

Todd Rima rolled the dice a little bit when he left a strong program at NIACC six years ago to become the new head coach at Kirkwood.

It paid off handsomely on Sunday.

The Eagles spanked Southeast Community College of Nebraska, 10-1, to win the North Plains district baseball title and earn the school's first trip to the NJCAA Division II World Series since 1999.

Kirkwood (42-15-1) will be one of only 10 teams at the national tournament in Enid, Okla., from May 26 to June 2.

Rima spent 11 years at NIACC, a junior college in Mason City that competes in the same conference with Kirkwood. He thought Kirkwood had more resources than NIACC to compete at a national level on a regular basis and moved his young family to Cedar Rapids to embrace the job.



Kirkwood made four trips to the World Series in the 1990's under Coach John Lewis and finished second on two of those trips, but the program had slipped a little when Rima arrived.

Now the Eagles are back, joining the Kirkwood basketball teams, softball team, men's golf squad and volleyball team as national powers.

"This athletic department deserves the baseball program to go back to the World Series," Rima said after getting a bucket of ice water dumped on his head and hugging his family. "This community deserves it.

"We needed to get Kirkwood back to the national level and that's what we wanted to do. And to be able to do it this year, with this group of kids, it means more to me than anything in my coaching career."

Kirkwood and Southeast split two games on Saturday, setting up a showdown in Game 3 of the best-of-3 series. Rima said he slept fairly well Saturday night, knowing he had two of his aces - Hunter Lee and Adam Ketelsen - primed and ready for the decisive contest.

Rima may have slept well, but Lee was a bundle of nervous energy.

"I did not sleep very well at all," he said. "As soon as the game ended last night it was focus-mode until I got to the ballpark. I was going through the game in my mind, what I was going to do and how I was going to attack them. I couldn't wait to get the ball today."

Lee did yeoman's work last Saturday when he threw 131 pitches when the 12th-ranked Eagles trimmed 10th-ranked Southeastern of West Burlington, 5-4, in the regional tournament. He actually topped that performance Sunday against Southeast. This time, he threw 132 pitches in seven innings and was touched for just one unearned run.

Lee struck out 11 batters with a sizzling fastball and nasty slider. He walked only one man and

scattered six hits against the Storm (42-16). Lee, who will pitch for the Iowa Hawkeyes next season, is headed to the World Series with a 9-2 record and 3.93 ERA.

"Man, Hunter had that look in his eye today," said Rima. "The first inning, you could tell he was himself. He battled through it again. And Ketelsen came in and was outstanding."

Ketelsen, a sophomore from Mount Vernon who is headed to Central Michigan, was one of Kirkwood's top starting pitchers all season, but he unselfishly switched to the bullpen in the regional and district tournaments and had three strong outings.

Ketelsen (8-1, 2.39) retired all six batters he faced in the eighth and ninth innings Sunday with three strikeouts, including a whiff to end the game.

Kirkwood was the visiting team by virtue of a coin flip and scored twice in the top of the first inning on RBI singles by Taylor Jackson and Izaya Fullard, both of whom battered the Southeast pitching staff in the tournament.

Southeast pulled within 2-1 in the third inning on an unearned run, but Kirkwood made it 4-1 in the fourth inning on a two-run single by Ross Kramer.

The Eagles grabbed a 5-1 margin in the sixth inning on another RBI single by Fullard, then made it 6-1 in the eighth on another RBI single by Kramer. Ketelsen relieved Lee in the bottom of the eighth with that five-run cushion, then the Eagles broke it open by scoring four more times in the ninth on a two-run double by Jackson and a two-run single by Fullard.

Ketelsen pitched a 1-2-3 inning in the bottom of the ninth and the 19-year World Series drought was over. Gloves flew high in the air and the dogpile formed on the mound.

"It's an unbelievable feeling," said Jackson, a freshman from Chicago who went 11-for-16 in the district tournament and made several sensational plays in center field. "This is actually my first

time winning a championship with a school -- high school or elementary school. It feels great."

Fullard went 9-for-15 in the tournament and drove in four runs on Sunday, giving him 73 RBIs this season, now tied for third in the country. He's battled a few ailments along the way and served as the designated hitter Sunday instead of playing third base, but continued to swing a red-hot bat.

"It's awesome," Fullard said about making the World Series. "At the start of the year, we always talked about where we wanted to be. I never even imagined having an opportunity to make it there (to Oklahoma).

"I love this team and I think we have a really good shot to win it all."

Fullard, a freshman from Iowa City West, is hitting .459 with his 73 RBIs. Fullard, Lee and all-star shortstop Korry Howell will all be playing for the Hawkeyes next season.

The Eagles have an extremely talented club, with 14 players already committed to four-year schools for 2019, including at least nine who are heading to NCAA Division I programs.

"Top to bottom, we have talent," said Fullard. "We have guys on the bench who are DI guys. They don't get the opportunity because we have so much talent."

Rima has enjoyed a winning record in each of his six seasons at Kirkwood, but this is clearly his best team here.

"I think it's the most talented team that I've ever coached, but I think it's also the most unified," he said. "I think that is what's special about them. You watch them pull for each other, the energy that guys have in the dugout.

"They pull for each other. They're excited. That's what makes this team special."

NIACC never made it to the Junior College World Series during Rima's 11 years in Mason City, but he left lots of talent behind and enjoyed seeing his old club reach the World Series the year after he left for Kirkwood.

All of the Eagles are excited about making the World Series, but the champion in that department is probably sophomore Cal Clark, who is certainly the most courageous player on the team. Clark was hit in the face by a fastball a month ago and suffered six broken bones, but he hustled back three weeks later to help spark his team in the regional tournament as their designated hitter.

He served as the DH for the first two games of the district tournament on Saturday, then returned to second base on Sunday with a special mask to protect his face.

Clark is a Cedar Rapids Prairie grad who stayed in the neighborhood to play at Kirkwood. He saw spot-duty for the Kirkwood basketball team during the 2016-17 campaign to help in an emergency and now is headed to the World Series.

"I've been a part of the Kirkwood community since I was about three years old," he said. "Being able to play basketball was a great experience, but then to finally do it in the sport I love - to finally get this program back to Enid, Okla. - that's where we being."

Clark knows it's the first trip to the World Series since 1999, when he was too young to remember.

"I would have been two years old at the time," he said. "Right about when I was starting to become a Kirkwood fan. So to get back now is really special and I can't wait."

Clark helped Prairie win the Class 4A state baseball title two years ago. He played for Rima and

Prairie before joining his high school coach at Kirkwood.

By coincidence, the Prairie Hawks open the 2018 season Monday night in the Metro tournament against Mount Vernon at 5 p.m. at the Kennedy High School field. Rima's assistant coaches at Prairie have been getting the team ready for the season and Rima was non-committal about whether he'd be in Prairie's dugout Monday evening.

"I'm worried about the Kirkwood Eagles right now," he said. "We'll see what tomorrow brings."

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Southeast 001 000 000 - 1 6 0

W - Lee (9-2). L - Reinkall.