

The Kirkwood women's volleyball team was being blitzed by sixth-ranked Sauk Valley in the Kirkwood tournament Friday night when Coach Jill Williams plucked Nyadoar Gatwech off the end of the bench to see if she might be able to light a fire.

The 6-foot-3 freshman from Marshalltown, who had played briefly in only one match all season, helped turned the contest around.

The 11th-ranked Eagles rallied for a 15-25, 12-25, 25-18, 25-19, 18-16 victory after being thoroughly outplayed by Sauk Valley in the first two sets.

Gatwech entered the match in the third set and immediately made a big impact. She finished with five blocks and altered several other shots at key moments.

Williams said her impact was "huge."



"Their outside hitters had just been tearing us up," said Williams. "They had to alter their shots and make some changes (with Gatwech on the floor) because she does have more size. It gave us a spark, we found our energy.

"It wasn't just her," said Williams, "but others started to play with some pace and with some energy and with some purpose. One thing led to another."

Kirkwood led 14-10 in the fifth set and needed just one more point for the victory, but Sauk Valley scored four straight points to tie the game at 14-14.

Kirkwood had a 15-14 lead, but Sauk Valley staved off match point. Sauk Valley had a 16-15 lead, but then Kirkwood staved off match point to stay alive.

Gatwech and Haleigh Durnin combined to block a shot to give the Eagles a 17-16 lead, then a slam by Sauk Valley sailed wide to give Kirkwood the satisfying victory.

The victory was especially satisfying for the Eagles because it came right after they dropped a tough five-set match to 12th-ranked Illinois Central in their first contest.

Williams was proud of her players for finishing the night on a high note.

"I told them it speaks a lot about their character," she said. "As long as they have that belief, they'll have that ability to come back."

Kirkwood's job is only half-done in the tournament. The Eagles return to action Saturday against top-ranked Parkland at 11 a.m. and against ninth-ranked McHenry County at 3 p.m.

There are six ranked teams in the seven-team field with the No. 1, No. 2, No. 6, No. 9, No. 11

and No. 12 teams in the NJCAA Division II rankings all in Cedar Rapids.

"It's great for our fans," said Williams. "Anyone who wants to come watch good volleyball, this is the place where it's happening this weekend."

Margaret Micka and Abbi Tunis collected 23 kills in Kirkwood's two matches Friday. Ady Wintermote had 18 kills and Alexa Whipple 14.

Lauren Keane led the Eagles with 42 assists and Grace Swenning had 40. Brianna Eberhardt came up with 42 digs and Micka had 35. Durnin finished with 18 blocks, including nine in each match. Tunis had 13 blocks, including nine against Sauk Valley.

The tournament resumes Saturday at 9 a.m., with the last match scheduled for 3 p.m.

Parkland won both of its matches Friday. Kirkwood, Illinois Central, Sauk Valley, Central (Neb.) and Johnson County both went 1-1. McHenry finished 0-2.