

Kirkwood likes playing host school at nationals

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood Community College volleyball team has to face the host school in the first round of their national tournament Thursday afternoon, but that's OK.

The Eagles like it that way.

Kirkwood (37-8) will meet Owens Community College (35-9) in the opening round of the NJCAA Division II tournament at 2 p.m. Thursday at the Owens gym in Toledo, Ohio.

Coach Jill Williams thinks her team will be able to feed off a crowd that undoubtedly will be cheering against them.

"We like high energy and we like excitement," she said. "It's better to be in that situation than being in a quiet gym where there's nobody there."

The 16-team tournament begins Thursday with eight opening-round matches. If the Eagles beat Owens, they'll face either Iowa Central Community College (34-10) or Monroe College of New York (35-5) in the second round Thursday night.

The Eagles defeated Owens 21-25, 25-21, 25-11, 18-25, 15-11 on a neutral court on Oct. 18 and enter the tournament on a hot streak, having won 22 of their last 23 matches.

The only blemish during the streak was a 3-2 loss to Iowa Central in a showdown for the ICCAC regular-season title in Fort Dodge.

Kirkwood is not a tall team, but the Eagles have played well as a unit this season and rely on other factors to be successful.

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"I'd say chemistry and communication. That's a big thing," remarked Brittany Ambler, a sophomore from Conrad. "We are an athletic team and I think we work well together. If we're going to five games, we're going to still have that energy level."

Lexi Litts, a sophomore from Cedar Rapids Kennedy, was named the MVP of the regional tournament and enters the national meet with 1,434 assists. She played in the Class 4A state tournament as a sophomore, junior and senior at Kennedy and is looking forward to her first experience at a national event.

"I'm excited," she said.

Ambler was named to the all-regional team and leads the Eagles with 444 kills. Ashley Gonzalez, a sophomore from Camanche, also made the all-regional team and has 393 kills this season.

Kirkwood left Cedar Rapids on Monday and planned to spend the night in Fort Wayne, Ind., before finishing the trip to Toledo on Tuesday. There will be a banquet for all the teams in Toledo Wednesday night before the tournament begins Thursday.

The Eagles are making their second trip to the national tournament in three years. They finished eighth in 2010.

The three-day tournament ends Saturday.