

Xavier's Miller hoping to help Eagles to national tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 11 May 2011 15:14 - Last Updated Wednesday, 11 May 2011 15:19



McKenna Miller is determined to succeed with her softball career.

She was determined at Xavier High School, where she overcame a serious injury to become one of the top sluggers in the state. And she's determined at Kirkwood Community College, where she's helped the Eagles enjoy a banner campaign.

The numbers speak for themselves.

Miller had surgery for a torn labrum and torn rotator cuff during her freshman year at Xavier in 2007, but she rebounded and tied for third in the state in home runs last season with 13 as a senior.

She did not begin her freshman year at Kirkwood this season in the starting lineup, but she got a chance and is hitting .317 with six homers and 28 RBIs heading into the district tournament in Columbus, Neb., on Thursday.

Miller has fallen out of the starting lineup for the fourth-ranked Eagles (50-9), but she loves playing softball for one of the top junior college teams in the country.

"It's awesome," she said after practice Tuesday. "This has been my dream since I was little."

Kirkwood will face Central Community College of Nebraska in the district tournament on Thursday. There are only two teams in the district tournament and the winner will advance to the 16-team national tournament in Normal, Ill., on May 19.

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Kirkwood and Central C.C. will meet in a best-of-3 series, with two games Thursday and another game Friday, if necessary. Whichever team wins two games makes the national tournament.

Kirkwood won the Region XI title on Monday to qualify for the district event. "We're very, very confident," Miller said. "We have a little bit of revenge for them."

Central beat Kirkwood, 1-0, earlier in the season.

Miller is a catcher by trade, but she's been a DP - Designated Player - at Kirkwood this season. The Designated Player is like a Designated Hitter in baseball, except in softball the DP is eligible to rotate into the game on defense.

Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge uses the DP like a DH, without using the DP on defense. Miller has not caught a single inning this season for a couple of reasons.

Miller is still trying to strengthen her throwing arm following her operation in 2007, and Kirkwood has another outstanding catcher in Jena Malmen, a freshman from Orion, Ill., who leads the nation with 27 home runs.

"Jena is amazing," Miller said. "I'm very happy for her and very proud of her."

Miller and Malmen are both freshmen, but Miller hopes to battle Malmen for the starting job next season. She'll work on her arm strength during the offseason in preparation for 2012.

"That's my goal, to be the starting catcher next year," she said.

Miller was the No.1 catcher at Xavier as a senior and shared the job as a junior.

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"Defensively, she's a great defensive catcher," said Yegge. "I really like her defensively, and she's probably the best defensive catcher we have, but the arm strength is what keeps her out of the lineup.

"I'd love to be able to have two catchers that I can count on and keep them healthy, but that's all on her," he said. "If her arm gets healthy and she keeps getting stronger, I'd have no problem catching her. But I can't put somebody back there who's not going to be able to throw anybody out."

Miller said her arm still hurts every once in a while.

"It gets tired, basically, but I'm kind of used to it," she said. "I don't really know when it hurts anymore. It's just a numbing thing."

Miller will be ready to swing the bat in the district tournament, if called upon. If not, she'll support her teammates and try to help Kirkwood reach the national tournament.