

No. 7 Eagles soar to national tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 05 November 2018 05:53 -



Alexa Aldrich-Ingram nearly quit college volleyball a year ago after a disappointing season at Drake, where the Bulldogs tried to convert the phenomenal kill-shot artist into a setter.

Now she's headed to the junior college national tournament with her new friends at Kirkwood with a brilliant smile on her face.

"Coming to Kirkwood has been one of the best decisions I've made," Aldrich-Ingram said Sunday afternoon after the Eagles punched their ticket to the NJCAA Division II tournament. "I'm so glad I came here. It's been an exciting year."

And it's not over yet.

The seventh-ranked Eagles spanked Metropolitan Community College of Missouri, 25-15, 25-22, 25-19, to win the District D championship and qualify for the national meet in Charleston, W.Va., from Nov. 15-17.

Aldrich-Ingram, a 5-foot-8 southpaw from Iowa City West, collected 16 kills and leads the nation with 632, many of them devastating rips that make opponents fear for their safety.

She has incredible hang-time, reminiscent of NBA great Michael Jordan, and swings that left arm with incredible force.

"She's a crowd-pleaser," said Kirkwood Coach Jill Williams. "She creates that energy. People love to see that.

"That's her out there doing her thing, having fun and loving it. It was fun to watch her this

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season."



Aldrich-Ingram was named the district MVP, a well-deserved honor that delighted the legion of family and friends in the audience. They all wanted to pose with their favorite player and her handsome award.

"It's amazing," she said. "My family is so supportive and my friends are so supportive. I didn't expect anything less from them. It's so much fun."

Aldrich-Ingram had another sensational performance Sunday, but she was hardly alone as Kirkwood raised its record to 32-8. Abbi Tunis had nine kills, Haleigh Durnin seven, Sami Johnson six, Taylor Carey five and Lauren Keane four.

Keane collected 37 assists and Maddie Lavenz made 20 digs. Carey and Durnin blocked three shots. Every player on the floor made an important contribution.

Kirkwood won its regional title last weekend despite being only the No. 5 seed for the postseason, knocking off the No. 4 and No. 1 seeds on their way to the regional crown. Williams was never obsessed with her team's seeding for the regional. She simply wanted her team to be playing its best volleyball when it counted.

"The leadership continued to get better. And I think that built our chemistry," she said, tracing her team's evolution. "Our system came to life. And you just saw a high-energy team with a lot of confidence on the floor."

The Eagles kept the faith after losing some conference matches they thought they should have won.

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"I think having that mind-set: No matter the rankings, we can beat any team," said Aldrich-Ingram. "I think having that in the back of our head and knowing the way we can play has been key."

Williams will be making her fifth trip to the national tournament in 14 years at Kirkwood. The Eagles placed seventh in the nation on their last trip to the national meet in West Virginia in 2016.

She said this is the first time one of her teams clinched a spot in the national tournament on their own floor.

"I can't think of a better place to do it than Johnson Hall, to be back here and to be able to do it in front of our fans," she remarked. "We had a great crowd, so that was exciting."

There will be 16 teams at the national tournament, including top-ranked Coffeyville and second-ranked Parkside.

"We have big goals," said Aldrich-Ingram. "I think it will be a blast."

As soon as Sunday's match ended, they played John Denver's hit "Take Me Home, Country Roads" on the public address system at Johnson Hall. It goes like this:

"Country roads, take me home
To be place I belong
West Virginia, mountain mama
Take me home, country roads"

The national tournament will be played at the Charleston Civic Center in Charleston, W Va.