

CLINTON - Kirkwood baseball coach Todd Rima calls Hunter Lee a "bulldog" because he'll fight for every scrap of food and pitch until his paws fall off.

He proved it Saturday in the biggest, boldest game for Kirkwood this season (so far).

Lee threw 131 pitches in eight glorious innings as the 16th-ranked Eagles upset seventh-ranked Southeastern, 5-4, in the winners bracket finals of the regional tournament at Ashford University Field.

The victory, which was Rima's 200th as Kirkwood's head coach, lifted the Eagles into the championship round on Sunday or Monday, needing one more victory to claim the regional crown.

Lee went blow-for-blow with Southeastern ace Chas Sagedahl, who threw a dandy game himself, but Lee made the biggest pitches when it counted as the Eagles dumped the No. 1 seeds into the losers bracket.



Spencer Wiskus delivered a huge three-run homer against Sagedahl in the top of the first inning for a 3-0 lead before the big lefty settled into the game. The Blackhawks came close several times, but never fully caught the Eagles.

Sagedahl, a southpaw from Wisconsin, began the day with a sparkling 9-1 record and 1.06 ERA, but Lee was the Pitcher of the Game with his yeoman work on the mound.

"Unbelievable," Rima said. "Early in the game I don't think Hunter had his best stuff, but he really, really competed and fought. And then he founds his best stuff. And he was really, really dominant.

"To go pitch-for-pitch with that kid, just an unbelievable effort by Hunter Lee. That's one of the best efforts that I've been a part of in a big game like that."

Lee has battled a few issues with his talented right arm during his two years at Kirkwood, so it seemed like Rima would make a pitching change after the seventh inning with Lee already sitting at 119 pitches.



Lee came into the dugout after the seventh inning and saw Rima huddled with pitching coach Dan McKinney. He knew what they were talking about, with closer Cameron Cowan ready in the bullpen.

"I went up to them and said, 'Hey, I'm cool either way, but I'll give you three more outs if you need me to,'" Lee related.

"He said he felt great," Rima confirmed. "He said, 'You're not taking the ball from me. I want the ball.'"

Lee needed only 12 pitches in the bottom of the eighth, putting him at 131 and into the danger zone. "He wanted the ball in the ninth, but that's too many," said Rima.

To make the decision a tad easier, the Eagles scored in the top of the ninth on an RBI single by Ellison Hanna for a 5-2 lead and three-run margin. Lee, a future Iowa Hawkeye, was done for the night.

Cowan relieved in the bottom of the ninth and got the first out on an easy comebacker, but then things got scary on the Kirkwood side of the field and hearts began thumping.

Southeastern mounted a rally with a double and three straight singles, pulling within 5-4 with one out and runners on first and second. Cal Stalzer was warmed up in the bullpen, but Rima stuck with Cowan and was quickly rewarded.

Cowan got Marcos Sanchez to hit an easy grounder to shortstop Korry Howell for a 6-4-3 double play to end the game. Howell flipped to Chili Moseley for the force at second, then Moseley fired a strike to Wiskus at first base to end the game.

"It's pretty crazy," said Rima, now 200-89-1 in six years at Kirkwood. "I'll tell you what: I'm so happy for these kids right now that they've put themselves in this position.

"This team has worked their butt off. They play with passion, they play for each other. And we're not done. We've got to finish it now."

Wiskus, who got a late start this season due to a broken hand, strode to the plate in the bottom of the first with Taylor Jackson on second base and Izaya Fullard on first with two outs. He smashed a 1-1 pitch over the left-field wall against Sagedahl for a three-run homer.

"It set the mood and set the tone for the game," said Wiskus. "It got us ready to go."

"For Wiskus to do that in the first inning off of that kid, it got us going," said Rima. "We needed that. Sagedahl doesn't give up runs. He's unbelievable. Tip your hat to that kid."

Southeastern pulled within 3-1 in the second inning and made it 3-2 in the sixth, but Lee (8-2) wiggled out of trouble.

Howell led off the top of the eighth with a double, but was still standing at second base with two outs as SCC's middle infielders jockeyed to keep him close to the bag. Howell finally got a good read on Sagedahl and took off for third, and the Eagles caught a break when the throw from the catcher hit Howell in the head and skipped into left field. Howell got up and jogged home to make it 4-2.

Moseley got a one-out single in the top of the ninth and advanced to second on a wild pitch. Hanna, who has struggled lately, served a pitch into left field for an RBI single and 5-2 lead, knocking Sagedahl from the game after 8 1/3 innings and 115 pitches.

Those two insurance runs proved to be critical in the bottom of the ninth when SCC scored twice and scared the dickens out the Kirkwood fans.

Kirkwood will sit and watch a pair of losers bracket games on Sunday, waiting for Southeastern, NIACC or DMACC to survive and reach the championship round of the double-elimination tournament.

NIACC and DMACC tangle in the first game Sunday, with Southeastern waiting to play the winner in the losers bracket final. Kirkwood has defeated all three of those teams in the tournament already and will need to beat one of them again for the title.

If Southeastern (46-12) wins the losers bracket, they'll face Kirkwood in the championship game at approximately 5 p.m. on Sunday. But if NIACC or DMACC win the losers bracket by winning two games on Sunday, the championship game will be pushed to Monday at noon because teams are not allowed to play three games in one day.

Whoever emerges from the losers bracket will have to beat Kirkwood twice in a row to deny the Eagles the title. The regional champion will host a two-team district tournament next weekend, with the district champion advancing to the NJCAA Division II World Series.

"I have all the confidence in the world in this squad and I know we can get it done," said Lee.

"There are four great teams left in this thing and we've got to find a way to get one more win," said Rima.

Kirkwood 300 000 011 - 5 7 2
Southeastern 010 001 002 - 4 11 1

W - Lee (8-2). L - Sagedahl (9-2).