with 10 homers and 72 RBIs.

Audra Bridenstine, who became the regular shortstop in 2017, has switched to the outfield after hitting .379 with two homers and 36 RBIs.

The other three sophomores are Sonya McCormick, Brianna Smith and Miranda Kaste.

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McCormick transferred to Kirkwood from Iowa Central, where she hit .368 with 11 homers and 54 RBIs last season. She's ticketed for the starting job at third base.

Smith hit .222 as a reserve infielder last year and has moved to the outfield this season. Kaste is finally healthy after missing two full seasons with injuries and could be a super-utility player for the Eagles at nearly any position.

Yegge likes his freshman class and is counting on many of them to fill key roles.

Natalie Halvorson, who played for Yegge at Cedar Rapids Prairie, has been battling Mayhew for the honor of being Kirkwood's No. 1 pitcher entering the year. "She looks better than she ever has since I've had her," he said.

Rachel Stewart, from Davenport West, is currently the starting second baseman. Kenady Waugh, from Fairfield, could become the top shorstop, but she's currently battling a sore arm.

Twelve of the 13 freshmen are from Iowa, including outfielder Lauren Kuch from Prairie. Taleah Smith, an outfielder from Iowa City West, is red-shirting this season after spending the fall semester at the University of Northern Iowa.

Chaise Light, Amanda Pipolo and Megan Kublik are not playing for the Eagles this season after being on the team in 2017 as freshmen.

2018 ROSTER FRESHMEN (13)

Kenady Waugh, IF, Fairfield
Jessi Butler, C, Muscatine
Skylar Ryan, OF, Iowa City West
Lauren Klaahsen, OF, Nora Springs

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Natalie Halvorson, P, Cedar Rapids Prairie

Rachel Stewart, IF, Davenport West

Alli Sprague, P, Farmington, Ill.

Lauren Kuch, OF, Cedar Rapids Prairie

Randyn Carter, IF, Louisa-Muscatine

Jocey Parham, P, Corydon

Hannah Mausser, C, Pleasant Valley

Bailey Clemens, IF, Cascade

* Taleah Smith, OF, Iowa City West

SOPHOMORES (6)

Brianna Smith, IF, Essex, Ill.

Miranda Kaste, IF, Muscatine

Monika Bevans, C, Solon

Sonya McCormick, IF, Monticello

Audra Bridenstine, OF, West Liberty

DoniRae Mayhew, P/IF, Bettendorf

* Red-shirting