

Kirkwood golfers aiming high (and dry)

Written by Jim Ecker

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Sean Cleary was excited when he left Ireland two years ago to attend Kirkwood Community College and play golf for the Eagles.

"I thought you could play golf the year-round," he said Thursday, laughing at himself. "That's what I thought."

Cleary and the Eagles have been watching the rain and trying to stay warm this spring, just like everyone else, but they did manage to win the Iowa Central Invitational this month and place third at the Wartburg College Invitational.

Several meets have been postponed and their practice time on courses has been limited.

"I think they've done a pretty decent job of putting up a score that we're proud of," said Coach Darin Pint. "That's a positive, but you never want to go through something like this again."

Kirkwood is ranked sixth in the nation by Golf World at the NJCAA Division II level. Nine of the Eagles are averaging between 74 and 79 shots per 18 holes, fostering good competition on the team.

Kirkwood finished ninth in the national tournament last year and is looking for a better showing this season.

"Realistically, I think we can definitely be top-3, to be honest," said Cleary. "The team would like to perform a lot better than ninth."

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"On paper, it looks good, but last year we were expecting top-5. I think this year we're definitely looking for top-3. I think that's a realistic goal. Hopefully we can produce."

Kirkwood has 10 golfers on the team. Nine of them are from small towns in Iowa and Cleary is from Tipperary, Ireland.

"There's enough good players in the state of Iowa that you can win with the kids in the state," said Pint, in his 17th year as head coach.

Jordan Azbell from Peosta has the best average on the team at 74.4, but they're all bunched together after that. The roster includes Brian Schreck (Carroll), Kyle Jackson (Stanwood), Logan Baburek (Belle Plaine), Marcus Giltner (Batavia), Mitch Jacobi (Belle Plaine), Ryan Johnson (Elgin), Ryan Palser (Creston) and Sheldon Gryp (Victor).

Cleary has been averaging 77.4 shots and hopes to improve as the weather gets better.

"It's been really tough, just trying to get everything going and trying to get some consistency in your game," he said. "It's hard to get your confidence level. It's a grind, for sure, but everyone else is in the same boat."

When Cleary decided he wanted to attend college and play golf in the United States, he put his profile on a website that helps international golfers find schools. Pint was interested.

"Coach ended up giving me the best offer," he said. "This is helping me get to the next level. If I had gone to a four-year school right away I doubt I would have been prepared."

Cleary said it's not unusual for young golfers from Ireland to seek opportunities in America.

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"It's getting more frequent," he said. "Everyone wants to do it now. Trying to get to the next level, coming over here is the best option."

Cleary said he has matured as a golfer since arriving at Kirkwood. He said his wedge game is normally his strength, along with putting.

"My driving has gotten a lot better this spring," he said. "I've put myself in great position.

"I'm rarely in trouble like I used to be last year. I really struggled to get off the tee. I feel like I'm more solid all-around now."

Pint, 39, is an accomplished golfer himself. He finished third in the Class 2A state tournament as a junior and senior at Wapsie Valley High School and won the Iowa Conference tournament when he was a junior at Coe College.

He's finished second and third in the Cedar Rapids City Amateur tournament and placed in the top-10 several other times.

Kirkwood has finished in the top-15 in the nation in 11 of the last 13 years. Pint said the breakthrough came in 1999, when the Eagles finished 11th in the national tournament in College Station, Texas, with just four players.

Kirkwood has finished as high as second in the nation and placed fifth one time. Pint thinks another top-5 finish is within reach.

"I think it's a great goal," he said.